

How to Challenge Negative Self-Talk



Medically reviewed by [Kendra Kubala, PsyD](#), Psychology — Written by [Andrea Rice](#) — Updated on September 13, 2021

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Negative self-talk is part of the human experience. Challenging negative thoughts is a practice of cultivating self-awareness.



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Most people have an ongoing dialogue with themselves — whether internal or vocalized.

While [research](#) shows that positive self-talk can improve mood, boost productivity, and increase self-respect, negative self-talk can take a toll on emotional well-being, hinder self-confidence, and lead to self-blame.

While negative self-talk is a natural part of the human experience, there are ways to disrupt patterns of unhelpful thinking with a few strategies to challenge your inner critic.

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Why are we prone to negative thoughts and self-talk?

Human beings are hardwired with a [negativity bias](#), a psychological principle asserting that we're more susceptible to negative stimuli than positive ones, and we can easily become consumed by them.

[Louisa Jewell](#), the author of “[Wire Your Brain for Confidence](#)” and founder of the [Canadian Positive Psychology Association \(CPPA\)](#) in [Toronto, Ontario](#), says part of our inherited bias toward the negative can be explained from an evolutionary perspective.

“If you go back thousands of years, we were constantly scanning the horizon for threats,” [Jewell](#) says. “It was much more important for our brains to constantly be scanning for those threats because it helped us survive as human beings.”

For many — but not all — modern-day individuals, physical safety is generally not a concern. Yet most people are still prone to constantly “scanning” for threats, which can ultimately be more harmful than it is helpful.

Is negative self-talk related to depression?

Our [predisposition](#) to negative thinking can be genetic and also a byproduct of our upbringing, conditioning, or both.

The field of [epigenetics](#) posits that [gene expression](#) can change depending on our behaviors, environment, or both. Genetic factors that may [cause depression](#) can vary. How we were raised and conditioned and how we live (diet, exercise, and [sleep quality](#)) can influence to what degree we might experience depression, [anxiety](#), and stress.

“Epigenetics shows that gene expression is both what we inherit in our genes and also how we interact with the environment that will determine how genes express,” [Jewell](#) says.

[Jewell](#) explains that a habit of [overthinking](#) is associated with clinical mental health conditions like depression. Indeed, [research](#) shows that repetitive negative thinking, or unhealthy [rumination](#), is a common [comorbidity](#) among depression and [anxiety disorders](#).

In addition, [research from 2013](#) suggests that [rumination](#) is a major cause of depression in women, who are also twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression as men.

[Other research](#) has shown that self-deprecating thinking, a form of negative self-talk, is also more common among women.

While there’s also [some evidence](#) to suggest that depression is

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For instance, if one or both of your parents were diagnosed with clinical depression, there's a chance — not a guarantee — that you may also experience symptoms of depression, which may depend on how your genes express themselves.

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The link between self-talk and self-doubt

When it comes to our abilities and talents, the occasional bout of self-doubt is common.

However, if you find that you're constantly questioning whether you're good or capable enough, the negativity bias suggests there's a tendency to fixate more on what you did "wrong" than what you did right.

Think of a time when you accomplished something, but you focused more on that *one thing* you could have done better. Despite that 90% of your efforts went over really well, you dwell and ruminate on the other 10% that could have improved.

When you're hyper-critical of that 10% and are constantly questioning your abilities, then your negative self-talk has manifested into self-doubt.

A consequence of self-doubt, according to Jewell, can be the "imposter phenomenon" (or syndrome), a self-deprecating mindset that occurs when we don't acknowledge our achievements. We relinquish any successes we may have earned because we don't believe in ourselves and our abilities.

Feeling like a fraud is a form of self-doubt that can be brought on by the pressures we often feel to succeed. The imposter phenomenon is also associated with depression and anxiety.

Our propensity to doubt, dwell, and ruminate is also related to feedback and criticism. In fact, recent research found that regardless of peoples' mental health status, participants were more likely to recognize negative verbal feedback over positive feedback.

The negative feedback simply stood out more in their minds.



How to stop negative thoughts

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thoughts takes a little more effort than just trying to [think positively](#). For starters, it's helpful to consider your effort versus the outcome.

According to [research from 2019](#), children who practiced positive "effort-talk" performed better in mathematics compared to children who practiced positive [self-talk](#), "ability-talk," or no self-talk at all.

Here's a look at the differences, according to the study:

- **Ability-talk:** "I am very good at this!"
- **Effort-talk:** "I will do my best!"
- **Self-talk:** "I'll do well!"

By prioritizing their effort over the outcome, subjects who practiced positive effort-talk were able to detach themselves from any negative thinking about their competencies and abilities.

[Other research](#) has shown that psychotherapy for negative thinking, including [cognitive behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#), can help individuals challenge their negative or [irrational thoughts](#).

By identifying your negative recurring thought patterns, a CBT-certified therapist can help you learn how to respond to your negative thoughts in a more constructive manner.

[Jewell](#), who teaches a course called "[Silence Your Inner Critic](#)," describes this technique as a "rewiring" of the brain. "By rewiring our thinking, we can become more optimistic about the future," she says. "We have to rewire our brains for positivity."

Here are a few tips to start rewiring your negative thinking and stop your inner critic in its tracks.

Cultivate self-awareness

Our propensity for negative self-talk is often automatic, as the nature of the mind is to fixate on the negative.

So the first step in challenging negative thoughts is to become aware that you're having them.

According to [Jewell](#), it's not just about becoming aware of what you're saying to yourself, but also *when* you're saying it. Understanding the triggers, what you're saying, and *why* you're saying it can help you



Dispute the thought

It can be helpful to think of any evidence that disproves the negative thoughts you're having, says [Jewell](#).

teammate recently praise the work you did?

Disputing the thought with positive evidence can help you reaffirm your capabilities and increase your self-confidence.

Practice self-love

Having [compassion for ourselves](#) is also key to overcoming negative thinking.

"We want to be able to love ourselves first, to have full acceptance of who we are, flaws and all, to accept the fact that we are imperfect," [Jewell](#) says. "When we can do that, I often find that the negative self-talk backs off because we love ourselves and we've decided that we're not going to continue to speak to ourselves the way we do."

Embrace gratitude

[Positive psychology research](#) shows that [gratitude](#) improves emotional well-being and boosts happiness, which can also make it a valuable tool for rewiring negative thinking.

The next time you find that you're criticizing yourself, finding gratitude for where you are and what you've created for yourself can help to change your mindset.



Worksheet

If you want to learn more about how to challenge negative thoughts, consider using this [Challenging Negative Thoughts worksheet](#) from Therapist Aid. It has questions to help assess your own negative self-talk.

Was this helpful?

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Looking ahead

Developing the self-awareness to acknowledge negative thoughts when they arise and dispute them with evidence that proves otherwise is

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Over time, with practice, some of those negative thoughts might even start to subside. Just keep in mind that recognizing your patterns and retraining how you respond to them is no easy feat, and you don't have to do it alone.

Consider [reaching out to a mental health professional](#) to find out if CBT or other forms of psychotherapy can help you challenge your negative thoughts, nurture a positive mindset, and inspire more confidence in yourself and your abilities.

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