

## Self-Talk: One Key to Personal Success

How important are the words we use in our mental dialogue or self-talk during a workout in the gym, at a business meeting, or with family and friends? Are we truly coaching ourselves toward the life we want or directing activities through our self-talk toward the inevitable failure in which we believe?

"You idiot! Can't you get it right?"

"Why aren't you paying attention?"

"Man, you screwed it up this time."

These are not the statements of a co-worker, employer, or coach directed at you. These are the thoughts and ideas coming from your own mind!

Before I go too far, let me point out that my forte is as a women's gymnastics coach where appropriate self-talk is critical to success and safety. Can you imagine a gymnast getting up on a Balance Beam, a piece of gymnastics apparatus that is four feet off the ground and only four-inches wide, and saying to herself, "I hope I stay on, but I'll probably fall and straddle the beam on my next skill." Ouch! That kind of self-talk is not only detrimental to confidence, it can cause painful consequences.

Continuing with the gymnastics analogy, see if there are any similarities in the self-talk of athletes and your self-talk on a daily basis in business or your personal activities. You may not have to suffer the immediate and painful consequence of inappropriate self-talk like these athletes, but negative self-talk does have an affect on the quality of your life, your success, and your level of happiness in general.

As a gymnastics coach, I hear comments from gymnasts like, "I can't", or the infamous, "I'll try, but..." (and then add an excuse for failure in advance) that are quite common. The range of excuses and negative comments are varied but they have one thing in common; these thoughts are negative associations about some aspect of the gymnast or her capabilities, which, in many cases, have no basis in reality.

Could you be doing the same in your experience of the world?

As a coach, I also need to watch what I say to my athletes so I don't reinforce their negative self-talk. Coaches, gymnasts, parents – literally everyone - need to concentrate their mental language on what they want, not what they don't want to have happen.

For instance, when a gymnast attempts a skill and has poor form I used to respond with, "Don't bend your legs." All the gymnast hears and pictures mentally is "bent legs" and that is what she is thinking about the next time she makes an attempt at the skill. You don't think so? Try this.

## **DON'T THINK OF AN ELEPHANT!**

No matter what is written here make sure you do not allow the mental image of an elephant to come into your mind. Don't even think of a baby elephant, or an elephant at the zoo, or an elephant missing one shoe, but...

I'll bet you did.

In the same way I caused you to think of an elephant, I would unintentionally cause the gymnast to concentrate on the reverse of what I wanted her to do. This principle is why many smokers can't quit smoking. They concentrate on not smoking instead of the positive aspect of clean, pure lungs. It is why people who want to lose a few pounds fail at a diet because they focus on being overweight instead of slim and trim.

Self-talk and coaching cues that focus on what you want to achieve produce much better results. Instead of saying to the gymnast, "Don't bend your legs," which creates a mental picture in the gymnast's mind of bent legs, the more appropriate coaching cue would be, "Next time, keep your legs straight." Now the gymnast has a mental picture of what she needs to improve.

The key is to always state in clear terms exactly what you want, not what you don't want mentally, verbally, and physically - you can communicate "elephants," negative or positive with facial expressions and body language as easily as you can with words.

I also learned that when I wanted feedback from a gymnast, I needed to instruct her in the proper method of reply. For instance, if I ask, "What do you think you can do better next time?" The appropriate reply from the gymnast would be, "Next time I will keep my legs straight." Definitely not: "I won't bend my legs," that response only reinforces the bent legs.

In keeping with this theme there are certain questions a coach never answers, such as: "What am I doing wrong?" The correct form of the question is "What can I do better next time?" Always correct the form of the question and tell your gymnasts (or business associates and employees) why it is important to ask positively oriented questions.

Eliminate all negative words and phrases from your vocabulary. Avoid statements like, "I can't," "That's too hard," or any variation on that theme. One statement I always change in a gymnast's vocabulary is, "I'll try," followed by the inevitable, "but...", and then an excuse in advance for why she might fail. I would much prefer to hear, "I'll do my best," and then accept whatever she does and give instructions for improvement on the next attempt. Whether the skill is completed perfectly on each attempt is not important, only that the gymnast gave her best effort.

While I have related the concept of self-talk from the world of gymnastics coaching it is just as valid in all walks of life from parenting to business, teaching to personal goal achievement. The basics are:

1. Always state mentally and verbally what you want (to have, do, or be).
2. Adopt the posture and physicality of a person who is confident in achieving his/her goals.
3. Do your best on each attempt at your goals. Use the experience gained from each attempt to continually learn and adapt your skills. (Note: If you achieve every goal on the first attempt; your goals are too easy. The fun in life comes from overcoming mistakes and learning from past failures.)
4. Change negatively oriented statements as soon as they occur. This will take continuous practice. We are all proficient in thinking of anything and everything that can go wrong. Be kind to yourself. You have had a lifetime of practicing negative self-talk, it will take at least a "few days" to substitute the old habit with the practice of goal/need/desire -oriented self-talk.

Thought is the ancestor to every action our body makes. Your mind will work to achieve your currently dominant thought regardless of what it is; so think only about what you want. And remember, you don't always get what you want on each attempt, but in the long run, you usually get what you expect. Expect the best.

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