

Negativity is such a no-no

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS at a party last week and spied an old acquaintance. He was sauntering around looking very relaxed. "You seem contented today," I said. "Like the cat with the cream. What's happened?" "Nothing," he said, smiling. "It's just a normal day."

"But I can see that look," I insisted. It was the look of bliss, of being in love or in passion with some project, something that takes us straight to the centre of our being. "No," he said. "I'm always like this. Whether it's sunny or rainy, good day or bad. This is how I am."

Some people are blessed with such a disposition, either through years of rigorous spiritual discipline or simply by having been born with an easygoing temperament. I'm not one of them.

"It's all in the mind," my friend smiled. "Go home and write down all your negative thoughts and see what you tell yourself each day. You'll be surprised at how much what you say to yourself influences your sense of wellbeing." His idea had merit so I went home and jotted down my thoughts.

Therapists I've interviewed over the years tend to divide our negative self-speak into useful categories. There are the thoughts that disempower us. These involve feeling victimised and have the ring of Poor me! to them. "It isn't fair," we start whining. In such a childlike frame of mind it's difficult to take responsibility to remedy the situation, which reinforces a sense of powerlessness.

The opposite style of thoughts are marked by a sense of misplaced grandiosity, intolerance or arrogance, where we blame others. Someone else has to change for things to be OK. These thoughts are equally disempowering because they, too, trap us in an impotent state of childish rage.

There are self-defeating thoughts such as "I'm not good at" and "I can't". From my years of hosting relationships programs on talkback radio, I can report that the most common include "I'm trapped [in this relationship, job etc]", "I'm getting too old to", "I'm not witty or interesting company", "I'm losing my looks/power", "I'm so unhealthy", "I'm not a good parent", "I'm not safe in the world", "I can't cope", "I'm not loved enough", "I can't be happy". Underlying these statements is a deep-seated lack of self-worth.

Then there is envy and jealousy. Other people are having more fun, sex, romance with their partners, respect from their kids. There are the comparisons where we pit ourselves against another and usually come out second best. And there are, of course, the shoulds, oughts and musts that mark our inner critical parent and elicit the response of shame and guilt.

There are our fears of the things we believe are going to swamp us -- disaster, failure, rejection, illness. Most of the things we fear are not happening in the moment we are fearing them and the fight or flight hormones we release into our bodies while we are living inside a fabricated reality can damage our health, as well as ruin the present.

In my scrawling mess of negative self-speak I found a plethora of utterly awful statements. There was no lack of self-pity. Twice I complained it's not fair, particularly when a neighbour started drilling. I was apt to panic if things didn't go to plan (as they never do). I continually beat myself up over unimportant things: forgetting to buy a new floppy disk, forgetting to get oranges for school lunch, a phone bill not paid. Gosh, I'm hopeless, I wrote three times in five hours.

I was left laughing out loud at what self-defeating garbage went on in my head. As a wise woman recently told me: "You would never let anyone talk to you the way you talk to yourself. You'd deck 'em."

It was a really interesting revelation -- the degree to which our minds and the stories we tell ourselves make us feel poorly and create the very outcomes we fear. Mostly it's the same old sad thoughts repeated over and over, beliefs we've long outgrown but still hold us pinned.

And it's very important to note the physiological effects of such negative beliefs. During the exercise, I noted the way each thought made me feel -- how my stomach knotted, the way my breathing went shallow, how I used coffee and sugar to placate myself, the way I hunched my shoulders, chewed my fingernail, and probably created stress hormones in my blood.

As my friend from the party testifies, not everyone does this to themselves. But from the letters I get each week, negative self-speak seems to be a widespread problem. I may not yet be able to walk around in a state of ongoing calm but at least I'm now aware of my thoughts. And awareness of a problem is the first step to its cure.

www.ruthostrow.com

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 05 JUL 2003