

Watch your Words

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Words are powerful. Sometimes we think it is only money or weapons or physical strength that are powerful. Probably, because that is how many people are taught to think about power, and it is how many people try to get power. But there is another source of power. And it is a quiet source of power. It literally gives you power over yourself, which in turn enables you to have influence over your life. And it involves language. What you say matters. If you want to see the power of words in the external world, we only have to look to the law to see that. People win based on their ability to think, reason, persuade, negotiate, and argue. All requiring verbal and thinking ability. What we sometimes forget, is that while we are ready to acknowledge the power of words when we engage with others, words spoken to ourselves also have power. We tend to believe what we tell ourselves. And the more often we tell ourselves something the more we are inclined to believe it and treat it as fact. And, what we say determines how we feel and act. How we act determines the results we get in our lives.

The poet Hafiz is famous for the quote, ***"The words you speak become the house you live in***". Your words influence how you feel and how you act. If you keep telling yourself that something is impossible, then you will not even try it. If you feel that it is necessary for your happiness, but you still think it is impossible, then you are going to make yourself very unhappy. The words others say to us, for instance, "you are a failure", "you will never amount to anything", "it is too hard for someone like you" can hurt a lot, but they don't hurt as much as when we take in those words and believe them and come to think the same way about ourselves. As we internalise what is said to us that is negative and hurtful, so we create hurt and negativity for ourselves. Other people can say really horrible things to us that are painful and crushing, but it is what we say to ourselves that really does the damage.

When working with clients most people get that words are important. They also get that the words they use, including their self-talk is important. Many of them will deliberately try to think positively, regularly tell themselves positive statements, and focus on their strengths. Which are especially helpful in building a good self-image and achieving a goal. But often it is the other "stuff" that is missed. It is what you say to yourself that you may be unaware of. Below are some examples.

Do you ever say to yourself, “This is so hard, I don’t know how I am going to be able to do it.”?

You may think that is a fairly harmless statement. However, because our words influence our feelings and our actions, you are telling yourself that this task is hard, you don’t think you can do it, and that starts off a train of similar thoughts. If you say that to yourself, you just make it harder to do. And because your mind believes what you tell it, you make that task even more difficult to do. Thus, you are likely to procrastinate to avoid starting such a dreaded task, and if you do start, when you are working you will be constantly reminding yourself of how horrible it is and thus make yourself feel horrible too. If the task is hard, don’t make it harder. Use different words that are reasonable but don’t engender such dread in you. You could say:

“This appears a difficult task, but I know that I can do it. Once I have completed it, I will have accomplished something considerable”. Or “If I break this down into little steps and focus on each one at a time, I will get through this without much hassle”. You could even come right out and tell yourself, “I can do this with relative ease”.

The point is, think about the words you are using and if they are helping you achieve what you need to achieve. And if they are not, then reword what you are thinking so it doesn’t seem such a horrible endeavour. Even if no one is likely to find the task a pleasant one, you can turn it into a challenge, or recognition for yourself for tackling something like this, or something equally motivating that gets you to get on and do the task without it being so terrible.

Another example:

“My life is so busy, I don’t know how I am going to get everything done today”.

If you tell yourself that you are so busy, you are going to magnify the busy in your head and you will most likely increase your stress and anxiety.

Instead, you could say:

“I have such a full life, I am so pleased that I get to experience so many things. I am truly living my life to the full”.

When I talk to clients about this they often ask me how do they change. I think many of them want a quick and easy way to do this. The problem with the way we talk to ourselves and think about issues is that it is automatic and very well learned. We are unconsciously competent at this. To change it first requires you to become consciously aware of what you are doing when you are doing it. Then you have to consciously change what you are thinking and telling yourself, and then you have to practice it many times until you become unconsciously competent at a new way of thinking and talking to yourself.

So, think about what you are saying to yourself. At various moments throughout the day ask yourself what you are thinking and telling yourself. Then challenge it and change it to something that works for you and is realistic and positive. Learning takes time, but once you start it gets easier until it eventually becomes natural. And when you change what you are thinking and telling yourself, you eventually start seeing changes in your life that reflect your new ways of thinking and self-talk.