

## Self-Talk: Moving from unhealthy inner-monologues to constructive inner-dialogue (i)



Who do you talk to most every day? Is it your spouse or your superior? It is neither. Does it surprise you that it is actually you? Yes, we talk most to ourselves. Even when we are speaking or are spoken to, we talk to ourselves.

This talking in our head goes on non-stop. It continues in our dreams too. We are not talking about hearing an inner voice, as in experiencing hallucination. It is an unconscious thinking *to ourselves*. They are thought habits and messages generated *from within ourselves* which we accept without questioning.

Our inherent need to make sense of our experiences started us on this lifelong habit of talking to ourselves. We are often unaware of this inner-monologue happening. Depending on our experiences, our interpretations of them and the conclusions we arrived at, the inner-monologue we have can be healthy, self-edifying or unhelpful and self-defeating or a combination. At the news that our job application was unsuccessful, our self-talk can be one of self-negating, "I knew it! What's new?" or self-defeating, "I can't go through another interview anymore!" or self-motivating, "Where did things go wrong? How can I fare better?"

These sample strands of inner monologue are not random. They follow a predictable pattern. They are consistent with our beliefs and personalities. They are an offshoot of the beliefs we formed about ourselves and others which are hard-wired into our brain. (*previous article*) They drive our behaviour.

Our brain cannot differentiate between healthy, true, valid or misleading and unhelpful thoughts. Remember Jane from our previous article? As an immature child, she formed faulty conclusions about herself and others. She concluded that she had to project a hard and unfriendly front lest she, like her mother, becomes a victim of others' abuse. Her convictions about those experiences became entrenched in her. Her recurring self-talk would have included 'I am in a vulnerable place', 'I need to protect myself from this person'. Over time, these thinking, emoting and behavioural habits became hard-wired so much so that even her children experienced her as 'harsh' and 'hard to talk to'. It cost her many relationships.

Jane recognised that what was hardwired into her brain was taking her down a path she did not want to continue going. She was also cognizant that she could now choose to change the path by altering the hardwiring. She knew it would be a commitment of a lifetime. Something that has been erected over such a long time doesn't come down at one blow. Jane is at least committed to not letting the same self-talk habit and pattern follow her around leading her to the same outcome. She wants to take responsibility for her thought life, gain a deeper grasp of what influences her self-talk habits so that they do not continue to run on autopilot.

Jane needs to set out on this journey on a strong and sure footing. One of the tools she can bring along is the 'Self-Talk strategy'.

## Connect-Point

***If you find yourself in a hole, (and you do not like where you are) stop digging. ---Will Rogers***

The Self-Talk strategy is a 2+1 phase strategy. It culminates in a final phase when we turn our usual inner-monologue into an inner-dialogue. This strategy aims to weaken the old neural connections and simultaneously strengthens new connections we want to forge in our brain.

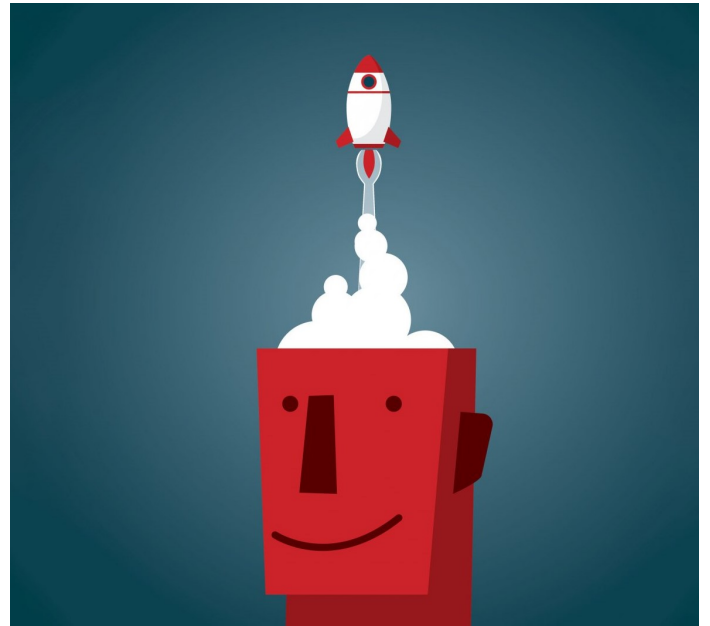
Phase 1 is a self-observation phase. It is creating psychological space for self-awareness to be built up. At different times of each day, in different scenarios, whether alone or interacting with others, Jane has to pause, step back and ask, "Am I or have I been talking to myself?" The first time she catches herself doing so will be a breakthrough moment. Self-awareness always begets more self-awareness. This requires intentionality and consciously carving out psychological space.

In Phase 2, self-probing is required. After Jane has established that engaging in self-talk is indeed her habit, she will practise 'labelling'. When she catches herself in an inner-monologue, she labels and describes what she is doing. For example, 'I am mind-wandering', 'self-criticising', 'indulging in self-pity', 'making assumptions', 'carried away with what ifs', etc. It would help Jane greatly if she observes and describes the bodily sensations that accompany the self-talk. It may be 'a tightening in chest', 'increased heartbeat', 'sweaty palms', etc. Jane must commit to being specific in her labelling and descriptions. The rationale is simple. No renewing of mind can come about if there is no awareness of what currently fills our mind.

Descriptions such as 'I am ruminating', 'self-protecting', 'being suspicious', 'self-justifying', 'self-doubting', 'self-accusing', 'worrying', 'overthinking' are common. *Jane should commit to stay in this phase until a pattern surfaces.* This gives her a clearer picture of what has been going on in her mind that has been driving her behaviour.

The 2 phases above will move Jane to the ultimate objective of the exercise. The final phase is pivotal. It is where change is affected. Without going through the first 2 phases, Jane will never be able to move into this critical point.

Thus far, hardwiring was allowed to take its course in Jane's brain because, like us, Jane has unknowingly identified herself with her thoughts, beliefs, and thus, her self-talk. She and her self-talk has been one. This allowed her self-talk to perpetuate and influence her behaviour.



The ultimate self-awareness we aim for is the ability to think about our own thinking. After we have labelled and described, we must be prepared to ask ourselves pertinent questions. What has triggered the self-talk? What emotions do these self-talk messages activate? What do the messages do to me? Do I like what they are doing to me?

It is in essence about having an honest conversation with ourselves about what we have been saying to ourselves, about ourselves or about others.

Instead of identifying with our self-talk the way we used to, we create a space to confront, appraise and hopefully change them. The way we process the answers to the pertinent questions will open the path to rewiring a new habit. What we hope to do is to change self-talk that steals to self-talk that heals, self-talk that enfeebles to self-talk that empowers. For that to come about, a lot must happen in this phase.

An entire article has to be devoted to just this phase to do it justice. So more about this pivotal phase will be discussed in the next article.

Like Jane, we have been held prisoners by habits of the mind. These are like ticks, parasites that are hard to recognise, let alone yank off. We have been passively led by these automatic thought habits that have come to feel natural. The past cannot and need not dictate our future unless we let it. If we are not happy with where they lead us to, we can and have the capacity to create new paths. Only we can do the yanking. One yank at a time. That's what is required of this change strategy.