

How to Use Self-Talk to Improve Performance

Marianne Stenger



Do you ever talk to yourself? Although it's not always a conscious habit, most of us practice self-talk on a daily basis, as a way of guiding, motivating or supporting ourselves.

Maybe you're heading to the store and start running through a list of all the items you need to buy. Or perhaps you're trying to get through a particularly challenging task at work and find yourself whispering something like "Come on, focus, you can do this."

Over the years, research has shown that self-talk can boost productivity, motivation and confidence, and even help regulate emotions.

"There is robust evidence that self-talk strategies facilitate learning and enhance performance," according to sport psychologist Antonis Hatzigeorgiadis, who studies the phenomenon of self-talk.

He explains that there are generally three reasons why we practice self-talk: to instruct, to motivate or to evaluate.

Instructional self-talk happens when we need to guide ourselves through a specific task, such as learning a new skill. Motivational self-talk usually is used when we want to psych ourselves up for something challenging; it can help to boost effort or increase confidence. Evaluative self-talk mostly is related to past events or actions.

Hatzigeorgiadis stresses that in order to reap the benefits of such self-talk, it needs to be short, precise and, most of all, consistent.

"Self-talk strategies involve the use of cue words or small phrases aiming at enhancing performance through the activation of appropriate responses," he says. "The rationale behind the use of self-talk strategies is that people provide appropriate instructions or directions for action to themselves and subsequently execute the correct or appropriate action by simply following the self-instruction they have used."

Of course, self-talk also can be ineffective and even counterproductive if it's not done right. But what exactly is the "right way" to talk to oneself?

"It is a matter of personal preference or what works for each person; but generally, it is advised that self-talk is positively rather than negatively phrased and focuses on what you should do rather than on what you should avoid," Hatzigeorgiadis says.

So, for example, it would be better to say "stay cool," instead of "don't get upset." Although both instructions convey the same meaning, one uses positive words rather than negative ones.

Another thing that can make a difference when practicing self-talk is the way you address yourself. According to research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, using "you" rather than "I" when talking to yourself tends to be more effective.

The researchers explain that when you think of yourself as another person it allows you to give more objective and useful feedback. For example, saying something like "Not bad, but you need to focus harder next time," would be more motivating than "I wasn't focused enough," which is more self-defeating than constructive.

To make self-talk more effective, Hatzigeorgiadis recommends developing and applying effective self-talk routines that you practice and you use consistently. When it comes to improving your performance through self-talk, he shares the following strategies:

- Identify what you want to achieve.
- Match self-talk to your needs.
- Practice different self-talk cues with consistency.
- Ascertain which cues work best for you.
- Create specific self-talk plans.
- Train self-talk plans to perfection.

Reference

Kross, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Park, J., Burson, A., Dougherty, A., Shablack, H., Bremner, R., Moser, J., & Ayduk, O. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.