

Mental toughness beats negative thinking



By Pamela Enders

When it came to “trash talk” in sports, Paul was an expert at deflecting the castigating comments from his opponents. As a matter of fact, he rather enjoyed ignoring the nasty comments that came his way when he played soccer. It didn’t affect his playing ability at all, he said.

But when Paul had to go out to promote his law business, it was a different story. He didn’t enjoy public speaking and didn’t think he was good at it. He knew it was important to “put himself out there in order to attract new clients,” but he dreaded the prospect.

In meeting with Paul, we discovered he was an expert at engaging in “trash talk” with himself. It began when he was preparing a talk and blossomed into a full-fledged barrage by the time he actually gave the presentation. Like most people, Paul had little conscious awareness he was berating himself. He was just aware he was feeling lousy.

Activation. Belief. Consequences.

A first step for Paul was to keep track of his internal dialogue for a period of time. The structure he followed was to take some time at the end of each day to review what happened that day (the **activating** events); what he thought about what happened (his interpretation or **belief** about the events); and what his feelings were (the **consequences** of his belief). Paul’s record looked something like this:

What and how we think affects the way we feel. To change our feelings, we need to challenge our negative beliefs.

1. Activating event: Began work on presentation. Belief: This isn’t any good. I’m not any good at this stuff. I’ll never be good. Consequences: I feel tired and anxious.
2. Activating event: Asked to set up a meeting with a new prospective client. Belief: I wonder what I’ll do to louse this one up. Consequences: I feel on edge.

After a few days, Paul was able to see what cognitive psychologists have been discussing for decades: What and how we think affects the way we feel. To change our feelings, we need to change the way we think and challenge our negative beliefs.

While such a notion might conjure up images of a certain Saturday Night Live personality who made fun of positive thinking, the actual process of identifying, reframing and altering self-defeating beliefs is a serious and often life-changing method based on years of respected research.

Challenging beliefs

If Paul could change how he thinks, he would change how he feels. The belief itself needs to be assessed and challenged — debated and disputed.

There are four ways to debate/dispute negative beliefs:

- 1) Evidence: What evidence is there to support the belief? This is not about the magic of positive thinking, it's about accuracy. Most times, reality will be on your side.
- 2) Alternatives: Are there other ways to explain the situation? Most events have multiple causes. Do you latch onto the worst explanation or interpretation? Focus on what is changeable.
- 3) Implications: What are the implications if the belief is true? In this case, de-catastrophize and consider what steps you need to take to address the problem. Developing a plan of action can help to relieve distress.
- 4) Usefulness: If the belief is destructive, why hold onto it? Rather than asking if a belief is true, consider if it is functional to believe that right now.

Paul decided to take an informal poll of those who had seen him give a presentation to determine if his own negative assessment was accurate. Others' feedback was not nearly as disapproving as he had imagined. He was told his talks were well-organized and informative but that he needed to work on posture, eye contact, connecting to the audience and communicating enthusiasm.

The critiques made sense. If Paul believed he was terrible, it was hard for him to project confidence and enthusiasm. We are what we think.

Once Paul had developed an awareness of how automatic his negative thinking was, he learned how to stop, assess and debate/dispute his negative beliefs. This freed him to either set aside a belief that was inaccurate, or honestly confront what realistically needed changing and develop a plan of action. Realizing he wasn't doomed to be a terrible presenter gave Paul the motivation and energy to work on the things that could be changed. ☺

Pamela Enders of Winners Circle Coaching in Cambridge, Mass., is a psychologist-coach with 26 years' experience. She is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and an adjunct faculty member at Temple University's Beasley School of Law. Reach her through www.pamelaenders.com.
