

Lesson Four: Self-talk

Aim: To look at the role thinking plays in shaping our feelings and to become aware of some unhelpful thinking styles.

Materials: 'How realistic are you?' worksheet
'Unhelpful thinking' worksheet

1. Ask the young people if they know what self-talk is. Self talk is how we talk to ourselves in our heads. It is like a running commentary on what is going on and what we think about it in order to make sense of the world. It could be something simple like reminding ourselves of the way to the shops, or something more negative like telling ourselves how useless we are. Everyone does it, it is normal, and we often don't notice we are doing it.

2. Distribute the 'How realistic are you?' worksheet. Make the point that setting unrealistic standards for ourselves that we would not expect of other people can be a sign of negative/depressed thinking and that this can create problems with our mental health.

3. Outline the following types of negative thinking/self-talk which are unhelpful and which are likely to make us feel more anxious or depressed.

Blowing things out of proportion. Everything is so awful you exaggerate the importance of certain events, e.g. it's raining, your car breaks down and you miss meeting your friends at the cinema. You think 'This is the worst thing in the world to happen to me ever!'

Dwelling on the bad. You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it, one negative thing at a time, e.g. you get good marks in 3 out of 4 questions in your exam, and one not-so-good a mark in the other question. All you can think about is the one question you messed up, rather than the three you got good marks in, and feel a failure.

Jumping to conclusions. You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion, e.g. you discover you have 8 missed calls on your phone and think 'Someone must have died'.

Mind reading. Without checking first you assume someone is thinking or reacting badly against you, e.g. you walk down the street and people laugh as you walk past. You think 'They are laughing at me'.

Fortune telling. You predict things will turn out badly, e.g. 'There's no point applying for that job as I'll never get it anyway.'

Ignoring the good. Anything positive does not count. You reject positive comments or events, e.g. a friend tells you that you look well. You think 'How could I look well with my hair like this?'

If only. Thinking things would be different, if things (or you) were different.

Should statements: Thinking in absolutes. Telling yourself things or people should act in a certain predictable way, e.g. life should be easier, parents should be kinder, everyone should be nice to me. I ought to behave properly, slip ups should not happen and I ought to know better.

4. Distribute the 'Unhelpful thinking' worksheet and ask the young people to identify the different types of negative thinking. There could be more than one correct answer to each example given.

5. Collate their answers. Ask if they imagine how thinking like this quite a lot could affect their mood. How might that make you feel? Could this in turn affect what your behaviour?

6. Make the point that self-talk is important because most of us are talking silently to ourselves for much of time. What we are saying can affect how we feel about ourselves and what we do. Negative self talk can slowly wear away at our self-esteem until we believe everything we are saying to ourselves. We feel lousy and this affects what we do.

7. Ask the young people to look again at the examples given and come up with a more positive/balanced/realistic way of thinking about these situations. Could thinking like that make you feel any different?

8. If we are depressed or stressed, learning to think in different ways can help our moods to improve. It is hard work though and best done with the guidance and support of a friend or counsellor.

How realistic are you?

Our values and beliefs create the standards we set ourselves through which we evaluate ourselves and others. Unhelpful values and beliefs tend to create unattainable or unrealistic standards which can create difficulties for our mental wellbeing.

Importantly, our values and beliefs are learned therefore we can change them. Part of promoting positive mental health and wellbeing involves becoming aware of our values and beliefs and challenging or changing unhelpful or unrealistic views.

In the following exercise, tick the box beside each statement, depending on how much you agree or disagree with it.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I should not make mistakes					
I should be good at everything I do					
When I don't know, I should pretend that I do					
I should not disclose personal information					
I am a victim of circumstances					
My life is controlled by outside forces					
Other people are happier than I am					
It is very important to please other people					
Play it safe – don't take any risks					
I don't deserve to be happy					
If I ignore my problems they will go away					
There's no point – nothing will ever change for me					
I should strive for perfection					
Basically there are 2 ways of doing things – right or wrong					