

Self-Talk and Self-Affirmation

Mental Health Mastermind

Investigate Your Self-Talk

Self-talk is the running dialog you have with yourself every day. Self-talk can be positive or negative, encouraging or discouraging. Your self-talk shapes your beliefs about who you are, how the world works, and where you fit into it all.

Start Where You Are Today

You can't change your self-talk if you don't know what it is. Start where you are by asking what kind of statements you make to yourself.

Let's start with today.

- How did you perceive yourself today?
- What did you tell yourself about yesterday?
- What did you tell yourself about the day ahead?
- How did you talk to yourself about a challenge today? How about a positive event?

The way I talked to myself today:

Self-Affirmation

A self-affirmation is self-talk or self-directed statements specific to personal traits, important areas of your life, values, and your self-concept. In other words, it's an intentional thought about who you are and what matters to you.

Technically, any self-talk about yourself is affirming *something*. In other words, you are stating that something is so. The more you practice these thoughts the more you believe them. The more you believe them, the more you repeat them. This is the vicious cycle of **confirmation bias** and, when you have a negative self-image, negative feedback seeking.

Even if you're currently affirming negative beliefs about yourself, you can shift your mindset to include more **positive** self-affirmations with practice.

How Positive Self-Affirmation Helps

Research on affirmation shows us that self-affirmations can...

- give us a sense of adequacy and control in stressful situations
- help us react in a non-defensive way when our ego is bruised
- take better care of our health
- encourage open-mindedness
- cope with our own mortality
- boost our self-control reserves
- feel less stressed on exams
- improve problem-solving and creative thinking in high-stress situations
- protect us against the negative effects of chronic stress

Science also shows us that the relevance of an affirmation, how much you believe in it, and how you feel when you're thinking it make a big difference.

The Basics of Positive Self-Talk and Self-Affirmation

You can make your self-talk more positive and affirming by learning to notice it as it occurs. When you notice your critical voice, breathe, and see if you can find a more constructive statement to make to yourself. A good rule of thumb is to think about what you might say to a friend or child about this same situation.

Sometimes, you won't catch negative self-talk until it's built up a lot of momentum. That's okay. The goal isn't to make a dramatic overnight transformation. The goal isn't necessarily to feel good either. When changing negative self-talk, the goal is to build awareness and slow the momentum of the negative thoughts. Every time you practice, you begin to build up momentum in a positive, more constructive direction.

An effective self-affirmation includes important domains of your life, personal traits, or important values. It is phrased positively (i.e., what you have, do, or are) and in the present tense as if you *already* possess this quality or value.

Applying Self-Affirmation to Wellbeing and Goals

Positive self-talk and self-affirmation can help you improve your wellness and stick to your goals. Use positive self-talk to encourage yourself toward healthy choices and attitudes. Use self-affirmation to build up reserves of self-control and motivation as you try new and challenging things. Your self-affirmation doesn't need to be related to the goal to work. As long as it is personal to you and you have enough emotional buy-in for it to stick (even for a little while), it can benefit your progress.

Craft Your Personal Affirmation

Investigate Your Values, Interests, and Strengths

Answer as many questions below as you like. The more you investigate, the more fuel you'll have for crafting a personal affirmation. Don't worry if you don't have an automatic answer to some of these questions or if it feels unfamiliar or challenging. Move on to a question that resonates with you and take it at your own pace.

If you're not sure what your values or strengths are, try taking this free Values in Action Survey of Character Strengths: <https://www.viacharacter.org/> or use this list of the 24 character strengths studied in positive psychology to get started: <https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths>

My values and interests (e.g., ideas, concepts, beliefs, virtues, and character strengths that are important to you):
What I treasure most in my life (e.g., relationships, events, opportunities, activities, or any other domains of your life):
What I appreciate about myself:
What in my life makes me feel empowered, inspired, or enthusiastic?

Sit with It.

Did this feel comfortable or uncomfortable? How often do you affirm these positive qualities?

What is this activity like for you so far?

Take some time to read over your responses above. Make a note of any words, phrases, or ideas that stand out to you.

What stands out to you in your responses so far?

Free Associate

Let your mind wander for a few minutes as you read over your list. What situations or memories come to mind as you review this list?

Step 3: Write about it.

Write a few sentences to a paragraph about a time when you show the importance of this domain, trait, or value in your life. Is there a specific moment that showed you the importance of this area or a time that best illustrates its role in your life?

Step 4: Distill it down.

Distill this down to a word or phrase. This might be a completely new word or phrase or one from your original list. Notice if this word or phrase carries any new meaning after following the steps above. If you do write a statement, make sure it's positively stated, presupposes any changes you want to make, and has positive emotion behind it. Aim for 10 words or less.

If you need a little help creating your affirmation, you can use these fill-in-the blanks as templates.

- I am...
- I easily...
- I am a.....person
- I enjoy....every day
- It is easy for me to...
- I am completely free to...
- Every day, I...
- My life is an example that...
- The most important thing I've learned about life is...
- I appreciate that I...

Step 5: Practice it.

Remember, new beliefs happen with repetition, so repeat this new affirmation any chance you get. Post this word or phrase in places you're likely to see as you go through your typical daily activities. And take brief breaks throughout the day to breath and bring your affirmation to mind. It can also be powerful to record yourself reading your affirmation and listen to it a few times every day.