

Chapter 4

How Dare You Speak to Yourself Like That?— Examining Our Internal Dialogue



“View your life with kindness. Stop beating yourself up about things from your past. Instead of slapping your forehead and asking, ‘What was I thinking,’ breathe and ask yourself the kinder question, ‘What was I learning?’”
—Karen Salmansohn

What it is ... We have an astonishing capacity to set unreasonably high internal standards, look for the slightest evidence that we may in fact be screwing up, and serve as judge and jury for ourselves, usually with a “guilty” verdict. What happens too often is that the capacity for compassionate self-evaluation is overshadowed by an unrealistic, incessant inner negativity.

Sample scenario #1: Aailyah has a running voice inside her head that says she should somehow be doing more, in spite of a demanding job, three kids at home, an ailing mother, and her volunteer work in the community. Others give her regular accolades for her positive energy, yet Aailyah often lies awake at night or stares off in the distance during the day, wondering in a vague sense *What’s wrong with me that I can’t do better?*

Sample scenario #2: Charles heaps praise upon his direct reports, has a kind word for the other department managers, and is authentically pleasant with his boss. However, it is well known that if you walk by his office and the door is open, you can frequently hear him muttering phrases like “You stupid idiot” and “Nice work, knucklehead” to himself.

Why will this help me at work? Even though we may mask it well, our negative internal dialogue still has its effects. First, we often project our unnecessary frustration onto others, frequently without our awareness as it’s happening. Secondly, we may be perceived as “moody” as we go

through our rituals of self-recrimination, and this reduces our availability to others. Third, this is another example of the benefits of modeling the positive behavior we want to see from others.

Why is this so difficult at times? Here's a little bit of psychological theory for you. When we were kids and there was tension or significant unmet needs in our environment, we didn't have a lot of choices. We certainly couldn't say at the age of six or ten, "Hey, I'm going to go get a job and an apartment, and I'll check back in with you." One response for us was to "be bad," but that came with some big trade-offs (like "ouch!"). So many of us internalized the sentiment that "if something is wrong, maybe it's because I'm not doing the right thing." This potentially sets us up for a lifetime of trying to be OK, when in fact, we already are.

Your frank self-assessment:

- You may not know how much of this lies within. What are some negative thoughts, feelings, or statements that you have had about yourself? Take a pad or pile of blank cards, and in three minutes, write down quickly, without censorship, every negative thought, feeling, or statement you've ever had or made about yourself. If you're like me (when I did this exercise in a workshop), you may be stunned at what you capture.
- What are the primary themes or statements that you tell yourself when things aren't going well? If they are self-critical, how can you reframe them?
- Who are your allies—the people who can see through the false assessments and stern admonitions to support you? Can you tap in to them and their positive mirroring more often?

Flip's tips:

- If you have a harsh inner critic, know that you're not alone. It is amazing to me that once I develop a sense of trust with the people I work with, a gentle line of questioning will almost always reveal that the person I'm talking to has this dynamic as well.
- There are two manifestations of this pattern that have labels—one is "caretaker," where we are hard on ourselves because we unrealistically feel that everyone around us should be okay first, and the second is "perfectionist," where nothing is right with us unless and until it is perfectly right.
- Either unpack those old bags or leave them at the curb, but don't drag them along. There's almost always a family history component in this dynamic. Sometimes it's useful to

understand how the pattern got there, and sometimes it's just helpful to focus on changing it.

Action for traction:

- What are the primary themes or statements that you tell yourself when things aren't going well? Go to extremes—write down a description, like you were writing a novel, of this most despicable character that you see when you look in the mirror. Go ahead and list all of the truly bad habits, huge deficiencies, and glaring gaps. Now, have a good laugh.
- The ones you love must know. Give those closest to you the permission to share what they've seen or heard in terms of your self-judgment. Take it as their investment in your well being.
- Do you have the “roller-coaster effect”—one day you're brilliant and on top of the world, an hour or day later you're lower than whale poop? These cycles make it hard to be balanced, so notice what happens as it's happening and then use that awareness to even things out in the moment.

Baked-in benefits:

- By demonstrating more empathy, compassion, and acceptance toward yourself, you'll be in a better place to give the same to others.
- You'll provide a valuable service to your children, anyone that you mentor, and those around you who struggle with the same dynamic.
- You'll appear less neurotic. How delightful!

For a deeper dive ...

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