

LifeSkills: How to take the chance to express yourself

by Marie-Hélène Pelletier, M.Ps.

Your self-talk can increase or decrease your fear of expressing yourself.

For some, this feeling of discomfort or anxiety is so strong it keeps them from taking what they think of as the risk of saying what they think. The consequence of the fear of asserting yourself is that you give away power—the power of your views—to someone else.

The process becomes cumulative. Every time you fail to make your opinions known, you feel less power. And feeling this loss of power, you continue not to speak up for yourself. Furthermore, the other person in the equation takes the power you have given up and considers this is exactly what you want.

Why some people don't say what they think

There are many reasons why people fail to speak their minds. Some people become so anxious at the mere prospect of speaking out, they hide their anxiety by not saying anything or making some noncommittal remark.

After the fact—assuming you are one of those people—you may regret your silence and mentally kick yourself for not speaking out. Rather than give yourself a mental kick, look at what may be the source of your anxiety in these situations. The source, more often than not, is what psychologists call self-talk.

What exactly is self-talk?

Self-talk is just what it sounds like—it's what we tell ourselves in the course of every day interactions with others, whether at work or in a social situation.

This unspoken speech comes quite rapidly before, during, or just after a particular interaction. This self-talk expresses our perceptions of the particular event and how we feel about how we react.

Research has shown that the nature of a person's self-talk is one of the most important factors causing anxiety in social situations.

For example, someone in a group says something you disagree with. Your self-talk might be "I know she's wrong about that but if I say so, I'll only be embarrassed in front of everybody else."

So you say nothing and your subsequent self talk might be "I should have spoken up but at least I didn't embarrass myself."

How to become aware of your self-talk

One of the ways to become aware of your self-talk is to consciously pay attention to it. Observe yourself in the course of your interactions with others and take careful note of what you say to yourself. Some people find it helpful to write down their self-talk in the form of a scenario. Such a scenario might go something like this:

Situation: Yesterday, at a meeting at work, I wanted to comment on the discussion.

My self-talk: "What if someone tells me what I am saying is wrong? Everybody will think I am incompetent."

Behavior: I did not talk.

Evaluate your self-talk

Ask yourself if your self-talk is based on reality or fear. You can also ask close friends what they think. People are often surprised to find out how unrealistic some of their self-talk is.

Take the scenario outlined above. In evaluating the self-talk, the speaker might say, "If someone tells me what I am saying is wrong, it could mean I might indeed be wrong, in which case, the other person will probably tell me why. Or, the other person might be wrong, in which case, I can explain what I know. But one thing is certain, nothing in the situation says I am incompetent. It is simply a disagreement. An honest discussion of our differences can only have a positive outcome."

How can I change my self-talk?

When you realize your self-talk is not realistic, you can modify it. Begin by taking time to consider your self-talk. Then, rather than criticize yourself, give yourself constructive comments.

For example: "It's perfectly natural that not everybody will agree with me all the time. In fact, I may learn something from such disagreements. By the same token, by giving my honest opinion, I may be giving others an opportunity to learn. In any case, I have nothing to lose."

Persist

You now have a simple and proven strategy to use the next time you feel anxious or fearful about expressing yourself. The techniques we have described and illustrated should help you overcome your anxieties and eventually make it easier for you to express yourself.

If you have tried these suggestions and would like further assistance, you might want to seek professional help.