Self-talk Tips to Help you ‘Exercise’ Positive Thinking

Physical activity is one of those things that everyone thinks about doing, but few people actually do with any regularity, and if your busy life transpires against your efforts to get fit, you're not alone. As a nation we're having trouble ‘fitting in fitness’. Recent statistics estimate that 63% of Canadians are sedentary, or not exercising at a level to maintain adequate health, and a Health Canada survey reports that individuals between the ages of 18 and 59 list lack of time, lack of energy, and lack of motivation as their top three reasons for not exercising.

Does that come as a surprise? Lack of time is the biggest culprit with most procrastinating behavior. Lack of time draws on motivation and energy. In the daily rush from one commitment to the next energy drains. As energy approaches nil, the last thing a busy person feels like doing is getting motivated to do physical activity. Since the daily “to do” list is endless, it guarantees that lack of time will always be an issue…and thus the circle remains unbroken.

“So, when do I take care of myself?”

Not only will regular exercise make you look better, it will also make you feel better, and perform better each day as well. But you knew that didn't you? Yet each day you're plagued with lack of time, energy and motivation – all of which you need for making the changes they desire, and when you skip another workout you beat yourself up emotionally with the ‘failure’ of it.

“I'm such a loser! Why can’t I figure this out?”

The resulting decrease in self-esteem further diminishes any desire to make an effort at exercise “I can't get it right anyways…” and all of a sudden, years have gone by with nothing but resentment toward yourself and the exercise that eludes you. If you identify with this cycle, there is hope, and it starts with changing your mind about exercise. Your busy life will always toss out barriers in the path to getting active, but it’s your mind or the way you talk to yourself about exercise, that will make all the difference between success and sedentary.

“It's going to be another one of those days! I haven't had enough sleep, I'm tired, I've got so much work to do, I don't have any energy, I don't want to go to the gym, but I should because I'm unfit… but I don't have the motivation.”
**Change Your Mind About Exercise**

What do you say when you talk to yourself? For many of us, our days regularly start with an internal dialogue (or self talk) that includes variations of one or more of the above thoughts. It’s as certain as the ringing of your alarm clock. Just as we pre-program our alarm to trigger the start of our day, so too do we pre-program our thought processes, and then proceed through the day as if they were true. This is effective if the thoughts we feed ourselves are positive and empowering: “Today is going to be a great day! I’m alive, healthy, and happy, and I am going to go for a walk just because I can!”

Your subconscious brain believes what it hears most often, and the strongest message always wins. Unfortunately, according to behavioral psychologists, as much as 77% of self-talk is negative, or works against you, and it takes as many as 20 positive statements about yourself to counter-act even one negative personal statement.

Researchers have learned that the human brain operates much like a personal computer. Once information is imprinted on the disk, the only way to change the information is to erase it, or replace it – otherwise the computer will keep repeating what you “pre-programmed” into it. “I’m such a loser! Why can’t I figure this out?” The subconscious mind works in a similar fashion. Information is fed into it through our senses, our thoughts, our impressions, and what we hear from ourselves and others. “It’s going to be another one of those days” most certainly will be, because we don’t like to be wrong…even if being wrong means suffering.

**Positive, Negative, or Logical?**

Self-talk is a health behaviour that has potentially far reaching effects. Positive self-talk is good for your mental and physical well-being. It has been linked to the reduction of stress, which in turn can affect other positive health changes like exercise. It seems logical that positive self-talk would be favoured over negative, but negative is not always bad. Negative thinking heightens an individual’s sensitivity to the situation they are facing. When faced with potential danger or adversity, negative thinking will help you think more clearly. This logical, accurate self-talk is grounded in a person’s ability to critically think their way through a situation. This can be a challenge in day-to-day life if perception and reality are not in sync, and negative thinking over rules the actual situation. A healthy weight adult may still have feelings of inadequacy stemming from a “chubby” childhood. A perfectly capable person may believe that they are useless after years of being told that they were. Beliefs shape our self-talk (in either a positive or a negative direction), which in turn affects our self-esteem – our internal feelings and evaluation of ourselves based on our “perceived” self-image. Self-esteem and self-image are closely related, and are largely based on beliefs which are formed early in life.

Regular exercise can do much to boost your self-esteem, provided you can find a way to habituate the exercise before your negative inner voice shuts you down. Why not take a step in the positive direction?
Talk to Yourself Better
By becoming aware of your thoughts and attempting to manage them, you can directly influence your emotions and actions in a positive way. The development of “positive thought” patterns requires, quite simply, that you recognize self-talk for what it is, deal with negative messages, and harness the positive inner voice. To make self-talk positive, individuals must change what goes on in their subconscious, and transfer it to their external voice. Here are 2 fundamental steps to begin with:

1. Pay attention to the messages you are telling yourself. How are you communicating your beliefs to yourself and those around you?
2. Believe that if you change your self-talk to include more positive messages, you will influence your behaviour toward those messages.

The Replacements
You can develop the habit of positive self-talk around exercise or any behaviour you wish to improve. Below are examples of 6 negative self-talk scenarios along with some “alternative thought” solutions.

One - Focusing only on the problems
This is the essence of complaining. We dwell on the problem instead of the solutions. “I can’t find time, I’m too tired, I can’t afford it, there are no good facilities near my home…”

Instead: Assume that most problems have solutions, and ask “How do I want this situation to be different?”

Two - Expecting the worst
“What if I exercise and I don’t lose weight?” only promotes anxiety and does not encourage effective behaviour (like focusing on each exercise session).

Instead: Talk yourself toward positive outcomes “How can I ensure I get to each workout?” or “What activities do I really enjoy?”

Three - Thinking in absolutes
This type of thinking (using must, always, or never) exaggerates reality. The statements “I always eat too much” or “I must exercise at least an hour to make a difference” will be untrue most of the time.

Instead: Replace exaggeration with more accurate words like “I often eat more than I need to, but I can change that” or “A small amount of exercise is better than none at all.”
Four - Shoulds
Statements like “Should have, ought to, must, have to” imply a consequence if you don’t follow through, and lack of follow through leads to guilt. “I should get to the gym more often” or “I have to eat less sweets” means every time you don’t comply, you’ve done poorly.

Instead: Replace these words with ‘could’, and realize the power of choice.

Five - All or Nothing
“If I don't lose 20 lbs this time I’m cancelling my gym membership and eating anything I can get my hands on.” Thinking in extremes distorts our reality. If we're not achieving the top of the class we must be bottom of the barrel.

Instead: Recognize that there are always options that range from positive to negative in-between. With weight loss, it’s good to be reminded that you can’t get to 20 lbs of weight loss without first getting to 1, then 5, then 7, then 10 …

Six - Negativity
My clients will often say things like “I'm fat” or “I'm weak” or “I'm lazy” as a means of poking fun at themselves (usually out of discomfort). Saying these things makes them part of your identity.

Instead: Change your negative “I am” statement into a statement about behaviours - “I make healthy food choices”. You can change a behaviour much easier than an identity.

The reality about exercise is this – if it were easier, more people would be doing it. That being said, every effort you put to the task will help you habituate exercise once and for all, and it can happen in small steps if that’s what it takes (see side bar “4 Steps to Creating a Habit with Exercise”). Make the journey a little less daunting by re-framing your fitness fears into a step-wise fitness plan that operates from a point of “I can”. Once you are able to recognize the many forms of negative self-talk that may threaten your efforts at exercise, you can take the steps to gently but authentically choose the positive voice instead. Be patient and persistent with yourself and enjoy the journey as you learn to talk to yourself better. Each time you hear that negative internal voice piping up, pause. Actually smile. Calm your inner voice and rephrase your thoughts toward the positive. “I am strong and capable. I can!” It takes time to replace the habits of a lifetime, and it takes time to realize success at fitness. You can find the strength and positive voice to get there. Remember that your subconscious brain believes what it hears most often, so keep telling yourself “I can” and eventually you most certainly will!
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To learn more about Michelle turn to the next page and read her bio!
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Health and Productivity Expert Michelle Cederberg helps organizations increase productivity and effectiveness by cultivating energized and engaged employees. Through 20 years of hands-on experience as a speaker, author, fitness educator, life coach and entrepreneur she has developed innovative and practical methods to solve our enduring health and energy dilemmas in a realistic and do-able way.

She holds a Masters in Kinesiology, a BA in Psychology, a specialization in Health and Exercise Psychology, and is a Certified Exercise Physiologist (CEP) and Certified Professional Co-Active Life Coach (CPCC). She truly combines mind, body, and practicality to inspire change! Michelle is the author of three books and her newest; *Energy Now! Small Steps to an Energetic Life* has been featured in the National Post, Calgary Herald, Huffington Post, Best Health Magazine, Canadian Living and more.

As a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) she shares her experiences in a humorous and realistic way with delighted audiences across North America. Speaking with humour and passion she breaks down the mental and physical barriers that rob us of the energy we need and deserve. Through her presentations, products and personality she motivates audiences to take small steps toward big changes, so they can harness greater energy, productivity and success - even with a busy schedule!

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