

Self-Scripting for Academic Growth

Are you feeling stressed, want to make or break a habit, or improve your performance on tests and quizzes? Our internal dialogue, or 'self-talk', is a vital component to minimizing stress, influencing our behavior, and optimizing performance. We're constantly speaking to ourselves (whether we notice it or not), and what we say can impact how we think, feel and act in the moment and in the future.

This 'self-talk' is different for everyone and can be positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate, or realistic or unrealistic. Self-talk is most helpful when it is positively focused, accurate, and realistic. In contrast, unhelpful self-talk tends to be negative, inaccurate, or unrealistic. Everyone can fall into these unhelpful thinking traps, but luckily there are tricks to change our self-talk to be more helpful.

Examples of thinking traps:

Here are some common examples of thinking traps that people tend to fall into.

- Focusing on the negative: only thinking about the negative aspects of a situation and omitting the positives.
- Exaggerating/Catastrophizing: exaggerating the consequence of something, or making a catastrophe out of a single outcome (e.g., going from A to Z without accounting for B-Y).
- Predicting the future: making assumptions about how something will go or turnout without accurate and necessary supporting evidence.
- All or nothing thinking: thinking in extremes without considering other options or outcomes (e.g., thinking in terms of black and white without considering grey).

A great way to change unhelpful thinking to helpful thinking is to use a self-script. A self-script is something you say to yourself to facilitate helpful thinking, and can guide you through a test or stressful situation. Self-scripts can be instructional (e.g., step by step directions on how to complete a task), motivational (e.g., positive phrases individualized to promote resilience and perseverance), or mix of both. The type of self-script you create for yourself will be specific to your circumstances.

How do you know when to use a self-script?

- The first step in knowing when to use a self-script is knowing when you are stressed. The best way to do this is to identify your own physical, emotional, or mental (thought process) signs that you may be stressing.
- Next, it is helpful to use relaxation or stress reliever techniques (e.g., deep breathing, visualization, progressive muscle relaxation) to calm yourself so you may think clearly.
- Examine your self-talk and identify what type of unhelpful thought(s) you may be having.
- Systematically challenge your unhelpful thought
- Generate a helpful self-script. This can be instructional, motivational, or both!

How to systematically challenge your unhelpful thought:

There are a number of questions you can ask yourself to help challenge your unhelpful thoughts. And just like writing a persuasive paper or developing a convincing argument, it's best to include observable, concrete, and data-based examples as your supporting evidence to strengthen your challenge. These types of techniques can help identify and poke holes in potentially inaccurate, unrealistic, and overly negative thought processes. Below are some general tips for challenging thoughts along with examples of questions you can ask yourself to help change thought processes.

Methods of challenge:

- Think about how someone else may think in this situation
 - How would someone I admire think in this situation?
 - What are my classmates likely thinking?
 - How would someone else think?

- Do a reality check
 - How do you know something is going to happen that way?
 - What is the evidence that my thought is true/not true?
 - Is what I am thinking likely to happen?
 - What else could happen?
 - What has happened before?
 - How sure am I that something will happen the way I believe it will?
 - Why am I so sure?
 - What are the facts?
 - Am I predicting the future?
 - What would I say to my friend or loved one to help give a reality check?

- Check to see if you're having helpful thoughts.
 - What's the worst thing that could happen?
 - Is it really that bad?
 - Would I feel bad forever?
 - Is it going to matter a week, month, year from now?
 - Is this thought helpful?
 - What other positive things could happen in this situation?

- Other questions to ask.....
 - What would be a more helpful thought?
 - What would my friends think?
 - What could be positive?
 - Do I need more information before believing my thought?
 - Am I reading the future or jumping to conclusions?
 - Is there another way to think about it?
 - What's the evidence for my thought?
 - Does the evidence support my thought?

Generating a self-script:

Instructional Self-Scripts: Internal step-by-step dialogue to help recall how to do something. This can be especially helpful when you're working through a difficult problem on a test or quiz. Here are some tips that can be helpful when developing your script.

- Start building your script when studying.
 - Practice scripting the steps necessary to solve a problem. This can include using mnemonic strategies such as chunking content and using alliterations to assist in consolidating learning and facilitate effective recall.
- Review and practice your script prior to the test so you have experience using it before you are stressed.
- Include relaxation instructions (e.g., deep breathing, muscle relaxation, visualization techniques) in your script at the beginning so you can think clearly to better problem solve.
- Consider including instructional steps for actual test taking. For example, if you spend too much time on test items, remind yourself that you need to move on from the item but can return with the remainder of your time after you attempt each problem.

Motivational Self-Scripts: Internal dialogue to help change your thought process, promote motivation, reduce stress, and optimize performance.

- Identify the think trap
- Reminder to use relaxation techniques
- Challenge the unhelpful thoughts
- Use "I" statements to change your thought process
 - I am, I can, I will, I am able to....

Combined Scripts: Using principles and characteristics of both instructional and motivational self-scripts to assist in recalling or replicating process and promote helpful thought process to minimize stress and optimize performance. Personalize your script to meet your needs!

Example:

I will do well on the test because I am prepared. I understand the material because of attending class, studying, and completing the homework. In the past when I have prepared this way, I scored well on the exam. It is okay if I don't know an answer immediately. It will come to me, and I can move on and return to the question. Even if I don't know how to solve the problem, it is only one problem and will not significantly affect my overall grade in the course or my GPA.

Helpful tips to remember:

Your self-talk occurs consciously and unconsciously, but your self-script is a conscious creation of your thought process that can be molded, influenced, and drafted however you'd like! Here are some tips to make the most out of your script.

- Create your self-script when you are less stressed and are thinking clearly
- Practice the self-script regularly under non-stress conditions. Just like studying or playing a sport, the more you practice, the better you will perform when you need it!

- Write your script down on an index card for quick and easy use when you are feeling stressed (just be sure to check with your professor before bringing it into a test!)
- You can make multiple scripts for multiple situations if needed.
- Your self-script is intended to influence thought processes, and thoughts change. So, consider revising and changing your script as needed.
- Take time to reflect on how your self-script helped to reinforce the process, or to make any necessary changes.
- Remember that a little bit of stress is good and promotes optimal performance. Self-scripting can help keep your stress levels where they are most helpful.

Additional resources:

- Make an appointment with your guidance counselor to work on developing your own personalized self-script.
- It is important to note that mental health functioning can influence self-talk. If you believe your self-talk interferes with your daily functioning, or if you are concerned about your mental health, talk to your parents or counselor.

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