



Self-Talk's Role in Addiction Relapse

*"I'll just have one. It's no big deal."
"I can't have fun unless I'm drinking."
"I can handle it; it's not a problem."*

Quitting addictive substances or activities is the cue for the deluding, conniving self-talk to begin. Before you know it, this deceptive self-talk has become a deafening self-shout, and the danger of relapse is just around the corner. That's the power of language and how it shapes our thoughts and actions.

But it is possible to get ahold of this self-defeating, one-way conversation. Change your self-talk and you change yourself.

Addictions help avoid painful emotions. People develop addictions not only to substances—such as drugs, alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, sugar, food—but also to activities, such as gambling, sex, the Internet, work, theft, shopping. The common thread is a preoccupation that interferes with life, continued use or involvement despite negative consequences, and loss of control. While they may bring short-term relief, addictions result in long-term nightmares.

To the voices in your head, however, it's ALL about short-term relief.

Lynne Namka, author of *Avoiding Relapse: Catching Your Inner Con*, refers to this self-talk as the "Inner Con." This is the grand seducer who tempts you back to your addiction with huge fabrications, distortions, tricks and rationalizations that ignore the severe emotional, interpersonal and physical consequences of continued use.

"Your Inner Con is absorbed in totally protecting and preserving itself," she writes. "It feeds your fixation and agonizes about not being complete without using. It seduces, swindles and victimizes you to go against yourself and your better nature. It divides your psyche and creates

mistrust in yourself. Its purpose is to keep hounding you until you weaken and give in. It will say anything to get you to use."

This Inner Con is the fear-based part of you. It fears change. It fears facing the painful emotions that the addiction hides. Actually, it's the active voice of your addiction.

But it is not who you are. It is just a fragment of the total you.

Understanding this, relapse into addiction becomes only one choice of many. Doing some or all of the following actions will help counter this negative, seductive self-talk:

Get support. Talk to a trusted friend or family member, or attend 12-step meetings. Work with a mental health professional. Find an "accountability partner."

Counter the negative, distorted self-talk with affirmations. "I am the master, not the slave. I choose not to smoke," or "I am able to say 'No.' I choose to read a book rather than use the Internet," or "I am a good person, and I choose to have friends who do not pressure me into drinking with them."

Journal. Make lists of all of your Inner Con's statements. Write dialogues between this and other inner characters. Write all the emotions that surface when you're not engaged in your addiction. Then talk to a friend, a sponsor or your therapist.

Schedule daily contemplation time to help change beliefs and destructive self-talk. Use this time to journal, meditate, pray, read or study. You may want to make this a daily practice for the rest of your life.

Replacing the negative self-talk with supportive beliefs and self-talk frees up blocked positive energy. It puts you on a path not to destruction but to fulfillment. *

10 Ways to Love ...Fearlessly!

Let's face it: love is messy. With its magnified highs and lows, love is unpredictable and never what we expect—so much so that we might be tempted to cower in fear. But if we approach love with the courage of a warrior, we can have relationships of heroic proportions. Here are 10 ways:

- 1. Be yourself.** If we want to be loved for who we truly are, why put on an act?
- 2. Don't believe your stories.** Our interpretation of events and feelings is, in fact, just one possibility for what is actually true. Focus on what IS to get closer to the truth.
- 3. Stay open.** Fear's favorite pastime is to shut us down. But when we are vulnerable, true connection to others is possible.
- 4. Speak up.** We become silent when we desperately want to connect.
- 5. Stop looking for perfection.** More than likely, what we call "high standards" is a mask for our own feelings of inadequacy.
- 6. Embrace the messiness.** It gives us the gift of growth.
- 7. Get mad.** Learn the difference, though, between expressing anger responsibly and dumping it.
- 8. Love with no thought of what you'll get in return.** This is fearless love in action.
- 9. Take responsibility.** Be accountable for your own emotions, thoughts and actions.
- 10. Love yourself.** Only then can you love others and be loved. *

A Letter From *Christopher Ann Vallier* LCSW, JD



One of the biggest challenges for anyone struggling to wean off of addictive substances or behaviors is to transform the voices inside the head from unsupportive (“Just once won’t make a difference...”) to helpful (“I know what will happen if I have just one, and I am able to say ‘No.’”). Read the lead feature article this month to explore ways to shift to more positive self-talk, as well as the back-page article, which deals with self-defeating behaviors and actions.

It’s only a short step away from constant negative, critical self-talk to allowing others to talk to you in abusive ways. The page 3 article on stopping this verbal abuse is full of good examples that will help you identify—and then stop—the yelling, belittling and emotional injury that result from such relationships.

The Top 10 this issue asks us to be advocates for our love relationships, to approach loving and all its challenges with courage and steadfast conviction.

Part of the responsibility of an advocate is to protect and defend...in this case, protect and defend our loved ones and the relationship itself. But this is quite different from being “defensive” in a relationship, which is simply not taking responsibility for **our own** actions. Take the quiz to see how defensive you are and some alternatives to defensiveness.

Don’t hesitate to call if you need to talk about these or any other issues in your life.

How Defensive Are You?



In her book, *Taking the War Out of Our Words: The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication*, Sharon Ellison estimates that we use 95% of our communications energy being defensive. Indeed, as soon as we feel any threat, either of not getting what we want or of being harmed or put down in some way, we are ready to protect ourselves by being defensive. Imagine how more enjoyable our communications could be if we learned how to respond nondefensively and how to avoid provoking defensiveness in others! Take this Thriving quiz to see how defensive you tend to be.

True False

- 1. When a police officer pulls me over, I’ve always got a “reason” ready for why I was speeding.
- 2. When people criticize or judge me, I am quick to point out their own faults.
- 3. I often think, “Can’t others see that I’m not perfect?”
- 4. If people are upset or disappointed with me, I let them know why they are wrong with explanations and excuses.
- 5. I’m afraid that what others think of and say about me is true.
- 6. I’m always looking for the hidden critical message beneath people’s requests.
- 7. If I don’t defend myself, I’ll just get run over.
- 8. If I’m open to people’s criticisms and judgments of me, it means I’m weak.
- 9. I can never admit that I’m wrong.
- 10. I may not defend myself verbally to someone, but I’ll be sure to get that person back somehow.
- 11. If I’m at fault for something, it’s always because of some factor outside of myself over which I had no control.

If you responded true more often than false to the above questions, consider some of the following alternatives to defensiveness.

- 1. I’m always looking to improve myself, so I welcome feedback from others on how well I am doing (or not).
- 2. I sit with someone’s criticism of me to see if there is a kernel of truth in it. If there is, I acknowledge it and work to improve in that area.
- 3. I realize that sometimes people’s criticisms about me are all about the “story” they have made up around a situation. I don’t take it personally, and I don’t take it on as my responsibility.
- 4. I know that I can actually have greater influence in a situation by acknowledging that I may be wrong.
- 5. When someone uses the words “always” and “never” I ignore those words and focus instead on the rest of the message.
- 6. I take responsibility for what I can change.
- 7. I listen for the (usually) hidden need expressed in a person’s complaint or anger, acknowledge the need, and then see whether there is something I can do to meet it. *

Stop It! Learning to Deal With Verbal Abuse

Sarah is watching TV with her husband Erik. A commercial for a fast food company comes on, and she picks up the remote and mutes it.

"Hey!" Erik yells. "Why the hell did you do that! I was watching it!"

"Oh, sorry," Sarah says, turning the sound back on.

"Well, it's too late now!" he rages. "I missed it. *You know* that I've been wanting a hamburger all day."

Sarah stares at him, shocked. She hadn't known that, and how would viewing the commercial satisfy his desire? She's trying to figure all this out, why he got so mad, what she can do to fix it.

"Sorry," she says. "I thought you hated commercials."

He turns to her, calls her an idiot and an obscene name, heads for the door, then slams it behind him.

Now, she's even more confused, remembering all the times he's complained about commercials. Didn't he just say last week that he wanted a DVR so he could skip them? But Sarah's afraid to say that, to set him off again, so she just stares blankly at the screen.

Like many in verbally abusive relationships, Sarah thinks that if only *she* changed, *she* communicated more clearly, *she* explained things better, her husband wouldn't get so mad at her.

But as Patricia Evans, author of *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, explains, abuse victims don't realize that the problem isn't theirs: it's in the abuser's need to dominate and control. When Sarah's husband yells at her for no reason, she thinks he's misunderstood her. She doesn't realize that he's not looking for understanding, he's establishing his power over her.

Sarah's story exhibits several of the hallmarks of verbal abuse:

- It's hostile.
- It's unpredictable and even bizarre; the attack comes out of the blue.
- It's manipulative and controlling.
- It happens when no one else is around.
- The victim feels confused and surprised.

Other common aspects of verbal abuse are:

- The words are hurtful; they attack the person or his/her abilities.
- Verbal abuse may be overt, such as angry outbursts, or subtler, such as jokes that convey a general disdain for the other person or her/his interests.
- If confronted, abusers deny the abuse and try to convince the victims that they are too sensitive or are imagining things.

- It's insidious. Over time, the victim's self-confidence erodes. Victims stop trusting themselves or their perceptions. They become conditioned to the abuse and adapt. They may even think it's normal, that all people treat their spouses that way.

What Can You Do If You Are Being Verbally Abused?

First and foremost, recognize that the abuse is not your fault, and that you can't debate or reason or understand it away. What you can do is refuse to play along.

- Respond to abuse with "Stop it!" or "Don't talk to me like that"—twice if necessary.
- Resist the urge to explain or defend. Remember, the abuser is not interested in understanding you; the abuser wants to control you.
- Listen to your feelings and believe them. Don't believe it when an abuser tells you you're crazy or wrong or that you can't take a joke.
- If the abuser keeps trying to provoke you, assess the danger and, if necessary, remove yourself. Verbal abuse can be a doorway to physical abuse.



- Get support through a therapist and/or a support group. An abuser's behavior is designed to keep you off track; you'll need support to see it for what it is and develop the self-esteem to stand up for yourself consistently.
- Seek information. Read the books and articles written on the subject. You're not alone. Other people have paved the path for your freedom. Take advantage of what they offer.

When you calmly stand up for yourself and refuse to be goaded

into defending or explaining, the abuser will give up. That's because, as Suzette Haden Elgin, author of *You Can't Say That to Me!*, explains, abusers need a victim; if you won't play that role, he or she can't abuse. Elgin also recommends ignoring the bait, but then responding to the underlying assumption that often hides in abuse.

For example, Sarah could have responded to Erik, "How long have you thought I didn't care about you?"

Erik would have been flustered, thrown back on himself, this time staring at her in shock. Sure, he'd recover; he would use some of the common abuse strategies that the authors outline in their books. But it won't matter, because no matter what he says, Sarah will not be provoked.

Verbal abuse *can't* function without a victim, and with a lot of support and information and self-care, Sarah has learned to refuse that role. ✱

Saving Ourselves from Self-Sabotage

When he was a boy, Stan vowed he'd never be a father like his own father—aloof, critical and emotionally unavailable. Yet, 30 years later, he catches himself treating his son harshly and constantly judging him for not measuring up.

Patricia loves her job and her boss. The only thorn is that her boss prizes punctuality and Patricia just can't seem to be on time for anything, whether it's a team meeting or that project that was due last week.

What Stan and Patricia have in common is self-sabotage. It eats away inside, creating a cycle of self-destruction with the result that we aren't really living the life we want for ourselves.

"If we don't succeed in identifying and owning this sinister part, we can never be free," says Stanley Rosner, author of *The Self-Sabotage Cycle*.

Numerous studies show that women are more prone to lower self-esteem and self-doubting thoughts. This leads to self-sabotaging behavior, according to author Nancy Good. In *Slay Your Own Dragons*, she lists several signs of self-defeating behavior:

1. Being overly passive, fearful,

listless or indecisive, so that chances pass us by.

2. Having a chronically chaotic financial situation.

3. Being controlled by depression and anxiety.

4. Being controlled by compulsive behaviors to abuse alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, food, physical exercise, etc. Being compulsively late. Expressing anger inappropriately.

5. Being mistreated by partners and spouses. Being stuck in an unhappy relationship but doing nothing to change the situation. Having a series of unsatisfying relationships.

Recognizing self-defeating thoughts and behavior is the first step to change. The first step is to observe yourself and your thoughts.

The next step is to take responsibility for your thoughts and behavior—so that you control them and they stop controlling you.

Self-observation is a powerful tool against the behaviors that defeat us. For example, Stan could take his son fishing taking care to be positive and to stay silent when he feels a criticism

rising in his throat. To do this, he would first have to decide that a good relationship with his son was more important than being "right."

Setting a goal is the next step. Without blame or shame, choose one behavior to change. For example, Patricia could decide not to be late anymore. To do this, she would have to decide that something was more important than being late—a job she loves, for example. One tactic might be to write a positive affirmation each night in a journal, or set her clock an hour early, or enlist a friend to call her for a week, reminding her to walk out the door. After a while, the rewards of being on time could become greater than the self-defeating cycle of being late.

It's not easy to change patterns of self-sabotage, but with time and practice—and a good dose of self-love—it is possible to end a self-defeating cycle and live the life we truly want for ourselves. *



Christopher Ann Vallier, LCSW, JD

12011 San Vicente Blvd., Suite 402

Los Angeles, CA 90049

310-440-1015

www.VallierTherapy.com

Chris Vallier is a California Licensed Clinical Social Worker, as well as an attorney and California State Bar member. She worked most recently with the Adult Outpatient Program in the Department of Psychiatry at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

Previously with the Department of Justice in Washington, DC, she made her professional transition to therapy with the Older Adults Outpatient Psychotherapy Program at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

Now in private psychotherapy practice in Brentwood, CA, Chris works primarily with individual adults, couples, seniors, working women and those in mid-life transition.