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# TALK BACK

*to your*

## Negative Self-Talk

by Molly Rose Teuke

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## Molly Rose Teuke

Molly Rose is an experienced coach and writer, focusing her energy around helping clients make a smooth transition to their next chapter, whatever that means to them — navigating new frontiers, launching a small business, or welcoming retirement. She has been trained in coaching basics by Coach University, and holds an advanced brain-based coaching certification from Results Coaching Systems, powered by the NeuroLeadership Group.



She is also a member of the North American training team for the NeuroLeadership Group, and is a natural facilitator, skilled at creating energy and managing the dynamics in small group training environments.

Molly Rose holds a BA in Journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and an MA in Communications from Ohio University. She is a member of the executive board of the International Coach Federation/Wisconsin Chapter.

She has an abiding curiosity about how our brains work, reads avidly in neuroscience, and speaks often on diverse aspects of “How to Get Your Brain on Your Side.”

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## Preface

WE CAN BE HARD ON OURSELVES. In fact, we can be our own worst enemy. You know what I'm talking about, right? That voice that says, "Who do you think you are, trying to start a new chapter?" or "Forget it, no way will you be able to make this work," or "Yeah, sure you'll succeed in this new direction. Right!"

But you don't have to be your own worst enemy. Because that's not you talking. It's your brain. And it is possible to get your brain on your side. With a few simple tips, you can learn to talk back to your negative self-talk, with power and authority. You can believe in your brain as well as your heart that you will make it. And that makes all the difference in your success.

I'd love to hear how these tips work for you. Feel free to let me know at [mollyrose@mollyrosecoaching.com](mailto:mollyrose@mollyrosecoaching.com).

And congratulations on taking time to get your brain on your side.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Molly Rose" followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line.

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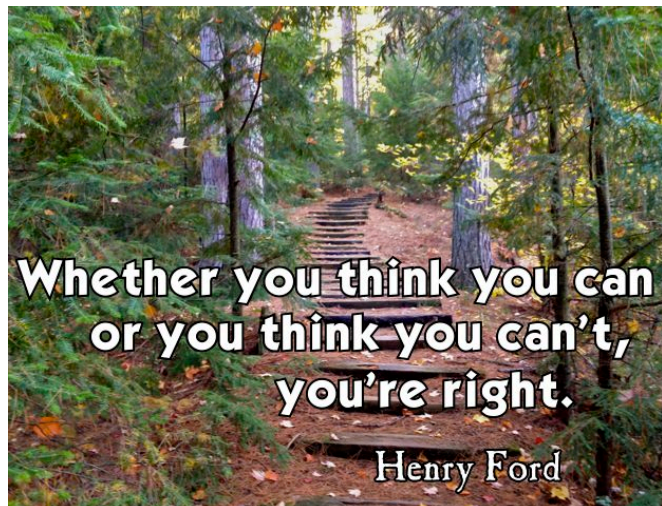
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## Why talk back to your negative self-talk?

Because self-talk has an impact, that's why. As Henry Ford famously said, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right."

Negative thoughts take their toll — not only on your success and your overall life satisfaction, but on your health. They make us anxious, nervous, and prone to procrastination and depression. But simply ignoring them isn't the answer. In *The Willpower Instinct*, Kelly McGonigal suggests that "... when people try to push away self-critical thoughts... their self-esteem and mood plummet faster than when people openly contemplate such thoughts."

So what are you supposed to do? Acknowledge your self-critical thoughts and gently set them aside, replacing them with positive thoughts. Easier said than done — and that's why I'm here, to share some tips on how to do it.

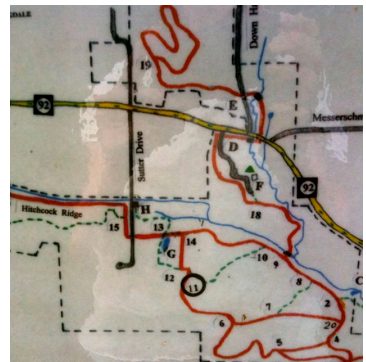


## Tip #1: Get to know your brain. Understand how the brain develops negative thinking.

Talking back to your negative self-talk is easier when you have some idea what's happening up there when those negative voices pipe up. Let's start with getting to know your brain.

It used to be a given that adult brains were done developing. Remember that old saw, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks?” Turns out not true. You *never* stop growing your brain. Every time your brain encounters anything new, it changes.

It turns out our brain cells are organized more like roads on a map than like cogs in a machine. Every moment of every day, your brain is busy laying down new mental pathways and creating new connections across existing pathways. It's how your brain makes sense of everything that pours into it every moment of every day. Your brain creates mental “maps” to create thoughts from all the bits of information you feed into it.



**FACT WE CAN AND DO GROW A BETTER  
BRAIN EVERY DAY OF OUR LIVES.**

Thanks to brain imaging technologies, scientists can now track how thoughts and impulses move through the brain as electrical signals, following the mental maps you lay down. They can now literally see that every time you encounter a new fact, a new experience, a new idea, any new input at all, it creates a new data point upstairs that gets connected to other data points. This gives you a framework for how to talk back to your negative self-talk.

These maps reflect all the different routes information travels when you think. They show all the connections — the pathways — from one data point to another in your brain. Your opinion of yourself comes from your brain connecting the data points you connect most often. Connect certain data points often enough and you create an expressway. Your self-talk is your brain moving along the mental pathways you travel most often. When you set a course for yourself and then repeatedly tell yourself, “Idiot! You’re not cut out for this,” or “Give it up, this is never going to work and it’s never going to make you happy,” you’re creating routes your brain will begin to travel by default. The result: negative self-talk. Your brain doesn’t discriminate between positive and negative messages. It simply goes down the most oft-traveled routes.

**FACT POSITIVE MESSAGES BROADEN OUR MIND  
AND EXPAND OUR FIELD OF VISION.**

We have a choice in the messages we take to heart and use to create our self-talk. Which ones serve us best? Positive messages, of course. In *Positivity*, her groundbreaking work on the science of being positive, renowned research psychologist Barbara Fredrickson notes that positivity broadens our minds and expands our field of vision, just as some flowers open in sunlight and close in darkness. Then why do we choose to listen to negative messages and accept them as gospel? It’s our brain’s way of protecting us.

**Tip #2 Don’t buy into your brain’s scare tactics.**

The brain’s primary organizing principle is danger versus safety. Our brains don’t like anything that smacks of danger. Yet how can success in life be perceived as dangerous?

Because success usually requires changing something up in your life, and to do that, you have to do things differently than you've ever done before. Your brain doesn't like "different." It likes familiar behaviors because they feel safe.

Your brain lives to keep you safe by steering clear of danger. It's as much in favor of your success as you are — it just views success

a little differently. It's not about achieving new goals. It's about surviving to see the dawn of another day. That means no risk. No risk of any kind.

Just keep doing what you've always done and your brain will be happy. Understand that when your brain is shouting, "No! Don't even go there!" it's just doing its job of protecting you.



Once you understand that, you have a much better shot at talking your brain down from the ledge, which leaves you more able to move into uncertain territory.

**FACT OUR BRAINS WANT TO AVOID RISK, AND THAT MEANS "DON'T TRY ANYTHING NEW."**

And let's face it, trying to shift into a new place or role in your life is nothing if not uncertain territory. To your brain, trying to shift your mental gears by, say, giving up your paycheck and doing something completely different, is lunatic. Even anticipating change feels pretty risky to your brain. You can either be daunted by your brain's vigorous cautions, or you can retort, "Ok, I get that this could be a little risky, but I'm going to do it anyway, so you might as well help me out here."



Another reason we embrace negative messages, according to several research scientists, including Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist at Florida State University, is that our brains are wired to give up to five times more attention to negative inputs than we give to positive inputs. We also respond more quickly and with longer lasting impact to negative inputs. We remember them longer.

**FACT OUR BRAINS ARE WIRED TO PAY UP TO FIVE TIMES  
MORE ATTENTION TO NEGATIVE INPUTS.**

When you think about our primitive brain, it makes sense. Attending to a scary rustling in the grass more urgently than to a more positive experience led to survival. Your brain experiences “negative” as “dangerous” and paying more attention leads to more certain survival.

What does that mean for self-talk? That a negative message from a family member, colleague, or friend — even the checker at the grocery store — is going to stick in your brain five times longer than a kind or encouraging word. Sure, we have more sophisticated brains today, but that primitive brain still has its influence.



Paying attention to the negative also makes us less smart. In a classic 2001 study by Friedman and Förster, two groups of people were asked to lead an imaginary mouse through a maze on paper. One group was moving toward a chunk of cheese at the end of the maze. The other group was trying to avoid a hovering owl. When tested for problem-solving acumen after completing the exercise, the group escaping the owl had significantly less success in solving simple problems.

When I'm stung by an unkind remark and I can't let go of it, it's helpful to realize that obsessing about it is just an outdated part of my brain's job description. That helps me let go and focus instead on taking in the encouraging words I hear.

### **Tip #3 Monitor and edit the words you use.**

Make them positive words. In their *Psychology Today* blog, "Words Can Change Your Brain," Andrew Newburg and Mark Robert Waldman, authors of the book of the same name, have an entire post on "The Most Dangerous Word in the World." That word is "No," and when you say it, your brain is likely to release stress chemicals, and signal the brain of anyone who's listening to you to do the same. Their blog is worth reading; you'll find a link to it at the end of this ebook.

Another word to edit out of your speech is "but." That word suggests you're immediately going to contradict yourself, as in "I want to succeed in this new goal, but I don't know where to begin." Substitute the word "and" — "I want to succeed in this new goal, and I don't know where to begin" — and feel how different that sentence sounds. It puts the emphasis right back on "I want to succeed," and makes you feel you can figure out where to begin. Be a but-buster.

### **Tip #4 Recognize negative messages for what they are.**

You can't talk back to your negative self-talk if you don't recognize it. Recognizing a negative message from someone else isn't that hard, because you usually feel it as well as hear it. You tense up, your heart beats a little faster, your face flushes. Recognizing your own

negative messages is tougher, because you don't have the same physiological response when you hear your own brain putting you down. And perhaps because you don't want to believe you could really say those things to yourself. Listen actively to your own self-talk and notice the negative messages. If you think you don't have any, you're fooling yourself. It's critical to get past that. Hint: The voice that says, "I don't have any negative self-talk" is exactly the voice we're talking about. As Jeffrey Schwartz and Rebecca Gladding point out in *You Are Not Your Brain: The 4-Step Solution for Changing Bad Habits, Ending Unhealthy Thinking and Taking Control of Your Life*, "You can't change what you can't see."

## Tip #5 Make a conscious effort to notice positive messages.

Understand that your brain is wired to be more sensitive to negative messages, and take steps to overcome that. Dr. Roy Baumeister has written extensively on this phenomenon. According to a 2001 article he co-authored in the *Review of General Psychology*: "Bad information is processed more thoroughly than good....

The self is more motivated to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones." That means we have to work a little harder at noticing and taking in positive messages and making them

our own, especially when we're trying something new. The more you do this, the more you hardwire the practice and pretty soon positive self-talk becomes a habit. A really good habit.



**FACT YOUR PERSONAL BELIEF IN YOUR ABILITY  
IS YOUR BEST PREDICTOR OF SUCCESS.**

Shawn Achor cites an encouraging study in *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. A group of entry-level accountants was surveyed for their beliefs about themselves, and their performance was subsequently tracked. It turns out their own belief in their ability was a better predictor of job performance than actual level of skill or training. Not their spouse's or their best friend's or their colleague's belief. Their own. It takes us back to the Henry Ford quote at the beginning: "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." Not whether your spouse or friend or mentor thinks you can. Whether YOU think you can.

### **Tip #6 Surround yourself with people who believe in you and say it out loud.**

The more you hear, trust, and embrace messages from people who believe in you, the safer those messages feel to your brain. In this case, familiarity breeds safety. There's no shortage of people who believe in you and want to see you happy. You just have to seek them out. Go out of your way to spend time with people facing the same challenges you face, and seek out the "cheerleaders," the people who always have an encouraging word. Stay connected to them. Create a mastermind group of people you can call on when you need a boost. Enlist your family, your friends, your professional peers. Specifically request their support and explain why their positive messages are so important to your success. Every now and then, take a moment to thank them for their support.

**FACT NO TWO BRAINS ARE ALIKE**

How does it happen that one person is certain we're going to succeed, while the next person has doubts? No two brains are alike. We all have different life experiences, and no two brains create the same set of mental maps, or the same view of you. It's why two



people who know you pretty well can have very different opinions: "You can do this!" versus "You'll never make this work."

Spend more time with people who share positive messages — they feed your self-confidence, they make the scary future feel

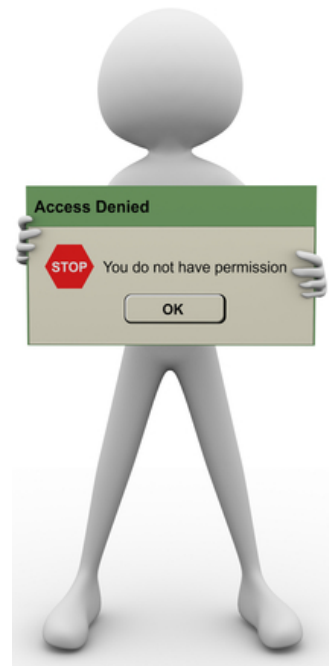
safer, and they make you happy, which neuro-scientists agree increases your likelihood of a satisfying life.

Here's another reason: Our brains are highly tuned to status. Every moment of every day, our brains are scanning the environment and gauging where we stand in the pecking order of our world. When you get an emotional boost from learning something new, mastering a new skill, or just hearing a compliment, that's your brain noticing that your status has just improved. When you suffer a status setback (someone beats you at tennis or golf, or someone takes a cheap potshot at your ego), you get that bruised feeling that comes with diminished status. It undermines your self-confidence and leaves you more susceptible to believing your own negative self-talk.

We simply need to hear positive messages. When you take in a compliment or encouraging word, when you trust it and focus on it, you're helping to pave positive pathways in your brain. Surrounding yourself with supporters is critical to successfully talking back to your negative self-talk with power and authority.

## Tip #7 Steer clear of people who feed or reinforce your negative self-talk.

You don't always have the luxury of walking away from the naysayers in our lives. But you can usually limit their opportunities to put you down. People who put you down are sometimes just trying to rile you up. Accept negative messages with confident composure and poise. Eventually, those messages will no longer stir up your brain and you'll find it easier to block them. The time will come when instead of feeling stress hormones flooding your brain at a negative message, you'll automatically respond mentally with a positive message. That's when you begin to feel you can overcome any obstacle and achieve your new dreams.



## Tip #8 Make a daily list of everything you do well.

One of the keys to maintaining a positive attitude is reminding yourself of all you do well. Each day, make a list of what you did well that day. Post it where you can see it often and read it out loud. If you can't think of anything, make it as simple as, "I kept

my cool when that driver tried to cut me off," or "I learned something new today."



Remember how critical mental maps are? If you get in the habit of turning your thoughts down positive pathways, it gets easier to ignore negative input, which means those

negative pathways become grown over. You can't go down these opposite pathways at the same time, and your brain will choose the path that gets more traffic. Your job is to make sure your positive

self-talk map gets more traffic and becomes your default route. Make it harder for your brain to go down a negative path. Make a list of your successes and your good points, look at it often, and take it to heart.

## **Tip #9 Find everyday ways to enhance your status by exceeding your own expectations.**

Remember what we covered in Tip #5 about status and how important it is to your brain's sense of wellbeing? The good news is, we don't actually need other people to boost our status or our self-esteem. Figuring out a puzzle or a Sudoku gives us the same pleasing little emotional boost as besting someone else. Your brain doesn't distinguish between self and others when it comes to status. You can beat yourself at something — even something so trivial as a game of solitaire — and feel great about it. Ditto for mastering something new, tackling a new project, or finishing one in record time. It all counts. Success is a great force in helping you get off the negative self-talk expressway.



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**Here's that link I mentioned — to The Most Dangerous Word in the World:**

<http://bit.ly/16WzKd6> “The Most Dangerous Word in the World” by Andrew Newburg and Mark Robert Waldman appears in their *Psychology Today* blog, “Words Can Change Your Brain.” In this helpful blog, you'll also learn about the most powerful word in your life. It's worth a read.

## What's next?

Now that you've learned something about negative self-talk and had a chance to think about your own negative voice, managing your self-talk might seem like a big job, no matter how positive your intentions. Yes, it can be. Be assured you can and will build your talking-back muscle. With a little practice, you'll find it much easier than you ever thought possible. Before long, you'll realize you're really good at talking back to your self-talk with power and authority.

I can help. Using a coach is a great way to fast-track the process. Coaching is one of the fastest growing success tools out there. From Fortune 500 executives to small business owners, people who want to create and succeed in a new direction are using coaches to achieve their highest potential — which includes mastering their negative self-talk. I'm trained and certified in Advanced Brain-based Coaching Skills to help you manage your self-talk and find your own personal path to success.

If you'd like to try a brainstorming session around taking charge of your own little voice, and your life, let's talk. I look forward to helping you break through your negative self talk and get your brain on your side once and for all.

To schedule your own complimentary brainstorming session, email me directly at [mollyrose@mollyrosecoaching.com](mailto:mollyrose@mollyrosecoaching.com) or call me at 608 770 7076.