



# Self-Talk

## Choosing Your Story

Brad Simkins

**I**magine that you are walking along a downtown street. You come to a crosswalk and wait for the light to change. Unexpectedly you feel a shove in the back, causing you to almost step into oncoming traffic. Your first thought is that some impatient punk is trying to make trouble.

What are your thoughts? How are you feeling? Do you see red; are you aggravated and reactive?

You turn around to confront the offender and discover that an elderly man has tripped and fallen, bumping into you.

Now what are your thoughts? How are you feeling? You might become calm and helpful, caring for the welfare of a stranger. The situations are the same, but you have a different reaction based on your perception of reality, on what you were thinking. Initially we assumed the negative, then we empathized and became forgiving. In split seconds, totally opposite emotions happened. In those split seconds, we've chosen how to feel. When I share with clients the observation that we can and do choose our feelings, they will often say that their emotions are a reflex; that they cannot control how they feel; that "it just happens".

While there is some validity to this, it is not completely true. We cannot choose the feelings that our thoughts create, but we can choose what we think. We can choose thoughts that are more positive, or at least neutral. We can elect to challenge our initial thought and choose to reframe it to a more open, more positive, thought. Reflex thoughts are often triggered from events of our past. They are not based in the present and have little, if anything, to do with the person or situation we are reacting against. When we monitor our thoughts and make conscious choices, we empower ourselves.

One of my favorite books is 'Man's Search for Meaning' by Dr. Viktor Frankl. Dr. Frankl shares his experience as a Jewish psychiatrist in a Nazi death camp. He relates an experience when the Nazis were forcing him and several others to dig a deep trench. One of the guards walked by and hit him in the back of the head with the butt of his rifle, calling out slurs and other demeaning comments. In that moment, he discovered the strength within to choose to not get angry with the guard by focusing his thoughts on having pity for the guard, realizing that the guard was a prisoner of the Nazi hatred as much as he was. Through the horror and tragedy he witnessed and experienced, Dr. Frankl discovered what he calls "our ultimate freedom" – the freedom to choose how we will respond in any situation.

Choosing a different way of thinking often involves reprogramming. Reactive patterns are created out of habit. The longer we have reacted a certain way, the more entrenched the habit becomes. Like walking the same way through a forest, we soon start to wear a path. The more we use that path, the more distinct the path becomes, and the more likely we are to walk along it. However, we can interrupt the pattern of negative thought. Reprogramming our thoughts through conscious choice leads us down a new path. A new groove begins to be formed. The old path, no longer used, fills in and slowly fades away.

An important target of reprogramming is self-talk. Many people are not aware of the negative thinking that goes on within them. If we have had a relationship with an abusive person (a parent, partner, supervisor), we often carry the role of abuser within us. Negative and hurtful things often remain inside of us and we echo them to the world, even when we are no longer with that person or situation. We denigrate ourselves and dismiss our worth; it can happen so subtly and so pervasively that we may not even realize we do so. We become the abuser de facto.

As we reprogram our thoughts from within, we apply them to the world outside of ourselves. Rather than responding to a motorist who has cut you off with "What a jerk!" you can choose to pull back and give them room.

It may seem phony, as if we are making up a story. But when our reaction is rage, and we "know" that the "jerk" in the next car is endangering and disrespecting us, aren't we making up a story then, too?

People will often view the negative version as reality and the positive version as make believe. Yet both are made up. And if we are going to make up a story, isn't it better to make up a positive story? If we are going to make up a story, why not make up a story that will help us stay in a good mood, be stress-free, and be empathetic to what comes our way.

When we react angrily, we only **Continued on page 13** ruin our day. The offending party has already gone on their way, probably thinking no more of it. The question must be asked: Who are you hurting? Getting angry at the other person has no real effect on them. But it does affect you. Anger is a cancer that eats us from the inside. Like rust on a car, it corrodes and weakens us.

When we set an intention to monitor our thoughts, interrupt negative thinking, and choose more positive thoughts, we begin a new journey of how we see the world and how we see ourselves. The peace within echoes onto the world at large.

*Brad Simkins counselor, author and radio host has founded and directed three nonprofit agencies, was a foster parent for 21 years, and works with individuals, couples and families of various ethnicities, religions, races and sexual orientation. Offering clients a balance of Eastern philosophy and Western approaches to Psychology emphasizing solution focused brief counseling he can be reached at (206) 455-0984 [www.innerguidehealing.com](http://www.innerguidehealing.com)*