


Make Every Session Count: A Coping Skills Manual

**"I think I can...
I think I can..."**



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"I think I can...I think I can..."

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Make Every Session Count* by John Preston, Nikki Varzos, and Doug Liebert

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"I think I can...I think I can..."

"I WANT TO GO back to school so I can get a better paying job. But my youngest is having problems; his grades are dropping and his attitude is getting worse and worse. His father is no help at all!"

Stephanie is a single mom with two teenage boys, working at a dead-end job that barely lets her pay the bills.

"I don't have medical coverage and can't afford a therapist for us. What am I supposed to do?! I could quit my job and get on welfare, then at least I'd have some medical care. But I don't want to do that. I want to go to school, but then I'd have even less time with the boys and they really need me now."

We're going to let you choose Stephanie's next line. Does she say, *"I can't cope. I feel helpless...stuck, I can't deal with all this!"* Or, *"Things are really tough right now, but I've been through worse. This is going to be hard, but I can handle it?"*

Stephanie is, as the saying goes, "between a rock and a hard place." She knows she is facing a difficult time. However, if she *believes*, she can cope, she may be distressed, but not overwhelmed—she'll feel more or less confident that she can manage.

On the other hand, if Stephanie begins to *think and believe*, "I can't cope," she'll feel more and more stress. Have her coping skills actually diminished? No. But her self-confidence is lessened if she doesn't believe she's able to handle the situation. Feelings of helplessness always increase distress.

How You Think Makes a Difference

We interpret our world through our *thoughts*, our *beliefs*, our *perceptions*, and our *attitudes*. By becoming aware of how your thoughts and attitudes influence your feelings, you can gain more control over your feelings—and your life.

Thoughts and attitudes are not mystical experiences. They naturally occur in our heads all the time

—we're constantly "talking to myself," sometimes out loud, but more often silently. As we discussed before your "self-talk" includes your observations of the world, conclusions, predictions, and problem solving. It happens *automatically*. And that self-talk can actually create or intensify positive or negative *feelings* (sadness, self-doubt, depression, anxiety, fear, anger, pain, discomfort, uncertainty...).

When you're faced with serious stressors or traumatic events, your self-talk is likely to become more negative ("I can't cope...Everything I do is wrong"), leading to low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

Your life—and the progress of your brief therapy—will improve if you begin to turn your self-talk around. You can do that by paying attention to it, then taking action steps to change it.

Listen to Yourself

In order to get a handle on this thinking-feeling-action process, you'll need to start paying attention to what you are feeling and thinking. For example, you'll notice change in your moods and feelings during therapy sessions. Your therapist will help by asking questions about how you're feeling, and what you think or believe about an event or person or life circumstance. The goal will be to spot unrealistic, negative, or pessimistic thinking when it occurs.

As you begin to notice and recognize your thoughts and feelings you may actually find your feelings getting stronger. That's because for the first time in a long time you may actually be allowing yourself to feel them. Don't panic, it's normal!

How to Turn Your Negative Thinking Around

Please keep in mind that you don't have to change your whole personality to have an impact on negative thinking. All you have to do is a simple three-step process. It takes just a minute. Step one: Notice negative, automatic thoughts the moment they occur. Ask yourself, "I'm feeling upset right now...What's going through my mind? What am I thinking?" Step two: Ask yourself, "Are my thoughts at this moment 100 percent accurate and realistic?" Step three: Replace negative and/or unrealistic thoughts with thoughts that are more accurate. In the next few pages we'll elaborate on this simple process. Let's start by looking at an example.

Your life—and the progress of your brief therapy—will improve if you can begin to turn your self-talk around.

Imagine you are asked to give a twenty-minute presentation at work before a group of fifty people. You seriously dislike speaking in public; in fact, it terrifies you. If you are like a lot of people, you may begin thinking, moments before you talk, "Oh my God, look at all those people, I'm going to blow it! I'm going to start to shake, my voice is going to crack, and I'll forget my speech. I'll humiliate myself and they're going to think I'm stupid!" These all-too-common thoughts are good examples of the sort of self-talk that focuses largely on negative outcomes. Such pessimism can scare you and increase the intensity of your experience to disaster, anxiety, and self-doubt.

If you were to think instead, "Oh my God, look at all those people. Now settle down. Sure I'm feeling anxious. Lots of people don't like public speaking and it's normal to be a little on edge about this, but I need to encourage and support myself. I'm going to give it my best. I may not win an Academy Award, but I'll get through this." Or, "I don't like this kind of stuff, but I'll survive. It may not be pleasant, but it won't kill me."

By replacing the negative thoughts with realistic, appropriate, and supportive beliefs, you admit to your unpleasant feelings while giving yourself support. In doing so, you are also stemming the tide of negative thoughts. The last thing that you need to do prior to getting up to give a talk is to scare yourself! The stress will not be completely avoided, but the outcome will be quite different. Your silent but potent inner voice can have a tremendous effect on the amount of stress you experience and your feelings of self-confidence.

Challenge Your Thinking

You're saying, "Okay. I can do that, but be more specific." Fair enough.

In this section, we've identified several common obstacles to healthy thinking and some specific ways to challenge them. You can interrupt negative thinking if you'll stop and ask yourself a question that examines your thoughts. Look inside yourself and bring your thoughts into conscious awareness. Use your realistic thinking to make positive thoughts and changes. The idea is to *identify* how your thoughts are upsetting you, then to *challenge* any faulty thinking and replace it with a healthier outlook. How

many of these are part of your style?

- *Jumping to conclusions* ("I just know she thinks I'm a jerk," "I know I'm blowing this job interview...the interviewer looks bored to tears"). How can anyone know with certainty what others are thinking or feeling? No one can read another person's mind. Jumping to negative conclusions always increases distress. In such situations, it's helpful to ask yourself, "What do I really know about this situation?"
- *Predicting the worst possible outcome* ("This is going to be horrible! I'll never get over it"). Remind yourself that you can't tell the future. Then ask yourself, "Where is the evidence that this terrible catastrophe is about to happen? What makes me think that this absolutely will happen?"
- *All-or-nothing thinking* ("I can't do anything right!"). Challenge directly with "Is that absolutely true? I can't do *anything* right?", then list a few things you've done correctly. Focus on the specific problem or mistake and acknowledge it.
- *Seeing the worst* (and ignoring the positive things). Remind yourself, "I need to look at the whole picture, including the good things, not just the things that go wrong." This is *not* a "just think positive" approach. We believe that such a sugar-coated view of things is not helpful or realistic. What we suggest is developing a reality-based and balanced perspective, considering both positive and negative realities.

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- *Labeling* ("I'm an idiot"). You're not, or you wouldn't have come this far on your own. Like everybody else, you've done some dumb things in your life, and you will again. But "idiot" is a term with precise meaning (look it up). If you really were, you wouldn't be reading this book. Keep in mind that you are a person who makes human mistakes and is capable of human successes as well.
- *Self-blame* ("It's all my fault"). Under stress it's common to fall into excessive self-blame. But assuming 100 percent of the fault is probably not realistic and serves mainly to increase feelings of self-hatred and low self-esteem.
- *The "shoulds"* (believing firmly that you or others *should* or *must* act only a certain way). Tell yourself that many things happen that are not pleasant, but this doesn't mean that they "should" or "shouldn't" be. It may be helpful and less painful to rephrase your thoughts in terms of what you want (Instead of "She should know how I feel," say to yourself, "I

want her to understand, but she can't read my mind." Or rephrase as "This shouldn't be happening," "It is happening and I don't like it")

The "shoulds" are an especially powerful negative thought pattern. When you think with shoulds you view yourself as a victim. Feelings of powerlessness and helplessness increase. Thinking with the shoulds is a way of strongly insisting that things must be a certain way. Thinking these thoughts never changes the reality—it only makes you feel worse.

An effective assault on the shoulds is to say to yourself, "Now wait a minute. It's not a matter of should or shouldn't. My wife just left me and it really hurts. I don't like it one little bit!" By doing so, you are honestly stating how you feel and have become more accepting of yourself as being in pain. (Ideas in this section draw on the work of Dr. David Burns 1980.)

Tools to Build Coping Skills and Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is basically the ability to trust in your coping resources. Remember that when self-confidence begins to sink, you may forget that you functioned successfully in the past. You may tend to focus on your failures. Instead, you might think, "I need to remember that I'm strong and have handled problems in the past. I need to believe in myself. It'll be hard at first but I can do it."

The trick is not to try to fool yourself into believing that there are no risks or pain, or that you are completely without fault. Your goal is to acknowledge, accept, and gain perspective. Be more self-accepting, not self-critical. Recognize that your thoughts are contributing to your anxiety or depression. You're hurting yourself and you need to stop the negative thoughts. Actively replace your thoughts with positive coping statements (see list *Positive Self-Statements to Help You Cope* for some samples which may fit you). Your self-confidence will begin to return.

Begin to challenge your thinking frequently. As soon as you notice an unpleasant feeling, reel it in; take a moment, write down your thoughts along with a more realistic response. (Jotting these thoughts down on paper is an especially effective way to become clear about how you are thinking, and to then gain a realistic perspective.) If you cannot do it on the spot, do it later in the day, taking a few minutes to go back over the events of the day and your thoughts. It takes a bit of time and effort to write things down, but the effects will be better if you bring your thoughts to awareness.

The strategies we've mentioned in this chapter actively interfere with negative thinking and can be helpful in restoring you self-confidence to deal with the demands of life. These techniques are not magical solutions, they are straightforward actions you can take now and can practice between sessions of brief therapy. Don't let their apparent simplicity fool you. These cognitive coping skills have been shown to be some of the most rapid and effective approaches to helping people regain control over unpleasant feelings. As you begin to feel better, you can develop effective decision-making and problem-solving skills that will help you gain an even greater sense of self-mastery.

In the next chapter we'll focus on taking direct action to change stressful events that arise in important interpersonal relationships.

Positive Self-Statements to Help You Cope

1. This feeling isn't comfortable or pleasant, but in this moment I can accept it.
2. I can be in pain, sad, anxious...and still deal with this situation.
3. I can handle it.
4. This is not an emergency. It's okay to think slowly about what's happening and how I feel.
5. This is not the worst thing that could happen.
6. This will pass.
7. I don't have to let this get to me; I'll ride through it.
8. I deserve to feel okay.
9. I don't have to do it right the first time; I'm not perfect and neither is anybody else.
10. I'm having a feeling that I don't like; it won't kill me, it just doesn't feel good.
11. These are just thoughts; I can change them.
12. I don't have to have all the answers; nobody else does either, though some folks think they do.
13. I have the right to change my mind about what I think about any given situation.

14. I have the right to make mistakes.
15. I have the right to feel anger.
16. I have the right to say "I don't know."
17. "I think I can, I think I can ..."