

Positive Self-Talk

By Marvin Zauderer

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There's a conversation that goes on in your head while you're riding, and it doesn't mean you're crazy. Take a look at it. Are you encouraging yourself? Worried? Beating yourself up? Self-talk can have a big effect on cycling performance. Increasing your awareness of negative self-talk and correcting it could become your most important mental skill.

Last month, I explored [Goal-Setting](#), the first of the [five core skills of mentally fit athletes](#). This month, we look at Self-Talk in more depth.

I can't climb... I didn't podium, so this race was a waste of time... I rode badly in a century last month, so I'll ride badly in this century today... I'm so nervous, I just know something bad is going to happen... I'm so much weaker than her – I'm really a weak rider... I can't win this race, so why bother finishing...? I'm really a lousy climber – I was just lucky today... The team's going to fire me if I keep doing so poorly... I should be a better rider by now...

Any of those sound familiar?

What you say to yourself needs to be directed toward improving your performance, not detracting from it. And if you don't train your self-talk, it can get out of control. Then a challenging situation – being dropped, having a bad day, missing the break – may become insurmountable.

Where does negative self-talk come from? Well, yes, it does come from watching too many Woody Allen movies, but where else? A key source: *anxiety*. Anxiety – and its cousins: fear, stress, worry, tension, and pressure – tends to fuel negative self-talk, and negative self-talk tends to feed anxiety. There are many ways to manage and reduce anxiety; I'll cover that in more depth in an upcoming article on regulating emotions. But for now, note that you *can* interrupt the cycle: stop the negative self-talk, and you remove an important source of anxiety's fuel. With less negative self-talk, you'll burn less energy on anxiety, you'll be more focused, and you're likely to have more fun.

Types of Negative Self-Talk

In the early 1960's, [Aaron Beck](#), the father of cognitive therapy, researched ways in which our thoughts affect us. He noticed that our minds distort reality at times (no, not *those* times), and that this can cause negative, unnecessary effects on our feelings and behaviors. He discovered that as we get more *objective* about situations, sensations, and feelings – what he called “correcting cognitive distortions” – we shift our thinking, and thus our feelings and behavior. Cognitive distortions represent the bulk of most negative self-talk.

Some of the most common cognitive distortions include:

- **All-or-nothing thinking.** Seeing things in absolute, black-and-white terms. You didn't podium, and so you think you wasted your time?
- **Being ruled by “should” and “shouldn't”.** You should be a better rider by now? Says who? This kind of self-oppression is sometimes also a sign of perfectionism and all-or-nothing thinking, eg. “I'm no good unless I'm perfect.”
- **Jumping to conclusions.** You can't climb? So you've never ridden 100 meters over a 3% grade? You have? How about a 4% grade? A related distortion:
- **Overgeneralizing**, where there's insufficient (rather than no) evidence for your conclusion. You

rode badly in a century a month ago, and that's unshakable proof that you'll ride badly in a century today? Hmm. Sometimes this kind of thinking leads to another distortion: **Labeling**. You say you're a "lousy climber?" Why? Because you've not yet beaten your friends up a 4-mile, 12% grade? Hmm.

- **Magnifying or minimizing. Catastrophizing** – dramatically overestimating the chances of something bad happening, like being thrown off the team – is a common kind of magnification. It tends to promote vigilance for the "worst case." You climbed well today because you were "just lucky?" Sounds like you might be minimizing.

- **Focusing completely on the negative.** Just because she's stronger than you (today), you're "really a weak rider?" Are you seeing the whole picture?

- **"I feel, therefore it is."** "Going with your gut" is a good principle, but taking it too far – "emotional reasoning" – can get you in trouble. Yes, you're nervous, but that doesn't mean something bad is going to happen. You may just be nervous.

These patterns of thinking often become habitual. Fortunately, they can be unlearned.

Correcting Negative Self-Talk

As with most everything within ourselves that we want to have a chance to improve, self-awareness is the key. On your next several rides, tune in to your self-talk. Without removing too much of your attention from the road, other riders, and road kill, pay attention to any bits of conversation you have with yourself.

For some of you, this may come easy. For others of you, self-talk may be difficult to notice at first. Try this: pay attention to your breathing. For thousands of years, meditators from a variety of traditions have found that paying close attention to the breath cultivates increased self-awareness, particularly of thoughts and feelings. Or, try this: notice any feelings that come up while riding, and see if you can remember any thoughts that came up before the feelings.

You may find it helpful to keep a log of your positive and negative self-talk. And, you may find it helpful to tell someone about it – your coach, a friend, your spouse – not necessarily to get their advice, but just as a way of "giving voice" to your self-talk. Sometimes when you hear it aloud, it can help you to be more sensitive to it next time.

You may also find it helpful to investigate what seemed to influence the self-talk. Were you happy, sad, scared, angry, tired, embarrassed, nervous, hungry, confident?

When you become aware of negative self-talk, you can use these techniques:

- **Thought-stopping.** Some people use sheer force of will, some visualize a red light or stop sign. Whatever you use, shut that thought down.

- **Questioning.** When you hear negative self-talk, wait. Ask yourself: What's the evidence for what your mind is saying to you? What's the proof?

- **Reducing your anxiety.** Depending on whether you're on or off the bike, use whatever you find soothing (and legal): breathing, meditation, imagery, music, being in nature, talking with a friend. You may not become relaxed, but you're likely to become *more* relaxed, perhaps just enough to allow another technique to work.

- **Thought-replacement.** Here's your counterattack. What could you say (instead) to yourself that would be encouraging, supportive or motivating, while still believable?

- *Positive, reality-based counterstatements:* ("Given my stage of training, I *am* climbing well.")

- *Affirmations.* (“I am strong and have a good team in this race.”)
- *Frequently-used cue words with positive associations.* (“Calm and focused”)
- *Behaviors.* (“I’m going to focus on having good form on this climb.”)

Sometimes, rather than being able to say something positive to yourself, the best you can do is to say something non-negative. For example, “I’m never going to win” could be replaced with “I’ll suspend judgment for the moment on how the race will play out.” That could be progress for you. In your training, notice frequent words and phrases of negative self-talk and develop a plan for responding to them. If you’re competing, review your plan as part of your pre-race routine.

The mind can be a dangerous thing. But you can use your mind to battle your mind – successfully.



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