

Where Do Negative Thoughts Come From?

Ryan is a good example of someone who felt trapped in negative self-talk and the feelings that came with it. He was a young salesman who had everything going for him: a promising career; a loving wife; two healthy, beautiful children; a life that seemed filled with exciting new possibilities. However, Ryan's internal world didn't reflect that life at all. Since he'd started his own family, he'd struggled with negative, self-defeating thoughts: "Life is hard. I don't think I can ever have what I want. What if I don't meet the next quota and get fired? How will I take care of my family? Maybe they don't care about me anyhow. Maybe they will leave me when I can't provide for them—just like all those 'friends' who don't call me back."

These negative self-talk loops seemed ever present, regardless of whether Ryan was working, playing with his kids, or trying to enjoy a game of tennis. This constant negativity and shifting between anxiety, insecurity, and depression took a lot of his energy so that on weekends often all he could do was stay in bed. He saw therapists and had tried antidepressants, but nothing seemed to make a difference. Eventually he started to get frustrated with himself for not being able to make himself feel better, for turning into what he saw as a useless member of society who was just taking up space.

Some schools of thought suggest that negative self-talk stems from our ego, or the "monkey mind," which is best ignored or fought by saying to ourselves, "Delete, delete, delete," or "Stop! I don't want to listen to you," or simply, "Shut up." Ignoring or fighting negative self-talk may work sometimes for some people. However, rejecting a part of ourselves doesn't really lead to a greater sense of wholeness and self-acceptance. Instead, wouldn't it be better if you understood where these insecure, doubtful, critical, and anxious thoughts really come from and what they are trying to achieve? Once you do, you'll probably realize why ignoring or scolding this part of you doesn't work in the long term.

At the time Ryan started working with me, he'd been stuck in that state for several years. When we talked about his childhood, he shared with me that although externally everything appeared quite normal, he'd never felt that anyone really cared about him. He was the youngest of five brothers and had a hard time relating to any of them. His father was mostly absent because of work, and his mother was busy taking care of a big household. Neither parent had the patience or awareness to notice that Ryan was a rather sensitive boy and needed more attention and support than they were giving him. All his basic needs were met; however, there was no warmth, love, or comfort in his home. His parents' behavior was mostly indifferent, neither praising nor punishing, leaving their kids without guidance or reassurance.

The lack of support and attention from his parents had greatly affected Ryan. Since early childhood, he'd felt sad, anxious, and lonely. What made it worse was that he couldn't figure out whether they weren't capable of giving more or whether there was something wrong with him for wanting more. At some point, he decided to escape this rather cold family mold. With his eyes set firmly on very specific goals, he forged through high school and college with great discipline and ambition.

In his thirties, Ryan became by far the most successful member of his family and could have enjoyed all his achievements, but the anxiety, sadness, and negative self-talk of the past caught up with him. His growing negativity seeped into his work performance and into his relationship with his wife and kids, often leaving him feeling isolated and rejected just as he had growing up. Why did all these old feelings and patterns resurface at the best time of his life? How could he still feel so bad about his life and himself after all he'd accomplished? Intellectually it didn't make sense. From the perspective of the subconscious mind, however, it does.

Here is why young minds matter. Before the age of ten, your mind is like a dry sponge, soaking up any information from the outside that appears relevant to answering the three basic questions for your survival: "Where do I belong?" "What am I about?" and "What's for dinner?" At that age you're rather powerless when it comes to feeding yourself, paying a mortgage, or dealing with perceived outside danger. You're highly dependent on the acceptance and support of your providers and protectors—mainly your family. A series of scary or confusing experiences during these early years can shake up your trust and confidence. Maybe you were reprimanded or criticized and didn't understand what you had done wrong. You may have been told that you would never amount to anything or just felt that whatever you did, it was never good enough. Maybe you were made fun of, didn't get enough attention, or were left crying alone for what seemed like an eternity, though in reality it may have been for only a few minutes. Or you may have felt like Ryan—unloved, unwanted, and not belonging.

When you were that small and vulnerable, negative messages and sentiments were entering your subconscious mind in osmosis-like fashion. It doesn't take major trauma for you to doubt and wonder whether you're really safe or whether you're good enough, loveable, able to fit in, and can really count on a daily dinner. Many of my clients grew up under completely "normal" and rather uneventful circumstances. But unlike their siblings or friends, their parents' expectations or judgments, their teachers' disapproving remarks, or the pressure of having to fit in with their peers left them with deep imprints of worry, pain, and insecurity. I often reassure my clients that there is nothing wrong with them and that they are not too sensitive. Rather than seeing themselves as flawed or weak, I ask them to feel good about their astute awareness and their courage to recognize and admit to themselves that there are wounds of the past that need to heal.

Like Ryan, you may have a part of your subconscious mind that still holds onto anxiety and limiting beliefs that stem from your childhood. Have you ever wondered why certain situations or people can make you feel small, vulnerable, and helpless? Why do certain triggers bring up the same negative thoughts and deflated feelings that you frequently felt when you were much younger? You want to disappear when you're about to give a presentation, convinced that everyone will notice that you're an inadequate fraud. When your spouse is busy and preoccupied, you feel rejected, unloved, and afraid of being abandoned. You revert to the pouty, defensive attitude of a teenager when you get that reproachful look from your parents for arriving late to Sunday family dinner. Or you blurt out a self-derogatory comment when somebody gives you a compliment, because you were told that feeling good about yourself is arrogant and off-putting. Doesn't all such behavior appear immature and inappropriate, making you sometimes shake your head in disbelief?

These childlike reactions make sense only when you realize that they're driven by a part of your subconscious that is stuck in the past. This part may still perceive you as a young, small, and rather powerless kid. It doesn't recognize that you've become a self-reliant adult and that your life is safe and enjoyable. Until now, you probably haven't consciously realized that this younger self exists. But listening to your negative self-talk or recalling those moments of involuntary immaturity probably make you understand that a part of you still hasn't fully grown up.

Why does this childlike subconscious part continue to create negative self-talk and old self-defeating patterns—even though this behavior just reinforces pain and anxiety and doesn't allow you to be happy, confident, and able to enjoy your life? The answer is simple: it doesn't know any better because it has never been properly guided, encouraged, and reassured. This younger self believes that the same reasons that warranted anxiety and insecurity when you were a child are still valid today—and that you're still lacking the strength, skills, and knowledge to deal with them any differently. The anxieties and limiting beliefs that are fueling negative self-talk can be deeply ingrained imprints that a part of your subconscious holds onto until it's convinced that you're no longer unsafe—or, as Carl Jung said, “until you've outgrown the problem.”