

You are What You Think: Self-talk Yourself to Success.

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Did you know that we talk to ourselves every second of every day? These thoughts are most commonly referred to as self-talk or the continuous inner dialogue within each one of us that can affect us either positively or negatively. Our self-talk is a reflection of what we are thinking. Self-talk can be an asset when it increases such things as our self-esteem, our performance expectations, and our confidence. On the other hand, it can be a hindrance when it is negative, inappropriate, or excessive. Research has shown that approximately 90% of everything we say to ourselves tends to be negative and unproductive. Wouldn't you like to lower that percentage? You can, and here's how.

Self-talk is very important in tennis for a variety of reasons such as the rapid pace of the game, the lag time between shots, points and games, and the many decisions that have to be made (serve to forehand or backhand) during the course of play. Self-talk is usually only classified as positive or negative in nature. However, a more complete classification of our self-talk is as follows:

Positive

Negative

Focusing

Distracting

Example: "Split-step as my opponent contacts the ball on her/his serve"
"I wonder why my opponent's toss is so high?"

Rational

Irrational

Example: "Hit my forehand up the middle to keep myself in the point."
"I am going to hit a drop shot from the baseline to surprise my opponent."

Realistic

Unrealistic

Example: "My goal is to get 75% of first serves in."
"My goal is to hit 100% of my first serves in."

Uplifting

Depressing

Example: "My foot work and hustle is really great today."
"I couldn't get to a ball if my life depended on it."

Relaxing

Tensing

Example: "Deep inhale through my nose and slow exhale through my mouth."
"If I hold my breath when I serve, that will be one less thing to go wrong."

This "internal chatter" has implications for your performance because it affects your feelings (e.g., increases in self-confidence versus increases in self-doubt), which will ultimately effect how well you play. In other words, what you think or say to yourself will become reality. Think and talk only about **what you want to happen** rather than **what you don't want to happen**. For example, if you focus on not hitting your shot into the net, that is likely where your ball will go. But if you choose a specific target on your

opponent's side of the court and aim for that spot, you will actually increase your chances of not hitting your shot into the net.

You likely remember the story of the little red train that said over and over, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." The train was actually using negative self-talk. To change to positive self-talk, the little train needs to say, "I know I will, I know I will, I know I will."

The goal is to keep your self-talk working for you rather than against you. In addition, it is important to be able to replace your negative self-talk with talk that is positive and helpful in nature. Changing thinking patterns that are a hindrance can be a challenging task but it is worth the effort. Becoming aware of your inner dialogue is the key to adjusting your self-talk (thinking). Once you are aware of what you say that's unsupportive and when you say it, you can begin to stop and replace the self-talk that is not beneficial with self-talk that gives you an advantage. Your self-talk affects how you play and getting control over what you are saying to yourself is a huge step in playing to the level you are capable of and finding greater enjoyment in the tennis you play. I know you can! I know you can! I know you can!"