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Self-Talk

The Key to Confidence

You've heard it before—and have probably even *said* it before.

“Story of my life . . .”

It's the middle of a stretch of bad luck or bad outcomes, and one more unpleasant thing comes piling on. A flight gets canceled. An important client backs out of a meeting and takes his or her business to somebody else. A player is making the familiar walk from the shower to his locker the week before spring training ends and slips and breaks his wrist.

“That's pretty much the story of my life,” he says.

If you've said those words (or ones like them) to yourself, you might think they're a natural response to the frustration that comes from an unfortunate series of events. It *is* natural, but the words aren't just a response to negative events; they're actually reinforcing a pessimistic, negative perception you have about yourself and your future.

Say them often enough, and you'll actually start expecting negative things to happen in your life, a way of living that may prevent your success.

When I'm working with a client who says something like that in a session, I'll stop them with a simple question: "What *is* the story of your life?"

At first they're a little confused about what kind of answer I want. I explain to them that we all have a "life story" we tell ourselves in order to make sense of our experiences. If you're a salesman with twenty years of record-breaking experience at your company and you get shut out by a client, you would probably react to that event internally and emotionally in a different way from how a beginner in his or her first week on the job would.

In the world of athletics somebody like Tom Brady has a different "life story" running through his head during a playoff football game from a younger, less experienced quarterback. That inner "soundtrack" lets him process things on the field much differently and recover more quickly from mistakes. "It could be a bad play that happened or an interception or a turnover or something, and [Brady] would come to the sideline and say, 'Okay, let's talk about what happened on that play,' said New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick. "He would say, 'This is what I saw. This is what happened. This is what this guy did, this is what that guy did, this is what the safeties did, this middle linebacker was here. This is what I saw on the route.' Then you go back and look at the film and all those things happened. The six, seven, eight, nine things that he described were pretty much the way the play unfolded."¹

The actual line-by-line narrative of that life story is called "self-talk," and it's something every person does almost constantly throughout every day. It's the stream-of-consciousness inner dialogue you have about yourself and all the things happening in your life. Your confidence—and your ability to perform at the peak of your abilities—is directly connected to the quality, frequency, and makeup of that self-talk. If you examine

Brady's self-talk, one critical element is missing: negative self-appraisal. He isn't berating himself; he is simply looking for ways to make himself better and having neutral or positive self-talk even when things go wrong. This allows him to mobilize in the face of adversity.

In simpler terms, improving your self-talk improves your self-confidence and self-esteem. And improved self-confidence and self-esteem are the cornerstones of improved mental performance. After all, nobody can be perfect all the time. As hitting legend Dave Winfield reminds me from time to time, "Slumps are to be thought of as 'periods of adjustment.' They are just 'statistically acceptable variations.'" Now that is some hall-of-fame self-talk!

In this chapter you're going to learn how elite athletes and business performers actually train their own self-talk—and create a better "life story"—in ways that boost confidence, optimism, and mental toughness.

It isn't about fooling yourself into believing something about yourself that isn't true; it's about *revealing* authentically positive and confidence-building storylines that exist but might not be at the front of your mind. For example, many of my baseball clients go through common growing pains during their first year in the big leagues. They might have some early success, but then the scouting reports go around, and the next circuit around the league gets to be tougher. When the slumps get deep enough, even the most naturally confident player can wonder whether he belongs. I'll ask the player some questions designed to remind him of the successes he had that got him where he is: "I hit .305 in Triple-A last year" or "I can throw my fastball wherever I want."

Working with those facts, the players can then work to re-establish a more positive, confident inner monologue.

It's something you can learn how to do too.

Much of the work in self-talk is derived from a style of therapy called *cognitive behavioral therapy*, which was initially developed to treat depression and anxiety.² This form of therapy is very similar to some aspects of sport psychology in that it takes an active directive and pragmatic approach to coaching people and developing strategies to deal with their problems. The renowned cognitive behavioral psychologist Dr. David Barlow developed a way of thinking about changing thoughts regarding anxiety that I use quite extensively in my work with athletes and performers. Dr. Barlow talks about two main errors in our thinking about ourselves that lead to a negative self-concept or feeling: *jumping to conclusions* and *blowing things out of proportion*.³

Before we introduce methods to help you to build adaptive responses to these two errors of thinking, let's examine what these maladaptive thought patterns are and how they work.

Jumping to Conclusions

When we jump to conclusions, we take a bit of information from the world and make a judgment about ourselves, others, or our environment. But "one swallow a summer does not make." In other words, if you see one lone bird traveling north, it's not safe to assume that the summer has arrived. The bird could be lost or an escaped pet, or perhaps it's a robot bird designed by an ingenious eighth-grader. If we see the bird and take that one piece of information to mean that there has been a change of seasons, we are incorrectly using real information to guide our thinking down an erroneous path. Generalizations we make about ourselves and our performance based on incomplete or flawed information can be damaging to our self-esteem and, ultimately, our confidence.

Many years ago I was working with a very successful baseball pitcher when he was in the minor leagues a few games away from breaking into the “show.” This pitcher was very astute about the principles of sport psychology. He had read all of the most popular performance psychology books and had even watched some online tutorials before we began to work together. This allowed us to operate at an extremely advanced pace and to use a comfortable psychology vocabulary in discussing ways we would work together on his actions and reactions. The pitcher was already dominating his division, but he knew that working on his “mental conditioning” could help him excel even more than he already was. We worked together to develop a highly sophisticated mental practice routine that he practiced twice a day except on days when he was pitching—because he felt that this interfered with his ability to enter the game with a calm and focused mind.

One day I watched him pitch seven hitless innings. Even though we try not to focus on the results in performance psychology, it’s still exhilarating to work with athletes of this caliber and see all of their mental practice pay off. In my mind I was cheering louder and louder with every strike he threw. Fans were hanging on the edges of their seats, the tension growing with each pitch. His pregame and in-game routines, which we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, were working! A no-hitter was a very real possibility.

But in the eighth inning the wheels started to come off. Even though he was executing his pitches well, with a high velocity and great location, the first two batters got bloop (a weakly hit fly ball that drops in for a single between an infielder and an outfielder—read: lucky) hits that went over the infielders’ gloves for singles. The no-hitter was no longer.

And that’s when it happened.