

An analogy I sometimes employ is to ask people to think of their ego as a puppy dog. Like a puppy it asks for attention, it can be mischievous and adorable all at the same time. There are multiple reasons why I use this analogy. One of the main reasons is that in thinking of our ego as a puppy dog, it allows us to observe ourselves without getting caught up in all the commotion. It breaks up the identification with our inner chatter and allows for distance to occur between our thoughts and identity.

For example, when I am confronted with a difficult task my self-talk revolves around “you can do this” as opposed to “I can do this”. Or I may do something that wasn’t in my best interests where in the past I might be saying “I am such an idiot” I might now say, “you made a mistake, just learn from it”. The latter may sound like a small difference, but this form of changing the inner chatter from an “I” to a “You” can help to lessen the impact of an overly negative mind.

For example, if I call myself an idiot, it becomes a very personal thing. It is easier to become identified with the thought. In the act of disparaging and belittling ourselves we begin to form an identity which at its core believes itself to be stupid. Sometimes we are wise enough to dismiss the internal name calling as widely off the mark. However, if repeated enough, especially with some conviction, we soon start to feel like an idiot and unworthy.

But when there is a type of separation by employing you in the second person instead of the first person “I” habit, it tends to give us a little breathing space where we do not so readily identify with our negative self-talk. Our egos have a much harder time gripping us when we can have a little distance from it - hence the treat the ego like a puppy dog analogy.

We can also gain some distance from our thoughts by saying something along the lines of “this is a story of me being stupid”. By tacking on “this is a story” to the beginning and or end of our thoughts it helps us to recognize that we are not our thoughts. The same would apply to feelings and emotions as frequently these can be misleading. For instance, we might have a strong feeling that something is wrong, but that might be because we have perceived a threat which wasn’t there. Our brains respond as if there is a real and present danger there just like it would if a lion was about to pounce on us. Gaining distance and space helps us to organize the mind to not always be in threat on mode.

The same principle can also be applied to positive things. For example, instead of saying “I did great”, we change to “you did great”. The net effect is that we start to become our own coaches in our own life and we are more able to clearly see what course of action must be taken. We know from some research studies conducted with leading sportsmen that using

inner talk in such a manner is useful and beneficial to that individual. Coaching ourselves becomes an integral part of success.

I am not suggesting that all our internal talk becomes of the second person variety. For example, I might say “I am hungry” or “I am sleepy” as an accurate reflection of what is transpiring in consciousness at the time. That’s fine. But when there is something that needs to change in life or something that is proving to be troublesome it is helpful to gain some separation from it.

It is also worth noting that it’s not the use of “you” as such that is important because we could just as easily say “you are such an idiot” to ourselves. Obviously if we take the latter on-board it is detrimental to our well-being. What is more critical is to find ways which allow us to gain some space from our thoughts and emotions. Combining this space with kinder and gentler self-talk can really make a remarkable difference in our lives.

When we are caught up in something and our emotions and thoughts are overwhelming us we have great difficulty in generating beneficial decisions. In fact, when the latter occurs, it’s almost a case of “oh no, not again”. That’s because when we are overwhelmed we are functioning off old outdated patterns which typically have stemmed from childhood. These patterns served us well at one time, but as we grow into adulthood they are no longer beneficial and often are detrimental to our well-being.

There is some evidence that employing second person terms like “you” also help in performance orientated behaviours. In a study of university students, self-help statements that use “you” instead of I turned out to have a more beneficial result. Hopefully, future studies will expand to include a greater segment of the population, but the shortcomings of the research studies aside, it is in the least providing some indication that “You” may be better than using “I” in some circumstances.

I often suggest that people begin by writing things down and then looking at the writing when the intensity of what has been written has died down. Then in small steps to begin to incorporate a way of inner talk that is very similar to talking to ego as if it were a puppy dog. It’s not a panacea by any stretch of the imagination but finding the right balance between owning our behaviors and creating enough distance/observing our own behaviors does help for most people. Our inner talk is one area where by changing a few simple things can have some beneficial consequences in our lives.

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