

Lesson 5

Negative Self-Talk: Thoughts That Undermine Our Self-Esteem



Facilitator's Note

The cornerstone of this lesson is a picture book that people of all ages enjoy: *Don't Feed the Monster on Tuesdays*. The book illustrates how negative self-talk influences our feelings and can “eat away” our self-esteem. Students enjoy this book because it uses humor to exaggerate some of their own negative thoughts (which they are increasingly aware of now that they have the capacity for greater self-reflection). Earlier sessions on feelings help students recognize that what they think influences how they feel. This session sets the stage for the next session on stress, where students will see how their own thoughts (negative or positive) can increase or decrease the amount of stress they experience.

Because of the time required to read the book aloud, we skip our typical warm-up activity, and reading the book becomes the warm up.

As part of our discussion and vocabulary, we use a simplified way to introduce students to the ten common errors of thinking introduced by David Burns in his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*.

Troubleshooting

At times we forego having students draw their monsters in order to allow for more discussion time. This can be a judgment call on your part as you determine what would be most beneficial.

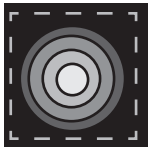


Sources

Warm Up: Adolph Moser, *Don't Feed the Monster on Tuesdays: The Children's Self-esteem Book* (Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, 1991).

Lesson 5 Vocabulary: Common errors of thinking are adapted from David Burns, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), pp. 42–43.

Lesson 5: Negative Self-talk: Thoughts That Undermine Our Self-Esteem



Goals

Students will:

- increase their awareness of how thinking impacts feelings
- increase their awareness of the difference between fact and interpretation
- understand that how we talk to ourselves about our own experiences affects how we feel
- learn to recognize some of the thoughts and beliefs that cause emotional pain
- realize that a small change in how we think about something and describe it to ourselves can lead to a big change in how we feel



Objectives

Students will be able to:

- define negative self-talk
- begin to notice their own “inner voice” and the kind of messages that they send themselves
- identify where they get the ideas for the inner messages that they direct toward themselves
- explain how to “talk back” to negative self-talk and how to change negative messages



Materials and Preparation

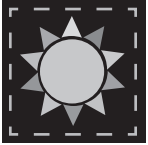
- Book: *Don't Feed the Monster on Tuesdays: The Children's Self-Esteem Book* (highly recommended but not required)

Copy one for each student:

- **Lesson 5 Vocabulary**

Review:

- **Lesson 5 Vocabulary** terms and definitions



Warm Up

15 minutes

Read *Don't Feed the Monster on Tuesdays* aloud to students. Note: If you do not have this book, or choose not to use it, the presentation below provides all of the material you will need to teach this lesson.



Brief Presentation

15 minutes

Say to students:

Inside each of us is a negative, often critical voice. This is the voice that directs our thoughts to get angry with ourselves when we make a mistake, to put us down when we forget something, to make fun of us when we accidentally break an object, to blame us for triggering our parents' anger, or to judge us when we don't get a phone call we were expecting from a friend. It's the voice that says, "You're dumb, ugly, fat, and/or stupid." It's the voice that says, "You don't have any friends and no one likes you." It is a harsh, critical inner voice that we wouldn't use when talking to anyone else.

We call this self-critical voice our *negative self-talk*, or our "monster" voice, since it eats away at our self-esteem. This internal voice is a powerful way we put ourselves down and defeat ourselves. It undermines our ability to deal constructively with our shortcomings, disappointments, or hurts. In the story we just read, we saw that the monster thrives and grows bigger and bigger on this negative self-talk, while we end up feeling awful, shrinking smaller and smaller. This negative thinking and critical voice directed at ourselves leads us to feel bad, unimportant, and unworthy. With this monster voice, our self-confidence gets weaker and weaker.

Negative self-talk can occur so quickly in our heads that it sometimes slips by our awareness. We're going to practice pausing to notice and catch these thoughts, so that we can each shrink our own monster and protect our self-confidence. We need to appreciate that we all make mistakes; it is what makes us human. Mistakes are part of the process of learning anything, and we all need to learn how to accept them when they occur. When we are not able to accept our mistakes

and move on, we can get stuck in a rut and become afraid to keep trying. *(You may choose to offer an example for students at this point, such as learning to ride a bike. Or you could explain that professional athletes, who are the best at their given sport, make mistakes all the time. Part of the reason these elite athletes are able to succeed is because they have developed an internal voice that can accept their mistakes and can encourage them to keep trying. The statistics for baseball players reveal that professional players strike out two-thirds of the time that they are at bat.)*

Sometimes we don't know what's bothering us. Sometimes we just feel stupid or unlikable or ugly. At other times we may feel attractive, acceptable, or smart. How we look has not changed, but how we speak to ourselves and how we feel has changed. *When we have negative thoughts, we can pause to recognize that the monster is speaking. We can ask ourselves where we got these ideas. Often, the ideas reflect unrealistic expectations, such as "I should be perfect," or "I should always be in a good mood."*

In a few moments we will share a chart that can help us to identify when we are engaging in some common ways of thinking that are based on distorted ideas that make us feel bad and deficient. When we get the facts straight, stop judging ourselves, and accept our humanness, we can feel better and then try harder. Criticism is not a great way to motivate ourselves to change. It nourishes the monster within and strengthens the voice that discourages us. We can get tricked into thinking that this harsh voice is actually telling us the truth about ourselves. But it isn't the voice of truth! We can, and we need to, catch our negative self-talk and work to change it. All of us, including adults, need to "talk back" to that critical voice. When we don't make efforts to counter our negative self-talk, we end up believing and feeding the monster. This is the kind of situation that leads people to feel unhappy and to give up rather than take charge and keep trying.

Examples to help illustrate that how you speak to yourself makes a difference:

- The straight-B student: A middle school boy believes that he is a B student, that he never gets A's. Then his friend tells him, "If you can get B's, it's really not much harder to get A's. Perhaps it would take more studying, but if you want A's, it might be worth it." Do you think this could make any difference?
- Another example: A girl who has never had success in athletics all the way through eighth grade thinks that she is just not an athlete. Is it possible that she has not yet discovered her capabilities? The skills for basketball are very

different from the skills for crew or swimming or tennis or track or skiing. Perhaps she is not an athlete—or perhaps it’s too soon to know this for sure since there are other sports that she has not yet tried. Will she try a new sport if she tells herself that she isn’t good at sports?



Developing Vocabulary

Give out the **Lesson 5 Vocabulary** handout and talk about the common errors of thinking described on it. (You may wish to select three or four to talk about in more depth rather than covering them all.)



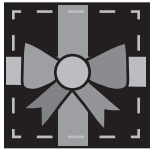
Activity

10 minutes

Say to students:

Draw your monster and write what it says to you in cartoon bubbles. Then write what you can say back to it. See if you can figure out what sets off your negative self-talk, so you can give it a specific retort.

For example: If the monster says, “You’re dumb—you can’t do math.” You can say back, “Hey, so I made a few mistakes on my math homework, so what, I’m learning! I can ask for help and I can learn. That’s smart, not stupid.”



Wrap Up

5 minutes

Say to students:

Everyone engages in negative self-talk occasionally. Some studies say that there is a higher percentage of automatic negative talk within our minds than there is positive self-talk. To become more aware of how it works, we can pause, notice our thoughts and focus on the facts, rather than our judgments of how we think we should be different. Once we figure out that we have been feeding the monster, we can think about ways to be more understanding of ourselves. We can learn to fix what we need to or just accept what we can’t change. We can stop the negative self-talk, work with the issue at hand, and quiet our monster. If we offer ourselves more kindness and less criticism, we don’t have to settle for feeling miserable.

Sometimes when we feel stuck, a friend can help us. A friend may have had a similar experience and can tell us about it. That helps us

feel understood and not so alone in a situation. All of this helps us to move forward and figure out what we can do about the situation or problem. We can learn to cope with challenges.

We can help each other when we hear friends—or even parents—say their negative self-talk out loud. We can say we recognize that kind of negative thinking because everyone does it at some time. Then we can help them remember that it's okay to make mistakes and ask them to think about what they have done well recently. We may even be able to remind them of something we know that they have done well.

To transform our monster talk, we need to start asking ourselves questions such as:

- What would I rather be hearing right now?
- If I were a positive coach, what would I say to myself right now?

You might even write down some of the statements on paper. It may feel uncomfortable at first, but if you keep writing, it will become less awkward and it could help you develop a new habit. You don't have to believe everything that your positive coach says, but if you practice developing this voice, it will help you feel more confident, keep trying, and have more resilience for life's challenges.



Thoughts/Self-Discoveries for the Week

2 minutes

Say to students:

During this week, keep on the lookout for your monster's negative self-talk. We can help each other with this. If you hear anyone say negative self-talk out loud, you can say, "Wait a minute, I think you're feeding your monster. Maybe you're not happy with _____ (example: your test results today), but you're still good at _____," or "I notice you are feeding your monster when you say _____. How about not doing that?"

Good luck saving your self-confidence from that monster that wants to eat it away!

Lesson 5 Vocabulary

Self-Talk: What we say to ourselves in our thoughts.

Negative Self-Talk: The put downs and self-defeating remarks we say to ourselves when we are disappointed and/or are feeling bad about something.

Fact-Finding: Figuring out what actually happened in order to help ourselves avoid making negative interpretations.

Common Errors of Thinking

Common errors of thinking that keep us feeling bad:

- **All-or-Nothing Thinking:** When we think in one extreme or the other—thinking that things are all good or all bad.
Examples: If what I do isn't perfect, then I'm worthless. If I don't get the A, that means I'm stupid. If I'm not on time for school, I might as well not go at all.
- **Overgeneralization:** When we assume that because one thing went wrong for us, everything is going wrong for us and will continue to go wrong for us.
Example: I got a C on a math test and I assume that I'll never do well in the class.
- **Mental Filter:** When we focus on one negative thing that happens and allow it to overshadow everything else.
Examples: I forgot to do my homework, so I feel like I can't do anything right. I didn't score a goal in soccer, so I think that I played a terrible game.
- **Disqualifying the Positive:** When we reject, ignore, discount, or minimize our positive experiences and hold on to a negative viewpoint instead.
Example: That A was just a quiz grade; it does not matter.
- **Jumping to Conclusions:** When we make assumptions and give events a negative meaning, even when there are no definite facts to support our conclusion.
Example: Amy did not call me last night—she must be mad at me.
- **Mind Reading:** When we make up a story about someone else's actions and assume that our story is accurate, so we don't check it out. We think we know what the other person is thinking.
Example: Pete didn't look at me today at lunch, so I know that he doesn't like me anymore.

Lesson 5 Vocabulary, continued

- **The Fortune-Teller Error:** When we expect that things will turn out badly, so we become convinced that our prediction is an already-established fact.
Example: I'm not trying out for the play because I know I won't get a good part.
- **Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization:** When we exaggerate something's importance or we shrink things and consider them insignificant (such as your own strengths or another's hurtful actions).
Examples: You notice a blemish on your face and think that everyone is staring at you, thinking how awful you look because of it; or you minimize the hurt you feel when someone says something mean to you ("I'm just too sensitive").
- **Emotional Reasoning:** When we assume that a negative feeling we have is reflecting what is true and accurate, even though it isn't. We assume that the way we feel is how things really are: "I feel it so it must be true."
Example: You are feeling sensitive from an argument that you had with your mom, so later, when a friend says something to you, you feel that she does not like you (and assume that your feelings are correct).
- **Should Statements:** When we try to motivate ourselves with *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts*, *musts* and *ought tos*. When we make should and shouldn't statements we are assuming that there is only one right way to approach getting things done.
Examples: I should not have bought the blue shirt; I should have bought the yellow shirt like Joey's. I should have finished writing my paper by now.
- **Labeling and Mislabeling—extreme form of overgeneralization:** Instead of simply describing our mistakes, we attach negative labels to ourselves, often putting ourselves down in the form of name-calling. When someone else's behavior annoys us, we label that person as well. Mislabeling involves describing something in language that is intense and full of feeling.
Examples: I'm a loser. He's no good. She's just stupid.
- **Personalization:** We take responsibility for something that is actually beyond our control.
Examples: It's my fault that Mom has a headache. My parents split up because of me.