

Self-Talk for Teachers

Self-talk goes beyond the little voice we have in ourselves saying “What if..” or “I can’t handle this.” Self-talk is often an automatic process that is subtle. It may be a single word or series of images that hold meaning and memories. It often goes unquestioned and unchallenged.

As teachers, we are trained to be mindful of students’ self-talk. We teach growth mindset and promote a culture of learning from mistakes and growing into skills. We recognize a student who throws down their math book in frustration saying, “I can’t do this!” yet often we let those same thoughts go unchallenged in our own minds.

Types of Negative Self-talk



The Worrier (Anxiety)

The worrier is usually:

1. Anticipating the worst
2. Overestimating the odds of something bad or embarrassing happening
3. Creating grandiose images of potential failure or catastrophe

The worrier is looking out for potential problems and imaging the worst scenario coming true. They worry.



The Critic (Low Self-Esteem)

The critic may feel apart from your own thinking—like a voice in your head evaluating and judging every action that you take to determine whether you are “worthy” but usually finds that you don’t measure up and feel worthless. It is there to remind you of every past mistake you have ever made as proof that you are a failure.

The critic is the one that compares you to the teacher down the hall who has a pinterestworthy classroom and seems to have it altogether which only leave you feeling not competent or capable.



The Victim (Depression)

The victim makes you feel helpless and hopeless as if your negative situation is never going to get better and is never going to change. It’s the part that complains about strategies and dismisses ideas immediately because they will never work. It tells you that there is something specifically inherently wrong with you.

The victim brings up thoughts like I can’t.. Or nothing is ever going to work.



The Perfectionist (Chronic Stress / Burn-Out)

While it is good to strive to be better and improve as a teacher, the perfectionist takes this to the extreme. The perfection lives in a world of ideals of what they should be doing.

The perfectionist will tell you that your efforts are never good enough. It does not matter how many good things you are doing, there will always be more to do and to do it better. The perfectionist will tie up your identity into being a teacher and that your self worth is only as good as the success you have as a teacher.

Combating Negative Self-Talk

The first step to solving any problem is to be aware of it. Once you take a step back and examine your thinking and what pattern you fall into: worrier, critic, victim or perfectionist, you can take steps to combat the negative self-talk and move toward a growth mindset.

The best way to counter negative self-talk is to replace it with positive affirmations. Just like we teach our students to turn "I am bad at math!" into "I don't know how to do this math.. Yet!", we too can turn our negative selftalk into positive affirmations even in the midst of moments of overwhelm, burn-out and crisis. In fact, that is when we need it the most.

Question the truth of your negative Self-Talk

- What is the evidence for this?
- Is this always true?
- Has this been true in the past?
- What are the odds of this really happening or being true?
- What is the very worst that could happen that is so bad about that? Would you do if the worst happened?
- Are you look at the whole picture?
- Are you being fully objective?

Negative Self Talk

Worrier

What if the principal comes in to observe me when I'm in the middles of a lesson that goes horribly wrong? What if a parent yells at me when I call to talk about their child?

Critic

That was so stupid! Why did I say that? The lesson went okay but I could have done so much better. I can't ever get it right! I wish I could be as good as that teacher who always has flawless lessons and activities ready to go.

Victim

Everything is constantly changing in education, why even bother trying? It will never get better. I will always be behind in my work and I can never catch up. I've already tried those strategies and nothing will work to help.

Perfectionist

I stay late after school; I come in early in the morning. I often am here on weekends. I should be working harder, I should always have my classroom under control, I should always be happy. What I'm doing is never enough.

Positive Counterstatements

Worrier

The worst isn't likely to happen, but even if it does, I can handle it. I can do this.

Critic

We all have lessons that go wrong sometimes. I can learn from it for next time. Most lessons go well and even this lesson had a lot that went great! I couldn't get the camera to work, but I was able to be flexible and adapt. The students still learned and I role-modeled how to be patient with my students.

Victim

Education isn't hopeless. I am in this for a reason. I am resilient. I can be open to new strategies that may work and talk to colleagues who had experience with success in my difficult situation.

Perfectionist

Life is too short to be taken seriously. I do not always have to be perfect. I care about my students and their learning and that is the most important part of education. I am.