

White Bears and Willpower

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Your subconscious mind is always listening to and believing in everything you repeatedly say about yourself. Avoid becoming your own enemy of progress.

—Edmond Mbiaka

When you stop for a few minutes of quietness and listen to what is going on in your brain, you will typically 'hear' yourself talking to yourself. Every human being does this although many never take time to pay attention. Recent research shows that your style of self-talk can make a huge difference to your success in life. This is the story of mirror twins and their journey to empowering and life-changing self-talk.



The twins settled themselves on the settee and frowned at the life coach. “Oh my,” said the coach, “mirror twins are rare.” That brought a smile to both faces. Sure enough, Dane had a dimple in his left cheek; Zane, in his right cheek.

“What can I do for you?” the coach asked, pleasantly.

“We turned fourteen last week and our uncle gave us six appointments as our birthday present—to see you. He said learning more about our brains would help jump-start our success,” said Dane.

“We’re gymnasts,” said Zane, jumping into the conversation, “and plan to make the Olympic team. Dane is left handed—the first in our family!—while I am right handed.”

“That fits what is known about mirror twins,” said the coach. “As you know, identical twins typically have the same sex and blood type and similar physical features, but mirror twins have opposite asymmetric features. If one twin is right handed, the other twin is left handed. In your case, Dane has a dimple in his left cheek, while Zane has one in his right cheek. Mirror twins can even have hair that whorls in opposite directions and opposite teeth. Some even have mirrored internal organs.”

“Our hearts are on the same side,” said Dane, laughing. The coach smiled.

Identical twins can occur when a single egg fertilized by one sperm divides into two separate embryos. Mirror-image is a label that describes their physical features. Rare, they account for about five million twins worldwide; twenty-five percent of all identical twins.

“Congratulations on going out for the Olympic team,” said the coach. “I suggest we begin with self-talk.”

“Self-talk?” exclaimed Zane. “A friend of mine talked to himself a lot and got locked up in a mental health ward.”

“There’s ‘talking’ and then there’s ‘talking,’ you know,” said the coach, chuckling. “*Self-talk* is just a label for what you tell yourself. Studies have shown that human beings talk to themselves almost continually. What you tell yourself and the style of language you use can make a huge difference in your success.” Zane’s facial expression continued to show outright skepticism. “You’re talking to yourself right now,” the coach continued, “although I don’t know what you’re saying.”

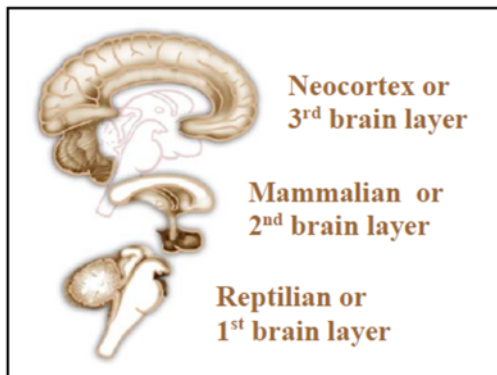
Zane burst out laughing. “Don’t know about you, Bro,” he said looking at his twin, “but I *was* talking to myself, saying: ‘What in the world is a white stuffed teddy bear doing on the coach’s book shelf? That’s a little weird.’” Zane motioned toward the little white bear with his right hand.

Dane smiled broadly, displaying the dimple in his left cheek and waving his left hand toward the little white bear. “Caught me, too,” he said. “I was wondering almost the same thing: ‘What is a white teddy bear sitting in a life coach’s office beside a model of a brain, no less?’”



“That’s what thoughts are,” said his coach. “Just personal private conversations with yourself. Fortunately, most of us have some type of *governer* that prevents us from blurting out every word of our silent internal conversations. But when that governer fails momentarily . . .”

The twins looked at each other, grinning. Obviously they’d also had the experience of saying aloud—unexpectedly—exactly what they’d been thinking silently but never intended to verbalize.



The coach pointed to a poster on the wall that read: *Every waking moment we talk to ourselves about the things we experience. Our self-talk, the thoughts we communicate to ourselves, control the way we feel and act.*

—John Lembo

“Self-talk is typically either negative or positive. That’s where Dr. Daniel Wegner’s white bear phenomenon comes in,” said the coach, gesturing to the bear on the bookcase. “The cut-away model of a human brain next to it can help you see the three brain layers. “Thoughts and words create internal mental pictures in working memory, part of the neocortex or 3rd brain layer, which is the portion that contains conscious thought. The mammalian or 2nd brain layer and the reptilian or 1st brain layer are both subconscious portions of the brain. They do not use language per se, but they are able to perceive the pictures that filter down to them.”

Your subconscious mind follows the pictures like a map, believing that if you put them into working memory, they must be important to you. So it does its best to help you do whatever those pictures represent.” The twins nodded.

“The kicker is that the brain deals easily with positives, a one-step process. What you say and think forms the picture you want in your brain. Negatives on the other hand are a two-step process—which often creates a challenge for the brain.”

The coach continued. “For example, when you say, ‘Don’t think about the white bear,’ a representation of a white bear goes into your brain’s working memory and that becomes all you tend to think about.”

“Yikes,” said Zane. “Let me get this clearly. If I say, ‘Dane, don’t miss your landing,’ his brain initially pictures taking a hop or two at the end of his dismount and may or may not change the picture. But when I say, ‘Dane, stick your landing,’ it tells his brain exactly what to do and he’s more likely to accomplish his dismount without taking a hop or two.”



“That would be much more helpful,” said Dane, chuckling. “But how would I talk to myself?”

“Excellent question,” said his coach, smiling. “There is new research about the most effective way to talk to yourself. The formula is this: Your given name, plus the pronoun you (as if you are speaking to your brain as a separate entity—which is sort of is), and positive present tense instruction. For example: ‘Dane, you are sticking your landing.’ Studies by Ethan Kross, PhD, assistant professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan, have shown that it is less stressful and more effective to use your given name rather than ‘I’ or ‘me’ when talking to yourself.”

The coach paused so the twins could absorb that and then continued. “Dr. Kross found that the brains of study participants who used the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ during self-talk episodes required far more electrical activity. When participants repeated the same self-talk exercise using their given name and ‘you,’ however, the electrical activity in their brains decreased significantly and their level of anxiety went down as well. Jason Moser, PhD, a neuroscientist at Michigan State University, asked study participants to give short speeches describing the reasons they were qualified to land their dream job. Half of the participants were instructed to refer to themselves using ‘I’ and ‘me’ pronouns; the other half were told to use their given name and ‘you.’ The participants using the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ exhibited more anxiety and felt convinced it was an impossible task. Conversely, those using their given name and ‘you’ reported significantly less anxiety and said they felt more confident. Any questions so far?” The boys shook their heads.

“And there’s more. Independent evaluators who judged each speech observed that participants using their given name and the pronoun you not only gave better speeches but also engaged in far less negative self-talk after their presentation. Using your given name (‘Dane, *you* are. . .’) depersonalizes things slightly,” said the coach. “It gives you a bit of healthy psychological distance from yourself. This allows you to think more clearly, perform more effectively, and emphasizes that *you* are collaborating with *your* brain and *you* are giving the directions.”

Zane seemed anxious to respond. “Okay. First, given *name*; then, the pronoun *you*, and positive *present* tense instructions. But why can’t I say, ‘Zane, you are going to stick your landing on your next dismount’?”



“You can say anything you want,” his coach replied. “But when the brain hears future tense it tends to procrastinate, perhaps thinking: *That’s in the future. I don’t need to do anything now. When the future arrives, I’ll help you.* But the future never gets here when you use future tense. When you speak as if what you want is happening right now, the brain is much more likely to respond with, *Oh, okay, I’m in gear to help you.* Bottom line: your brain can only do what it thinks it can do and you tell it what it can do through your self-talk.”

“This is great!” exclaimed Dane. “I’ve never understood how I could cooperate with my brain to be more successful.”

“Everything starts in the brain,” said the coach. “Henry Ford reportedly said, ‘If you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right.’”

“I see that telling my brain only what to do and avoiding negative self-talk or verbalizing what I no longer want to do is huge,” said Zane, thoughtfully. “But I suppose changing my self-talk is going to take some work...”

“That comment reminds me of a quote attributed to Stephen King: ‘*Talent is cheaper than table salt. What separates the talented individual from the successful one is a lot of hard work.*’ Almost everything in life that is worthwhile takes some work,” said the life coach.

“I’m so on board with this,” said Dane. “I’m picturing how effective self-talk can help me.”

“Does the same thing go for willpower?” asked Zane. “I’ve been telling myself ‘I want to *stop* doing a hop on my dismount.’ But nothing has really improved.”

“Willpower has been greatly misunderstood,” his coach said. “Willpower is a function of your brain’s prefrontal cortex, located directly behind your forehead. Dr. Daniel Wegner has pointed out that willpower was not designed to stop undesirable behaviors—even more so if the behavior gave you some type of perceived reward.”

Zane and Dane both sat up straighter in their chairs. “Willpower was designed to provide the energetic determination to carry out your plans, decisions, wishes, and goals. *Skillpower* (honed through practice) will help you make healthier self-talk choices. Then you can activate *willpower* (also honed through practice) to help you follow through on those choices.”



Dane glanced at the clock. “It’s time to meet with our gym coach,” he said. “We’re out of here. Are we ever going to have an interesting discussion today!”

“Too bad we only have five more visits,” said Zane, holding out his hand to shake their coach’s hand. “I am more successful in sticking my landings.” Then he added immediately, “Rephrase. Zane, you stick your landings.”

“Excellent,” said the coach. “And, Zane, you may be surprised how much you can learn in five more sessions.”

“I already have a plan,” said Dane. “I’ll ask for more coaching sessions for a Christmas present.”

The mirror twins laughed and high-fived as they barreled through the door, calling back, “Thanks, coach. Rad!”

And both remembered to wave at the white stuffed teddy bear. Dane, with his left hand and Zane, with his right.