Lesson 7

How Thoughts Affect Feelings and Behavior

This lesson helps students understand the power that thoughts have over emotions and behavior and recognize when their thoughts and self-talk are negative or exaggerated.

Preparation: Before meeting, prepare copies of the “Self-Talk, True Talk” handout (page 64) to distribute to students.

1. Review
Revisit the homework from Lesson 6, and ask students to share the feelings they had when they were asked, “How are you?” and whether they tended to answer honestly or not. Ask students how they decided what to answer with in these situations. Use this discussion to introduce the idea that we all talk to ourselves about our feelings and that we use that internal conversation—or self-talk—to guide our actions.

2. Sharing Circle
Ask students to raise their hands if they ever talk to themselves. Regardless of how many say yes, make the point that we all talk to ourselves—we just don’t always realize it. Also ask them to consider whether their self-talk is positive or negative—kind or critical. It’s normal to engage in both. Ask students to share examples of things they might say to themselves during a challenging situation. If they need prompting, share an example from your own life. Positive and negative things we all might say to ourselves at times are things like:

- “I can do this,” and, “I can’t do this.”
- “This is going to work out well for me,” and, “This is not going to go well.”
- “This is fun,” and, “I hate this.”
- “I could do this forever,” and, “When will this be over?”
- “I feel good in this,” and, “People will laugh at me.”

3. Skill Introduction
Explain to students that self-talk is the term for what we say to ourselves, usually about ourselves, in our minds. Self-talk can be positive or negative, and these thoughts have a lot of power to influence our feelings and actions, even when we aren’t fully aware of our self-talk or its effects. By becoming more aware of these thoughts and working to shift them from negative to positive when necessary, we
can affect both our feelings and our behavior in beneficial ways. Continue the
discussion by saying something like, “Your self-talk can tell you how you are
feeling and how to react, even when you’re not aware of it. Sometimes
those thoughts can become negative and harmful, so it’s important for
us to be aware of them. That can be difficult because there are so many
distractions in life, from homework to social media. We sometimes need
quiet in our lives in order to tune in to our self-talk.” Recommend that
students try to find even a few minutes of quiet time each day to sit, think, and
become conscious of these thoughts.

Remind students of the examples they raised during the sharing circle, and
discuss the fact that sometimes our feelings are more likely to overwhelm us when
we use self-talk that is negative and exaggerated. Acknowledge that bad things
happen and that it’s okay to feel upset when they do. However, repeating negative
self-talk over and over again tends to make these situations and feelings worse. It
can lead to a cycle that looks like this:

bad thing happens → we feel bad → we use negative self-talk → we feel worse →
we react based on our negative feelings → more bad things happen

You can illustrate this cycle with an example, such as:

someone insults us → our feelings are hurt → our self-talk tells us that everyone is
always saying bad things about us → we get angry → we insult the person back →
we get in a fight and get in trouble

You might find it helpful to show this on the board, making it clear and visible
how self-talk can worsen a situation. Share with students that one way they can
notice and identify exaggerated and destructive self-talk is to listen for times when
they put themselves down or call themselves names like stupid, loser, or ugly. They
can also listen for the following “exaggeration words” in their thoughts about
themselves or about a situation:

- always or never
- everyone or no one
- everything or nothing
- all or none

Talk through an example with students. For instance, ask them to imagine that
they’ve texted a friend with an invitation to do something and they don’t hear back.
Ask them to give you a negative self-talk explanation of why they got no answer. If
needed, prompt them with this suggestion: “All my friends are always dumping me!
Everyone hates me and no one will ever want to be my friend. And I don’t blame
them—I’m a total loser.”
Help students see that when self-talk sounds like this, it’s definitely negative, and it’s probably exaggerated and untrue as well. If we’re not aware that this is happening, we can’t do much to change it. But if we can notice our unkind and negative thoughts about ourselves, then we can step back and ask if what we’re saying to ourselves is accurate. Is it really true that all our friends are dumping us? Is it even true that this particular friend is, or are there other possibilities? Ask students to now propose more positive and accurate self-talk in response to not getting an answer. Again, provide an example if needed, such as: “He might not have gotten my message. Or maybe he got it but was busy and just forgot to get back to me.”

Reiterate the point that negative self-talk often leads to negative emotions and actions. To cope with negative self-talk, the first step is to be aware of it. It’s especially important to tune in to our self-talk during times of stress or challenge. When we can consciously “hear” these thoughts, we can then reflect on whether what we’re saying to ourselves is true or not and be more aware of tendencies to exaggerate the bad. One powerful way of thinking about our negative self-talk is to ask whether we’d say the same things to a friend in a similar situation. People tend to treat their friends more fairly and kindly than they treat themselves.

4. Reflection
Distribute the “Self-Talk, True Talk” handout and discuss it briefly as a group. Ask if any students would like to share examples of situations where they have engaged in negative self-talk. Make the point that everyone engages in this kind of self-talk at times—including peers who are isolated or seem unhappy as well as peers who are popular or seem to have it all together.

5. Homework
Have students write in their EQ journals about what surprised them as they considered the thoughts they may not be aware of. When it comes to how their self-talk affects their feelings, what kinds of thoughts and internal messages might they want to consider more carefully from now on? Also, have students make entries in their journals when they notice themselves engaging in negative or self-defeating thoughts in the coming days. Next to each negative statement, have them try to write a more accurate and positive statement. Let them know that you’ll ask them to share their experiences during Lesson 8 and that in that lesson, you’ll talk more about how to change negative self-talk into positive self-talk.
Self-Talk, True Talk

*Self-talk* is the conscious or subconscious inner dialogue we say to ourselves, which affects how we feel and what we do. Sometimes, without meaning to, we may lie to ourselves and think things about ourselves that are untrue or exaggerated. Sometimes exaggerating the positives in a situation can feel good, but usually we can’t fool ourselves for long. Even more often, these exaggerations are negative, which can lead us to feel even worse. When we pay attention to our self-talk and listen for words and phrases like the ones that follow, we can catch ourselves exaggerating and can work on using self-talk that is both positive and true, which helps us deal effectively with our feelings and the world.

**Sometimes we think in absolutes.** That can mean that our self-talk includes words such as:

- *always* or *never*
- *everyone* or *no one*
- *everything* or *nothing*
- *all* or *none*
- *can’t* or *impossible*

**Other times, our self-talk uses negative and exaggerated words such as:**

- *worst*
- *horrible*
- *worthless*
- *gross*
- *disaster*

**Sometimes we blame ourselves or put ourselves down in our self-talk with strong and hurtful words like:**

- *stupid*
- *loser*
- *ugly*
- *disgusting*
- *hateful*
- *failure*
- *I deserve this*

Listen to your self-talk for these words and others like them. When you hear them, try to step back and look at what you’re saying as honestly and objectively as you can. Ask yourself, “Is what I’m telling myself really true? Why am I so sure it’s true? If it’s not true, what is closer to the truth?”

You may find that you have certain words or ideas that you think repeatedly. Be careful, because even if you know something you’re telling yourself isn’t true, you might end up believing it if you say it often enough. Words are powerful and can be hurtful both to others and to you. So keep paying attention to what you say to yourself, especially when you are feeling discouraged or upset. If you’re using negative self-talk, those negative thoughts are probably reinforcing your negative feelings. When you can change your thoughts for the better, you can work on breaking that cycle and begin feeling better.