The Danger of the Word ‘Should’

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Why You Should Stop Using the Word 'Should'

Many mental health therapists, especially those using cognitive behavioral therapy, are interested in the way people speak to themselves. Sometimes it is aloud, and other times it is only in your head. Sometimes you pay attention to it, and other times you don’t even recognize it is happening.

Therapists call this self-talk. Your self-talk is influenced by your feelings and behaviors; unwanted feelings and behaviors, like those fueled by anxiety, will lead to unwanted self-talk.

Self-talk is even more important because it can influence your feelings and behaviors. So, if you are full of negative, anxiety-provoking thoughts, your feelings and behaviors will be more anxious. On the other hand, if you want to feel better and have behaviors less impacted by anxiety, changing your self-talk will be a valuable method to accomplish this.

The words used in self-talk matter. The differences between helpful self-talk and hurtful self-talk may seem small or unimportant, but word choice will dramatically change the impact of self-talk.

Self-talk varies widely from person to person, and differs based on the mental health of each person. For example, certain styles and themes of self-talk are common in people with depression while others are common in people with anxiety.

A lot of anxious self-talk will be in the form of a question since the unknown sparks anxiety. Other anxious self-talk might look like this:

- I should be doing better.
- I should try to avoid that person.
- I should get out of bed, but I don’t want to.
- I should stay at home. It’s scary out there.
- Other people should try to help me.

The trend in the anxious self-talk is the word “should.” Should is a tricky word to use in self-talk because it carries tremendous weight. By using the word should, you are passing judgment on yourself or the situation.

There is risk of failure when using the word. If you *should* get out of bed, what happens if you don’t? Does that mean you failed or made a mistake? How do you feel after you make a mistake?

Using should statements is frowned upon when trying to establish desirable self-talk. In fact, should statements are a type of cognitive distortion that people experience while depressed or anxious.

Cognitive distortions are flawed thoughts or beliefs that make symptoms worse. In terms of cognitive distortions, should statements are expanded to include other unwanted words and phrases like: must, have to, and need to.

They all share the theme of putting added pressure on the current situation and creating the risk of failure. People who use any of these words or phrases in their self-talk are in danger of damaging their mental health.

Simple Solutions

Removing should statements from your self-talk is a great goal to have. It will aid your well-being as a pleasant side effect. The process requires only a few steps and a lot of practice. Here's how:

Play Detective

Using should statements will increase your anxiety, but you may not even realize how often you are doing so or if you are using the statements at all. Because of this, paying attention to your self-talk is a good first step.

As mentioned, self-talk happens all of the time and goes by unnoticed often. By attending to it, you can move the thoughts from the unconscious to the conscious. Take note of the times you use should statements and the situations that trigger their use.

Are you thinking about what other people should do? Are you thinking about what you should do? Or are you thinking about some other variation? Be sure to account for every variation of should statements that you use in your self-talk.

Eliminate

With the level of self-monitoring you have completed, you can now identify all the instances of should statements in your self-talk. If you can slow down your process enough, you can avoid using should statements altogether. Remember, should statements lead to negative results — eliminate them whenever possible.

Substitute

After you have done a few days of elimination, you may find that the word is very ingrained into your self-talk. If this is the case, elimination may be challenging, and substitution might be right for you.

Each time a should statement slips out, work to find a suitable alternative for "should" in the sentence. "I really should call my mom." Saying this means that not calling your mom is a failure.

Try this: "I would like to call my mom," or, "I could call my mom." These examples of self-talk work to be more general statements without judgment or criticism attached.

"I have to do well on this presentation." Saying this automatically builds feelings of tension and anxiety. What happens if you don't do well? Anxiety will make you think terrible results are a certainty.

Try this: "I'm going to try my best on this presentation," or even better, "I think I'm going to do quite well." These statements will reduce anxiety while building confidence and optimism.

To most people, the word "should" seems like a harmless part of everyday speech. To the mental health professional, should is a word that carries a lot of weight.

Over time, this weight begins to cumulate and ends with higher levels of anxiety and depression. Eliminate it or substitute it whenever possible. One small change can lead to huge results. You SHOULD start today — or, starting today could do a lot of good.