

# A guide to **RECOGNISING AND MODIFYING NEGATIVE SELF TALK**



Developed as part of  
ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving  
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students





about

# RECOGNISING AND MODIFYING NEGATIVE SELF TALK

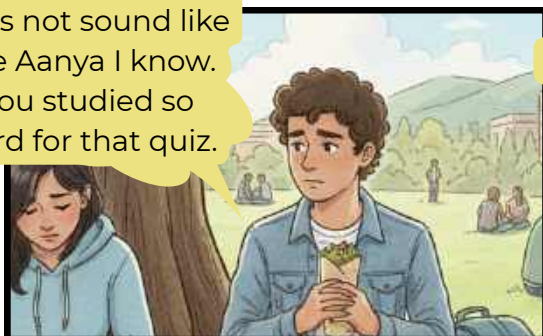
Hey, Aanya. You have been really quiet today. Everything okay?



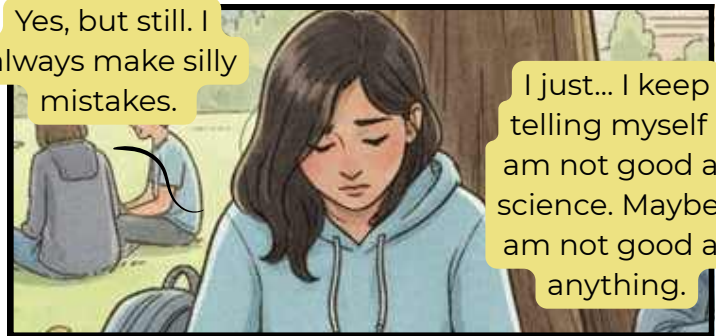
I performed poorly in the science quiz. I knew I would mess it up. I am just not smart enough for this stuff.



Wait a second. That does not sound like the Aanya I know. You studied so hard for that quiz.



Yes, but still. I always make silly mistakes.

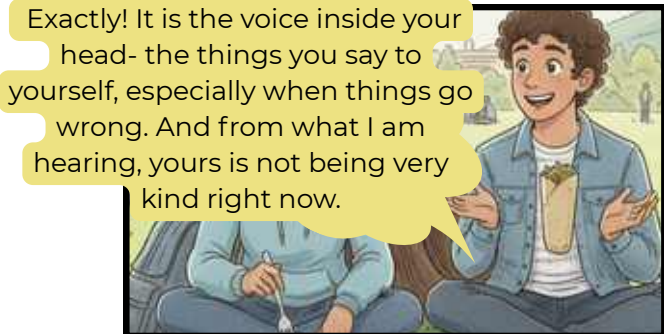


I just... I keep telling myself I am not good at science. Maybe I am not good at anything.



Aanya, have you ever heard of something called "self-talk"?

Self-talk? Like talking to yourself?



Exactly! It is the voice inside your head- the things you say to yourself, especially when things go wrong. And from what I am hearing, yours is not being very kind right now.

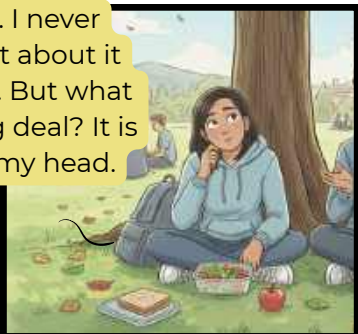


So, everyone has that voice?



*"you've"*  
**GOT THIS**

Yes! We all do it. Sometimes it is positive, like "I have got this!" Other times, it is negative, like what you just said: "I am not good at anything." That is called negative self-talk.



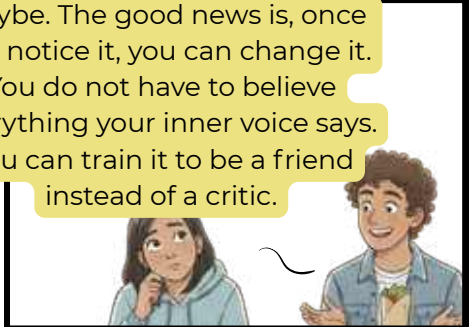
Hmm. I never thought about it like that. But what is the big deal? It is just in my head.



It may be in your head, but it changes how you feel and act. If your self-talk keeps putting you down, it can make you feel hopeless, anxious, or scared to even try. It is like having a bully living in your brain!



Wow. So that is what I have been doing to myself?



Maybe. The good news is, once you notice it, you can change it. You do not have to believe everything your inner voice says. You can train it to be a friend instead of a critic.



That actually makes me feel a little better already. So... how do I start?

That is what this guide is all about. Let us learn how to listen, understand, and reshape the stories we tell ourselves.



## What is Self-Talk?

Self-talk is the inner voice in your head that runs a constant commentary on your life. It helps you process experiences, make decisions, and understand yourself. It is like a narrator who never takes a break. This voice can be encouraging or discouraging, rational or emotional.

Self-talk can be:

### Positive

"I studied hard,  
I can do this."

### Neutral

"It is Monday,  
and I have  
math class."

### Negative

"I am going to  
fail. I am not  
smart enough."

Everyone talks to themselves- but learning to recognize and influence your self-talk can shape how you experience the world.

### Reflective Activity: Meet Your Inner Voice

1. Create a character that represents your inner voice.
2. What does it look like?
3. What does it usually say?
4. Is it helpful, hurtful, or a mix of both? Draw and label your character.



## How Does Self-Talk Influence Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors?

Self-talk directly affects your mindset, feelings, and actions. Think of it as the bridge between your thoughts and the choices you make each day.

### Thoughts

Your beliefs about yourself and the world stem from what you tell yourself. If you constantly think, "I am not good at this", your mind will begin to accept it as the truth, even if it is not.

### Emotions

Negative self-talk can fuel feelings of sadness, fear, or anger. Positive self-talk can create feelings of hope, motivation, and calm.

### Behaviors

Your actions often follow your thoughts. If you tell yourself, "I am going to fail," you may not try at all. If you say, "I can handle this," you are more likely to take action and do your best.



## Let's look at a scenario:

You receive a low grade on a test. Your self-talk could be:



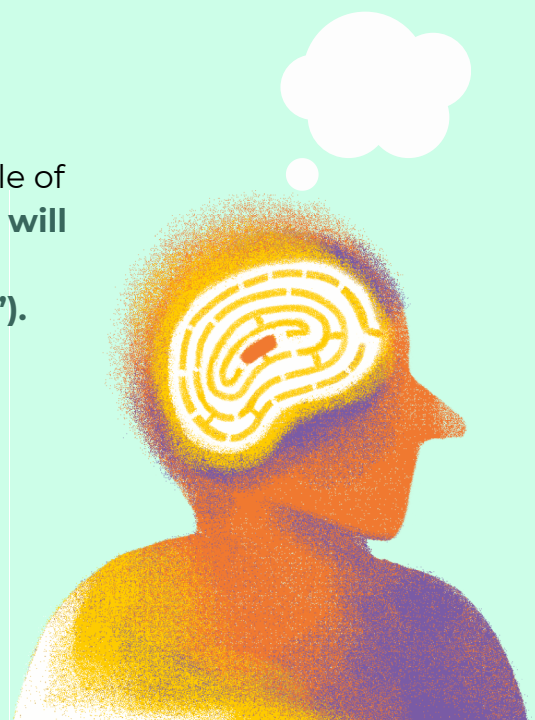
Each version leads to different emotional reactions and decisions. For example, with positive self-talk, you may feel disappointed momentarily, but you might feel motivated again to try again. You would be able to understand that a low grade on a test does not define your worth, and you would take it as a challenge to overcome. However, with negative self-talk, you might feel low, sad, demotivated to try again, while also attaching the situation to your self-worth leading to more general statements such as "I always fail- I must be a failure".

## The Thought-Emotion-Action Chain

Draw three connected circles labeled: Thought, Emotion, and Action. In each one, write an example of negative self-talk and its impact (**e.g., Thought: "I will embarrass myself during the presentation" → Emotion: "Anxiety" → Action: "Avoid presenting"**).

Then, create a second chain with a more positive version of the same situation.

This helps you see how what you say to yourself changes everything else.



## The Impact of Negative Self-Talk

Negative self-talk can:

- Lower your confidence and make you feel inadequate.
- Reduce motivation by making challenges feel overwhelming.
- Increase feelings of anxiety and depression, particularly when it is constant.
- Harm academic performance by affecting concentration and problem-solving.
- Encourage avoidance behaviors, like procrastination or giving up.



Over time, constant negativity can become a habit that colors how you see yourself and the world.

## Understanding Negative Self-Talk

### Common Patterns of Negative Thinking

These thinking traps or distortions are common but harmful. Learning to spot them is the first step toward change.

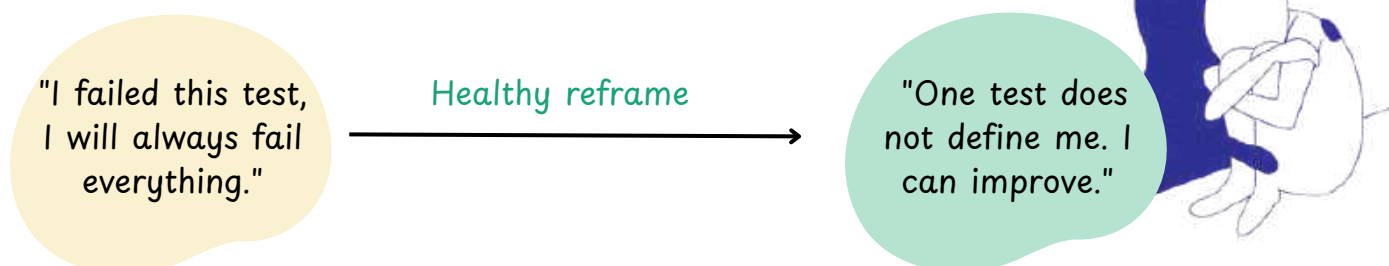
#### ① All-or-Nothing Thinking:

When a person sees things in extremes or black-and-white and fails to see the in-between grey areas. If it is not perfect, it is a failure.



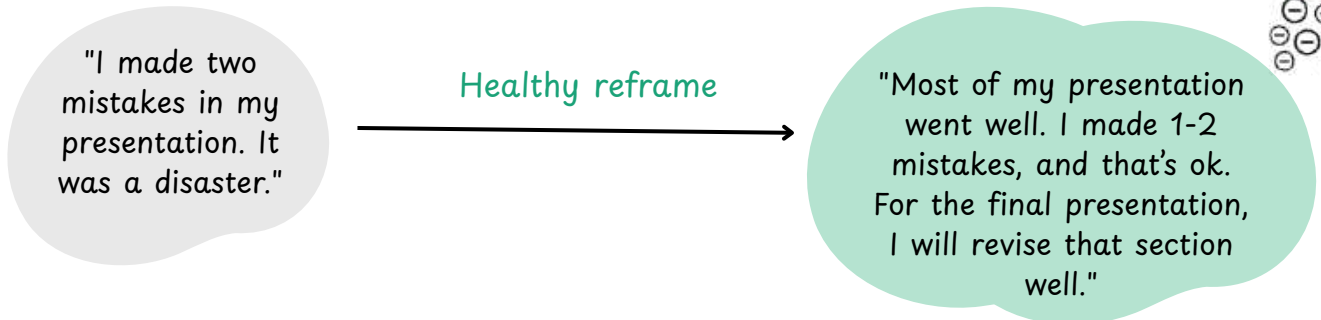
#### ② Overgeneralization:

When a person views one event as part of a never-ending pattern. They use one or two experiences to draw conclusions that things will 'always' be negative or undesirable.



### 3 Mental Filter or Selective Abstraction

When a person focuses only on the negative aspects of a situation and ignores the positive, concluding that the whole situation is negative.



### 4 Disqualifying the Positive

When a person rejects positive experiences or achievements, or transforms them into negative ones.



### 5 Jumping to Conclusions

When a person makes conclusions without any evidence or proof.

- **Mind Reading:** Assuming to know what others think.



- **Fortune Telling:** Predicting things will go badly.



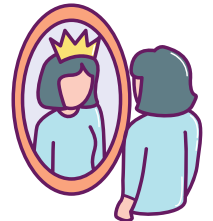
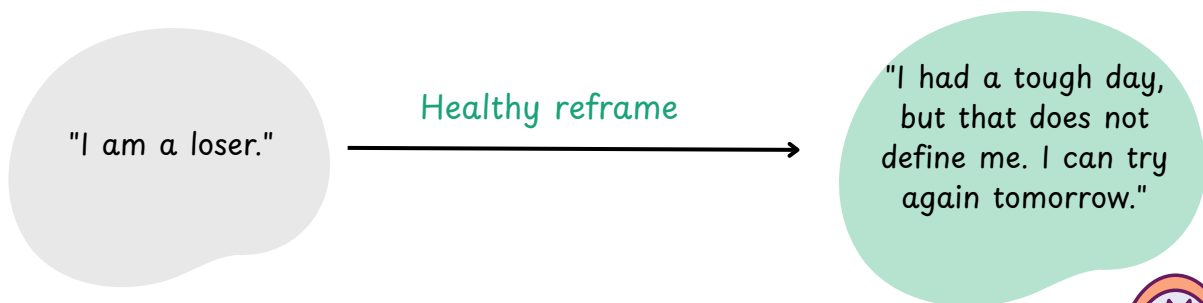
## 6 Catastrophizing

When a person believes that the worst outcome of a situation will happen. They may blow things out of proportion, usually into a negative conclusion.



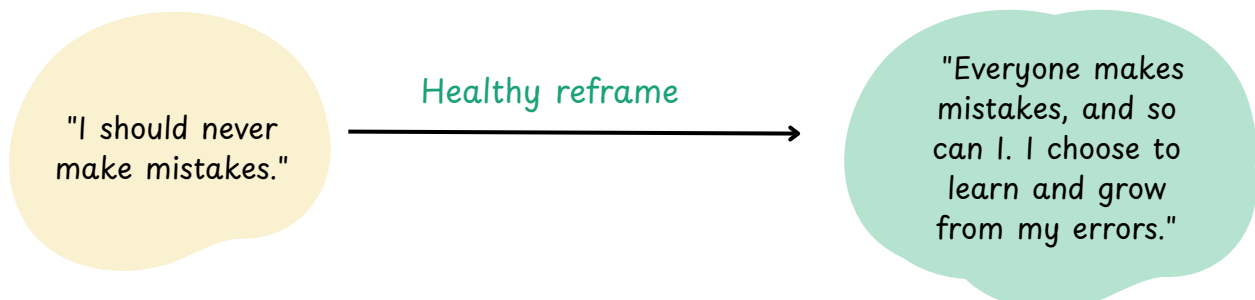
## 7 Labeling

When a person attaches harsh and negative labels to themselves based on one or two instances, and ignores their strengths.



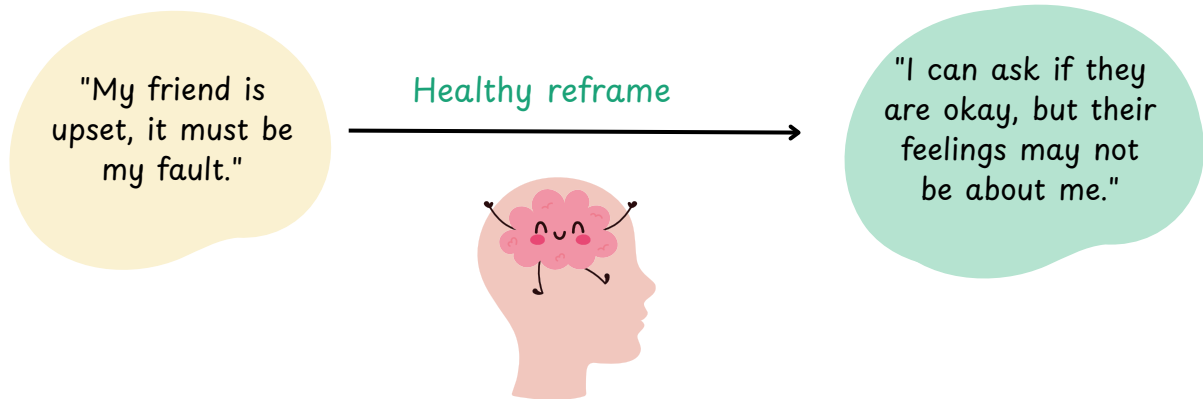
## 8 Should/Ought/Must Statements:

When a person sets unrealistic expectations for themselves or insists that things 'must' happen a certain way.



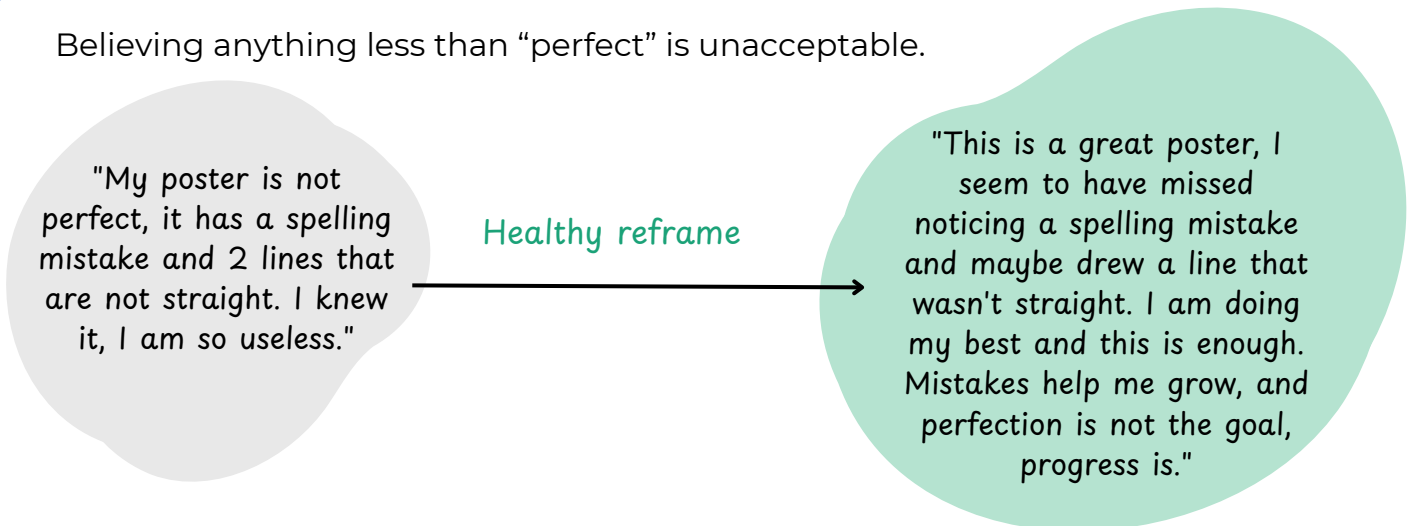
## 9 Personalization

When someone blames themselves for things outside their control.



## 10 Perfectionism

Believing anything less than "perfect" is unacceptable.



## Recognizing Your Own Negative Self-Talk

Before you can change negative self-talk, you need to recognize when it is happening. Often such self talk can be automatic and you may barely notice it. Here is how to start paying attention:

### 1) Tune Into Your Inner Voice

When you are feeling stressed, disappointed, or upset, pause and ask: "What am I saying to myself right now?"



## 2) Look for Clues in Your Emotions

Strong emotions like anxiety, shame, or anger often come from harsh self-talk. Trace the feeling back to the thought that caused it.



## 3) Spot the Inner Critic

We all have an “inner critic”—a voice that exaggerates our flaws and doubts. This is the voice that constantly criticizes, doubts, or shames you. It might:

- Compare you to others
- Remind you of past failures
- Minimize your accomplishments

It might sound like:

- “You are not trying hard enough.”
- “Everyone else is better than you.”
- “You will mess it up again.”

Name this voice. Is it Bossy Bob? Miss Mean? Giving it a name helps separate it from your true self.



## 4) Keep a Thought Journal

Write down negative thoughts when you notice them. Include:

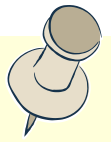
- The situation
- What you told yourself
- How it made you feel

Over time, you will start to see patterns in your thinking.



## 5) Recognize Triggers

Are there certain situations, people, or topics that spark negative self-talk? Knowing your triggers helps you prepare and respond with more awareness.



## Reflective Activity: “Catch It, Name It, Tame It!”

Create a 4-column chart:

1. Negative Thought
2. Inner Critic’s Name (the name you give your inner critic)
3. How I Felt
4. What I Can Say Instead

Practice filling it out for different moments in your week. You are training your brain to catch unhelpful thoughts and replace them with more balanced ones.

## When Negative Self-Talk Becomes Self-Sabotaging

Self-sabotage is when you get in your own way due to fear, shame, or low self-worth. It can look like:

- Not applying for opportunities
- Procrastinating important work
- Giving up easily
- Ignoring self-care

Your inner critic convinces you that you will fail, so you stop trying to protect yourself from disappointment—but this actually creates more frustration and regret. This is why it can be important to identify and correct the self-talk before it creates a negative loop.



## Strategies to Modify Negative Self-Talk

### 1) Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive restructuring is like being a thought detective. It helps you spot unhelpful beliefs, challenge them with evidence, and replace them with more balanced, realistic ones. This does not mean forcing yourself to fake being positive all the time; it is about being fair, kind and compassionate to yourself.



Challenge irrational thoughts by asking:

- Is this thought 100% true?
- What is the evidence for and against it?
- Am I overreacting or being too hard on myself?
- What would I say to a friend in this situation?

# “THINK” to Restructure Negative Self-Talk

## T: Take Note of the Thought

Catch the thought when it pops up. Ask yourself “What just went through my mind?”; “What did I say to myself when that happened?”

## H: Highlight the Emotion and Reaction

What did this thought make you feel?

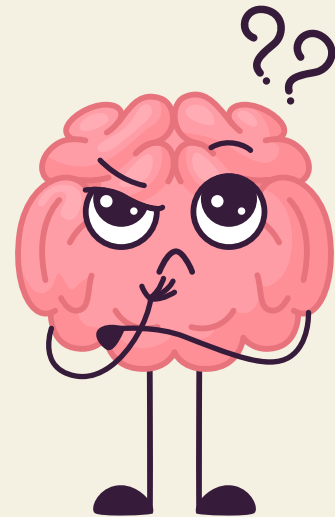
- Emotions (e.g., fear, shame, nervousness)
- Physical reactions (sweaty palms, stomach ache)
- Behaviors (did not raise hand, skipped practice)

What did you do (or avoid doing) because of it?

## I: Investigate the Evidence

Be a scientist of your own mind. Ask:

- What facts support this thought?
- What facts go against it?
- Am I confusing thoughts with truths?



## N: Name a More Balanced Thought

Now, reframe it. Keep it honest, not overly optimistic. Ask:

- What would I say to a friend feeling this way?
- What is a more helpful, realistic way to look at this?

## K: Keep Practicing

One thought will not change everything. The more you challenge negative self-talk, the more you rewire your brain. Over time, balanced thinking becomes your default.

**Use sticky notes or journal prompts to remind yourself of restructured thoughts.**

## 2) Reframing Techniques

Learn to look at situations differently.



- Instead of: "I can not do this."
- **Try: "This is hard, but I can take it one step at a time."**

### Let's Try Reframe Relay

You can pair up with a friend. Share a negative thought and challenge your friend to reframe it in 10 seconds. You can take turns.

**You can use this chart to restructure and reframe:**

Situation	Unhelpful Thought	Feeling/ Reaction	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Balanced Thought
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## 3) Self-Compassion and Affirmations

Treat yourself with the same kindness you would offer a struggling friend. You can use affirmations – statements that are consciously said to ourselves that can help build capacity to be kind and compassionate to ourselves.



**Design a poster or card with your favorite affirmations. Use colors, stickers, or drawings. Display it where you see it often.**



## 4) Practicing Mindfulness

Mindfulness helps you notice your thoughts without judgment. You can start small and do the following to experience mindfulness:

- Focus on your breath.
- Observe your thoughts like clouds passing by.

Let's make this fun?

**Mindful Minute:** Spend 60 seconds sitting quietly. Focus on your breathing. Afterwards, write down what you noticed or how you feel.



## Building Positive Inner Dialogue

Your inner voice can be one of your biggest supporters- if you train it well. Building positive self-talk is not about ignoring problems or pretending everything is perfect. It is about being realistic, kind, and encouraging to yourself, especially when things are tough.

Here is a guide to begin nurturing a positive inner voice:

### ① Celebrate Small Wins

Your brain responds to encouragement just like anyone else would. Praise yourself for progress, not just perfection.

“I spoke up in class today- that is a win.”

“I tried even though I was nervous.”



### ② Remind Yourself of Your Strengths

Keep a running list of your qualities and achievements, big and small. Revisit it when your confidence wavers.

“I am thoughtful.”

“I make great playlists.”

“I handled that argument maturely.”

### 3 Be Patient With Yourself

Growth takes time. Replace harsh deadlines with realistic encouragement.

- Instead of: “I should have figured this out already.”
- Try: “I am still learning, and that is okay.”

#### Evening Reflection Practice: “Rewriting the Day”

Take 5 minutes each night to reflect. In a journal or notes app, write:

- One thing you are proud of: Something you did well, no matter how small.
- One mistake you learned from: Reflect without judgment- what did it teach you?
- One thing you are looking forward to: End your day with hope or excitement.

#### Example:

- Proud: “I asked for help in math class.”
- Learned: “I interrupted someone- next time I will wait my turn.”
- Looking forward to: “Practicing guitar tomorrow.”



Do this regularly to train your brain to notice your effort, learn from setbacks, and build hope.

### When to Seek Support

Negative thoughts can come and go- but sometimes they stick around and start to seriously affect your well-being. You do not have to face them alone. Here are signs that it is time to reach out for help:

**1. The thoughts are constant and overwhelming:** You find yourself thinking negatively all day, every day- even about small things.

**2. Your thoughts are hurting your self-esteem:** If you are constantly telling yourself you are worthless, useless, stupid, or that you do not matter, it is time to speak to someone who can help you shift those beliefs.

**3. You stop doing things you used to enjoy:** When negative self-talk makes you avoid hobbies, friends, or activities because you think you are “not good enough” or “do not deserve to have fun,” that is a red flag.

**4. You feel anxious, sad, angry, or hopeless most of the time:** Your emotions feel heavy and hard to handle- and they are tied to how you are thinking about yourself or your future.



**5. School feels too hard- even when you try:** Negative thoughts like “I will never understand this” or “Why bother trying?” make it hard to study, concentrate, or stay motivated- even when you want to do well.

**6. You experience thoughts about hurting yourself or not wanting to be here:** This is the most serious sign. If you ever have thoughts like, “No one would care if I disappeared,” or “I just want to stop existing,” talk to a trusted adult immediately. These thoughts are not shameful—but they are a clear signal that you need support right away.

**You are not alone—and there are people who want to help:**

- A parent or caregiver
- A school counselor or teacher
- A trusted older sibling or relative
- A mental health professional
- A helpline or support group



Even if you are not sure how to explain what is going on, just saying, “I have been having some really negative thoughts about myself lately, and I do not know how to deal with them,” is enough to get started.

**Your thoughts are not facts. You have the power to challenge and change them. By becoming aware, practicing kindness, and seeking help when needed, you can build a stronger, more supportive inner voice. One that cheers you on- especially when things get hard.**

**You are always worth kindness- especially from yourself.**



Developed by  
School of Human Ecology (SHE)  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai