

The [Professional Learning Hub](#), Griffith University, is proud to present **Positive on Purpose**, a podcast series by Mia O'Brien

Episode 2 – Stories part 1



I'm Mia O'Brien from the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, and welcome to my podcast: Positive on purpose – no magical thinking required.

This podcast is titled 'Stories we tell ourselves: why self-talk is the ultimate superpower'

I want to start with a scenario, which I'm sure is familiar. As I talk you through imagine you're actually there, walking in the shoes of our hero or heroine, as the case may be. It goes like this:

It's Monday morning, and you're enjoying a coffee break outside in the warm sun. Suddenly you get a text from a colleague that says 'where are you? The meeting has started and your presentation is up next!'

Startled, you spill coffee on your shirt, dash upstairs and fumble loudly and clumsily into the meeting room, only to realise you've left your laptop with the presentation on your desk outside. Too late to retrieve it, you make a mumbled apology and sit awkwardly on the only chair remaining. A warm flush of embarrassment creeps slowly across your cheeks.

I'm sure we've all been there. But take a moment to really put yourself into that scenario. What are the thoughts running through your head? What kind of story are you telling yourself? It probably goes something like this..

You idiot, you never get organised, God you look like a novice... you're going to sound so stupid. Look at Jo smirking as usual – probably can't wait to point out all the holes in this report. Did I even remember to fact check the figures in that graph? I meant to.. what was that statistical term - Outlier? In-lier? I can't even remember the four milestones.. Geez why do I put my hand up for these things? Why can't I ever get these things right..?

Everywhere we go, and for most things we do, we're usually accompanied by an inner dialogue that unfolds constantly in our minds. This kind of internal commentary or inner speech is referred to as 'self-talk'. Self talk runs in the background of our day to day lives. It's You, talking about you, to *YOU*... and for the most part it's a kind of banal commentary about what we're seeing, experiencing or thinking. We talk to ourselves about ourselves– as

in, we tell ourselves the weather is nice, promise ourselves an extra coffee if we get to work early, ask ourselves if we've left the iron on, and wonder if we've made the right decision.

Now self talk can be really helpful – especially when you're talking yourself through a new task or set of instructions, composing an email, reminding yourself to pick up the milk. It's particularly prevalent when we're running back over the day's events on the drive home, or as we settle into bed at night.

However sometimes self talk is quite extensive, and gets filled with detailed explanations of our lives and experiences. In turn these thoughts influence how we see ourselves and the world around us.

I call this kind of extended commentary '*the stories we tell ourselves*' and this podcast title suggests, our stories can be an absolute superpower or they can act like kryptonite and undermine our confidence and strengths just when we need them most. To explain what I mean by that, let's take a closer look at self talk.

Why do we even have self-talk?

Self talk, which we do both aloud and internally by the way, reflects our very human propensity to be self aware and highly reflective, both of which play an important role in the survival of our species. Vygotsky argued that self talk was part of the process of developing higher order mental functioning and unfolds in tandem with our abilities to interact with others.

Developmentally, we're driven to dialogue and *stories; we're absolutely wired for stories;* and in time our internal dialogue becomes a regular habit, as we tell ourselves a constant, overarching story ourselves about our lives. They're stories about who we are, where we are and why we are the way we are.

Self talk has fascinated scholars for decades but, received quite limited attention in the research.

What we do know is that about 96% of all adults engage in self talk at least 25% of the time.

Self talk reflects a combination of the conscious and unconscious beliefs and biases that we hold about ourselves and the world. The important thing is that self talk is highly reflexive – so positive and beneficial, or negative and self-limiting – self talk both influences and is influenced by, those beliefs.

Now, there are three conditions that make our self talk more acute or more urgent than normal – those conditions are when we're in a potentially negative or risky situation, when we need to demonstrate high autonomy or responsibility, or when our behaviour is being evaluated or judged.

That takes us back to our opening scenario. The self talk of our heroine was really amping up in response to that same trifecta of conditions – i) she was late for an important meeting (the potentially negative event), ii) she was required to present a report (that's the high autonomy and responsibility part), and iii) this was all about to occur in front of an audience (where her performance – good or bad - could be making a lasting impression on people that matter).

In other words, self talk is likely to be louder and more compelling when we're slightly stressed; and as we know from the previous podcast, these are the moments when our brains activate the *fight, flight or freeze* response. That's the response that, in sensing potential danger, shuts down our higher order thinking capacity and focuses our attention in a very narrow, laser-like fashion to the priority of survival. Our brains and bodies literally block out all extraneous information in order to run, hide or defend ourselves...none of which are helpful when you need to deliver an important presentation.

So let's look at the self talk in the scenario. You'll remember our coffee-stained heroine found herself sitting at a meeting with an inner commentary that basically sounded like her worst enemy shouting in her ear.

This kind of self talk is negative and self-deprecating. And to make matters worse, that negativity bias that we all have built into our brain goes into overdrive and the combination... well... as this scenario shows, can paralyse people into self-absorption, self doubt and total inaction. This perfect storm of body chemistry and internal chatter can weaken any superman or woman at the knees, and in the case of our scenario, leaves our heroine struggling to remember the essential points of her imminent presentation.

So this is what's so important about self-talk:

Over time, self talk becomes a series of stories that we tell ourselves – and those stories are pretty compelling.

So we don't all have to forget a meeting and drop coffee on our shirts to generate a litany of negative self talk. You'll remember that Vygotsky pointed out that self talk develops as a result of most the common interactions we engaged with throughout our lives – that's the kind of talk we have with particularly influential others such as our parents, carers, siblings, teachers, and such. The quality of those interactions influences the messages in our own self talk.

The point is, if we don't pay attention, we can rehearse *negative* self talk more often than *positive* self talk – and when that happens we become our own worst enemies... late for meetings or otherwise.

KEY POINT - The stories we tell ourselves – good or bad, empowering or debilitating, aspiring or crushing – are entirely believable to our mind's eye. That's the neuroscience – it's just the way our brain functions. Anything that we put on repeat in our internal dialogue will start to be taken as fact. So let's listen to that statement again - *The stories we tell ourselves – be they stories of hardship or opportunity, success or defeat, potential or pointlessness – are entirely believable to our mind's eye.*

So we need to pay attention to them. If the story you tell yourself isn't affirming your confidence and cultivating a sense of belonging and purpose in life; then it's doing you a real disservice.

If that story is ruthlessly critical about your abilities, your purpose and your place in the world; and if that self-talk habitually overstates and exaggerates the negative (as that

negativity bias make us inclined to do), then you're on the fast track to anxiety, depression and all kinds of dysfunction.

So self-talk is not at all about magical thinking, it's vital to our wellbeing, sense of confidence and success.

Join me for the next podcast 'Stories we tell ourselves, part 2' which outlines strategies for ensuring YOUR self-talk is enabling, empowering and evidence based. That's the path to making the stories we tell ourselves a potential superpower.

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