

LOVING KINDNESS: DEALING WITH NEGATIVE SELF – TALK AND NEGATIVE TALK

Written by Peter C. Ashenden
Executive Director of Mental Health Empowerment Project, Inc.

As a person who has been plagued with the symptoms of depression for over twelve years I have discovered a technique that I would like to share with you.

During this time in my life, I have been an active supporter and participant within the “mutual support” community. Through this, I have learned that I can have a productive life, but must always monitor my feelings and warning signs on a daily basis. In the last two years I have been trying a technique that had been suggested by several individuals. I had previously dismissed this technique because it has to do with a form of meditation. Thinking I would have to sit in the lotus position (which at 250 plus pounds was an impossible mission all by itself) and chant the sound “ummmm...” for several hours didn’t seem like it would be very helpful. In addition, anyone who has been plagued with addiction issues knows that staying in the moment is a task that requires extreme concentration with limited success in the beginning. The whole idea seemed like it would only add to the confusion and frustration that I experienced every day in my own mind. But I was determined to give it a try nonetheless.

I was to sit quietly, in a comfortable position, and concentrate on my breathing for a half-hour to an hour every day. I was amazed that in as little as two or three weeks I was taking time every day to sit quietly, focus on my breathing, and stay in the moment. This meant that I was not considering the future (what am I going to do about this or that) or reflecting on the past (which usually results in me emotionally beating myself up for one thing or another).

The next step I learned to practice was to review my body’s feeling at any given time, using a technique called “Body Scan.” During your quiet time, you move from area to area in your body concentrating on what each area feels like.

As a result of these practices my mentors felt that it was time to move into the next area, which is called “Loving Kindness.” This practice was very difficult for me to understand and even harder to start to practice. But, again, I saw the results from individuals that were using these methods on a daily basis and I wanted what they had. The first step was to make a concerted effort to not allow any word to leave my mouth that was not wrapped in kindness. I have not shared my past experiences with you but I come from a professional middle class home that was riddled with alcoholism issues, self-esteem problems, and a total lack of affection and nurturing. The most difficult part of growing up was that no one was allowed to discuss family affairs with outsiders. As a result feelings were stuffed and never addressed and a show was always put on for those who interacted with us. Taking that into account, practicing loving kindness got off to a rocky start. But seeing the results of its practice in others gave me the desire to persevere.

Often, I would find myself saying things that were not wrapped in kindness but similar to the old behaviors that I was very comfortable and familiar with. I had a hard time trying to change. However, I did not give up and allowed myself to make mistakes. What I saw happen, was that I soon began to easily recognize when I was slipping into my old behaviors, and made a more concerted effort to change. Another result was that when I *was* successful in wrapping each word in kindness my interactions with others were not as argumentative or defensive. By projecting kindness and consideration I got the same in return from others. I was no longer plotting and planning how to hurt someone but actually started to think kind thoughts about the person that I was interacting with. This technique also succeeded in preventing the frequent gossiping and negative comments about people or situations that I often would hear from others, who I would participate with before I started my loving kindness approach. This made me feel much better about who I was and how I felt about myself. Please understand this was not something that just happened over-night. When around negative people I still felt the urge to participate but recognized that was not the way I now wanted to interact with people.

After a few months I was slipping and relapsing into my old behaviors less and less, and continued to feel better about myself. Also, I noticed that the symptoms and early warning signs of my depression were occurring less and less. When they did occur, it was easier to get back on track and I did not suffer as I had in the past with feelings of hopelessness and insecurity. Finally, I found that all my interactions with others were more positive and less problematic.

The hardest part of this journey was that it was up to me to choose my newfound approach or to fall back on old behavior patterns.

I am sure that many of you are asking why is learning about all this so important? What I have learned is that when I stay in a place of kindness I do not engage in hurtful or harming behavior. The most significant thing I learned was when you project kindness you get back kindness. I also found that I began to trust people more. When you are not engaged in negative or hurtful behavior you are no longer living in a negative world. The result is that by not projecting mistrust you do not receive mistrust and this then applies to all of your interactions with others.

I think it is important to offer you an example that I have experienced so that you can better understand why I have worked so hard in this area of self-realization and personal improvement.

I think of people that have been involved in the “Consumer Movement” for a significant period of time. Whenever I would see them, we would always share the latest gossip and interact with a generally negative attitude about everything. As a result of these negatively charged interactions, I would always be left with the feeling that many people involved in the “Consumer Movement”, (a cause that I deeply care about), were totally uninformed and not doing anything positive to move us ahead in our struggle or to advance our cause within the mental health system.

As I began my new “more positive loving kindness” practices on a daily basis, I found that I really had nothing to say to these types of negative individuals. By choosing not to engage in negative behavior, the negative people in my life stopped approaching me now that I would no longer reciprocate negativity back to them. Like magnetic forces attract and repel so do interactions with people. This is only one of the many examples that I have encountered.

There are many more instances of successes using similar techniques to what I have learned. What is most important are *your* own examples. I ask you to consider the benefits or gifts that become available with some hard work and a focus on improving your attitude. I believe that it is possible to find a place that is more productive and far less stressful than the place that so many of us have locked ourselves into, simply out of routine rather than what is best for us.

If you would like further information on the various practices mentioned please contact the Mental Health Empowerment Project, Inc. Peter would be happy to tell you about the books and writings that have been instrumental in achieving his own personal goals.

The phone number in New York State is 1-800-MHEPINC or they can be reached at 518-434-1391. You may also write to the Mental Health Empowerment Project, Inc. at 261 Central Avenue, Albany, New York 12206.