

"Fighting Feelings of Failure: How to avoid defeatist thinking that keeps you from giving yourself a real chance to succeed"

"I think I can. I think I can. I know I can. I know I can. I *knew* I could! I *knew* I could!" *The Little Engine that Could*. Truly one of the best stories because it teaches children a lesson that motivational speakers and mental health workers try very hard to get across to adults: Thinking tremendously affects feelings and behavior.

Try this: Say to yourself, "I hate the way I look and feel and I hate the way people stare at me." Pause. Pay attention to how you feel (as in emotionally) when you say those sentences. Feelings like sad, mad, scared, or angry. Say it again: "I hate the way I look and feel and I hate the way people stare at me." How do you feel? Where do you feel it? You may notice a tightening in your chest or in your abdomen. Does that signify anger to you? Sadness? Did you find your teeth clenching as you read the words? Was there a lump in your throat? Did those words evoke frustration? Irritation? Sorrow?

Now say this: "My physical appearance is improving since I have been taking better care of my health. It's nice to hear the kind things people say as they notice this." Again, pause. How do you feel? Optimistic? Hopeful? Pleased? Where do you feel it? A lightness in your chest? A tingling in your stomach? A smile on your face?

Try the above routine with the following statements. Read them to yourself or out loud. As you do, pay close attention to the sensations in your body and how you feel emotionally.

- I have tried and tried to succeed in dieting and have failed every time. Why would I think *this* time will be any different?
- I stay at home most of the time because I'm embarrassed to be seen in public.
- It's not fun to eat in a restaurant, especially when I'm with other people. I think others are watching to see what I eat."
- People think I'm a happy person. I say I'm a happy person but I cry a lot of the time when I'm by myself. I don't really like myself.

Now, read the sentences below, which correspond to the ones directly above, but are an altered version. Again, listen to how your body responds and to how you feel.

- I have tried and tried to succeed in dieting and have failed every time. This time *will* be different and I *will* succeed because I *expect* myself to succeed.

- I have stayed at home a lot because I've been embarrassed to be seen in public. I am going out now more because it reminds me that I am as worthy as everyone else to be out in the world. It's also good incentive for me to continue my healthy habits because I really like going places and want to continue feeling better and better about myself.
- When I eat in a restaurant, I worry that other people are watching to see what I eat. Instead of hating that, I have decided it's a good thing because it reminds me to make healthy choices. Who knows? Maybe I'll inspire others to eat better, too!
- People think I'm a happy person. I cry a lot when I'm alone. I haven't liked myself for a long time. Now when I cry I think about the tears as shedding the pain from my inside. When I finish crying, I congratulate myself for letting go of pain and then remind myself of three things that are good about myself.

Most people feel more neutral, if not *hopeful*, when they read the second set of statements. The goal of *choosing* to think more positively is not necessarily to constantly feel happy-happy-joy-joy. One goal of choosing to think positively is to stop berating yourself. Another is to create a positive roadmap for your behavior.

HOW YOU THINK AFFECTS HOW YOU FEEL AND WHAT YOU DO.

Let's take the four statements above a step further.

- Statement #1, related to repeated past dieting failures: Expected success in the present will reinforce the desire and need to eat right and exercise so that success is achieved.
- Statement #2, related to staying home due to being embarrassed to be seen in public: If you don't add the second, more positive part: a) you will likely feel sad and miserable and b) you will likely continue the same behavior. However, when you add the part about going out serving as a reminder of being worthwhile and providing an incentive to practice healthy behaviors: a) you will feel happier and more motivated, and b) you will have provided yourself with the verbal reinforcement that will lead to continued healthy behavior.
- Statement #3, related to eating in restaurants and thinking others are watching: Again, simply noting the dread associated with eating in public and the paranoia that others may be watching leaves you with *continued* dread of eating in public and *supports your fear* that others may be watching. Choosing (and I do mean *choosing*, because

what we think about things and how we think about them *is* a choice) – choosing to think about a public eating experience as an opportunity to help yourself make healthy food choices leads to feeling happy and optimistic. It also reinforces the probability of continuing to use restaurant eating as a positive way to make healthy choices.

- Statement #4 in the above leaves me feeling miserable just writing it. The revised, healing version results in my feeling happy. Hopefully, you would be proud of yourself for finding a way to use your sadness as part of your healing process. You would also feel happier knowing that you *are* healing.

What you say to yourself (in your head and out loud) is the key to your success. How you choose to think will determine whether or not you succeed. You must fight negative self-talk *at all times and not allow it*. This can be hard work and takes a lot of practice and persistence. Treat yourself with as much kindness, compassion and encouragement that you give to others. Success can be yours. Success can be yours. Success IS yours. I *knew* it would be!

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