

# 5

## CONSTRUCTIVE THOUGHT-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

### Developing a Travel Mind-Set

*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make  
a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.*

—John Milton

The traveler physically collapsed and groaned with relief as he gazed upon the white-haired old man who sat before him. He paused for a moment to peer cautiously over the sheer cliff he had just climbed to reach the top of the mountain. He looked out at the thick jungle beyond that had been his home for many days. “Old man,” he gasped, “I have traveled for days to speak to you because many have said you are among the wisest of all the living. I must know the true nature of life—is it good or is it bad?”

The old man responded with a question of his own: “Tell me first—how do you see life, my son?”

The traveler looked away, frowning, and said slowly and sadly, “I believe life is bad—people are selfish and basically cruel, and fate always seems anxious to deliver a disheartening blow.” Then he turned to the old man and asked, with obvious anguish in his voice, “Is this the nature of life?”

“Yes,” responded the old man. “This is the nature of life, my son.”

The traveler dropped his gaze, his face going blank. He then pulled himself to his feet and solemnly began his descent back down the cliff.

## Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Recognize that we create our own unique psychological worlds by choosing what to think about and how to think about it, and that our psychological worlds help to shape our behaviors.
2. Employ the concept of self-talk to identify and replace negative internal dialogues with more positive ones.
3. Explain the importance of beliefs relative to behaviors and apply this mental strategy by challenging and replacing irrational

and dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions with more positive and rational ones.

4. Describe and use mental practice techniques following the specific steps outlined in the chapter.
5. Contrast opportunity thinking with obstacle thinking and apply the self-leadership strategies of positive self-talk, challenging beliefs and assumptions, and mental practice to foster habitually opportunistic thinking.

A few moments later another traveler pulled himself up over the edge of the cliff and collapsed at the feet of the white-haired old man. "Tell me, old man of much wisdom," he gasped, "what is the nature of life? Is it good or is it bad?"

The old man again asked the question, "Tell me first—how do you see life, my son?"

At this question the traveler looked hopefully into the old man's eyes. "Life can be hard, and the way is often difficult," he started, "but I believe the nature of life is basically good. People are not perfect, but I see much value in the heart of each I meet—even those that would be called the most lowly. I believe life is challenge and growth, and offers a sweet victory for those who try and endure. Is this the nature of life?" he asked as he continued his hopeful stare into the old man's eyes.

"Yes," responded the old man. "This is the nature of life, my son."

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The emphasis of this chapter is on our unique psychological worlds. We begin from the viewpoint that, because of the way we think, each of us experiences a psychological world that is different from the psychological worlds of all others, even when we are faced with the same physical situations. Our senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, and perhaps other, more mystical senses) are constantly bombarded with stimuli. Right this minute you likely have a potentially overwhelming number of things to focus on. What sights and sounds are available to you, both near and distant? By the way, how do the bottoms of your feet feel? Are they tired, sore, comfortable? What kinds of things have you thought about lately? Have you spent more mental energy thinking about your problems or about your opportunities?

The point is that we usually have a choice regarding what we focus on and what we think about. We can't deal with every possible stimulus we come in contact with, nor can we deal with every possible thought. Of course, we don't have much of a choice about some of our thoughts, such as those we experience when struck by unexpected physical pain, but we do have a choice regarding what we think about much of the time. In addition, we can think of the things we choose to think about in different ways. That is what this

chapter is all about: what we choose to think about and how we choose to think about it. This might sound a little silly, but it is probably the most important part of self-leadership.

This chapter is thus devoted to providing a foundation for increasing your understanding of and improving your psychological world. Several strategies will be suggested that can help you develop more desirable patterns of thought through which to see and deal with the world. Take a few moments to assess your own tendencies regarding the use of constructive thought strategies by responding to the statements in Self-Leadership Questionnaire 3. For each of the nine statements, select the number that best describes your position. Follow the directions provided for scoring your responses.

## INTERPRETING YOUR SCORE

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Your scores for A through C suggest your current tendencies concerning several constructive thought-focused self-leadership strategies that will be addressed in this chapter. Your score for each of these strategies could range from 3 (a total absence of the strategy in your current self-leadership) to 15 (a very high level of the strategy in your current self-leadership). Your scores on A through C can be interpreted as follows:

1. A score of 3 or 4 indicates a *very low* level of the strategy.
2. A score of 5 to 7 indicates a *low* level of the strategy.
3. A score of 8 to 10 indicates a *moderate* level of the strategy.
4. A score of 11 to 13 indicates a *high* level of the strategy.
5. A score of 14 or 15 indicates a *very high* level of the strategy.

Each of the strategies addressed by the questionnaire should generally contribute to personal performance and effectiveness. Therefore, high scores on A through C suggest a high level of self-leadership, which offers potential to enhance performance. Each of the specific strategies is discussed in more detail throughout the remainder of the chapter.

Your score on X indicates your overall use of the self-leadership strategies. This score could range from a low of 9 to a high of 45. Your score on X can be interpreted as follows:

1. A score of 9 to 16 indicates a *very low* level of the strategy.
2. A score of 17 to 24 indicates a *low* level of the strategy.
3. A score of 25 to 31 indicates a *moderate* level of the strategy.
4. A score of 32 to 39 indicates a *high* level of the strategy.
5. A score of 40 to 45 indicates a *very high* level of the strategy.

In general, a high score on X suggests that you possess some positive constructive thought tendencies. Your score on X reflects what you believe are your current

**Self-Leadership Questionnaire 3**  
**Self-Assessment Questionnaire for Constructive Thought-Focused Strategies**

	Describes me very well	Describes me well	Describes me somewhat	Does not describe me very well	Does not describe me at all
1. I think about my own beliefs and assumptions whenever I encounter a difficult situation.	5	4	3	2	1
2. Sometimes I find I'm talking to myself (out loud or in my head) to help myself deal with difficult problems I face.	5	4	3	2	1
3. I visualize myself successfully performing a task before I do it.	5	4	3	2	1
4. I try to mentally evaluate the accuracy of my own beliefs about situations I am having problems with.	5	4	3	2	1
5. Sometimes I talk to myself (out loud or in my head) to work through difficult situations.	5	4	3	2	1
6. Sometimes I picture in my mind a successful performance before I actually do a task.	5	4	3	2	1
7. I openly articulate and evaluate my own assumptions when I have a disagreement with someone else.	5	4	3	2	1

8. When I'm in a difficult situation I will sometimes talk to myself (out loud or in my head) to help myself get through it.	5	4	3	2	1
9. I often mentally rehearse the way I plan to deal with a challenge before I actually face the challenge.	5	4	3	2	1

**Directions for scoring:** Add the numbers you circled for each statement as indicated below to determine your score for each self-leadership strategy.

	Scores
A. Evaluating beliefs and assumptions (add numbers circled for statements 1, 4, and 7)	
B. Self-talk (add numbers circled for statements 2, 5, and 8)	
C. Mental practice (add numbers circled for statements 3, 6, and 9)	
X. Total score (add scores for A through C)	

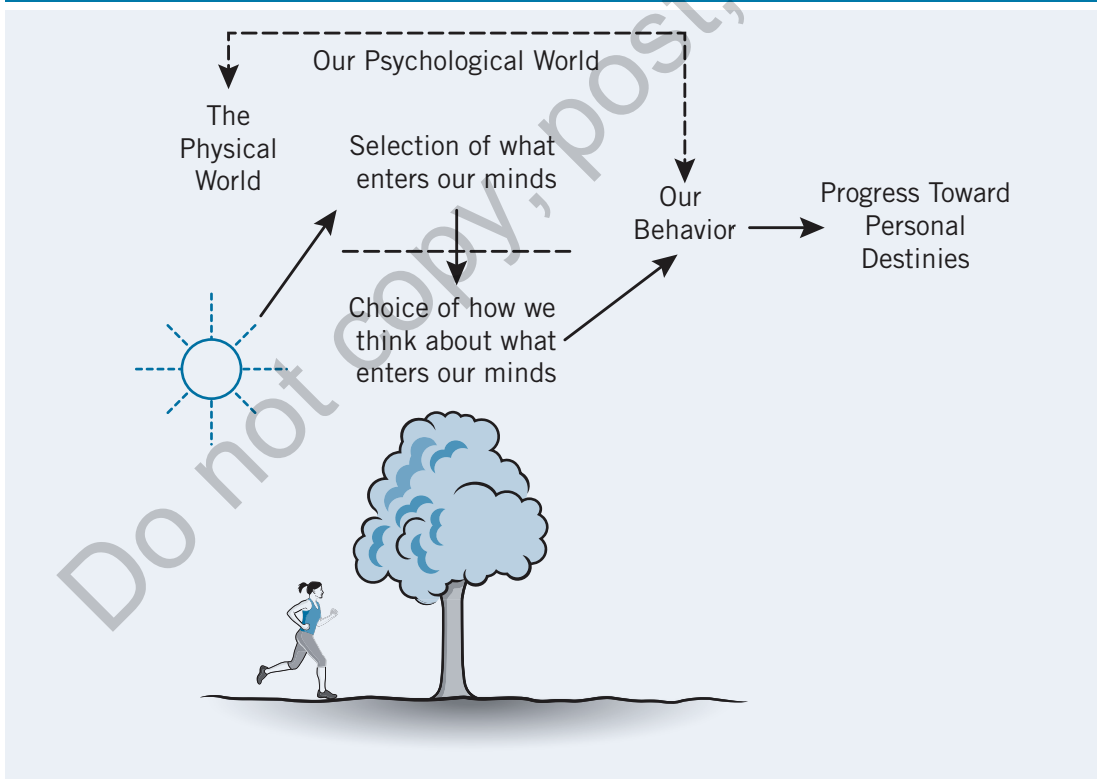
**Source:** Adapted from Jeffrey D. Houghton and Christopher P. Neck, "The Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire: Testing a Hierarchical Factor Structure for Self-Leadership," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 17, no. 8 (2002): 672–91.

constructive thought tendencies. Regardless of your score, the remainder of this chapter is designed to help you implement and improve upon several constructive thought-focused self-leadership strategies. This chapter will provide you with a basis for better understanding and more effectively using the power of positive thoughts.

## OUR PSYCHOLOGICAL WORLDS

What each of us experiences in life is unique. No one else in the world can experience exactly what we do. We create our own psychological worlds by selecting what enters our minds (where the essence of human experience takes place) and what shape it takes after it does. The content of our unique psychological worlds determines the way we behave, and our behavior helps determine the nature of our physical worlds.<sup>1</sup> All of these things together determine our progress toward our personal destinies. These ideas are represented pictorially in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 The Role of Our Psychological Worlds



We carry in our minds a world that is more real to us than the physical one within which we live. A winter blizzard has a different meaning to an avid skier than it does to an avid golfer. Identical physical conditions can result in joyful exultation for one person and depression and gloom for another. In fact, we are capable of turning potentially joyful, motivating situations into circumstances of demoralizing gloom through our thoughts and resulting actions. For example, if we are invited to a social gathering of some kind, we can experience the event as an unhappy one by being overly self-conscious about our appearance and what we say. In essence, by doing so we are choosing to focus our mind on negative aspects of a potentially positive situation. In general, we can look for the positive or negative in people and situations, and as a result we create the psychological atmosphere in which we live and experience life. The following story reinforces this point.

### The Vision

Do you have a grand idea  
To which some might laugh and smile?  
They think it can't be done;  
They call it a "someday I'll."  
Then consider this story of two men;  
Their business was selling shoes.  
They were confronted with the same situation,  
But each had differing views.  
Both were sent to a far-away island  
To test if their abilities were elite.  
And they discovered, upon arrival,  
The natives had nothing on their feet.  
The first sadly called his boss  
With a very large case of despair,  
Relayed that there was no hope for business  
Because everyone's feet were bare.  
The second was filled with much elation;  
Told his superior the good news.  
Said he was going to make a million.

No one *yet* was wearing shoes.  
The meaning in these few words  
Is your thoughts can help you advance  
Because what to some might spell disaster  
Could be for you, your one big chance.  
The secret to creating opportunities  
Isn't money or political pull.  
Simply, it's your attitude—  
Is the glass half-empty or half-full?  
A different real world example  
Might help reveal this story's key.  
It's a lesson of a pollinating insect,  
The plight of the bumble bee.  
According to the laws of science,  
The bee should not be able to fly.  
But this creature didn't acknowledge this  
And instead gave flight a try.  
So remember what history reveals  
As you pinpoint your dreams with precision;  
The primary keys to greatness  
Are your attitude and your vision.<sup>2</sup>

Because our actions help shape the physical world where we live, our psychological worlds ultimately have an impact on the physical world itself. In fact, the way we think about the physical world can be self-fulfilling. If we attend a social gathering worrying that we will not be accepted or liked by those present, we can make this fear come true. If we are withdrawn and closed off to others, these others are likely to reciprocate with similar behavior.

The remainder of this chapter will address different ways of analyzing and dealing with the way we think and how this affects our own self-leadership. The intention is to increase our understanding of and ability to deal with our psychological worlds. We can change our psychological worlds and our resulting behavior and experiences if we choose to do so. This viewpoint is consistent with psychological perspectives that place the responsibility for our actions and self-improvement where it belongs: on ourselves.<sup>3</sup>



If we wish to achieve effective self-leadership and obtain personal effectiveness, we need to take responsibility for what we think and do. This approach is in direct contrast to the common tendency to place the responsibility for our actions on external sources such as authority figures or traumatic experiences from our childhoods. The focus is on dealing with and improving our immediate thinking and behavior rather than on looking for reasons (excuses) to explain why we can't become what we wish to become and are capable of becoming.

## **IS THERE POWER IN POSITIVE THINKING?**

In the 1950s, the concept of more effective living was a topic widely written about. This viewpoint, which can be called *positive thinking*, was introduced by the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale, who published several books on the subject, including the well-known best-seller *The Power of Positive Thinking*.<sup>4</sup> In support of his ideas, Peale subsequently reported numerous cases in which persons overcame challenges and obstacles with the aid of positive thinking.<sup>5</sup> Peale's work, however, was never subjected to what authorities in the fields of psychology and human behavior would describe as scientific research. In fact, until recently, most academics in these areas would likely have considered Peale's work with some amusement. Nevertheless, as a result of the work Peale gained widespread public notoriety and attention such as few authors ever receive. More recently, evidence has been accumulating in support of the many benefits to be gained from positive thinking.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of positive thinking is a useful reference point from which to consider improvement of our psychological worlds. Several different elements that offer the potential to help explain how our thinking can have an impact on our behavior and experience of life will be addressed in this chapter. These include our beliefs, our imagined experiences, our self-instruction (self-talk), and our thought patterns. The underlying logic is that if we make systematic efforts to change our thinking in beneficial ways, then we can improve our self-leadership. Beneficial thinking (or positive thinking, if you prefer) offers the potential to help us improve our personal effectiveness just as beneficial *behaving* does. In fact, as mentioned earlier, our behavior and our unique ways of thinking (mental behavior) are two primary, interrelated features in the total influence picture.

### **Self-Talk**

Puff, puff, chug, chug, went the Little Blue Engine. "I think I can—I think I can—I think I can—I think I can—I."

Up, up, up. Faster and faster the little engine climbed, until at last they reached the top of the mountain.

And the Little Blue Engine smiled and seemed to say as she puffed steadily down the mountain. "I thought I could. I thought I could. I thought I could. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

As children, many of us heard these words spoken by the Little Blue Engine: “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” These same words can benefit you today! The well-known phrase uttered by the Little Blue Engine is an example of a mental strategy known as self-talk.<sup>8</sup> The way in which the Little Blue Engine talks to herself clearly affects her performance (getting over the mountain). In the same way, we believe that the mental technique of self-talk (what you say to yourself) can help you perform better on the tasks that you are responsible for completing. In fact, if you are at this moment not doing well at school, on the job, or in your personal life, then it could possibly be related to what you are saying to yourself.

For example, consider for a moment if you have ever told yourself any of the following:

- It’s going to be another one of those days!
- I don’t have the talent.
- My roommate just doesn’t like me.
- I can’t seem to get organized.
- It’s going to be another blue Monday.
- I hate working within a team.
- If only I were a little smarter, then I could do this job well.
- If only I were taller.
- If only I had more time.
- If only I had more money.
- I’m too old to work that hard.
- I never get a break.
- I’ll never be as good as the other students in class.
- Nothing ever seems to go right for me.
- Today just isn’t my day.

If you are like most of us, you have told yourself negative things similar to these examples. These statements are negative in that they are “sappers”—types of self-talk that sap your energy, your self-confidence, and your happiness. Sappers are destructive self-talk: they prevent you from achieving your goals and feeling good about yourself. They serve as self-fulfilling prophecies, because what you tell yourself every day usually ends up coming true. If you tell yourself that you won’t have a good day, you won’t. If you tell yourself that you can’t lose weight, you can’t. If you tell yourself that you won’t enjoy your job, you won’t. It is that simple.

The story of the Little Blue Engine's sister should reveal the impact of sapper self-talk on performance:

Puff, puff, chug, chug, went the Little Blue Engine's twin sister. "I can't do this—I can't do this—The mountain is too big—I'm tired—I'm hungry—I'm irritable. This is impossible—I can't do this."

Up, up, up. Slower, slower the little engine climbed until it just conked out.

The Little Blue Engine's twin sister just frowned, and all depressed . . . she fell down the mountain. "I knew I couldn't do it—I knew I couldn't do it—I knew I couldn't do it."<sup>9</sup>

These stories represent the utilization of two different styles of the mental strategy self-talk—with two different outcomes. The Little Engine That Could uses positive self-talk to make it over the huge mountain, and the children receive their toys. Her twin sister does not make it over the mountain because her negative self-talk saps her energy and attitude. Rumor has it that the twin sister of the Little Blue Engine (the Little Engine That Couldn't) is roaming around the country from train station to train station holding a sign that reads "Will Work for Fuel."

These two stories reveal the power that our self-talk can have on our success and happiness. As leading psychologist Pamela E. Butler writes,

We all talk to ourselves. What we say determines the direction and quality of our lives. Our self-talk can make the difference between happiness and despair, between self-confidence and self-doubt. Altering your self-talk may be the most important undertaking you will ever begin.<sup>10</sup>

The life of Olympic decathlon gold medal winner Dan O'Brien serves as a real-world example of Butler's words. In 1992, O'Brien failed even to qualify for the U.S. Olympic team, despite being a favorite to win the gold medal. In the 1996 Olympic Games, he returned to win the gold medal that had eluded him four years earlier. What was the difference for O'Brien between the 1992 Olympic trials and the 1996 Olympic Games? Why did he fail in 1992 and then crush the field in the decathlon events in 1996? Quite simply, O'Brien altered his self-talk. As O'Brien explained,

Now I know what to do when I feel panic, when I'm nervous and get sick to my stomach. . . . Instead of telling myself I'm tired and worn out, I say things like, My body is preparing for battle. This is how I'm supposed to feel.<sup>11</sup>

For O'Brien, changing his self-talk pushed him to Olympic glory. In the same way, changing your self-talk can enhance your life at work, school, home—everywhere.

Much like Dan O'Brien before her, Serena Williams uses a form of self-talk to help her stay focused during a tennis match. "Usually, I'm singing a song in my head," Williams says. "Then if I stop singing, I usually start losing, then I go back to singing. It's

## DISCOVERING YOUR NEGATIVE SELF-TALK EXERCISE

crazy up there.”<sup>12</sup> As Steve Jobs once said, “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice.”<sup>13</sup> The question you might be asking at the moment is: How do I change my self-talk so that I can get over my own personal mountain to achieve my goals and dreams? The following exercise should help you change your sapper self-talk to self-talk that can help you achieve maximum performance.

After answering the questions in the exercise, take a close look at your responses. Do your self-talk examples contain a lot of destructive sappers, or is your self-talk supportive and motivating? If the former is true, that should be a signal to you that what you are telling yourself is causing many of the negative events and emotions that you are experiencing within your life. In other words, you are the person responsible for sapping yourself. The good news is, now that you know you are talking to yourself in a negative way, you can change your self-talk.

After you have completed the exercise, examine what you have written in the negative self-talk and positive self-talk columns. Do you see a pattern? Do you see that your negative self-talk is demotivating and negative, and that it seems to sap energy,

This exercise will help you discover your negative self-talk during the course of a day. Respond to the following questions, each of which will require a significant amount of thought. Fully relive the situations you are writing about so that your answers are as accurate as possible.

1. List a project or activity that you have begun or considered beginning. What did you tell yourself as you started or failed to start it?

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2. Think of a time when you were feeling lonely. What were you telling yourself at this time?

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3. Think of a day when you were feeling stressed and overwhelmed at work. What were you telling yourself during this chaotic time?

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4. Think of a criticism you recently faced from a coworker, fellow student, boss, or teacher. What were you telling yourself at this time and after the criticism?

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5. Think of a recent compliment that you received from a coworker, boss, teacher, or fellow student. What were you saying to yourself at this time and after the compliment?

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6. Think of a day when you were feeling negative about yourself. What were you saying to yourself at this time?

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7. Think of a day when you were experiencing some symptoms of illness, such as a headache or achy bones. What were you telling yourself during the time when you were experiencing these symptoms?

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Following the examples below, write down some of the instances of negative self-talk you've listed above, and then, opposite them, write what you could have told yourself if you wanted your self-talk to be positive rather than sapping.

Negative self-talk	Positive self-talk
1. I hate working within a team.	1. Although this is a new experience for me, I know that if I make a good effort toward cooperating, we will make a much better product than if we were working by ourselves, and it will be fun getting to know each other.

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Negative self-talk	Positive self-talk
2. I'll never lose this extra weight.	2. I will lose this weight. It will take a lot of determination and willpower. I will achieve my goal of losing one pound per week.
3. I'll never be able to earn a good grade on one of Dr. Neck's exams.	3. Someone once said, "If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got." I need to find out what I'm doing wrong and correct my mistakes in terms of how I study and how I take tests. With effort and persistence, I will get an A on Dr. Neck's exam.
4. I am nervous about this job interview. I'm probably not as qualified as the other applicants.	4. I am prepared for this interview. I have done my homework. This company needs my skills.
5. She [he] will never go out with me. She [he] is out of my league. Why should I even bother asking her [him] on a date?	5. Seize the day! If I don't ask her [him] out, how will I ever know if she [he] would go out with me? Once she [he] gets to know me, she [he] will love me!
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.

*Source:* Adapted from Charles C. Manz, Christopher P. Neck, James Mancuso, and Karen P. Manz, *For Team Members Only: Making Your Workplace Team Productive and Hassle-Free* (New York: AMACOM, 1997).

happiness, and self-confidence? Conversely, do you notice that your positive self-talk is motivating and supportive? Wouldn't you rather give yourself an advantage in all aspects of your life by making your self-talk positive in the future? Now that you are aware that your self-talk might be negative and have practiced changing it to be positive, you are well on your way.

Finally, you should create situations so that your positive self-talk becomes a habit for you. Try to be aware of what you are telling yourself over the next several weeks. From the moment you get up in the morning until the moment you go to sleep at night, remind yourself to talk to yourself in positive ways. Repeat the exercise above daily, until you start to notice that you are having difficulty identifying any negative self-talk and have chased all the sappers away.

## EVALUATING BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS

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One of the greatest weight lifters of all time was the Russian Olympian Vasily Alexeev (sometimes transliterated as Alekseyev). Evidently, he was trying to break a weight-lifting record of 500 pounds. He had lifted 499 pounds but couldn't for the life of him lift 500 pounds. Finally, his trainers put 501.5 pounds on his bar and rigged it so it looked like 499 pounds. Guess what happened? Alexeev lifted it easily. In fact, once he achieved this feat, other weight lifters went on to break his record. Why? Because they now knew it was possible to lift 500 pounds. Alexeev created a new mental outlook for weight lifters. Once people believed it was possible to lift 500 pounds, a major barrier to that accomplishment was removed.

The idea that we can achieve what we believe is possible to achieve is not new. The amazing fulfillment of many predictions made in books that have attempted to describe the future, such as *Future Shock*, *Brave New World*, and *1984*, suggests that what we believe can happen *can* happen.

One recently developed perspective in the field of psychology suggests that life problems tend to stem from dysfunctional thinking.<sup>14</sup> In short, mental distortions form the basis for ineffective thinking that can hinder personal effectiveness and even lead to depression. These distorted thoughts are based on some common dysfunctional beliefs that are activated by potentially troubling or disturbing situations. Based on the work of David Burns, we can specify eleven primary categories of dysfunctional thinking:<sup>15</sup>

1. *Extreme thinking*: Seeing things as black or white (e.g., if total perfection is not achieved, then a perception of complete failure results)
2. *Overgeneralization*: Generalizing a specific failure or negative result as an endless pattern
3. *Mental filtering*: Emphasizing a single negative detail, thus distorting all other aspects of one's perception of reality
4. *Disqualification of the positive*: Mentally disqualifying positive experiences from having any relevance or importance
5. *Mind reading*: Drawing negative conclusions regarding situations despite a lack of concrete evidence to support these conclusions
6. *Fortune-telling*: Arbitrarily predicting that things will turn out badly
7. *Magnifying and minimizing*: Exaggerating the importance of negative factors and minimizing the importance of positive factors related to one's situation
8. *Emotional reasoning*: Interpreting reality based on the negative emotions one experiences
9. *Use of should statements*: Using terms such as *should* and *shouldn't*, *ought*, and *must* in one's self-talk to coerce or manipulate oneself into taking actions
10. *Labeling and mislabeling*: Describing oneself, others, or events with negative labels (e.g., "I'm a failure," "He is a cheat")

11. *Personalization*: Identifying oneself (blaming oneself) as the cause of negative events or outcomes that one is not primarily responsible for causing

Burns argues that individuals need to confront these dysfunctional types of thinking and replace them with more rational thoughts (beliefs). For example, imagine an aspiring entrepreneur who freezes up during his presentation of a business plan to a venture capitalist (VC). The entrepreneur stumbles when asked about his valuation method even though he was an investment banker for eight years. Additionally, the VC claims the entrepreneur's pro forma statements are exaggerated given market conditions. Rather than defending his position, the entrepreneur agrees with the VC. The end result is zero financing from the VC. As the entrepreneur leaves the presentation, he thinks to himself, "I am the worst presenter. I'll never be able to get funding for this venture. Never."

This scenario presents an example of the distorted belief of extreme thinking, which, as noted above, takes place when an individual evaluates his or her personal situation in extreme black-and-white terms. The entrepreneur is not recognizing the fact that some of the most successful entrepreneurs present to more than twenty venture capitalists before receiving financing. He is evaluating his personal qualities in extremes of black and white.

To alter this destructive belief, the entrepreneur must identify the dysfunction and then change his thinking to be more rational in nature. The entrepreneur could challenge thoughts of himself as a complete failure and revise his beliefs regarding himself by reversing his thoughts and saying to himself, "Some of the most successful entrepreneurs have to talk to close to two dozen venture capitalists before receiving financing. I shall learn from this mistake. It's not the end of the world; I will do better next time."<sup>16</sup>

An exercise designed to facilitate your attempts to examine and improve your self-talk and beliefs follows.

*"You can't control the wind, but you can certainly adjust the sails."*

1. Think of a recent time when you were feeling a negative emotion(s) (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression). List the negative emotion(s) you were experiencing.

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2. What was the problem or task that you were facing at the time (e.g., job interview, relationship problem, test)?

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3. List some of the things that you were telling yourself at this time.
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Can you identify mental distortions (e.g., extreme thinking) in the self-talk you noted in step 3? If so, what are they?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. How could you change (reword) your self-talk to rid your internal speech of any mental distortions?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_

### The Power of Negative Thinking?

Throughout this chapter we have extolled the virtues of positive thinking. Indeed, self-leadership theory and research suggest that the constructive thought strategies of positive self-talk, evaluating beliefs and assumptions, and mental practice outlined in this chapter can help to shape more positive and optimistic thought patterns that in turn may enhance positive attitudinal and performance outcomes.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, some researchers have suggested that a strategy known as *defensive pessimism* may be effective in shaping our behaviors in positive ways.<sup>2</sup> Defensive pessimism involves setting unrealistically low performance expectations for oneself in advance of a difficult

or risky performance situation in order to harness the anxiety associated with the looming potential failure as motivation to increase one's efforts aimed at avoiding that failure. Although we agree that pessimism may have beneficial effects on motivation and performance outcomes in some situations, perhaps in part by prompting individuals to engage in proactive threat assessment and contingency planning, we also are quick to caution that when taken to the extreme, too much pessimism could have negative impacts on one's psychological and physical well-being.<sup>3</sup> For that matter, optimism and positive thinking, if taken to the extreme (like taking toxic

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levels of vitamin C or almost any health supplement) without regard to anticipating possible setbacks and obstacles, would likely not yield good results either. In short, we suggest that balance is the key—perhaps

something like a 4 to 1 ratio (i.e., 4 doses of opportunity thinking and 1 dose of potential obstacle-based contingency planning)—to effectively harnessing the power of both positive and negative thinking.

### Notes

1. See, for example, Jeffery D. Houghton and Darryl L. Jinkerson, “Constructive Thought Strategies and Job Satisfaction: A Preliminary Examination,” *Journal of Business and Psychology* 22, no. 1 (September 2007): 45–53; Nikolaos G. Panagopoulos and Jessica Ogilvie, “Can Salespeople Lead Themselves? Thought Self-Leadership Strategies and Their Influence on Sales Performance,” *Industrial Marketing Management* 47 (May 2015): 190–203.
2. Maria Cohut, “Can Pessimism Be Beneficial?” *Medical News Today*, October 27, 2017, [https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/319899.php?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=daily-us](https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/319899.php?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily-us); Julie K. Norem, “Defensive Pessimism as a Positive Self-Critical Tool,” in *Self-Criticism and Self-Enhancement: Theory, Research, and Clinical Implications* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), 89–104; Julie K. Norem, *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking: Using Defensive Pessimism to Manage Anxiety and Perform at Your Peak* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
3. See, for example, Dusti R. Jones, Barbara J. Lehman, Julie A. Kirsch, and Katherine G. Hennessy, “Pessimism Moderates Negative Emotional Responses to Naturally Occurring Stress,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 69 (August 2017): 180–90.

## MENTAL PRACTICE

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Mary was gliding cautiously across the shimmering ice when one of her skates struck a hard lump on the otherwise smooth surface. Her weight shifted quickly forward, and she found herself flying through the air. She landed hard on her shoulder and right cheek and felt pain go through her body. Her collarbone had been severely fractured, and she noticed blood trickling from a cut on her cheek. Then she heard a loud crack, and the ice began to separate underneath her. A moment later, she could scarcely breathe because of the icy cold water that enveloped her body. The extreme pain in her shoulder made it impossible for her to swim. She gulped water in an attempt to breathe. A desperate sense of panic swept over her, and . . .

“Mary, are you going to put your skates on, or do I have to do it for you?” asked Bill impatiently.

Mary stood up nervously and, turning to walk away, said, “I don’t think I want to learn to skate today; maybe some other time.”

Would you believe us if we told you that a technique is available that can help you perform better on the job? Would you believe us if we told you that you can access this technique without spending a penny? The only cost to you is a relatively small amount of your time. In fact, athletes have used this technique for years to enhance their performance: golfers, basketball players, gymnasts, and ice skaters employ this technique to golf better, shoot better, tumble better, and skate better. The good news is that this technique is useful not only for people participating in sports but also for you in your job or school.

This technique is called *mental practice*.<sup>17</sup> It involves imagining successful completion of an event before you physically begin the event. For example, consider an NBA basketball player who, before a game, pictures himself making all of his free throws. Because he has performed successfully in his mind, he should experience increased confidence in the real-game situation and thus have a better chance of making his free throws.

Consider another example involving two new salespersons about to make their first sales call. Suppose one salesperson experiences images of a muddled presentation that results in humiliating rejection from the client. This imagined experience could potentially block effective performance. In fact, such self-defeating images can promote corresponding negative results. The resulting lack of confidence and unconvincing presentation could lead to the failure that was imagined. Suppose the second salesperson imagines a positive experience resulting in a sizable sale to the client and a worthwhile experience for both parties. In this case, the individual would likely possess a higher level of confidence going into the presentation and a higher probability of success.

The point is that we are capable of creating a unique world within ourselves. The essence of our experience of life is centered within the inner world we create. Many would agree that the pain and suffering we imagine in anticipation of a visit to the dentist is often, and perhaps usually, much worse than the actual event. The imagined negative experience could last for days prior to the actual appointment, which is over within minutes. Also, our imagined positive experiences can be more striking and powerful than the corresponding experiences in the physical world. Anticipated events are often disappointing when they finally take place because they do not live up to our expectations. A party might not be as enjoyable as we imagined it would be; a vacation we planned for months might not be perfect. Films based on classic novels often fall short of the original works because the richness we can add to books with our imaginations can rarely be achieved in visual form by filmmakers.

Symbolic, imagined experiences are an important component of the psychological worlds in which we interpret and experience life. If we can discover the effects they have on our lives, we can gain a better understanding of ourselves. We might find, for example, that before undertaking new challenges, we usually imagine negative results. To

### *The Martian* (2015)

A scene from the movie *The Martian* provides examples of both positive and negative self-talk. While on a manned mission to Mars, astronaut Mark Watney (Matt Damon) is injured during a sandstorm. His crew presumes that he is dead and leaves him behind. Watney finds himself all alone and fighting for his very survival on the cold, red, inhospitable planet. Throughout the ordeal, Watney uses self-talk to solve problems and maintain a positive attitude. It will take four years for a rescue mission to reach him and, using self-talk, he quickly realizes that his most pressing survival need is a food supply: "Let's do the math. Our service mission here was supposed to last 31 sols [the duration of a solar day on Mars]. For redundancy they sent 68 sols worth of food. That's for six people. So for just me that's gonna last 300 sols, which I figure I can stretch to 400 if I ration. So, I gotta figure out a way to grow three years' worth of food here. On a planet where nothing grows. Luckily, I'm a botanist. Mars will come to fear my botany powers!"

Later, Watney uses more self-talk as he solves the problem of how to grow potatoes on Mars: "I've created one hundred and twenty-six square meters of soil. But each cubic meter needs forty liters of water to be farmable. So, I gotta make a lot of water. Fortunately, I know the recipe. You take hydrogen. You add oxygen. You burn. I have hundreds of liters of unused Hydrazine from the MDV. If I run the Hydrazine over an iridium catalyst, it'll separate into N<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>. Then I just need to direct the hydrogen into a small area and burn it. Luckily, in the history

of humanity, nothing bad has ever happened from lighting hydrogen on fire [chuckling to himself]. NASA hates fire. Because of the whole 'fire makes everyone die in space' thing. So everything we brought with us is flame retardant. With the notable exception of . . . Martinez's personal items. Sorry, Martinez. If you didn't want me to go through your stuff, you shouldn't have left me for dead on a desolate planet." Watney continues his preparations and soon ignites his fire, resulting in a large explosion that literally blows him across the room like a limp rag.

He continues his self-talk in the next scene: "So. Yeah. I blew myself up. Best guess? I forgot to account for the excess oxygen that I've been exhaling when I did my calculations. Because I'm stupid. I'm gonna get back to work here. Just as soon as my ears stop ringing. Interesting side note: this is actually how Jet Propulsion Laboratory was founded. Five guys at Cal Tech were trying to make rocket fuel and nearly burned down their dorm. Rather than expel them . . . banished them to a nearby farm and told them to keep working. And now we have a space program."

### Discussion Questions

1. How does Watney use self-talk to help shape his behaviors and his attitudes?
2. What are some specific examples of both negative and positive self-talk in these scenes?
3. How does Watney use the story of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory to help himself recover from the setback of the explosion?

deal with this habitual negative thinking, we could intentionally imagine positive results before we take action. Imagining a receptive, appreciative audience rather than a critical, hostile one before giving a speech, for example, might significantly help us overcome a fear of public speaking. By exercising greater choice and control over our imagined experiences, we can improve the quality of our psychological worlds and, potentially, our personal effectiveness.

To repeat, your mind is a powerful tool. You can use this tool to achieve great success. Just as a hammer is of no benefit to you if you don't know how to use it correctly, the tool of mental practice works only if you know how to use it correctly. Listed below are steps to help you use this mind tool to enhance your performance. By following these steps repeatedly, you can enjoy the benefits of mental practice.

## Steps for Successful Mental Practice

1. **Close your eyes.**
2. **Relax, concentrate, and focus.** Feel all the stress leaving your body. Start at your feet . . . feel all the stress leaving . . . go to your chest, then to the top of your head . . . feel all the stress leaving your body. Concentrate all of your energy on this mental practice exercise. Rid your mind of all distractions.
3. **Focus on a specific challenging situation** in which you would like mental practice to help you perform well.
4. **Talk positively to yourself.** Tell yourself several times that you are confident and that you have the power to perform well in this situation.
5. **Mentally picture yourself** right before you are to begin this task, event, or project.
6. **Continue to concentrate, staying relaxed and focused.**
7. **Mentally rehearse** successful performance of this challenging situation several times. It is important that you see yourself in your mind as an active participant and not as a passive observer. For example, if you imagine that you are shooting a basketball during a game, make sure you are standing on the court shooting rather than watching yourself from the stands.
8. **Repeat step 7.**
9. **Open your eyes. Smile. Praise yourself.** You were successful in your mind. Now you should have a greater feeling of confidence that you will perform this event successfully in real situations.

## CHECKLIST FOR IMPROVING YOUR IMAGINED EXPERIENCE TENDENCIES

The following are a few more tips to ensure that mental practice works for you:

- Make sure you visualize your actions in normal motion as opposed to slow motion.
- To help you relax (step 2 above), it might be helpful to mentally picture a calming scene, such as a beach, a mountain, a forest, or a pond.
- Repetition of mental practice is critical—make sure you repeat the steps above over and over to gain mental practice perfection.
- Space your practice sessions over several days rather than mentally practicing an event in one lengthy session.

A checklist is also provided to help you make improvements in your imagined experiences. The short exercise that follows will help you get started making the changes that you see as desirable.

Use your imagination to facilitate desirable performance.

- Analyze your current imagined experience tendencies. Ask yourself questions about your imagined experiences:
  - Do they focus on positive or negative outcomes of challenging tasks?
  - Do they generally facilitate or hinder my confidence and performance of tasks?
  - Are they realistic? Reasonable?
- Identify your destructive imagined experience tendencies, such as the tendency to habitually and unrealistically imagine negative results for your actions.
- Work to eliminate these destructive thought patterns by choosing to think about other things.
- Purposefully choose to imagine sequences of events and outcomes that help clarify and motivate (rather than hinder) your efforts—for example, once you have chosen a course of action and are committed to it, motivate yourself by imagining positive rather than negative results.

Follow the steps below.

1. Think about some recent challenges you have faced that especially provoked your imagination regarding the different actions you could take and the likely consequences of these different actions. Also, check yourself throughout the next few days as you face new challenges such as these.

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2. Explore the nature of your imagined experiences on these occasions. Were they realistic? Did they tend to focus on the positive or the negative? Were they constructive?

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3. Analyze the specific instances you identified in step 1 regarding the effect your imagination is having on your performance. What effect is your imagination having on your decisions (such as your willingness to take risks)? How is your imagination affecting your confidence and motivation?

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4. Purposefully use your imagined experiences to enhance your performance when facing new challenges. When facing problems that provoke your imagination, choose to keep your images constructive, reasonably realistic, and positive. This will take work, because it will likely mean changing ingrained, habitual ways of thinking—here the practice of self-leadership (e.g., using the strategies presented in Chapter 3) becomes important as you work to achieve further improvements in your self-leadership abilities.

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## Mary Lou Retton

In 1984, a ninety-four-pound girl with a megawatt smile and boundless enthusiasm captured the heart of America. That girl was sixteen-year-old Mary Lou Retton. Standing no taller than four feet nine inches, Mary Lou overcame amazing odds to become the first American-born woman to capture the all-around gold in Olympic gymnastics history.

Mary Lou had studied gymnastics in her hometown of Fairmont, West Virginia, since early childhood, but at the age of fifteen, she got the chance to train under the legendary coach Béla Károlyi in Houston, Texas. Károlyi helped the young gymnast develop her talent, and Mary Lou qualified to be on the 1984 U.S. Olympic gymnastics team. However, six weeks before the Olympics were to begin, she was told that she had to have arthroscopic surgery on her knee to remove torn cartilage and that she would not be able to compete. “She was declared out of the Olympics,” said Károlyi, “declared out of any hard landing.” But Mary Lou would not accept it. She wanted to compete, and she was determined to do just that.

Mary Lou did not focus on the setback the surgery would represent. Instead, she engaged in opportunity thinking. She focused on what was possible: a gold medal. Following her surgery, she went through physical rehabilitation and then went back to the gym. During the three weeks leading up to the Olympics, she followed a routine of both physical and mental practice. Each night before bed, Mary Lou went through each of her routines in her head. In her mind she performed each routine perfectly, over and over again. As she mentally practiced, she associated the word stick with the perfect vault she was visualizing. In gymnastics, to stick means to land so solidly that

your feet stick to the mat without the slightest hint of a wobble.

When the Olympics began, Mary Lou was ready. In fact, she performed so well that she earned a chance at the all-around gold medal. Going into her final event—the vault—she trailed Romania’s Ecaterina Szabo by just 0.05 points. When Szabo scored 9.90 in her final event, Mary Lou realized that if she could perfectly stick her vault and score a perfect 10, she would win the all-around gold medal by 0.05 points. But she also realized that if she wobbled at all, the gold would turn to silver.

In the final moments before her vault, Mary Lou engaged in positive self-talk, telling herself that she is at her best when she is under pressure—that pressure just makes her fight and scrap all the harder. She told herself that all she needed to do was stick, and she would win the gold. “I kept thinking ‘stick, stick, stick,’” she would say later. “I knew I had to get a 10.” Károlyi called Mary Lou over to give her some encouragement, but before he could give her any advice, she looked up at him and said quite simply, “I’m going to stick it,” causing Károlyi to break into a giant grin.

The partisan crowd of more than nine thousand spectators jammed into Los Angeles’s Pauley Pavilion fell silent as Mary Lou stood statue-like, waiting for the green light signaling permission for her to attempt her vault. Then suddenly, with a slight smile, she sprang into motion, sprinting seventy-three and a half feet to the board and launching herself twenty-two feet through the air, twisting and turning in midair before landing rock solid on the mat—no wobbles, no movement, just perfection! A perfect stick and a perfect 10! The sellout crowd went crazy,



screaming, “USA! USA!” and “Mary Lou! Mary Lou! Mary Lou!”

America fell in love with this amazing athlete and her ability to deliver a flawless performance under pressure. In 1993, nearly ten years after her big win, a national survey

by the Associated Press named Mary Lou Retton the “Most Popular Athlete in America.” Mary Lou is an example of the power of mental practice and self-talk and their influence on successful performance.

### Source/Additional Reading

Weinberg, Rick. 2004. “Mary Lou Gets the Gold in Olympic All-Around.” ESPN.com, June 30, 2004. <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/espn25/story?page=moments/70>

## THOUGHT PATTERNS

*Our life is what our thoughts make it.*

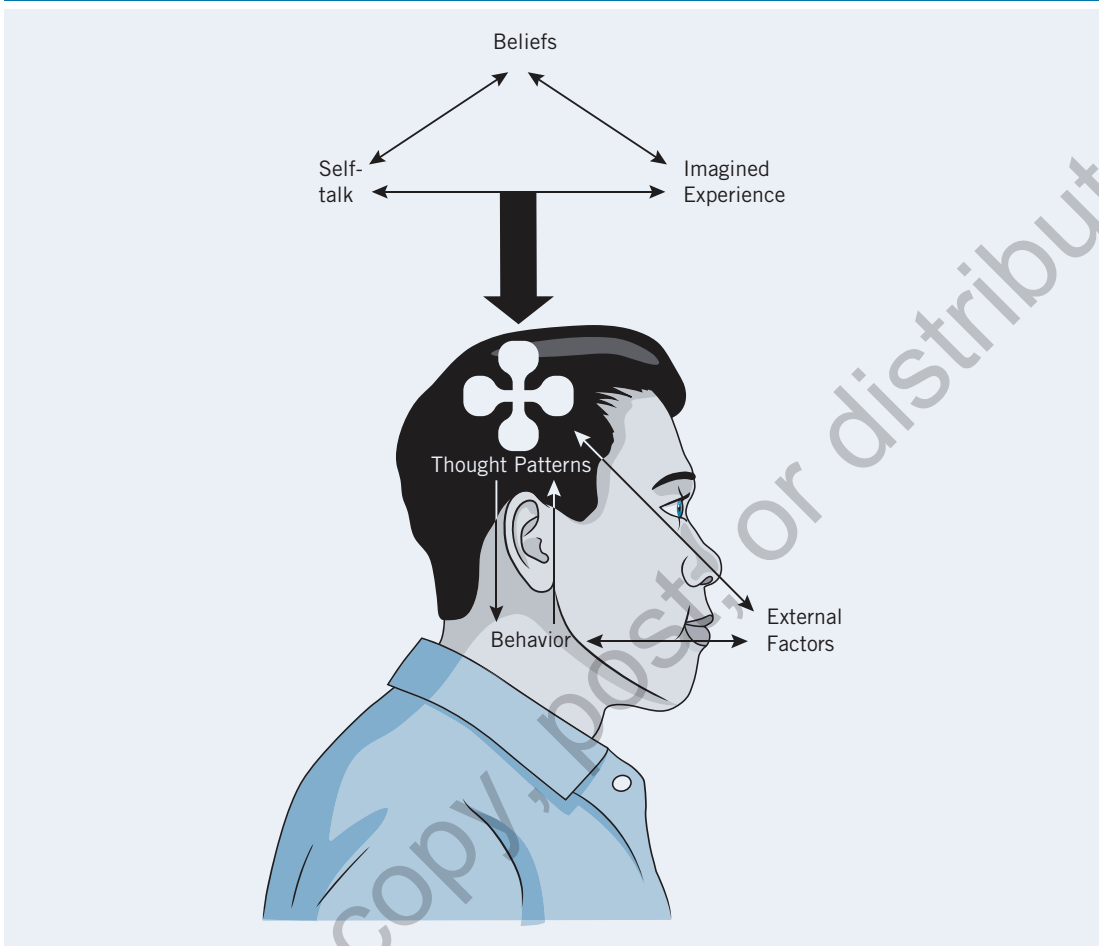
—Marcus Aurelius

The discussion above has addressed several factors that help shape our unique psychological worlds. One way of picturing these ideas is to view our internal psychological selves in terms of thought patterns. That is, we tend to develop certain ways of thinking about our experiences. We might say that just as we develop habitual ways of behaving, we develop habitual ways of thinking. These thought patterns involve—among other things—our beliefs, our imagined experiences, and our self-talk. Figure 5.2 shows how our beliefs, our imagined experiences, and our self-talk influence one another and help shape our thought patterns. Of course, these factors are also influenced by external forces such as our past experiences. The primary idea, however, is that we each construct a unique concept of life in our minds that influences our actions and how we feel about things.

Notice also in Figure 5.2 that behavior is included as an influence and a result of our thought patterns. Considerable debate and controversy have occurred recently over, essentially, a “chicken-or-egg” issue: Does our psychological makeup (e.g., attitudes, beliefs) cause our behavior, or does our behavior cause our psychological makeup? The logical answer is a bit facetious, but it is yes, they cause each other. Thus, an optimal approach to improving our self-leadership includes a focus on both. Indeed, considerable evidence suggests that if we change our behavior, we change ourselves psychologically. If we behave in a more courteous and friendly manner toward others, for example, we are likely to change psychologically into more courteous and friendly people.

So let’s spend a little more time thinking about how we think. Take a moment to complete the short self-assessment exercise starting on page 115.

**Figure 5.2 Our Psychological Worlds**



## **OPPORTUNITY OR OBSTACLE THINKING**

Among the different types of thought patterns that a person could adopt are two that might be called opportunity thinking and obstacle thinking. Opportunity thinking involves a pattern of thoughts that focus on the opportunities and possibilities that situations or challenges hold. Creative, innovative individuals who contribute to the major breakthroughs and advances in our world most likely possess this pattern of thinking. Their beliefs, imagined future experiences, and self-talk probably spur them on to undertake new opportunities. Obstacle thinking, in contrast, involves a focus on the roadblocks and pitfalls of undertaking new ventures. Such a mental pattern fosters

Choose the letter of the statement (a or b) that you agree with more for each of the ten pairs presented, and write the letter in the space in the right-hand column.

1. a. A real opportunity is built into every problem. b. Anything that can go wrong, will.	
2. a. A bird in the hand is worth two in a bush. b. Real opportunities are worth sticking your neck out for.	
3. a. Most people cannot be counted on. b. Every person is a valuable resource in some way.	
4. a. Difficulties make us grow. b. Difficulties beat us down.	
5. a. The world is full of impossibilities. b. Nothing is impossible that we can conceive of.	
6. a. When half of the days in an enjoyable vacation have passed, I still have half of my vacation to enjoy. b. When half of the days in an enjoyable vacation have passed, my vacation is half over.	
7. a. The best approach to dealing with energy shortages is conservation. b. The best approach to dealing with energy shortages is to develop new energy sources.	
8. a. Life after death. b. Death after life.	
9. a. Failure is an opportunity to learn. b. Failure is a negative outcome to effort.	
10. a. Happiness is the absence of problems. b. Problems are the spice of life.	

**Directions for scoring:** Circle the choice you made (a or b) for each pair of statements (1 through 10). Total the number of letters circled in each column.

	I	II
1.	a	b

(Continued)

(Continued)

2.	b	a
3.	b	a
4.	a	b
5.	b	a
6.	a	b
7.	b	a
8.	a	b
9.	a	b
10.	b	a
Total		
	opportunity thinking	obstacle thinking

### Interpreting Your Score

The short exercise you have just completed is designed to help you assess your current pattern of thinking. It focuses on two distinct types of thinking patterns discussed later in this chapter: opportunity thinking and obstacle thinking. The scores that you recorded for column I and column II (the maximum possible total for either is 10) suggest your current thinking tendencies. If your column I total is higher than your column II total, this indicates that your current thinking patterns tend to reflect opportunity thinking more than obstacle thinking. (The reverse is true if your column II total is higher than your column I total.) The greater the difference between the two totals, the more you tend toward one pattern or the other. In general, a higher score in column I than in column II reflects some desirable self-leadership tendencies, and a higher score in column II might indicate some fundamental problems.

As was the case for your scores on the self-assessment questionnaires presented earlier, your results on this exercise should be interpreted cautiously. The way you score might reflect your current mood or outlook as opposed to any long-term tendencies. On the other hand, an exercise such as this is useful for helping you reflect on the pattern of thought that you tend to adopt in thinking about and approaching situations.

avoidance of challenges in favor of more secure actions, often with substantially lesser potential payoffs.

Skiwear mogul Klaus Obermeyer is a classic example of an opportunity thinker. Obermeyer is founder of Sport Obermeyer, a ski apparel company that earned more than \$30 million in 1995 despite the fact that Obermeyer went skiing every day of the ski season. He has said that his company originated when he saw an opportunity:

It's very simple . . . I was making \$10 a day teaching skiing, but people kept canceling because of the cold. If I wanted to keep my class, I had to make them comfortable.<sup>18</sup>

Obermeyer clearly viewed the fact that his students were “canceling because of the cold” as an opportunity and not an obstacle. Indeed, in 1950, he made history by tearing up his bed comforter and using it to make the world’s first quilted goose-down parka. He also marketed the first turtleneck in the United States and the first mirrored sunglasses. As Obermeyer reasoned,

People skied in knickerbockers and neckties back then. It was cold as hell. They got frostbite. They got sunburned. And their feet hurt because boots didn't fit. But all these problems were opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

Another example of the benefits of opportunity thinking involves a woman named Helen Thayer. In March 1988, Thayer was on a journey that few believed a woman could accomplish: a solo trek to the North Magnetic Pole. She had only one week left in her grueling expedition when an unexpected storm developed, blowing most of her remaining supplies away; all she had left were seven small handfuls of walnuts and a pint of water. Thus, she would have to adjust from living on about five thousand calories a day to surviving on one hundred calories. Did she make it to her destination? Yes, she certainly did! How did she manage to finish her incredible feat? Her will to win and the power of her mind were her strategic weapons against the brutal elements and other dangers—the wind, the cold, the man-eating polar bears. As Thayer remarks in her book *Polar Dream*,

I found it to be a decided advantage to accept what I had and feel grateful for it rather than wish I had more. Wishing only made me feel even more hungry and thirsty, whereas acceptance and gratitude allowed me to channel my energy into moving ahead at a good pace.<sup>20</sup>

Thayer practiced opportunity thinking to accomplish her goal. Instead of viewing her loss of supplies as an obstacle that could prevent her from completing her trek, she viewed the loss as an opportunity that enabled her to focus her energy to finish the journey.

College football quarterback Tim Tebow’s classic postgame speech after his team’s loss to the University of Mississippi—the only loss of his junior year—is another great example of opportunity thinking. At the press conference following the game, Tebow had this to say about the heartbreaking loss:

I promise you one thing, a lot of good will come out of this. You will never see any player in the entire country play as hard as I will play the rest of the season. You will never see someone push the rest of the team as hard as I will push everybody the rest of the season. You will never see a team play harder than we will the rest of the season. God Bless.<sup>21</sup>

Tebow's team, the University of Florida Gators, ended up winning the national championship that year, and "The Promise" has now been memorialized on a plaque displayed at the university's Ben Hill Griffin Stadium.<sup>22</sup>

Each of us can possess both opportunity and obstacle thinking at different times and when faced with different situations. Some undertakings pose too much personal risk and should be avoided. On the other hand, we often find ourselves caught up in difficult situations unexpectedly. When avoiding such a situation is no longer a choice, the issue becomes how we deal with it. We probably tend to rely on certain thought patterns more than others in dealing with life's challenges. For example, should we seek worthwhile challenges because they help us grow, or should we do our best to avoid problems of any kind? Should our thoughts be that the world is cruel and unfair, or that the world is basically good and honest effort is rewarded? The pattern of our thinking influences our actions, our satisfaction with life, and our personal effectiveness.

Even presidents of the United States can benefit from seeing challenging situations as opportunities. On March 30, 1981, President Ronald Reagan was wounded in the chest by a would-be assassin's bullet. The horror of the situation was a shock to millions around the world. Logically, one would think President Reagan would condemn the violent act and display a negative outlook in its wake. Instead, he was said to have smiled through surgery. Numerous optimistic and humorous remarks the president made soon after the shooting reached the public, and this gradually helped relieve the nation's tension. The victim seemed to be trying to support the safe onlookers rather than the seemingly more logical reverse. Among the verbal and written quips made by the wounded president were "Honey, I forgot to duck" (to his wife); "Please, say you're Republicans" (to the doctors); the attempted assassination "ruined one of my best suits" (to his daughter); and "Send me to L.A., where I can see the air I'm breathing" (to the medical staff).

The results? President Reagan's popularity rose to an all-time high. Programs he had been working hard to push through Congress gained momentum. A short time after the incident, the president achieved his first major political triumph since taking office—Congress approved his budget. This accomplishment could be attributed largely to his admirable conduct in the wake of the assassination attempt.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of whether you are in agreement with this president's political views or approve of his subsequent actions in office, it is difficult to deny that his reaction to the assault on his life is little short of amazing. He was able to transform the would-be tragedy into a powerful opportunity. The public feeling surrounding this distressing event and the president's inspiring behavior is reflected in a view expressed by one television commentator who said, in essence, "I hope President Reagan feels better because of how bad we feel. I know how I feel. I wish I would have voted for him."

Opportunities can be found in even the most unlikely of situations if only we let ourselves see them through the patterns of our thinking. Consider one final example of opportunity versus obstacle thinking involving Thomas Edison. Edison's laboratory was virtually destroyed by a fire in December 1914, and the buildings were insured for only a fraction of the money that it would cost to rebuild them. At the age of sixty-seven, Edison lost most of his life's work when it went up in flames on that December night. The next morning, he looked at the ruins and said, "There is a great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew." Three weeks after the fire, Edison delivered his first phonograph.<sup>24</sup> Edison truly was an opportunity thinker in this case—he viewed the fire as a chance for a fresh start rather than as an excuse to quit. The question for you is, how do you view "fires" or problems in your life—as obstacles or as opportunities?

## THE POWER OF FAILURE

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*Only he who does nothing makes no mistakes.*

—French proverb

The self-leadership strategies outlined in this book are designed to help you be successful in achieving your goals and objectives. This leads us to pose an interesting question: Would you like to be successful throughout the remainder of your life? Would you like to enjoy meaningful success, where you learn, grow, and contribute in significant ways, so that your life is full, counts for something, and makes a difference? If your answer is yes, then you must fail. There is no exception to this rule. *Significant success requires failure*, but failure in a whole new light.

*Failure* is one of the most dreaded words in the English language. The very idea of failing is enough to stop most people in their tracks. It can cause the majority to simply pack up, turn around, and retreat without even trying.

*Success*, in contrast, is a nearly magical idea for most people. The possibility of succeeding or becoming a success is an almost mythical challenge. People love to be labeled as successful and often sacrifice greatly to achieve this end.

Although most people hate to be labeled a failure and love to be labeled a success, the fact is that only through seeming failure are most of life's greatest successes achieved. Usually, failure and success are almost entirely in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps this reflects an ultimate truth about what we call failure. The perception of failure is very often simply a misperception about difference—difference from what already exists or from what was expected. Of course, sometimes failure is tied to a lack of competence to perform in the face of a specific challenge, but seeming failures can offer us a powerful way to learn—they are almost always the fruitful stepping stones to life's greatest breakthroughs and successes. We can learn to accept that what most people view as failures are usually only temporary setbacks in relation to some arbitrary standard and that they are

an essential part of life. They are usually just *challenges in progress*. And when we learn this important lesson, we come to understand that the only real failure is to back away from worthwhile challenges without even trying.

The traditional Japanese art of repairing broken pottery in a way that restores its usefulness while making it even more beautiful and valuable provides a powerful illustration of how failures can often be transformed into success. Kintsugi (literally golden “kin” repair “tsugi”) uses precious metals such as liquid gold, liquid silver, or lacquer sprinkled with powdered gold to re-join the shards of a broken ceramic bowl or vase.<sup>25</sup> Because of the random way in which ceramic objects break, each repaired piece has unique and irregular patterns of precious metal that add beauty and refinement to the piece.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the wounds and scars that we experience as the result of our failures may be transformed into stunningly beautiful golden lines of success.

The book *The Power of Failure* by Charles Manz, a member of our author team, provides simple yet profound self-leadership strategies for turning seeming failures into successes, including practical prescriptions for successfully meeting some of life’s most common setbacks.<sup>27</sup> It is helpful to think of the book’s various specific lessons in relation to a larger whole—more general guidelines for failing successfully. Most of the book’s “success based on failure” prescriptions relate to eight primary themes, which are summarized here. We can think of these themes as offering a new view or vision of how we can transform failure so that it contributes positively to more successful living.

## A New View of Failure: Some Primary Themes

1. **Redefine failure.** Failure is a natural part of life that can affect us positively or negatively, depending on how we define it.
2. **Redefine success.** The best measure of success is based on our own deep knowledge of what’s right for us rather than on the approval or disapproval of others.
3. **Learn from failure.** Failure presents an opportunity for continued learning and growth, whereas success can lead to complacency and stagnation.
4. **View failures as stepping stones to success.** Success and failure are not incompatible—most failures are simply *challenges in progress* that can provide a foundation for success.
5. **Find the opportunities of failure.** Setbacks or short-term failures can contribute to future success if we focus on the opportunities they contain rather than the obstacles.
6. **Use negative feedback to your advantage.** Negative feedback can provide positive information for improvement and may even suggest that you are onto something new and different—a sign of a pending breakthrough success.



7. **Look beyond yourself.** As you learn to focus outward, on helping others succeed, you become less vulnerable to what otherwise might appear to be personal failures.
8. **Persist.** Keep on trying and trying. *Sustained Effort + the Lessons of Failures* is a powerful formula for success.

Among the many lessons offered by *The Power of Failure* is that we can live more successfully if we understand the following:

- Challenges are disguised opportunities.
- Differences are gifts.
- Mistakes are learning opportunities.
- When we try our best, we always succeed even if we don't achieve the results hoped for.
- The only way we can really fail is if we refuse to learn from our setbacks.

Real success that is sustainable over a lifetime is built on a solid foundation of learning and benefiting from every setback and shortfall, and is forged with the courage and strength that come from a commitment to harness the power of failure.

Jacques Wiesel once wrote, "Bloom where you are planted."<sup>28</sup> What does this mean? As we conclude this chapter, consider how the story of Jacques-Yves Cousteau illustrates both the power of failure and the ultimate message of this quote. From a young age, Cousteau dreamed of becoming a pilot. In pursuit of that dream, in 1930, when he was twenty years old, he passed the highly competitive examinations to enter France's Naval Academy. He subsequently served in the navy and entered naval aviation school.

A near-fatal car crash at age twenty-six denied him his wings, and he was transferred to sea duty. Did Cousteau whine because he could no longer fly an airplane? Did he gripe about life being unfair? Did he complain about the new situation in which he was "planted"? No, he did not. In fact, he decided to use his new position (sea duty) to his advantage. He swam rigorously in the ocean to strengthen his arms, which had been badly weakened by the car accident. This therapy had some unintended yet beautiful consequences. As Cousteau noted in his 1953 book *The Silent World*, "Sometimes we are lucky enough to know that our lives have been changed, to discard the old, embrace the new, and run headlong down an immutable course. It happened to me . . . when my eyes were opened on the sea."<sup>29</sup>

Think about this for a moment. Cousteau's passion, and his claim to fame, was his life as an underwater explorer. His oceanographic expeditions set numerous milestones in marine research and led to Cousteau's role as a spokesperson for the protection of the underwater environment. None of this—his expeditions, his documentary films and television shows, his books, the impact he had on many people's lives—probably would have happened if Cousteau had not "bloomed where he was planted." In other words, if

Cousteau had not embraced the change in his life due to his tragic accident, the world might never have heard of him. If he had cried about not being able to fly and had refused his new assignment, we would be saying “Jacques who?”

How many times in our own lives when we are confronted with change do we say, “I wish I were back home,” “I wish I were with my old friends,” “I wish I were still doing my old job”? If right now you are living in the past and wishing you were back in a situation from years gone by, consider the story of Jacques Cousteau. Then ask yourself: Am I trying to bloom where I am now planted? If you answer in the negative, you could be missing out on something magical in your life. You could be missing out on discovering something about yourself that could dramatically enhance your life’s direction. Cousteau’s near-fatal accident led to his being planted somewhere else, somewhere new, somewhere unfamiliar to him. Rather than focusing on the life that he had to leave, he chose to bloom in his new environment—the ocean. This choice resulted in his discovery of who he was and what his life’s passion would be. If he had chosen differently—chosen to complain about not being where he used to be and about what could have been—his life probably would have been less fulfilling and his impact on the world less substantial. If you have recently been “replanted” in your life, perhaps because of a new job, a new relationship, a family crisis, or any type of change, what decision have you made or will you make? To bloom or not to bloom is indeed the question. It is our hope that Cousteau’s life will show you the correct answer: choose to bloom where you are planted.

## REAL-WORLD SELF-LEADERSHIP CASE

### Gift Ngoepe: We Have Made History!

When Gift Ngoepe heard the announcement on the loudspeaker that he would enter the game as the Pittsburgh Pirates’ second baseman, he quietly said some words to his mother, who had passed away a few years earlier: “This is it, Mom,” he said. “We did it. We have made history!” After spending nearly nine years in the minor leagues, Ngoepe would become the first African-born player to appear in a Major League Baseball game. Ngoepe, who grew up in the South African town of Randsburg near Johannesburg, gives his mom much of the credit for his success in baseball. She told him to never give up on his dream of playing major league baseball.

But part of his success no doubt stemmed from his ability to use constructive thought-focused strategies to shape his mental approach to the game in positive ways. In an article featured in *The Players’ Tribune*, Ngoepe described his mental approach to his first at-bat in the major leagues:

I led off the bottom of the fourth, and prior to my very first at bat as a big league player, walking up to the batter’s box, I was a nervous wreck. I tried my best to get control of my emotions. It was not easy, let me tell you. I had to focus heavily on my breathing, because there was so much adrenaline running through me. I worked hard to control my nerves, but I was in my own head the

entire time. “You gotta calm down, Gift. You gotta calm down. Control your emotions. It’s just another baseball game. Just go out there and do your thing.” That’s easier said than done, believe me. When I stepped into the box, I took a very deep breath, and then I looked out at Jon Lester. “O.K. Gift,” I said to myself, “This is really happening. You are up against Jon Lester. He has three World Series rings. He’s one of the best pitchers in the game. And he’s facing you. He’s facing Gift Ngoepe!”

My plan was to swing at the very first pitch. I was looking for one pitch, in one zone. The idea was to hit the ball back up through the box. When Lester went away with his first pitch for a ball, it meant that I wouldn’t be able to go with my plan, but it also really helped to calm me down. I saw the pitch well. “Stay focused, Gift. You can do this. Look for your pitch.” Then another ball. “Alright Gift, you’re in a 2–0 count now.” At that point, in my mind, I thought about whether I should try to get the bat head out on the next pitch and see if I could pull the ball to left field. I paused for a second. “No! That’s not the approach that got you to this place. Stick with the plan, Gift: line drive back up the middle.”

The next pitch was a fastball right over the plate. I tried to inside out it, and I didn’t barrel it up. I just fouled it off into the stands, and I was not happy about that. “This is not good, Gift. This is a terrible AB right now, man. You were 2–0. You should’ve gotten

the bat head out and not gotten beat by a fastball. Come on, Gift!” When Lester took me to 3–1, I started to feel better. I relaxed myself. “Gift, you’re in a real good hitter’s count right now. Do what you know how to do.”

Then I got my wish. He threw me a 3–1 fastball over the heart of the plate. I was able to use my hands and hit it back up the middle for a single. It wasn’t a cheap hit either. It was solid. It was a real hit. A major league hit. And you better believe I’m smiling as I write that. You should see my smile right now. Gift Ngoepe, from Randburg, South Africa, is a major league baseball player, and he got a hit in his very first at bat in the big leagues. Never let anyone tell you that dreams don’t come true.

### Questions for Class Discussion

1. In what ways did positive thinking help Ngoepe to be successful in his life and career?
2. Explain how Ngoepe used self-talk to be successful in his first at-bat in the majors.
3. How do you think Ngoepe may have used the strategies of evaluating beliefs and assumptions and mental practice during his rise to the major leagues?
4. During nine years in the minor leagues Ngoepe experienced many failures and setbacks to his career. How was he able to overcome those failures and realize his dream of playing major league baseball?

### Sources/Additional Readings

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