I Perceive, Therefore We Are. We Interpret, Therefore We Communicate.

Developing Positive Self-Talk to Promote Healthy Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence that by promoting positive self reflection, we gain self-awareness which enables us to consciously and sensitively evaluate our own perceptions, as well those of others; ultimately improving our interpersonal communication relationships, no matter the level of closeness/intimacy the relationship contains. Before we can begin to improve our interpersonal communication relationships, we have to improve ourselves. That is to say, we have to first get to “re-know” ourselves, by gaining awareness and conscious control of our inner-voice, being conscious of the messages we send to others (and how they may perceive them), and being mindful in controlling our responses to others feedback.

“The Five Ways to Think of Self” (Jensen, A., Trenholm, S., 2008, p. 201-211) will be used as a guide, to expand our understanding of the ‘self’ by defining some of communication studies most important self-concepts. “The Five Ways to Think of Self” states that we can view the ‘self’ as: narrative, cognitive schema, behavioral indicators, relational achievements, and internal dialogue. Examples are later provided to show a multitude of types of interpersonal relationships, including: Stranger-Stranger, Teacher-Student, Boss-Employee, Parent-Child, and Husband-Wife relationships; which can demonstrate the total effectiveness of positive self-talk/self-concepts within a wide range of relationship types.

In addition, I have pulled quotes from one of my favorite books, entitled, “Notes to Myself: My Struggle to Become a Person” (1983). The author, Hugh Prather focuses on many aspects of individuality and our capability of triggering growth and understanding from our external surroundings.

*Keywords*: Self-Talk, Interpersonal Communication, Self-Concepts, Self-Narrative, Cognitive Schema, Behavioral Indicators, Relational Achievement, Internal Dialogue.

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According to Jenson and Trenholm (2008), the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993) states that, “The first recorded use of the word ‘conscious’ to denote awareness of internal thoughts and sensations dates from the late 16th century, while the word ‘self-conscious’ doesn’t makes its appearance until over a hundred years later.” It is important to recognize that this statement can be seen as a way to say that our perceptions have always been present within communicative relationships. However, our individual awareness of how our messages can be misinterpreted by others, as well as the potential for misinterpreting someone else’s messages, enters us into the discussion of the necessity to be fully-conscious and responsive in order to maintain or regain healthy interpersonal relationships.

To better understand how the ‘self’ plays a role in our communicative relationships, we must get to know and understand the ‘self’ first; in other words, define our self-concept. Self-concept is about how we view ourselves. It is our private, one-sided perception of how we visualize the image of ourselves, comparable at times to an almost “out of body-like” experience. As we evaluate ourselves, we do so by incorporating our own individually-formulated criteria, as to say that even the information we use to be able to perceive is even different from the information others may use to perceive. Having no generalized formula, scale, or generator to base our perceptual criteria on (nor any way to make such a tool) is what can be so devastating to our interpersonal relationships. As Prather (1983) states, “most words evolve as a description of the separated realities of the external world, hence their inadequacy to describe the one gentle reality within us all.”

**“You Are Not Yourself”**

Allow me to introduce you, to yourself. By incorporating Jensen and Trenholm’s, “Five Ways We Can Think of ‘Self’ (2008), it will be easier for us to see the many differing variations of how we can arrive at our destination of ‘self.’ The five ways in which we can begin to view ourselves, include the notions that the ‘self’ is, “a narrative, cognitive schema, a set of behavioral indicators, relational achievement, and internal dialogue” (p. 203).

**Self as a Narrative**

When we think of the word *narrative,* we think of stories. In this first approach to the ‘self,’ we tend to think of ourselves in fabled and story-like ways, almost like the main cartoon character on a comic book strip. Essentially, it is as if all our different versions of our self-identity are represented by the boxes on the comic book strip and we have to make meaning of the representations on the page. The only way for us to do this is by ordering the boxes in an organized and familiar way, which makes a more comprehendible “story” to us. According to Prather (1983), “Being myself includes taking risks with myself, taking risks on new behavior, so I can come to know how it feels to walk hand-in-hand with my ‘self.’”

**Self as a Cognitive Schema**

Jenson and Tenholm (2008) define *self-schemata* as, “cognitive structures that organize and guide the processing of self-related information…to make sense of [our] collection of self-concepts” (p. 207). Frank Macke (2008) suggests, “The gap between thought and emotion is, in the case of intrapersonal [communication], capable of being understood as the distance felt between the inner, secreted subjectively of the person impulsively seeing a secure attachment to the world and the social identity, the named persona of the visible self” (p. 127). Claiming there is a “gap” between thought and emotion, suggests a lack of structure. Lack of structure equals lack of proper organization, which is not good because the building blocks of interpersonal communication should not have “gaps.” In a sense, we have to structure the way in which we process our information, interpretations and perceptions, in order to limit “gaps,” and close the internalized distance we impose on ourselves.

**Self as Behavioral Indicators**

This notion suggests that when we recognize our individual perceptions during experiential situations, we can use that information we’ve obtained and apply it to new circumstances, in order to make better sense of all of our experiences. As we make sense and organize our understandings of these situations, we are then capable of taking our preconceived internalizations and reorganizing them to make new meanings of the world around us- particularly, in the world of interpersonal communication. Metaphorically, we are taking the boxes from the comic strip, rearranging them and making new meaning of our story, as well as new identities of our ‘self’ within those new stories.

Michael Hyde and Kenneth Rufo (2000) coined the term “call of conscience” in their article about “rhetorical interruptions” (p. 1) I feel this term is relevant to the idea of behavioral indicators, because by accessing our memories of the many perceptions about experiential situations we have encountered, we really do have to call upon our conscience to help guide our interpretations. This is because we are making a comparison between what we have experienced and what we will experience. This is an important factor of interpersonal communication because we rely on that “call of conscience” and our retrospective observations to help guide our future encounters. As Hyde and Rufo (2000) state, “We exist in a way that always opens us to the future, to what lies beyond the here and now, to a different time and place, to a realm of otherness that is always calling and challenging us to do the right thing, to be who we are- creatures who by nature are open to the otherness of others- so to ensure that a conversation telling of compassion, respect, and the importance of acknowledgment will go on even after we die” (p. 4).

We need to remain “open,” or rather, “open-minded.” It’s our part of being conscious that combats the assumptions and accusations we make about others, which assists us in being more receptive to the unknown, because of a heightened sense of understanding, based on past experiences. Because when we are more receptive of others, others tend to be more receptive of us; which can lead to a trusting foundation for which to build an interpersonal communication relationship. John Johnson (1984) in his article on The Role of Inner Speech in Human Communication, quotes Vygotsky and Sokolov, in a claim that states, “Communication can be achieved only in a roundabout way…every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relationship between things” (p. 213).

**Self as Relational Achievement**

According to Jensen and Trenholm (2008), “our most significant self-defining opportunities are embedded in our closest relationships” (p. 209). So, it is no wonder that interpersonal relational achievements can transcend to becoming the adjustment of the self-defined classification of one’s perceived self-identity. While involved in an interpersonal communication relationship, our closeness to another can bring out a different side of us, or “face.” As the communication relationship evolves, so does your understanding of your role within the situation, as well as your partner’s awareness/perception of your role.

**Self as Internal Dialogue**

Internal Dialogue means to be conscious and self-awareness, while communicating intrapersonally, or with yourself. For instance, self-talk is a way that we can talk to ourselves in a more constructive way, by saying things like “I was forgetful this morning by not turning off the coffee-pot,” as opposed to, “God! I am such a moron! I can never remember anything!” When we are self-aware during conversation, we can train ourselves to respond differently, when we recognize we have talked down to ourselves. By finding ways of talking to yourself in more constructive way, we tend to accept these personal constructive criticisms better because we are practicing the way in which we perceive meaning. When switching from conversation with our self (intrapersonal) to conversation with others (interpersonal), we often carry over the same communication habits. So by practicing positive self-talk with yourself, you are already setting yourself up to interject more appropriate responses when involved in interpersonal communication.

**Summary**

By applying the self-concept devices from the “5 things” mentioned, to our daily lives, we will not only better ourselves, but can also hold the potential for others to copy our newly redeveloped, more responsive behaviors. Schrodt, Soliz, and Braithwaite (2008) sum this idea up nicely, by stating that, “a better understanding of the importance of each social relations components can be gleaned by calculating the extent to which each component contributes to explaining variance in everyday talk” (p. 204). Just as each section of the “Five ways of Thinking of ‘Self’” gives us insight into defining ourselves and our intrapersonal relationship with ourselves, it may also by practicing it, points out all of our personal inconsistencies within our communication.

With the integration of the five mentioned self-concepts into our daily lives and a more conscious awareness of what we say to ourselves as well as others, it will allow us to more easily empathize with others based on the built trust through disclosure and constructive criticism, thus forming healthier interpersonal relationships, because as Zhang and Stafford (2009) said, “openness [and] honesty is generally desired and expected” (2009).

Finally, I will leave you with one last quote: Prather (1983) said, “The tools of the mind can be wrongly used, but the mind possesses no wrong tools.” So, I encourage you familiarize yourself with any negative self-talk you catch yourself making and use the tools mentioned to reformulate the messages and to construct new meaning for yourself.

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