

Internal Affairs

Yet another Valentine's Day spent alone with a tub of Ben & Jerry's? Wondering if and when you'll meet your knight in a shining Beemer? Before you go hunting for the perfect man, you might want to start looking within first.

BY SANTHI GANESAN

➔ It's a day that's either treated with indifference or hatred by singles. Lovey-dovey couples, romantic dinners, sweet sentiments—it's enough to make disillusioned singles regurgitate their take-away lunch. But some of them secretly desire the very things they supposedly detest—you know who you are!

'Where are the good guys?', you lament, before concluding they're either taken, married or busy swinging the other way. But ever considered your single status might have something to do with... you? Imagine that! You and the messages you send yourself could be the real culprit.

Our inner voice is our biggest critic, and it can't seem to shut up. Instead of being positive and supportive, it usually has a default setting of being negative. Like a tape recorder from *The Twilight Zone*, it endlessly chastises us for not being good/clever/brave/pretty/thin/rich/worthy enough. This self-sabotaging inner monologue is so deeply embedded, we don't even realise it's there. But we blindly believe the faulty messages. The problem is they don't stay locked away in our heads; they show up in the words we use, the way we carry ourselves, the way we dress and the way we treat ourselves and others. The result? A self-loathing individual with low self-worth, low self-confidence and possibly single!

Why Are Women Their Own Worst Enemies?

According to the Attribution Theory, coined by social psychologists, women tend to attribute success and good things to luck, while men readily take credit for it. When something bad happens, women blame themselves, while men attribute it to bad luck. This would explain why serial negative self-talkers are usually women.

In her book, *Women Who Think Too Much*, renowned psychologist Dr. Susan Nolen-Hoeksema says that while men look for distractions when they feel troubled, women

often ruminate endlessly on the negative event. This over-analyzing, over-thinking habit stops them from finding solutions to problems, leading to sadness, anxiety, depression, decreased productivity and reduced self-confidence.

Petaling Jaya-based life coach Sharmini Hensen believes that women are taught to put others before themselves. "We are conditioned from young to play a smaller role, and we carry this into adulthood. We also carry with us the added pressure of needing to be perfect in whatever we do. So when we do something and fail, we automatically tell ourselves, 'They are right; I can't do it.'"

But here's the best news. You can stop this faulty tape recorder and replace the negative messages with positive thought patterns! When the negative chatter stops, you'll start to feel better about yourself and your confidence will rise, which is what you need if you're looking for love. **Scoff if you need to, but you must love yourself first before someone else can love you.** Sure, expertly applied make-up and nice clothes can get you attention, but surveys consistently show that both men and women find confidence to be the sexiest thing in a person. Think of it as cosmetic foundation for your personality!

Identifying Negative Self-Talk

Awareness is key to stopping the crippling, limiting negative self-talk. When a negative thought pops into your head, say "stop"—loudly if you're alone, as it'll be more powerful! Then write down the thought so you get into the habit of recognising it. Negative self-talk takes numerous forms. In fact, there are different categories of it! We have Dr. David Burns to thank for that. An author and pioneer in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, he has identified 10 forms of distorted thinking patterns, otherwise known as twisted thinking!

1/All-Or-Nothing thinking—Everything is either black or white with no middle ground. Example: "If I don't marry a millionaire, I'm a total failure!"

2/Overgeneralization—A negative event that forms a never-ending pattern of defeat in your mind. Example: "Another blind date? No, thanks. I always get rejected."

3/Mental filter—You focus on the negative and filter out the positive. Example: If all your friends, save one, love your new hairdo, you'll focus on the one who didn't like it.

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4/Disqualifying the positive—You dismiss your accomplishments or positive qualities. Example: "Oh, it's nothing. Anyone can do it and do a better job."

5/Jumping to conclusions—You draw negative conclusions without facts to back you up. There are two types.

● **MIND READING—**You conclude someone is thinking negatively about you. Example: If your colleague doesn't greet you in the morning, your first thought is: "She hates me." ● **FORTUNE TELLING—**You predict the future will turn out badly. Example: "I don't think I want to go to the party. I know I won't enjoy myself."

6/Magnification (Catastrophising) or Minimisation—You blow things out of proportion or shrink their importance inappropriately. Example: "If anyone finds out that I collect Barbie dolls, my life will be over!"

7/Emotional reasoning—You assume your negative emotions reflect the way things really are. Example: "I feel worthless, so I must be worthless."

8/Should statements—You beat yourself up (or direct it towards others) when something doesn't go your

way. Example: "I should have done it a different way."

9/Labeling—You negatively label yourself and others based on limited information. Example: "I forgot your birthday. I'm so stupid."

10/Personalisation—You blame yourself for something you weren't responsible for. Example: "It's my fault they all left."

Changing Your Chatter

Negative self-talk won't stop overnight, as old habits die hard. That said, always remember that practice makes perfect! ▶ When you start being disrespectful and demeaning to yourself, stop and ask if you would say that to your best friend. Defend yourself against your own negative voice!

▶ Writing it down not only helps identify your negative thought patterns but also makes you see the absurdity of it.

▶ Challenge and question the accuracy of your thoughts. What is the evidence for or against it? Are there other ways you can look at the situation? Is it as bad as you make it out to be? What's the worst/best that could happen? What can I do to solve the problem?

▶ Replace words like "can't" and "don't" with empowering words like "will" and "can".

▶ Studies have shown that social media increases self-criticism, so log off and tune in to yourself instead. Learn to compliment yourself and don't be afraid to spend time with yourself. Exercise, take a walk in the park, go for art exhibitions. Don't use technology or people as a crutch. It's important to build your own sense of self.

▶ Learn to be proud of the things you believe in, no matter how uncool they may seem. Not feeling ashamed of yourself is important to build self-confidence.

▶ Always set achievable goals and gradually increase them once you've reached them. ●

THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING

The phrase is so clichéd that people tune off immediately. But studies have shown that optimism has a very real effect on health and wellbeing. "Start a gratitude journal," says life coach Sharmini Hensen. "Compile affirmations and positive thoughts and refer to them for a quick pick-me-up. The mind expands whatever it focuses on. Focusing on the negative only creates more of it. So forgive yourself, accept yourself and love yourself. Loving yourself means going where it's uncomfortable. Go there anyway. Know that you have infinite possibilities. Try positive self-talk for three months and compare yourself to how you were before. I promise you, once you've experienced the positive side, you won't want to go back!"