Negative to Healthy

Self-talk is the conversation you have with yourself – a voice in your head. It shapes your expectations and your world view. It’s especially important that people with rheumatoid arthritis avoid unhealthy self-talk, which can make the stress and pain of RA worse.

When self-talk is unhealthy, it holds you back and makes you feel cynical about life. When self-talk is healthy, the voice in your head becomes a cheering section urging you forward.

Here are 10 examples of negative thinking, and how you can turn them around.  
  
**1. Seeing all or nothing.** You place people or situations in black and white categories, with no shades of gray. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

**Healthy response:** You recognize an error but place it in the context of all the things you did right.

**2. Generalizing.** You see a single, unpleasant event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

**Healthy response:** You see a single, unpleasant event as a bump in the road.  
  
**3. Using mental filters.** You pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so your vision of reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors an entire glass of water.

**Healthy response:** You pick out the most pleasing detail and dwell on it.  
 **4. Disqualifying the healthy.** You reject healthy experiences, such as an acquaintance’s remark that you have a great sense of humor, by insisting it isn’t true. In this way you maintain an unhealthy belief such as, “People don’t like me,” even though it’s contradicted by your everyday experiences.

**Healthy response:** You embrace healthy experiences such as hearing a compliment about your sense of humor.   
  
**5. Jumping to conclusions.** You make an unhealthy interpretation even though there are no facts that support your conclusion. Some examples:

**Mind reading:** You conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you and don’t find out if you are correct.

**Fortune telling:** You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact.

**Healthy response:** You assume things are going well (that people like you, that you’re doing a good job, etc.) until you learn differently.

**6. Magnifying or minimizing.** You exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as your mistake or someone else’s achievement), or you inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or anther person’s imperfections). This is also called the “binocular trick.”

**Healthy response:** You celebrate your achievements and others’ small and large. If you feel jealous, you acknowledge that and then remind yourself of your own gifts and share others’ happiness.  
 **7. Basing facts on your emotions.** You assume that your unhealthy emotions reflect he way things really are: “I feel it, therefore it must be true.”

**Healthy response:** You remind yourself that most days you feel better than you do today.  
  
**8. Using “you should” statements.** You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if you have to be punished before you can do anything. (“I really should exercise. I shouldn’t be so lazy.”) Musts and ought’s are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment.

**Healthy response:** You motivate yourself by remembering good feelings or events that come with an activity. (“Exercise is hard, but I feel good afterward.”)  
 **9. Labeling and mislabeling.** These are extreme forms of generalizing. Instead of describing your error, you attach an unhealthy label to yourself. you say, “I’m a loser.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach an unhealthy label to him, such as “He’s a real jerk.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. Example: Instead of saying someone drops her children off at daycare every day, you might say she “abandons her children to strangers.”

**Healthy response:** Acknowledge your error, put it in perspective and move on. (“I’m late to the meeting. That rarely happens. I’ll be on time next time.”)  
 **10. Personalizing.** You see yourself as the cause of some unhealthy external event that you were not responsible for. (“WE were late to the dinner party and caused the hostess to overcook the meal. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn’t have happened.”)

**Healthy response:** You don’t take on the blame that belongs to other people. (“My husband wouldn’t stop watching the football game on TV and this made us late to the party. My husband was rude, but this wasn’t my fault.”)