

### **Restructuring Unhelpful Self-Talk**

(Except adapted from *Healing Fear* By Edmund Bourne, Ph.D. This book is an excellent resource)

When we experience anxiety we often overestimate the reality of a situation. To decrease our experience of anxiety we must challenge these thoughts and counter them with more realistic, less anxiety-provoking thinking. Use the steps outlined below to work on your negative self-talk.

1. If you're feeling anxious or upset, do something to relax, such as abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or meditation. It's easier to notice your internal dialogue when you take time to slow down and relax.
2. After you get somewhat relaxed, ask yourself, "What was I telling myself that made me anxious?" or "What was going through my mind?" Make an effort to separate thoughts from feelings. For example, "I felt terrified" describes a feeling, while "I will lose control of myself" is an overestimating thought which might lead you to feel terrified. Sometimes feelings and thoughts occur together in one statement "I'm scared I'll lose control" The negative thought here is still "I will lose control"
3. Identify the two basic types of distortions or errors within your anxious self-talk. Sort out overestimating thoughts, and then thoughts that underestimate your ability to cope. Note that overestimating thoughts frequently begin with "What if..." Thoughts that underestimate your ability to cope might begin with "I can't..." or "I won't be able..."
4. When you've identified your anxious, distorted thoughts, challenge them with appropriate questions.

For overestimating thoughts: "What are the realistic odds that this feared outcome will actually happen?" "Has this outcome ever happened before?"

For thoughts underestimating you ability to cope: "What coping skills can I bring to bear to handle anxiety?" "If the worst outcome I fear does occur, what could I actually do to cope?"

5. Write counterstatements to each of your overestimating thoughts. These counterstatements should contain language and logic that reflect more balanced, realistic thinking. Then make a list of ways you might cope with your phobic situation, including what you would do if your most feared outcome actually did occur.

Use the Worry Chart below to write down your anxious thoughts and corresponding counterstatements for your specific fear or phobia.

