



Many of us torment ourselves with a negative internal dialogue, but there are techniques to turn this around, says **Catherine Jones**

TALKING BIG

STEP 1

Tonight is a big night. You're accompanying your partner to his university reunion, there'll be at least two of his exes there, and everybody knows everyone – except you. You're dreading it. Driving home from work, you think about how you'll fail to impress his friends, and how unglamorous you feel. You arrive home sick with nerves, convinced it will be a disaster.

It's estimated that we say between 150 and 300 words a minute to ourselves in internal dialogue, making up thousands of internal conversations, also known as self-talk, every day. But even the most confident among us can see esteem levels take a dive when self-talk turns negative. Self-talk is the most important conversation we'll ever have because it shapes the way we see our world, and ourselves. So it's crucial your words are positive and realistic.

Professional athletes and their psychologists have worked hard to master the art of positive self-talk

as it helps them to focus on the next competition and counter self-sabotaging, negative thoughts.

'At the Olympics, everyone's equal physically; it's what's between the ears that counts,' says Paul Dent, a sports psychologist at the British Association of Sports and Exercise Sciences. By listening to our self-talk, we can apply techniques to ensure our internal monologues are constructive.

But there are limits, says psychology professor Tom Brinthaup. 'A 90 per cent positive level of self-talk is associated with narcissism and, while you might think a 50:50 ratio means a balanced perspective, in fact it's associated with depression and low self-esteem. The ideal ratio is a healthy balance of two-thirds positive, one-third negative.'

Positive self-talk techniques will help you to turn negative self-talk around. Turn the page for common conversations we all have with ourselves and advice on how to make them positive. ▶



'I STOPPED TRYING TO PLEASE PEOPLE'

● Jimmy Carr, comedian

When I left university, I got a marketing job with Shell. It took me a long time to realise I was unhappy there. I found no sense of identity in what I did. I thought I was depressed, but I was just

sad. It was due to circumstance, not serotonin levels. Looking back on it, being a nice middle-class boy made it more difficult to take a risk. The danger is you'll never do anything extraordinary because

regular life is pretty good. A big turning point for me was making the decision to stop trying to please people. It really helped doing a Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) course; I liked the idea of a therapy system that

involved dealing with the problem in the here and now. The course opened up the possibility that you can do whatever you want to do. I began to feel that I couldn't really fail.

Jimmy Carr's DVD 'Comedian' is out now.

TURN AROUND YOUR NEGATIVE TALK

'My relationships always end messily. I'll never find the right person'

Our tendency is to oversimplify and so we generalise, even though it's not accurate, explains psychology professor Tom Brinthaup. This leads to all-or-nothing thinking.

'Most people that I work with are completely at the mercy of how they're thinking; they don't understand that they can control how they feel,' says psychologist Allison Dyer. 'We control our self-talk, not the other way round. You decide what you want to listen to. When you have an all-or-nothing moment, ask yourself how you want to interpret the situation, and remember you have a choice.'

'I can't do work presentations'

We're most vulnerable to negative self-talk when we are in stressful or unfamiliar situations and lack confidence, says psychologist Paul Dent. The more we hear it, the more we believe it. 'Skill doesn't change overnight, therefore your ability at work doesn't change overnight,' he says. He recommends we store up a 'database of success' in our minds: a pool of positive, confidence-boosting memories that we can readily access when we feel our self-esteem start to dip. His clients refer to this just before going into competition. 'Research shows 75 per cent of confidence is about previous success, so the self-talk becomes "I've done this before, I can do this."'

'She hasn't returned my calls; she probably hates me'

From misread emails to half-heard conversations, so much day-to-day interaction is ambiguous, and it's easy to jump to the wrong conclusions about intentions and opinions. 'When something ambiguous happens to us, we tend to jump to conclusions and react accordingly,' says Brinthaup.

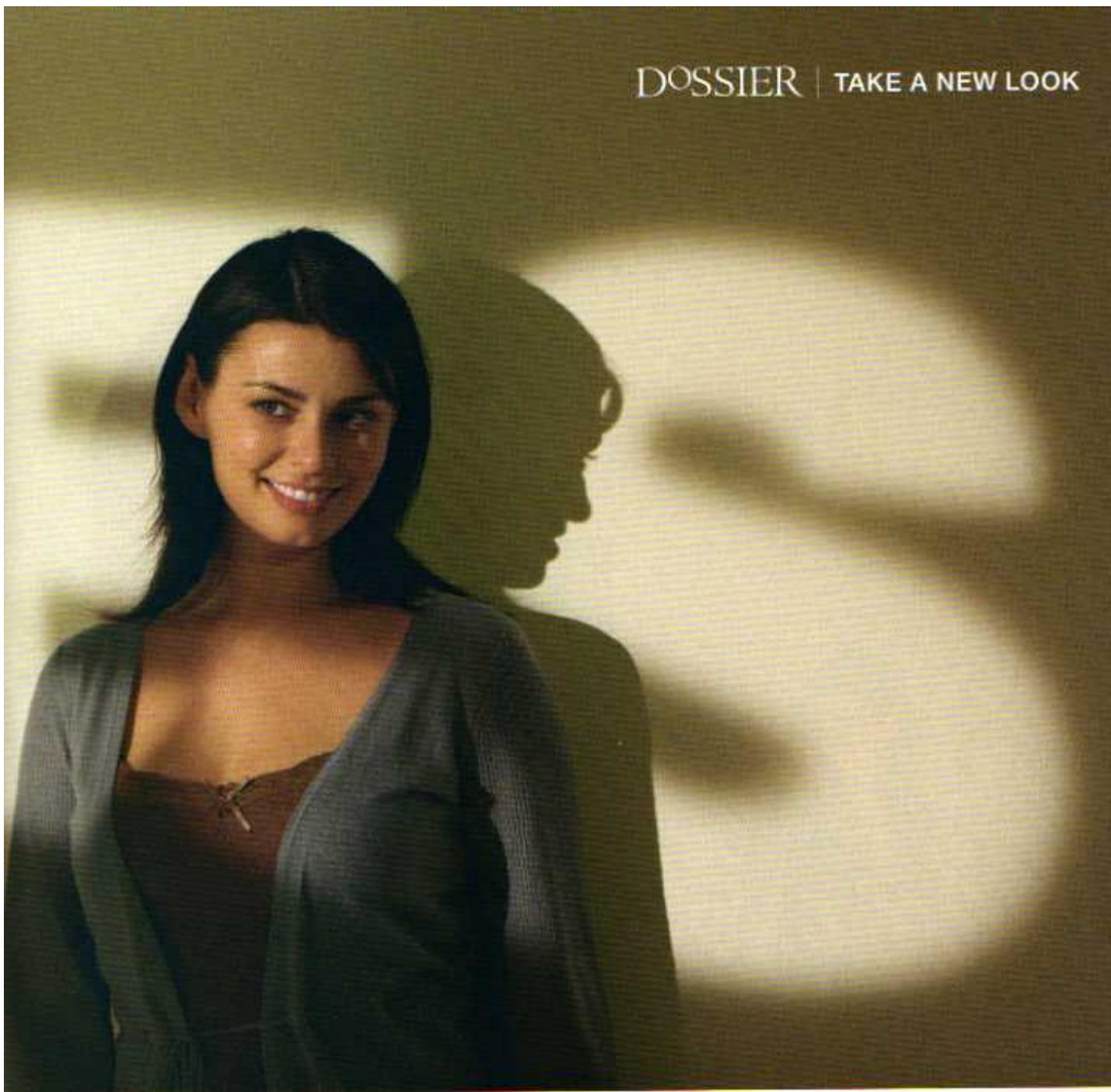
Over-dramatic self-talk is common, particularly in socially anxious people, and quickly leads to low self-esteem. 'You're not always conscious of negative self-talk,' says Dent. 'To make people more aware, we make clients write down every detail about their conversation.'

'I forgot to pick up the dry-cleaning. How will I pay off my credit card debt? I've got so much on at work. How can I fit in a holiday this year?'

There are times when our self-talk can spiral out of proportion, waking us in the small hours, for example, when our minds become cluttered with anxious thoughts. When athletes need to clear their minds they turn to key words, sometimes images, that can evoke feelings of calm. Repeating these words

pushes out the negative thoughts and works like a mantra. Dent recommends a technique known as parking. 'I work with Olympic platform divers. We use images of a dustbin halfway up the stairs to the board, where they screw up their negative thoughts and dump them before reaching the top.'





'I can't believe
I overcooked
the carrots. I've
ruined everything'

The most common negative self-talk is discounting the positives, says Dyer. You've spent an entire Sunday preparing a delicious roast dinner, but rather than enjoying your crispy roast potatoes, the just-right beef and the fluffy Yorkshire puddings, all you're thinking about is the one thing that's not perfect.

A negative mind can be a myopic one, blind to what's gone right, only focusing on what's

wrong. Perfectionists in particular are susceptible to this mindset, which can spoil a family dinner just as it can ruin our greatest achievements, from relationships to careers.

It's essential we can keep this thinking in check. 'You need to spend time thinking about what's gone well and what is good in your life so you can recreate a confident, robust foundation for yourself,' says Dyer.