

Protecting Ourselves from Negative Beliefs

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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As dozens of self help books tell us, our belief in ourselves as valuable, powerful, competent people is essential to our emotional safety and can help us to get more of what we want in our lives. Unfortunately, like pollution, which can challenge our physical health, the negative attitudes and comments of others and the destructive things we tell ourselves can undermine our sense of who we are.

The impact of negative beliefs is certainly true when it comes to personal and emotional safety. People stay in destructive situations because they believe that they do not have the right to leave. People do not speak up when something bothers them because they are afraid of hurting someone's feelings or making the person mad. Boys believe that they cannot walk away when someone insults them because doing so would make them look weak. Girls believe that they must fit a narrow definition of beauty to feel good about how they look. Women let men rape them because they believe that they are helpless...or that the attack was somehow their fault.

Often our awareness of our negative beliefs comes in the form of telling ourselves and others things like: "I am no good at writing, public speaking, math, fundraising, or cooking." or "No one likes me because I am too shy, wimpy, unattractive, clumsy, stupid, pretty, smart, or outspoken." or "I really hate planning ahead, confronting people, or getting angry." or "I am not the kind of person who can make a scene, stop myself from getting out of control when I'm upset, or ask for help." Fill in the blanks for yourselves. We all have them.

It is okay to choose to believe that we are no good at something, too anything, hate everything, or not the kind of person who can do whatever--as long as we realize that we ARE making a choice. For example, it is okay to decide that you can't cook. Actually, this belief might serve you well if you can get other people to do the cooking. And you can make a new choice if this belief stops you from doing something you may need or want to do--like eating good food.

It is important to remember that there is a difference between a belief and a fact. The fact is that I am shorter than most adults I work with. No amount of believing is going to make me taller. However, if I decide to believe my height makes me helpless or unattractive, then I am not doing justice to myself.

It is also true that I am physically dyslexic. It takes me a long time to learn new physical skills because I get easily confused. For this reason, I used to believe that it was impossible for me to teach anyone self defense. As long as I held onto this belief, it was true. However, I finally learned that the challenge of overcoming my own difficulties in learning made me a much better teacher.

We can take the power out of negative beliefs by saying them aloud and finding ways to look at them differently. One of the most powerful practices we have in Kidpower is teaching people to throw hurtful words that they say to themselves or others into an imaginary garbage can and replacing these words with an affirmation. We started doing this practice just with children but found that we were using it ourselves, as instructors, and now teach the Kidpower garbage can to everyone.

Sometimes simply looking at a belief from another point of view can make it not a problem anymore. In a recent workshop for professionals working with developmentally delayed young people, we practiced protecting ourselves from words that hurt by catching them in the air with our hands, throwing them into a REAL garbage can, and then saying something good to ourselves aloud while physically taking the good words in.

We had the participants tell us the actual words their folk hear like "Retard...dummy...freak....weirdo....special ed...useless...lazy..."

One teacher asked, "One of my students with Down's Syndrome says kids call her, 'The slowest ant in school.' What can she tell herself to take the place of that?"

"Well," I suggested, "She might say, 'When...you...go...slow...., you...see ...A LOT!'"

In our next session, the teacher said that her student just beamed and started laughing with this answer. She kept saying over and over, "When...you...go...SLOW...., you...SEE ...A LOT!"

Then this girl did some creative thinking of her own, and said, "When.. you.. go...TOO...FAST...., you...can...MISS.... EVERYTHING!"

This is a truth that, in our hectic lives, ALL of us would do well to remember.

So slow down and think about which of your beliefs are serving you well and which are not. If a belief or a label or a hurtful word is bothering you or stopping you from doing things that will make your life better, take the time to figure out how to change the negative belief, give yourself a more positive label, and throw away the hurtful words.