

## Performance Psychology: Taming the Inner Voice

Your inner monologue can be a source of strength or a cause of weakness.  
How do you fill your head with positive thoughts that will result in PRs and high performance?

Wendy Swift



Susannah Dy/CrossFit Journal

If everything that passed through your head was said out loud to another CrossFitter, would you be considered a good coach or a bad coach, a motivating coach or a demoralizing coach?

This question is important, because your self-talk is really your own personal coach.

## Voices in Your Head

I'm talking about that little voice inside your head that runs commentary throughout your day. Some people call it their "inner voice"; psychologists call it "self-talk." Since we learned to talk, that inner voice has babbled away at us throughout our conscious day, so much so that most of the time we don't even notice what's going through our heads.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we cannot assume that our inner voice is always doing us good. Sometimes our inner voice tells us things that make us weak, or it causes us to make bad decisions. Think of a typical CrossFit workout in which your inner voice has said something like this:

*"This is really hurting."*

*"I need to slow down."*

*"I don't need to go that hard today because I am still sore from yesterday."*

*"I can't keep up with X because he/she is way better than me."*

*"I suck."*

*"I can't do this."*

*"I'm not sure my knee/shoulder/whatever will hold up."*

The list goes on and on. These thoughts don't help you. They are destructive and they invite you to be less than you can be. So if you want to improve performance, then you need to learn to control your inner voice and make it work constructively to produce good, quality self-talk.

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Wendy Swift/CrossFit Brisbane

*Top: Fifteen-year-old Kelsey Swift of CrossFit Brisbane indulges in some pre-event "this is gonna hurt" thoughts at the Hard'n Up Challenge. Will her anxiety improve her performance?*

*Bottom: The WOD is underway and Kelsey is back in control. Did her pre-WOD thoughts set her up for success?*

Sounds pretty easy: "think positive." We've all heard that before, but there are some reasons that it doesn't happen.

First up, no one can "see" your self-talk, and therefore you are not often held accountable for it.

Second point: we are so used to our own self-talk that it's common to have a poor awareness of what we allow ourselves to think. Therefore, we consume a lot of "junk thoughts."

Third point: when we really feel like giving up, our emotions become dominant, and any conscious awareness that the inner voice has gone negative is totally overwhelmed by the emotional response.



Wendy Swift/CrossFit Brisbane

***Dominic McKenna of CrossFit Brisbane competes at the Wounded Warrior Fundraiser at CFX. Plan your self-talk ahead of time, so your inner voice is working for you at moments like these.***

### Raising Awareness

Awareness of your inner voice is necessary for you to assess the quality of your self-talk. The process is simple:

1. Get a diary.
2. Use your CrossFit workout as your daily task that you will use to monitor your self-talk (but you could use anything else in your life as well).
3. At the end of your workout, take a few minutes to recall what went through your head.

Specifically:

Your pre-workout self-talk, which could include:

- Assessment of how you were feeling.
- What you thought when you read the WOD.
- Reactions to how you felt in warm-up.
- Thought about previous performances in this or similar WODs.

Self-talk during the event, particularly once it got hard.

Any critical incidents, and what your inner voice responded with (for example, being overtaken by someone you usually out-perform, reaching a PR with two more rounds of lifting to complete).

4. Record a *brief* summary in your diary, along with a rating of your physical performance satisfaction. Continue this process for three to four weeks.

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Remember, the point of power  
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### Holding Yourself Accountable

Once you've started the monitoring process above, you'll develop a feel for the pattern that your inner voice follows. You may notice you respond well in some circumstances and poorly in others. What you are doing is collecting data on your own patterns of mental performance, and this data is powerful in helping you become accountable for the quality of your self-talk.

You will need to rate the quality of your self-talk based on the following criteria:

1. How much did my inner voice help me feel the way I wanted to feel?
2. How much did my inner voice progress me toward achieving my goal?
3. How much did my inner voice inspire me to greater effort?
4. How much did my inner voice help me improve/maintain my technique?

Based on your answers, rate the overall quality of your self-talk on a simple scale. For example, use a 1-3 scale where 1 means your self-talk didn't help at all and 3 means it really helped a lot. Continue your diary, but only include your "inner voice rating" against your workout.

One of the difficulties with measuring mental processes is that the data is subjective. However, as the evaluator in this process, you are comparing yourself against yourself. So as long as you remember the difference in quality between each rating, your data will have useful reliability.

If your inner-voice ratings are consistently low and you are not sure how to create good, quality self-talk, try planning your self-talk to match the following criteria:

1. Ensure your dialogue is in positive language (e.g., use "do" instead of "don't." It changes your focus to what you want to do rather than what you are worried about).
2. Ensure your dialogue is about the present tense. The past is over and done with, and the future is yet unknown. The only thing you can control is what you do with the present moment, so it is a worthy focus for your inner voice. Remember, the point of power is always in the present tense.
3. Make your dialogue "task focused." If things are getting tough and your inner voice is getting out of control, ask yourself, "What do I need to do right now to achieve my goal?" The answer will direct you to the appropriate task; e.g. "keep running."
4. Finally, your inner-voice dialogue must be believable. There is no point telling yourself something that is obviously untrue. Break the task down into something controllable, and then take action.

Susannah Dy/CrossFit Journal



***You need a strong inner voice to push to this point. Once you get there, your thoughts can bring you success or failure.***

## Replacing Negative Thoughts

Many athletes start their self-talk improvements with a focus on 'effort'—exerting themselves to persevere and try harder. But there are many more things that you can expand into as you develop better and better control of your inner voice. If you struggle to meet the criteria for good, quality self-talk, you may find it useful to use this focus list to expand your repertoire:

**1. Skill development and execution:**

*"Keep the bar close to my body."*

*"Dip and drive!"*

**2. Strategy:**

*"Work through six more, then I can put the bar down. I'll hammer it on the run."*

**3. Psych up for emotion and effort:**

*"Come on! I want this! Push through now!"*

**4. Relax and calm down:**

*"Breathe, get a rhythm, one at a time . . ."*

**5. Self-evaluation/self-reinforcement:**

*"I'm OK. Check my technique—can I push harder?"*

**6. Task Focus:**

*"Doesn't matter what's next. Just one more HSPU. Doesn't matter what anyone else is doing or saying."*

**7. Confidence:**

*"I'm so much stronger than I was three months ago. I can tolerate heaps more. I can't wait to do this!"*

The experience of commencing work on the inner voice could be described as similar to the experience of commencing the Zone Diet. At first you think you eat pretty well ("My inner voice is great!"). Then you start monitoring what you do eat and realize it is a long way from matching the Zone balance ("I don't actually think what I think I do."). You start with cutting out the obvious bad things and you notice improvement, so you move on to weighing and measuring ("diarizing" your self-talk) and planning your meals in detail (pre-planned inner-voice dialogue). Finally, you move past weighing and measuring and become pretty accurate at assessing when you have a good day. When you have a bad day, you don't stress about it; you move on and get right back on track at the next meal (workout).



*The author's husband, Matt Swift, competing in the Wounded Warrior Games. Determination and confidence show in an athlete's face, and usually in the results.*

Wendy Swift/CrossFit Brisbane

### Managing Emotional Response

Many good intentions fall by the wayside in the midst of high emotions (stress, anger, exhaustion, disappointment, etc.). Again, an athlete can do many things to manage this emotional energy. Use your experience to predict the emotions you might have in any situation in which your performance is important. Your emotional reactions will coincide with a pattern of thinking and a pattern of behaviors. You need to pre-plan some constructive self-talk for each of the emotional responses. Execute the plan and assess your performance.

The following is an example of a response pattern that does not progress the athlete toward his/her goals:

Emotion: Despair, pain, giving up.

Inner voice: "I can't do this."

Resulting action: Slowing down, shortening range of movement.

The remedial response involves pre-planned inner voice dialogue:

"This is my 'give up' moment. So right now is my test of character! Come on! One more rep! Accelerate! Lock it out! Rest short. Take it one at a time. That's it! Come on—this is the challenge right now! Do it!"

This example does not deny the emotion, but it does hit several focus areas, including strategy, psych-up and some technical self-instruction. It also hits the criteria of being positive, present, task focused and believable. If you plan your inner-voice dialogue ahead of time, you have a much better chance of using it in the moment and achieving the results you desire. Don't wait to see how you feel. Your feelings are the most difficult thing to control, so don't rely on feeling good. Work on your inner voice and make it strong in any emotional state.

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### Build Yourself Up, Smash PRs

In summary, taming your inner voice is like everything else: it gets better with work. Way before your performance deteriorates, a whole range of poor-quality thinking occurs. You're the only one who knows about it, and it causes you to back off just a little bit—just to put you slightly closer to your comfort zone. Sometimes it is delaying tactics and sometimes it is taking a softer option, but you know that in an honest assessment of your performance, it was not the best you could do.

So to access a better performance you need to work on your inner voice. You need to make your self-talk consistent and constructive. You need to *take responsibility* for what you allow yourself to think.



Courtesy of Wendy Swift/CrossFit Brisbane

### About the Author

Wendy Swift is a sport psychologist working for the Australian Institute of Sport and the Queensland Academy of Sport. Wendy's work for the past 14 years has focused on performance enhancement for elite-level athletes. Wendy is co-owner of [CrossFit Brisbane](#) with her husband, Matt Swift.