

WHY SAYING ‘YOU’RE NOT BAD REALLY’ DOESN’T WORK (AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD)



by Carolyn Spring

I used to think that one day, maybe one day (a long time in the future), I’d be ‘normal’ and then I wouldn’t have these thoughts any more.

You know the ones I mean:

- ‘You’re stupid’
- ‘No one likes you’
- ‘You mess everything up’
- ‘You’re such a waste of space’
- ‘Things won’t ever get better’
- ‘I feel so ashamed’
- ‘I hate myself’
- ‘I wish I could die.’

There’s a tonne more. They blare out in my head like the world’s worst playlist, always nagging away at me, undermining me, picking me apart.

I used to think that I needed ‘something’ to happen (the nature of that something was undefined – it was fundamentally magic, and so didn’t need definition) and then I wouldn’t think these thoughts any more.

‘How do I stop thinking these things?’ I asked one wise person. He nodded at me seriously and told me to start confronting them with ‘truth’. So I began confronting the thoughts, one after another:

- ‘I’m not stupid! I went to Cambridge!’
- ‘I have a few friends who do really like me!’
- ‘I don’t mess everything up, just some things ...’
- ‘I’m not a waste of space. Not completely...’

But I was like a toddler shouting against bedtime, arguing that it’s not time yet. ▶



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There was no conviction in my denials. I knew I was just trying to shout louder. And the more I thought about the things I was supposed to be contradicting, the more I ended up believing them. Because my brain had plenty of evidence to back up the complaints. There were a fair few people who actively didn't like me, and there were plenty of people with whom I'd never hit it off. So, unsurprisingly, I began to doubt that even my close friends could tolerate me. Big-time backfire.

Sometimes I would sit in bed, unable to move, unable to get up and get dressed and get on, because I felt so demoralised at the incessant torrent in my head. I was paralysed with the overwhelm of my self-hate. Ironically, the one thing I thought I was good at was finding fault with myself.

I was talking about it in therapy one day. I hadn't mentioned it that much, because I didn't want to admit just how mad I actually was. Therapy always felt like a fine line between not admitting enough, and so not getting help, or admitting too much, and being overwhelmed with shame, or freaking out the therapist to the point where they referred you on. You have to be just the right amount of mad to get help, I figured.

But the constant chorus of accusing voices was becoming unbearable. It was starting to affect me physically: milkshake-like diarrhoea, cramps, nausea, pain, headaches. I don't know

why I figured that it was causing the squits, but it seemed self-evident at the time. At any rate, I couldn't go on like this.

I can't recall how I talked about it. I just remember one line from my therapist, brilliant like the sunshine, casting the rest of the session into shadow.

'Maybe those voices are keeping you safe.'

It felt like my face had been twisted sharply to one side while I was being slapped on the other. This didn't make sense. These voices were attacking me, not keeping me safe. How could their attacks be for my benefit? This particular therapist was a stickler for positivity, but I wanted to grumble that this time she had gone too far.

'How?' I ask, eventually, trying not to sound as sulky as I feel.

'How do you think?'

They do that, these therapists. They're sneaky. You ask them a question, and they ask you one back. Damn, it's frustrating. My head already hurts. Don't make me do the hard work.

'I don't know.'

Stock response – but I'm too quick to reply, so it's obvious I'm not even trying.

'How do you think?'



Trick number two: they ask a question, and then they just repeat it, until you make some effort to answer it. Sneaky and persistent. That's what they teach them in therapy school.

I force the levers and gears of my mind into motion, trying to crank out a thought. I feel that familiar sense of dread, as if I'm about to realise something I don't want to know.

But I've been in this therapy game for a while, and I've learned a few tricks of my own.

'How might they be doing that to keep me safe?' I ponder out loud. At least it buys me more time. Maybe she'll forget I'm supposed to be answering it and she'll jump in, in overdue frustration at my ineptitude.

But she doesn't take the bait. Just makes one of those 'therapy noises' – you know, 'Hmmm, aahh, uh-huh?' I imagine they spend a whole term just learning those sounds.

And then – it's always when I'm not expecting it, like the first thunderclap of a storm – a thought occurs to me, and before I have a chance to edit it, it's coming out of my mouth.

'Because if I beat myself up first, it'll protect me from other people beating me up...'

Was that it? Do I pass?

'Exactly.'

Ker-ching to me: I have solved the puzzle of what the therapist wants me to figure out.

But still she's looking at me. Dammit, she wants me to apply it now.

'So?'

'So ...' I echo, buying more time. 'So if I beat myself up, it'll be less painful than if someone else beats me up. If I beat myself up, I might manage to stop myself from making mistakes that will be punished or mocked by others. If I beat myself up, I might manage not to be the evil person I really believe I am ...'

Damn. She's smiling at me in a way that shows she can't contain herself, as if I've just won the lottery.

'So ...?'

She's relentless. This is what distinguishes psychotherapists from mere counsellors, you know.

'So ... the thoughts I have ... that I'm crap and useless and bad and mess everything up ... are not necessarily true reflections of reality. They're just a way that part of me is trying to warn me ... They're me trying to keep myself safe. They're trying to help. It's just ... it doesn't help really. Not any more. But it used to. It was my best attempt at surviving a hostile environment. But I don't need to keep



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doing it now because the environment has changed.’

‘Huh-hmmm.’

That was the unmistakable noise of ‘well done’. It’s completely different to the others. I could almost change the conversation at this point. But, no, she’s greedy, this therapist. Always wants more.

‘So what are you going to do the next time you hear those voices?’

Resistance is futile now. I might as well have the epiphany.

‘I’m going to recognise that it’s a part of me who’s afraid that we’re going to get hurt by other people, and they’re warning me and trying to make sure that I don’t slip up so that I don’t give anyone a chance to attack me. I’m going to thank them for helping me. But I’m not going to believe that I’m crap. I’m going to reframe the thoughts as warnings instead of truth.’

‘Well done.’

I think the torment is over.

Now, let me be clear: I didn’t figure it out as neatly as that, in one session. Oh no. This was a conversation that I’d had at least half a dozen times by this point. I’m a slow learner (which is an ironic nod to the voice that tells me I’m stupid.)

Sometimes we don’t make any progress because we keep trying to solve the wrong problem: I think I’m stupid; therefore I must tell myself that I’m not stupid. And it doesn’t work. Because then I’m bad, as well as stupid; and I can try to tell myself that I’m neither bad, nor stupid, but then I’ll be stubborn too, and the list will just go on.

Instead we have to figure out what the real problem is, that’s presenting as this symptom. For me, it was a part of me trying to keep me safe in a hostile environment. The course correction I need is to remind that part that we’re not in that same environment any more. We don’t need to keep arguing like a toddler about bedtime. We don’t solve *You’re bad* with *You’re not bad*. We solve it by stepping out of the argument (putting the toddler to bed) and addressing the deeper issue.

I had to start doing that with myself. I’m not going to argue about whether I’m bad or lazy or stupid or unlikeable, I began to say to myself. I’m just going to step out of the argument, and recognise that there’s a part of me who’s trying to keep me safe by speaking to me in the language of my abusers; he or she or it is trying to prepare me for the accusations that might follow. And it’s okay, I can say to that part of me, you don’t need to do that any more. Because the abusers aren’t here any more. We’re safe. And it’s bedtime. ●

