

Why We Do What We Do

Humans have always been fascinated with themselves. As far back as is recorded, philosophers, scientists, religious leaders, and others have tried to explain, *Why we do what we do*. We seem so much more complex than any other life form that such explanations seem futile. But the answer to this age-old question lies in the very quality that allows us to know we are different than any other life form. It is our complex speech. In particular, **it is our...self-talk**.

When we are confronted with any situation, from a traffic jam to someone praising our work, we engage in silent self-talk that determines our emotional and behavioral reaction to that situation. This self-talk is instantaneous and just out of our level of awareness as in, "I don't know why I get so furious whenever I get caught in a traffic jam."

This self-talk has usually become a habit, but we try to explain it as if it were a personal quality: "It is just the way I am. I always get upset in these traffic jams." You frequently have habituated behavioral reactions to these emotions: "I just lay on my horn and curse". These emotions and behaviors occur without you having any awareness of what is causing them: "I don't know why I do it. I just get so angry and I act like such a jerk. But I can't seem to stop myself". You don't understand the role of your self-talk plays in your emotions and behaviors.

If you could look at your rapid-fire self-talk (automatic thoughts) that occurs at the traffic jam: "This is not fair! Why does this always happen to me! Some jerk is going to cause me to be late and I will get fired!" This self-talk may be outside of your awareness, but it causes you to be angry, your blood pressure to rise, and may cause you to do something stupid, like trying to cross the rain-soaked median to get around the jam.

We use this example as an obvious illustration of what can happen when your self-talk is not based on reality, is too extreme or too generalized. You are not the only one stuck in traffic, you probably won't get fired and the jam is not there just to inconvenience you. But still you persist in making yourself angry.

This type of thinking can occur in any situation at any time. Someone compliments your work and you tell yourself, "They don't really mean that, and I wonder why they are saying it. My work is always just adequate. I don't know why I bother."

These self-talk messages will cause you to feel suspicious and guarded and you will probably discount the compliment. Your overgeneralization, "My work is always just adequate," will cause feelings of insecurity, anxiety and possibly depression. Your performance may suffer, and your work may then become inadequate--not because of any real shortcomings, but because of your reaction to a compliment.

If this seems complex, it is. You see, the irrational self-talk in these two examples are typical self-messages children give themselves. Your dysfunctional adult self-talk started with dysfunctional childhood self-talk and it has survived to cause you adult problems.

Studies have shown that children are quick to incorporate irrational beliefs into their self-talk. One study (V. Waters 1982), identified the ten most common irrational beliefs of children. Examples of these beliefs are, "Things should come easily to me" and "It is awful if others don't like me."

It is easy to see how children incorporate these beliefs into their repertory of beliefs. When children are very young, adults try to remove most obstacles from their path. We feed, dress, and comfort them. They see themselves as the center of the universe. "Things should come easily to me". We assume that as the child grows older, their beliefs about life, themselves, and others will become more realistic and rational, "To succeed, I will have to learn to do the difficult, time consuming, and boring stuff."

But what happens if they do not change this belief: "Things should come easily to me"? Do they become the spoiled brats that everyone avoids? Do they become the bored, disenchanting young people who cannot keep a job and drop out of school? Do they become the frustrated adult who turns to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or other detrimental behaviors to give the illusion that everything will turn out just great?

We all enjoy attention and being liked. However, "**It is awful if others don't like me**" belief is full of pitfalls. Humans are social animals and when we are young, we are very dependent on others. In our ancient human history, if others in our cave did not like us, our very existence was threatened. We assume that as the child grows older, they are able to determine when it is appropriate to not worry about being "liked" or "not liked." But if that were true, why did the parental saying, "And if he /she jumps off the bridge, will you?" become part of folk wisdom?

Our children are supposed to change, "It is awful if others don't like me" to something more rational like, "It would be nice if the others liked me, but I am not going to do anything against my best self-interest just to please them." But how often do you see people in friendships, relationships or marriages that are totally dysfunctional. They are trapped not by any religious obligations or moral restraints but by a self-imposed irrational belief, "It is awful if others don't like me." This belief is part of the allure of gangs, "If I am a member, then they like me and I can reject all these others (parents, teachers, etc.) that give me a hard time about how I behave toward others."

There are adult parallels to each of the childhood irrational beliefs of Waters' study. If you were to conduct "belief studies" with adults who are chronically dissatisfied with themselves, their jobs, or their lives, you would see parallel adult versions beliefs of these childhood irrational beliefs.

It is our irrational beliefs about ourselves, others, life, and our future that is at the core of our life problems and unhappiness. What most adults fail to realize is that our beliefs start in childhood. They can be changed or modified to be more realistic beliefs during this childhood developmental period.

It is for this reason that we developed the series of fables that comprise The Adventures of Cosmos Crow. The stories in this series use the power of the metaphor to modify and change irrational beliefs to more effective rational beliefs. You have the opportunity to help this change occur by helping your child understand the concepts in The Adventures of Cosmos Crow.

PARENT'S POEM

**Some day when my children are old enough to understand the
logic that motivates a parent, I will tell them:**

**I loved you enough to ask you where you were going, with whom,
and what time you would be home.**

**I loved you enough to be silent and let you discover
that your new best friend was a creep.**

**I loved you enough to stand over you for two hours while you
cleaned your room. A job that would have taken me 15 minutes.**

**I loved you enough to let you assume the responsibility
for your actions even when the penalties were so harsh
they almost broke my heart.**

**But most of all, I loved you enough to say "no"
when I knew you would hate me for it.**

**Those were the most difficult battles of them all. I'm glad I won
them because in the end you won something too.**

Anonymous