

The Sixth Cardinal Sin of Thinking: Can't

by

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"I can't do it!" It's certainly a common enough phrase; I can't do this, I can't do that. It probably gets run through much more inside our mind than out. I'm not going to tell you it's not true, that you can do anything you set your mind to. There are some things you can't do. I know there are some things I can't do. The problem is that when we use that phrase "I can't" it suggests that we are not able to do it at some time in the future; that we are not able to learn how to do it. So, using the "I can't" phrase doesn't really do our potential any justice. And regarding our internal self talk, there is no distinction between fact and fiction. So, when the mind hears the self talk "I can't" it simply says "ok." There is also no time frame involved our self talk, the "I can't" phrase has no expiration date. As far as the mind is concerned, "I can't" means you never have been nor will ever be able to. That's not quite accurate.

Many in the field of mental health or self improvement suggest that "I can't" be replaced with "I won't." In some cases, that is a good suggestion. There are quite a few times when a person who says "I can't do that" is really saying they choose not to do that. In such cases, saying "I won't do that" is not only appropriate but more accurate and more empowering. You can try this out for yourself. If you can catch yourself about to say "I can't" when in fact it's a choice on your part not to do it, simply say "I won't" or "I refuse" or "I choose not to." Don't say "I can't" when in fact you can but don't want to."

But, what about those situations when in fact you really are not able to do it. You don't have the skill, the experience or the capacity? In those cases, it's still much better to use an alternate phrase. For example, if someone asks you to help them edit a book in a foreign language that you don't speak, you can say something like "at this time, I am not able to" or "I have not yet learned how to speak that language." By avoiding the use of "I can't" we don't shut down the future possibilities. The mind remains open to the potential.

But, what about a person who is clinically depressed, severely anxious or diagnosed with terminal cancer or some other serious physical condition. Are they not justified in saying "I can't get better?" It would be somewhat cruel to suggest to them it's their choice and they should say "I won't get better." The latter statement is not just a choice based phrase it is also very deterministic. It could itself be cause for depression as it is an affirmation of the problem. Yet, "I can't get better" isn't that accurate either. There are anecdotes of individuals who have overcome these types of problems and if any one individual can accomplish something, it is at least in the realm of possibility that others too can. So, more realistic self talk than either "I

can't" or "I won't" is called for. What might work? Well, this is the kind of thinking that is required of a person interested in adjusting their self talk. They need to think about alternative phrases and then begin to use them when they catch themselves using the old more irrational or less than realistic phrases. Before reading on, think for yourselves what might work in this situation.....

Because the issue of choice is somewhat secondary in these kinds of situations; that is, we can assume that nobody consciously chooses to be depressed or terminally ill, the "can't" and "won't" don't quite apply. Willpower is not the issue either. According to Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, the beginning of real change occurs when we acknowledge and accept where we are right now in the present moment. So, perhaps we can take the "I can't" and make it into an "I can" if we "can" simply accept our present condition. "I can accept my problem" or "I can accept my illness" can be the precursor openings which may prove helpful and perhaps even somewhat healing. Of course, acceptance of an illness is itself not a task which is accomplished right away. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has delineated the stages of loss and acceptance is near the end. Nevertheless, we can transform our "I can't" into an "I can" by changing what it is we think we can or can't do. "I can't get better" can become "I can accept this." Here, of course, the initial response to terrible news or a fatal illness is "I won't accept this" which is the first stage of loss, denial. But, the truth is, it can be accepted and, as one passes through the stages of loss, is accepted. And then, there is often much more peace, less resistance and openness to the possibilities so often found in "I can."