

The Third Cardinal Sin of Thinking: The Shouldacoulda

by

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In Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), there are several words and phrases used in self talk which are often pinpointed as problematic. In previous articles, I have discussed a couple of these word phrases and in this article will elaborate on a few more. However, it can be noted that these problematic self-talk word phrases arise up out of a mind that has been conditioned by our culture and our society along with its beliefs and values. Many of these beliefs and values are strongly held and often defy criticism or examination. REBT and CBT attempt to not only to point out and help change irrational and unproductive self talk, but also to explore core beliefs and values – and change them. A case in point is our socio-cultural pre-occupation with perfectionism. Whether in the form of body image, academic achievement, financial success or general relationships, we appear as a people to highly value and strive for perfection. Somehow, we have learned to believe that “I should be perfect” or “I could be perfect.” We often hear “I could have been better” or “I should have been stronger.” Who says!?

The trouble with perfectionism is, of course, that we often have no objective criteria to establish the achievement of perfection. And even if we did, it probably would not be good enough. “Not good enough” is one of the perfectionist’s mantras. And, since the perfectionist is often falling short of their goal, the “I should have done it better” “I could have done it differently” type statements are other mantras. Although the “shouldacoulda” statements are not, necessarily, in themselves problematic, they often become so when attached to the self incrimination and self demeaning tone these statements carry. What is often uttered, silently, after the “I shouldacoulda done it differently” statement is “I’m so stupid” or “I’m such an idiot.” For example, after receiving a B+ on a final report, a perfectionist student’s self talk might go something like this: “I should have put more into it, I’m just so mediocre.”

The “shouldacoulda” self talk also takes on a very limiting role in our life when it is used to prevent us from reaching out, doing something new and different as in “I should not do that” or “I could not do that.” Generally, this self talk is based in our desire to be normal, respectable, and not foolish. We decide to not engage in some behavior and say we should not or could not to shield us from possible embarrassment. This is part of perfectionism as the perfectionist is not allowed to be silly, foolish, erroneous or embarrassed. That would be “bad.”

In our desire to be a “good” person, we have unwittingly created an equation where good is equal to perfect. Mistakes are viewed as indicators of stupidity, errors idiocy and a simple over-sight or even silliness a sign of under achievement. Many of us have internalized this kind of thinking and whenever we are inaccurate, at fault or just slip-up, we automatically begin with very negative and demeaning self talk preceded by the reprimand I “shouldacoulda” done it better or different or simply shoulda “not” done it, the gist being that we were wrong, i.e., not perfect. This view of our behavior can not only make us depressed, it can significantly lower our motivation, make us terribly unhappy and can even cause physical symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches. The perfectionist’s life is often not a joyful one.

So, the question then becomes how does one fix this? The first step is to acknowledge the problem of perfectionism. There may be symptoms of tension, anxiety and stress in everyday life, especially during times when goals and achievements are at stake; there will most likely be a strong sense of not being good enough – no matter how successful nor how much effort is put into being successful. There may even be an awareness of the “shouldacoulda” self talk along with the negative put downs which often accompany it which is the place to be for beginning the next step.

The second step is to challenge the internal dialogue about behavior and performance. The “shouldacoulda” and demeaning self talk needs to be replaced. For example, “I should have known better” can be replaced with “I would have liked to have known better.” Or, “I could have been more prepared” can be phrased “Next time I intend to be more prepared.” Like the phrase “have to,” “should” and “could” and “ought to” suggest an external force making us behave in some way. Self talk is more empowering and quite a bit healthier when it leans more towards self motivating statements. The self deprecating statements such as “I’m an idiot” “I’m a jerk”, etc., should simply be dropped of completely, If you hear yourself make those statements you simply counter with a “no, that’s not true.”

The third step is, through repeated use of new self talk, build a belief system which accepts mistakes as part of growth, understands that errors are part of reaching the goal and recognizes that slip ups are all too human, and that you are a human. Since, as the saying goes, “nothing is perfect,” if you really seek perfection, you will end up with nothing.

The fourth step is a bit more provocative and will assist in the second and third steps. It is useful to purposefully make mistakes, mess up and generally try to be less than perfect. As you do this, challenge your self talk and beliefs about what this means about you as a person. Are you less than desirable because you make mistakes? Are you bad because slipped up? Are you less than human because you erred? Are you a failure if have not mastered a task right away? Of course not. Essentially, perfectionism is anti-human. As you become more accepting of your own mistakes and errors, you will be accepting more of yourself as a human being, nothing more and nothing less. You will also begin to find yourself more relaxed and

easy going; you will notice yourself being more understanding, accepting and compassionate towards yourself and towards others. You might even find yourself being a happier person.