

Coping With Ambiguity (And the Trouble with Affirmations)

By
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I don't believe in affirmations, but I do believe in coping statements. Affirmations are a form of magical thinking, a fervent wish that Reality be somehow different than what it is. Affirmations are used for the purpose of cancelling out "negativity," a practice that seeks to banish anything undesirable from appearing in the mind or in real life. However, psychological research shows that *thought suppression* will create a rebound effect, allowing disturbing thoughts and images to intrude with a vengeance. The result is to feel deflated and demoralized as the negative thoughts take over and spiral out of control. Worse, when we start to believe that our thoughts create reality, we may become even more discouraged or afraid. As Pema Chödrön states, "Affirmations are like screaming you're okay to overcome this whisper that you're not."

Coping statements, on the other hand, especially the ones offered in this handout, are intended to help you use *less* control. They do not oppose Reality; rather, they help you to embrace it. Paradoxically, giving up control can help you feel more in control. The following are the kinds of statements people say to themselves when they have overcome anxiety disorders, so beginning to talk to yourself this way will help you to feel stronger – *authentically* stronger. After a while, your inner voice will sound more powerful than your anxious thoughts, and your symptoms will subside more easily. Coping statements are qualitatively different than affirmations, because they emphasize resilience, not perfection.

Practice Willingness for short increments of time, by saying:

"I'm willing to be anxious,"

"I'm willing to be uncomfortable."

"I'm willing to accept Reality, on its terms."

"I'm willing to acknowledge that this difficult thing is happening."

Set a timer, and just try to be willing for 30 seconds, 3 minutes, or whatever. We should be 100% willing, but we can't do it all of the time. Practice willingness in short, manageable bursts. Imagine turning a willingness dial all the way up to 100%.

Move towards Ambiguity, by saying:

"I'll never know for sure."

"Maybe it will happen, maybe it won't."

"I can't predict the future."

"Anything is possible."

"I guess I'll find out."

"I guess I'll just wait and see."

"Things can be better or worse than I'm imagining."

"I'll cope with things as they happen."

Stay in the Now, by saying:

"Back to Now." (And tune in to your senses and your present activity).

"Right now, in this moment, I'm ok."

(You probably are. The worst we can feel is "extremely uncomfortable").

"Right now, in this moment, I have relatively enough information."

(If you're craving more certainty, the present moment has more of it than any other time you might be able to imagine).

Move towards Acceptance, by saying:

"The nature of Reality is uncertain and unpredictable, and will remain this way whether I accept it or not."

"I could choose resistance, but I usually lose that battle."

"Acceptance is paradoxical: it empowers me, makes me more flexible, and brings me closer to Reality."

"When I try to struggle against Reality, I suffer."

"Wishing for things to be different can be a trap. It can feel like an internal manipulation with my thoughts – a perpetual dissatisfaction."

Give up Control in order to get your life back, by saying:

"Less struggle equals less anxiety."

"I hate being blindsided. But if I have to trade *letting go of worry for the possibility of being surprised* – I'll do it."

"I'm willing to be caught off guard in order to have more experiences and feel alive."

"Worrying doesn't keep me safe. Bad things happen whether I worry or not."

"It's good that I can't control everything. I couldn't have created or predicted some of the best moments, or people in my life."

“Every good thing that ever happened to me came from the Unknown.”

Change your Stance from Fear to Awe, by saying:

“I can have reverence and awe instead of just fear.”

“I am moved by the plight of humanity. I know there is also bravery, compassion, kindness and grace – which also show up in the face of adversity.”

“I don't know the end of the story. Things are sometimes unknowable, and yet, can contain beauty and meaning that isn't revealed right away.”

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