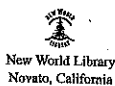


COACHING THE ARTIST WITHIN

Advice for Writers, Actors,
Visual Artists & Musicians from
America's Foremost Creativity Coach

ERIC MAISEL



You can use the following simple three-step procedure when you act as your own cognitive therapist: First, you notice your thoughts and identify those that don't serve you. This means growing aware of your linguistic tricks and understanding what your self-talk actually signifies. Second, you dispute those self-sabotaging thoughts. You say — silently or out loud — "No, I don't buy that!" Third, you substitute a new, useful thought.

Here is how this process would sound:

Example One

"I can't write if I outline. Outlining kills the creative spark in me."

"No! It's just that I'm feeling anxious about outlining my article and want an excuse to run from the task."

"I can write with an outline, and I can write without an outline. I can even write in the shower with a bar of soap! I can do whatever is necessary, and today what seems necessary is that I quiet my nerves, sit still, and outline."

Example Two

"For some people, writing is easy. For me, it is very hard. Therefore, I must not be a writer."

"Wow, was that a wonderful excuse!"

"Sometimes writing is easy, and sometimes writing is hard. So sometimes I will have it easy, and sometimes I will have it hard. Welcome to life."

Example Three

"I can't possibly write before breakfast. My rumbling stomach would distract me."

"Right! Very cute, mind."

"I can write morning, noon, and night."

he Buddha said, "Get a grip on your mind!" There is no more important lesson to learn. Wrong thinking, which we ourselves create and perpetuate, causes us needless suffering and prevents us from creating deeply, meeting the art marketplace, and living well. This wrong thinking comes in many forms. It appears as self-battering and self-bashing. It comes disguised as "objective thinking" designed to mask our anxieties, doubts, and fears. It comes as bravado, stubbornness, and rage. Wrong thinking is a surrender and a defeat and a creatively self-coach's prime enemy.

Just really noticing what you say to yourself can make a world of difference. Aaron Beck, one of the founders of cognitive therapy, explained:

A patient reported that he felt blue every time he made a mistake and he couldn't understand why he should feel this way. He fully accepted the notion that there was nothing wrong in making mistakes and that it was an inevitable part of living. He was instructed to focus on his thoughts the next time he felt an unpleasant affect in connection with making a mistake. At the next interview he reported the observation that whenever he made a mistake he would think "I'm a dope" or "I never do anything right" or "How can anybody be so dumb?" After having one of these thoughts he would become depressed. By becoming aware of these self-criticisms, however, he was able to recognize how unreasonable they were. This recognition seemed to remove the sting from his blue reactions. (*Cognitive Therapy of Depression* [New York: Guilford, 1987])

Psychology professor Robert Boice, who does cognitive work with blocked writers, had them first notice their wrong thinking and then substitute more helpful thoughts:

Initially, the cognitions of these blocked writers were typically counterproductive to writing. Clients at this stage tended to list thoughts that encouraged avoidance (e.g., "I really have to get the car washed"), that demeaned the task (e.g., "Most of what gets published today is garbage; why should I add to it?"), or that simply distracted them (e.g., "I wonder what I'll make for dinner tomorrow?"). Emphasis in early therapy sessions was placed on recognizing how these thoughts interfered with writing by competing for time and/or by inducing anxiety and self-doubt. Later, attention was shifted toward thought substitution. Clients were taught, via modeling and other tactics, to substitute more positive and relaxing thoughts that would help them get on task. (*Professors as Writers* [Stillwater, Okla.: New Forums Press, 1990])

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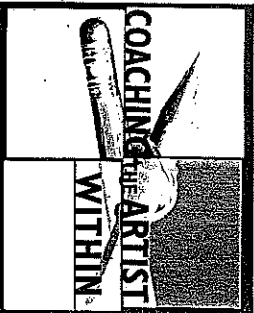
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"I'm studying the effects of negative reinforcement on ESP ability."

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