



## Silence self-doubt

Self-doubt can cause you to replace life's excitements with regrets and bitterness. Here's how to gag it

WE ALL HAVE IT. AND depending on who you are and what your weak spots are, self-doubt will speak to you in different ways. If you want to apply for a promotion, it might say not to even bother. If you're going on a date, it will tell you that you look fat.

"Every single time a negative thought sneaks in (and it does sneak), and we believe it – we feel terrible, incompetent, talentless, or charmless. The problem is, very often we don't even know we are doing it," says Michal Leon, life coach. But, she says, if we pay attention to this endless inner chatter and stop to monitor these voices, we can take the first step towards controlling self-doubt.

### The voice of self-sabotage

"Self-doubters," says life coach Lynelle Smith, "tend to dismiss compliments and embrace criticism. They focus on their weaknesses, ensuring that others see their shortcomings as clearly as they do."

She explains that when we receive criticism, or perceived criticism, which is in conflict with how we would like to be, that negative comment poses a threat to us. That threat makes us anxious, so we start bracing ourselves. It's a mechanism of mood regulation that helps us avoid disappointment when expectations exceed the results.

When we brace, we start to lower our expectations of

ourselves to avoid the pain. When a result confirms the expectations we had of ourselves (because they were so low), the anxiety is alleviated for that moment.

But the disapproving inner voices have spoken, and slowly but surely, we drop our expectations as low as they can go and abandon all commitment to who we want to be. "This, just to prevent any possible pain in the event our real self falls short of our desired self," says Smith.

### Tune out others' expectations

Instead of focusing on our real or imagined defects, we need to appreciate ourselves, dimply thighs and all. That might mean taking

little steps by paying attention to the verbal and non-verbal messages others give us. Highlight the positive. A smile, an invitation for coffee, or a call just to say hello confirm that we are valued. "The tricky part," says Leon, "is that the set of beliefs and rules that has been imbedded in us is complex and vast. It's a never-ending job developing the ability to choose which beliefs to take on and which to discard. Every time you feel you are stuck or upset, use a big searchlight to catch those negative rumblings and work through them."

### Say "Speak to the hand" to your inner self-doubt

Leon suggests this 5-step plan:

- 1 Write down every single negative thought that passes through your head for one day.
- 2 Identify the theme of your inner critic – this is the assumption that's limiting you at every turn.
- 3 Take time to put those assumptions under the spotlight. Are they really true? What evidence is there? Ask close friends to help you assess if your self-doubting thoughts are fair.
- 4 Decide which beliefs from parents, educators, community and society you choose to take on, and which you discard.
- 5 Replace the false self-criticism with positive affirmations. So, "How can I start my own business? I have no talents," becomes "I have no formal qualifications, but I'm creative and have a head for figures." ☺