Self-Talk and Self-Leadership: Advancing a New Application of Goleman's Leadership Model for Counseling College Students

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The self-talk habits of college students can be an important factor in determining their success in academia and beyond. Negative self-talk, a practice associated with emerging adults, can signal poor psychological functioning and can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression (Calvete et al., 2005). Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety and depression among college students have been at an all-time high (Casey et al., 2022). The most extensive validated scientific evaluation of mental health on U.S. campuses suggests decreased rates of flourishing, or positive mental health, from 57.1% in 2012 to 28.9% in 2022, and an upward trend in symptoms of anxiety and depression from 30% (anxiety) and 34.4% (depression) in 2018 to 35.9 (anxiety) and 41.5% (depression) in 2021 (Healthy Minds Network, 2022). Furthermore, the demand for counseling services at colleges has increased year over year (Healthy Minds Network, 2022). Therefore, the need to attend to emerging adults' mental health is urgent, and counselors should consider self-talk behaviors as they guide and advise students.

A substantial body of literature on self-talk dates to the earliest writings on human psychology (Reed, 1916). However, a scan of the current literature reveals a predominance of research on the role of self-talk in sports endurance and performance. To that end, many commonly used self-talk interventions center on coaching players to improve the valence (positive or negative) and content (word selection) of their inner speech (Van Raalte et al., 2017; Hamilton et al., 2005; Hardy, 2006). However, these strategies may not apply to college students struggling with negative self-talk. Instead, they may require more support and mentorship to restore their psychological well-being. Research indicates that such assistance from mental health professionals should develop the student's sense of self-efficacy and agency (Apriceno et

al., 2020; Bhujade, 2017). In an effort to address this gap between research and practice, this paper proposes using a widely accepted model of organizational leadership as a tool for counseling emerging adults who experience negative self-talk. The following presents the rationale behind the proposition and a case study demonstrating the approach.

Self-Talk

Internal self-talk refers to the usually silent inner monologue in which most people engage. Vygotsky (1962) identified self-talk behaviors of young children as adaptive functions that become internalized as private speech. Hermans' (1996) dialogical self theory posits that through such internal dialogues, we narrate our experiences, moderate our thoughts, and plan our behaviors. Thus, self-talk is directly connected to our sense of self and the surrounding world (Kross et al., 2014; Oleś et al., 2020). Through inner speech, we establish and affirm our beliefs and values, and in so doing, we construct concepts of ourselves and our place in the world. However, maintaining and responding to ongoing internal narratives while remaining aware of and responsive to external stimuli are complex processes that can be cognitively and emotionally taxing (Hermans, 1996). As a result, we often fail to balance our silent and spoken voices, which can lead to a faulty inner narrator, or negative self-talk (Kross et al., 2014).

During periods of increased stress, such negative self-talk can be a powerful, detrimental influence on self-esteem and cause mental health problems. Just as constructive self-talk can have a positive effect (Lim et al., 2005), negative self-talk can undermine self-esteem, destabilize social confidence, and negatively impact on overall well-being (Brinthaupt & Dove, 2012; Neck & Manz, 1992). While this description oversimplifies complicated mechanisms, it helps to explain how self-talk behaviors might intensify emotional distress and interfere with effective self-regulation.

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Self-Talk in Emerging Adulthood

While the first three years of life are traditionally considered the critical period of cognitive development (Sheridan & Nelson, 2009), emerging adulthood is also a particularly significant stage of social identity formation (Marcia, 1966; Erikson, 1968; Blakemore & Mills, 2014). According to Erikson's (1968) foundational theory of psychosocial stages, the years between childhood and young adulthood are an important developmental phase. It is characterized by a struggle between identity formation and role confusion. During this time, young people use self-talk to resolve feelings about themselves and their relationships with others (Winsler & Naglieri, 2003). However, self-talk can also reflect misinterpretations of the environment, which can lead to confusion and distress (Beck, 1970; Turner & Swearer Napolitano, 2010).

The transition to college presents many challenges for young people. These may include adjusting to unfamiliar campus life, contending with amplified academic expectations, and managing complex interpersonal relationships (Adams et al., 2006). Additionally, emerging adulthood presents a time of heightened psychological and social stressors which increase vulnerability to mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety (Beck, 1976; Kessler, et al. 2005; Leussis & Andersen, 2008). As a result, emerging adults are often likely to engage in an adverse valence of thinking, or negative self-talk (Calvete et al., 2005; Dyson & Renk, 2006). While some studies indicate that a degree of negative internal dialogue can serve as motivation, particularly for athletes (Tod, et al., 2011), most psychology literature concurs that habitual negative self-talk is a risk factor in emerging adulthood (Calvete et al., 2005; Dyson & Renk, 2006). For college students, such behaviors can be particularly debilitating (Blakemore & Mills,

2014; Bhujade, 2017) and problematic transitions to college can have long-term negative impacts on students' mental health and academic performance (Dyson & Renk, 2006).

Emotional Intelligence in Emerging Adulthood

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the degree to which individuals are able to perceive, process, understand, and regulate their emotions. Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence theory suggests five components of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Goleman (1995) posited that EI is more important and beneficial than cognitive intelligence (IQ), which measures the ability to solve problems through logical reasoning and knowledge skills. Strong EI is associated with adaptive coping behaviors, positive social relationships, successful personal adjustment, and overall psychological well-being (Saklofske et al., 2007; Bhujade, 2017; Dyson & Renk, 2006), two critical factors in the transition to college.

Research indicates that emotional intelligence and self-talk habits are linked. Individuals with strong EI are likely to take notice of their inner speech (Brinthaupt & Dove, 2012; Winsler & Naglieri, 2003). When such self-talk is adaptive or healthy, the individual is likely to reason effectively and resolve emotional problems in themselves and with others (Depape et al., 2006). The results of a 2006 study of 126 university students indicated that constructive self-talk is associated with emotional intelligence in a positive direction (Depape et al., 2006). Specifically, the findings highlighted the role of self-talk in the development of self-awareness and social skills This is consistent with other literature that connects self-talk with self-concept (Morin, 1995) and self-esteem (Hardy, 2006; Perry & Marsh, 2000).

Developing emotional intelligence and attending to self-talk behaviors during emerging adulthood can be especially impactful for healthy self-concept development. When young people are conscious of the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in their inner speech, they are more

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likely to develop a healthier sense of self and a clearer understanding of what motivates their behaviors (Steels, 2003). Therefore, college students – particularly those newly entering – require special attention and counseling to address negative self-talk and to increase their chances of persistence and success in higher education.

Goleman's (2000) Leadership Model

Goleman (2000) developed a leadership framework that builds on the five dimensions of EI. The model is widely respected among organizational leadership scholars and is regularly applied in training and development programs (Northouse, 2015). Goleman (2002) proposed six distinct leadership styles that use EI competencies to self-regulate and manage interpersonal working relationships. The six leadership styles are coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting, and coaching, Each of these reflects the leader's personality and addresses specific situational needs. The scope of this paper does not allow a thorough discussion of all six styles, but each one presents benefits and drawbacks depending on the context. In brief, coercive leaders are commanding and most effective in crisis situations. Authoritative leaders are visionary, inspiring teams to achieve organizational goals. Affiliative leaders are collaborative and seek to minimize conflicts. Democratic leaders are non-hierarchical and encourage equal participation. Pacesetting leaders emphasize high-intensity performance and productivity. Coaching leaders focus on the personal development of team members. Goleman (2000) contended that each style has its place, and the goal of effective leadership should be to match the appropriate style to the organizational or circumstantial need.

Self-Leadership

Most of the vast literature on leadership addresses factors associated with leading others, whether in corporate, governmental, military, or other spheres. However, the principle of *self-*

leadership or mastery of self is a growing area of scholarship. Simply put, self-leadership theory proposes that to lead others, one must first lead oneself (Manz, 1983; 1986). It might seem that leading oneself necessitates dividing metaphorically into two parts, one at the helm and the other subservient, however self-mastery requires an individual to have a secure and unified self-concept (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). Initially proposed by Manz (1983), self-leadership theory draws on social learning and behavioral theories (Bandura, 1986; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Stewart et al., 2019) to contend with the paradox inherent in concurrently serving as both leader and follower (Manz, 1986). The theory advances three modes of agency: individual, proxy, and collective. Because human beings exist within social contexts, even a self-leader must inhabit all three modes, constantly balancing internal influences with external stimuli to inform behaviors.

The basis of self-leadership is effectively regulating these three contexts to establish congruence between the internal and external selves (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Accordingly, self-leadership scholars assert that constructive self-talk often underlies effective self-leadership practice (Manz & Neck, 1991; Locke & Latham, 2004). Through self-talk, successful leaders leverage emotional intelligence factors to create congruence between their inner emotions and beliefs and their outward behaviors. Furthermore, research indicates that purposeful self-talk aimed at creating such balance can have a protective quality by neutralizing the effect of negative self-talk (Rogelberg, et al., 2013). Therefore, the ability to reframe negative self-talk is a valuable technique for developing and enhancing self-leadership.

However, shifting to a more constructive valence of thinking may present a challenge for dysregulated emerging adults who are caught in a cycle of negative self-talk. Research indicates that people high in self-leadership are likely to be high in EI (Furtner et al., 2010). However,

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young people are often still developing the EI competencies (Furtner et al., 2010) that underpin a healthy sense of self. As a result, they frequently struggle with issues of identity or self-concept. Marcia (1966) identified four *identity statuses* – diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement – that are characteristic of emerging adulthood. According to Marcia (1966), an individual's progress from identity diffusion to eventual achievement is the ultimate goal of this developmental stage. This complex psychological and emotional process requires both EI and self-leadership skills. For many emerging adults, leaving home to attend college is a time of upheaval during which they confront and reevaluate their feelings and underlying beliefs about themselves and the world (Bhujade, 2017). For some, this challenging time may lead to an identity crisis or other mental health challenges.

Application

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that is informed by social learning and behavioral theories to address the role of automatic thoughts in emotions and behaviors. CBT often focuses on self-talk as a mediator between what people think, feel, and do (Bandura, 1986). Although the term *self-leadership* is not often used in CBT vocabulary, the concept is directly applicable to the goals of most CBT treatments. The therapist or counselor generally aims to help the client increase EI to gain self-mastery through modifying their internal speech. The results of successful CBT treatment are reduced stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms and increased healthy coping mechanisms (Turner & Swearer Napolitano, 2010). Accordingly, the intervention suggested in this paper uses CBT self-talk techniques to increase EI competency and self-leadership ability.

Using Goleman's Model in Self-Leadership Practice

Goleman (2000) developed the leadership model to define ways that organizational leaders lead others effectively. The literature does not yet include self-leadership applications of the Goleman (2000) model. Therefore, this paper's suggested use of the model reflects a hypothesis that Goleman's (2000) six styles are valid in self-leadership and that the framework applies to emerging adults.

The basis of the following case study and intervention is Goleman's (2000) premise that a hallmark of effective organizational leaders is their use of the most appropriate style to lead others in a given situation. The present hypothesis assumes that an individual engaged in self-leadership may likewise employ a specific style of leadership to produce a desired emotional effect in themselves.

Example: The Case of Lily

Lily (a pseudonym) is a second-semester freshman at a big, Midwestern university. She is struggling to acclimate to her new surroundings. Although she is excited by the dynamic city, she misses her small town in the South, her family, and the friends she has known since childhood. Lily is intrigued by the new cultures she is exposed to, but she feels intimidated and unsure of how to explore the environment or approach her peers to develop friendships. She feels shy and insecure, perhaps because she was isolated for much of her senior year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a straight-A student in high school, Lily now feels out of her depth academically. Her first-semester report card was so uneven that she is not sure she belongs on such an esteemed campus. Although her professors have been encouraging, she interprets their critique as disapproval and proof that she is not up to the task.

As a result, Lily has had trouble sleeping, frequently feels anxious, and has had panic attacks. She never experienced any of these issues before going to college, but now her stress level is always high. Because Lily is scared to leave her dorm for fear that another panic attack might occur, she is self-isolating. Her loneliness makes Lily feel depressed, and, on occasion, she has considered self-harm.

After seeing a flier from the university counseling office, Lily makes an appointment. In describing her problems to the counselor, Lily shares that she tries to pull herself out of her misery by talking sternly to herself, to no avail. She reveals that she is primarily angry with herself for not being up to the challenge of college. Lily often directs herself to "get it together," and to "just level up." Furthermore, Lily tells the counselor that in her internal monologues, she labels herself "weak" and "pathetic" as a result of her "unacceptable" grades, her "lame" inability to make friends, and being "too much of a loser" to get out of her comfort zone. Lily states that she is considering leaving college due to her stress and anxiety.

Coercive vs. Coaching Styles

Lily's case indicates that her internal speech is delivered in a coercive style characterized by "demands for immediate compliance" (Goleman, 2000, p. 82). This style draws on the emotional intelligence competencies of initiative, achievement, and self-control, and its overall impact on the organizational climate is unfavorable. (In this instance, Lily's mood and emotional state constitute the climate.) Goleman (2000) concedes that the coercive style is effective in times of crisis. In an emergency situation, the coercive style commands compliance. However, for Lily, self-coercion only intensified her symptoms of anxiety and depression and precipitated an identity crisis (Marcia, 1966). Lily is in a constant state of arousal, unable to establish emotional equilibrium. In such a condition, Lily cannot create congruence between her inner and

outer selves. The critical monologue in her head has hijacked her ability to self-lead. By contrast, if Lily could reframe her inner speech to use Goleman's (2000) coaching style, characterized by empathy and self-awareness, she would likely experience less debilitating stress. Coaching leadership aims to identify strengths and weaknesses and to develop the necessary capabilities.

In organizations, the coaching leadership style focuses on long-term goals and ways that employees can be successful. The following intervention uses the coaching style to develop Lily's self-leadership skills by reframing her self-talk.

A Cognitive Behavioral Self-Leadership Intervention

Self-leadership theory (Neck & Manz, 1992; Ross, 2014) and CBT (Beck, 1970; Turner & Swearer Napolitano, 2010) assert that individuals can use techniques to influence and shape their ability to lead themselves effectively. These frameworks provide the rationale for the following program designed to help Lily to alter her internal self-talk style.

- Self-esteem is central to a healthy self-concept (Yukl, 2010; Ross, 2014). Therefore, Lily will conduct empirically proven mental imagery exercises to envision herself as powerful, capable, and safe (60 studies cited in Neck & Manz, 1992).
- Emotional intelligence, the key to self-leadership, can be learned (Goleman, 2000). To this end, Lily will practice self-awareness and self-directed empathy through journaling (DuPlessis, 2019). She will respond to prompts such as, *how I did my best today.*
- Understanding one's strengths is part of self-awareness (Du Plessis, 2019). Therefore, Lily will complete the Clifton Strengths Finder Assessment to better understand of her areas of strength (Asplund et al., 2007).
- Self-talk scholars suggest taking a distanced view of oneself to alter self-talk patterns (Liberman & Trope, 2010; 2014). Lily will use *decentering*, a self-distancing technique

using third-person pronouns (e.g., "*she should do this*" instead of "*I must do this"*) (Kross et al., 2014).

- In another self-distancing method, Lily will refer to herself in self-talk (e.g., "*Lily should try this*") (Kross et al., 2014).
- Lily will maintain a log of her efforts to alter negative self-talk, a technique with proven efficacy (Hardy et al., 2009).
- To consolidate, sustain, and build on self-leadership capabilities, Lily will adopt a practice such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Limitations and Implications for Future Study

The proposed application of Goleman's (2000) model to raise emotional intelligence and self-leadership capabilities has not yet been tested. Therefore, the proposal is merely academic. Additionally, the concept has two prominent limitations. First, reframing thoughts is a long-established, hallmark technique in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that involves identifying and changing distorted thinking (Beck, 1970). While the proposed application echoes CBT aims and utilizes similar techniques, the present focus differs from that of psychotherapy. Whereas CBT centers on mental health and emotional healing, the present approach emphasizes conquering stagnation to attain personal goals. Cognitive reframing in CBT is operationally defined as a therapeutic modality to alter maladaptive beliefs and perceptions to improve emotional well-being (Robson & Troutman-Jordan, 2014). By contrast, the proposed intervention offers tools for effective self-leadership.

Second, this proposal assumes that Goleman's (2000) leadership model has valid individual applications and is appropriate for use with college students. Organizational leadership constructs, including Goleman's (2000) model, were developed for adult leaders, and

not necessarily emerging adults. However, CBT techniques and interventions are empirically validated for clients of all ages. Moreover, CBT shares an underlying goal with self-leadership development – achieving self-mastery through effective management of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors.

While the proposal to use Goleman's (2000) leadership model for self-leadership development in college students is grounded in theory and practice, the approach has yet to be formally tested. Further research, including scientific study regarding the model's viability for promoting effective self-leadership, is necessary. If Goleman's (2000) framework has valid individual applications, it could represent a novel way of envisioning self-leadership and treating negative self-talk. The present paper explores the use of the model with emerging adult college students, but it may also apply to other populations. If the approach is valid, it will represent a valuable new application for the leadership framework and for supporting mental health in emerging adulthood.

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