Introduction to Self-Talk and Hypertension

Welcome back to the Reversing Hypertension Naturally Summit. I'm Dr. Laurie Marbas And today I'm very honored to have Dr. Shad Helmsetter, who is the author of What to Say When You Talk to Yourself.

And he is the original author of self-talk. I wanted to bring Dr. Helmsetter into this conversation about hypertension, because your self-talk and your thoughts and your mindset really play an important piece on whether you can partake in the behavioral choices in the lifestyle interventions that really will allow you to find health and potential reverse hypertension.

So with no further ado, welcome, Dr. Helmsetter. It's great to be with you. Well, I am, as always, delighted to speak to you. Just makes my day. There are individuals in your life who just provide joy, and you're absolutely one of those for me.

So thank you for being here. And I would really love to speak to what exactly is self-talk and positive self-talk. And maybe you can give a little bit of the history of how you got into this field.

Well, self-talk is first off, self-talk is something we all do all the time. Most of the time we're not aware of it. But our self-talk is our it's not only our inner conversation, it's also our conscious thoughts.

It's our unconscious thoughts. And it is also the words we say when we speak typically about ourselves or about our what's going on in our life. All of that is self-talk.

Is, is, is, is in all of that. And the important thing, the most important thing about that is, is that even though most of our self-talk is unconscious, it's actually our self-talk, where's our brain?

And so if our self-talk is down or negative or doubtful or uncertain or filled with anxiety in those messages are actually being wired into the brain with repetition because of the brain's neuroplasticity.

How Self-Talk Shapes the Brain

So as it turns out, at one time we thought that our self talk didn't mean much, didn't really do anything, didn't go anywhere. But in fact, not only does it mean something, it means something really important.

It does go somewhere in the brain and it does have a huge effect on how we think, how we feel and how we deal with life. Perfect. Yes, I know physiologically you'll see changes, for example, anxiety.

So those thoughts and speaking to anxiety, I see patients blood pressure just shoot through the roof and then through different types of interventions, meditation, whatever breathing dropped significantly so that clonic tonic stress and how we're thinking is so critical.

So how did you actually discover self-talk? And I love how you also mentioned it as a language that we're learning. I think it's so powerful, that analogy.

Well, I actually started out in a different field that I'm in today. I was always interested in psychology and human behavior and why people do what they do and why don't we do what we ought to do and things like that.

That was our great deal of interest to me. But my first early career was as a linguist. I was a Spanish English interpreter in Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I had studied foreign languages, and in studying those languages, it became clear to me that that we we live in the

words we think in. And it became also clear that that people who who chose different words actually had different attitudes about things.

And I thought there must be a connection between the words we think and the words we live in and the attitudes we have. And therefore, what we do, our behavior.

And so I decided to study that, and my interest was in the science side of it rather than just the human behavior side of it. And I discovered that it's absolutely true.

We we we think in the language of success or we think in the language of failure and we think in the language of self-doubt, misgiving, uncertainty. Ah, we think in a language of confidence and determination of, of optimism and potential.

So one of the things that I did was to study the words of people who were succeeding, study the language of people who are succeeding in life, that would mean I don't mean just financially, but in general their life is working for them.

I also decided to study the language of people who were struggling or failing, and I found that they, even though both of these individuals and groups of people were speaking English, they were using a whole different set of words and phrases.

And then my further research showed me it became very clear. And now it's it's pretty much common knowledge that all of those messages that we're giving ourselves that language, were thinking and actually got wired into us when we were very young.

And some are, but some of it never goes away unless we choose to get rid of it, unless we choose to learn a new language. So my work really has been about I guess I'm still teaching language.

I'm, I'm encouraging people to learn the new language of of success, the language of optimism, the language of confidence.

Learning a New Language of Confidence

One of the most interesting facets of the brain when it comes to self-talk is that we've discovered that people who think in the negative and grow stronger neural networks in the right prefrontal cortex of their brain.

So that part of their brain, actually the structure of that that part of their brain changes based on the amount of negative thoughts they have. And that's really that's really important because that happens to be the part of the brain that causes us to shut down or run and hide or stop or or lack confidence or think that that's the part of the brain that tells us what we can't do.

And and it it causes us to to flee or to hide. And the other the left prefrontal cortex of the brain does the opposite. That would be the part of the brain, generally speaking, that that that's where optimism lives.

I call it the success part of the brain. So people who are who are using or positive self-talk are actually changing the wiring structure of the left prefrontal cortex of their brain, and they're making it stronger.

So they're making the part of the brain stronger that helps them succeed and helps them look for solutions and and take action and get things done. So I think that's that's really exciting because what it means is this thing about doing well in life and getting through, getting past a lot of anxiety as an example isn't just an accident.

It's actually it's part of the process of the brain. And that means there's something we can there's something we can do about it. And to me, that's really exciting.

Well, it's like learning a new language in the skill set. And when you expand your vocabulary, I think you expand

your perspective. It's just like moving into different cultures, moving, you know, for example, my kids, bless them, they they were pulled and moved in many places.

But I think it it expanded their skill set of dealing with different things and new challenges. So when we look at self-talk, it's really interesting.

I've been learning a lot about expressive writing and narrative psychology, and they speak to this positive self-talk, these folks do better when they engage in certain exercises like expressive writing.

They seem to be able to assimilate like trauma or difficult situations much better than those who speak more negatively. So how do we even begin to change the self-talk or learn this new language that will help us in our future days?

There are some things you can actually do. There are some steps you can take. None of them are difficult. If if if you decide to do them, you can. Probably the biggest step is deciding to change your self-talk because it seems like a that's me. It's just the way I am.

I could never change that, but you actually can. And it starts with mindfulness. You start by becoming aware or becoming aware of the habit. So you can do that.

You can practice it over a period of time. You can, you can you can become mindful of virtually everything you think and everything you say. And at first that's maybe uncomfortable because we're just not used to doing that.

We're just used to living our lives and not thinking too much. Why did I just think that or why don't I just think that instead we just on thinking and in the language we were raised in.

So once you begin becoming mindful of your own self-talk, you start to notice that there are some things you probably shouldn't be saying. Like, I could never do that, or I'm not good or or everything I It goes right to my way.

Third or nothing ever works out for me or I'm just not lucky, or I never have $0.02 to rub together at the end of the month. All of those messages and cliches that were given to us so innocently by parents who loved us in many cases, parents who wanted us to be careful.

So they told us everything we could not do, everything we should watch out for, or you couldn't do that or that. That's that's that's not safe. Don't do that. Or we learn to be risk averse.

And and it was it's been estimated that during the first eight years of our lives, if we grew up in a reasonably positive home, we were told no or what we cannot do or won't work more than 148,000 times.

That's a big number. And but I don't really even think the size of the number is what's important, because most of us, even if even if we did, grew up in a very positive, positive environment a few thousand times of being told that we're no good or that we couldn't do something would be enough to begin to rewire the brain because the brain gets wired through repetition.

The key to success is repetition, repetition, repetition. The key to language is repetition, repetition, repetition. Just like with any new skill we want to learn.

If we want to learn a musical instrument, we know what we have to do. We have to repeatedly practice. Language is wired into the brain in a very similar kind of way.

So when we become mindful first that our self-talk may be working against us, so we decide to change it.

Changing Negative Patterns Through Repetition

And step number two, we begin with you can actually practice turning it around instead of saying, I'm no good at

that, I couldn't possibly do that. It's easy to turn that around and say, I can do this, I'm up to this and I'm smart enough to do this.

I can do it. When you first start changing your self-talk from the negative to the positive, the first thing that happens is your brain will argue with you until you know you can do that.

That's that's ridiculous. That can possibly work for you. Who are you kidding? But that's just your old programs trying to stay there. Your old programs have been laboring there in your brain for a very long time.

It's their home. Thank you. And they don't want to leave and they don't want you to change them. So any time when you start changing your self-talk, the first thing that happens is your brain will tell you that it won't work.

And so that's where many people will just stop and and they'll just say, well, I thought that couldn't possibly I couldn't change myself back. That's just the way I am.

But fortunately, we've been working with this subject of self-talk and teaching it to people for a very long time. And we've found that anyone who truly wants to change their self-talk, just like learning a new language, can change it.

Anyone can do it. We have we've never found anyone who could not do it. We found people who didn't want to do it maybe. Or that it was seemed like too much work or something like that.

But again, that was just their old program telling them what they couldn't do. So anyone who wants to change their programs can. We also at the Self-Talk Institute, we teach people to change their self-talk by listening to prerecorded programs of self-talk.

I first started writing positive self-talk programs and recording them for people about 40 years ago. And at first, even in my very positive way of thinking, I thought this would be great if everybody all over the world could do this, but probably not possible.

And that's a big task. But I do have to say that then ten years later and 15 and then 20 years later and 25 years later, I found that it had worked. People all over the world today listen to self-talk.

There are people who listen to self-talk every morning, and it's exactly like spending 15 minutes a day listening to a new language played in the background.

That's we learned our first language by hearing it played in the background. We didn't go to school to learn how to speak our first language. It was just spoken around us.

Most of what was said wasn't even being said to us. The brain was is designed to just listen. And if it's repeated often enough, it changes it from a short term memory to a long term recording.

And so it's actually recorded in Wired into the Brain. So when we're teaching self-talk to people, we use exactly the same methods as teaching foreign language.

So it's good. I started out in the field of foreign language. I may never have figured this one out, but so once people start practicing self-talk, they then find part three.

They find that they're stopping themselves in the middle of a start, and instead of giving in to the old negative, like, Oh, this won't work, or today's going to be another one of those bad days, or it's another Monday.

I, I don't talk much about myself, but I, I will say that I can't imagine me ever saying it's another blue Monday or today. It just isn't my day. It's just gone.

I got rid of that stuff. In fact, once you stop using the old self-talk, you're your brain only has so much space in it. It's got a lot of important things to record.

So when you stop using old negative self-talk as an example, your brain recognizes that it's no longer being used and it actually begins to delete it.

And it's called in the Silent Neuroscience Community. It's called pruning, just like pruning a raspberry so that the flowers will grow better. So your brain will actually prune out the old messages.

So what all of that gets down to is when you begin practicing changing your self-talk, your brain begins to wire it in with repetition. Then that becomes your new language, and then your new language determines your attitude.

Your attitude determines your actions. Your actions determine the results. Perfect. And I think it's a really fun story. I mean, I've had my own changes just to chatter in my mind when I started using self-talk plus, which is your app.

So if you if anyone is interested, please check out the app in the book. This there's amazing you've written many, many books, but could you talk about how you discovered this piece of yourself just kind of and then the benefit also with your spouse?

Yes, I think this is an unforgettable moment in my life. So I was studying the subject of self-talk. I was writing self-talk. And because I understood language training, I was writing self-talk passages just like you would write to yourself to learn a new language.

I began recording it and eventually I had it recorded by other voices other than myself. But I started out in my own voice. And it's it's harder to learn new self-talk in your own voice because.

Because your own voice is your most critical voice. So when you hear the new self-talk in your own voice, the tendency is to think, Now that I'm getting myself, that won't work.

But I started recording self-talk and then I had a I had a major goal. And that goal was I wanted to lose weight.

Personal Transformation and Weight Loss

I weighed a lot. I had not always weighed a lot, but I tried a lot of diets and I was a good goal setters. So the diets would work, but then they would always stop working and the weight would come back and it would bring its friends.

And so I just I just thought maybe I can never solve this problem of losing weight. Maybe that's just the way it is. So I listened to some very particular self-talk about that I wrote for Losing Weight, and it wasn't just about diet.

In fact, I didn't talk a lot about food. It was more about being in control of my life and taking responsibility for myself and making positive choices and being healthy and so on.

So it was it was much broader than than just some kind of self time for toward dieting. And what happened was I kept listening to that self-talk while I was shaving every morning and for about 15 minutes and I would listen.

And then the next day I would listen again, and then the next day I would listen again. And I was starting to lose weight and it was working. And in ten and a half weeks, I lost £58 shaving and listening to self-talk. And I thought that was absolutely remarkable because nothing else had worked.

But what what really impressed me was that during that same ten and a half weeks that I had been listening every morning, my wife, who was putting on her makeup at the other end of the same mirror, same area each day, lost £25, eavesdropping on me and my self-talk.

And that's that's when I really realized that it didn't make any difference whether she was trying to rewire her brain or not. The brain is designed to to get the message and wired in regardless.

And and so that that opened some major doors for me when I realized it doesn't make any difference whether we

want to believe in the new self-talk or not. And if if the brain gets the right words in the right with the right repetition, it will it will rewire the messages for us.

And I think that's a beautiful example of positive collateral damage. So I have patients who engage, like example someone is cooking in the home and then other people also are eating of the food just because it's presented in front of them and they have reduction in blood pressure and diabetes gets better and all these things.

So I love that your positive messages also affected your life because you have other stories as well in the book regarding how other folks may be trying to improve themselves in children and spouses also improve.

So Dr. helmstetter when it comes to positive self-talk and people are really worried that, you know, like I'm just not sure I can do this. How do we help people get over that first hurdle?

What is your advice typically just to kind of get out the gate because like you've mentioned, it's a decision. How do we help people understand that they can make different decisions?

Well, the cause the goal is to change from from one style of thinking to another. And because that can be a large goal, it's best like with a lot of goals to start with, simple steps, something very simple.

As an example, there are there are people who have asked me over the years many, many different people. Dr. Cher, what do I do if if something comes up that I'm not used to or a problem arises or something that's just beyond me and I'm just not up to it?

Is there some self-talk that I could use at the moment? And so over the over a period of years, I've identified a lot of different self-talk, test messages that we can use on ourself, even if we're not practiced positive self-talk yet, even if we haven't really learned, haven't changed all of our negative programs.

And one of them I found, interestingly, that works for a huge number of circumstances is when something is happening and worry immediately steps in it because it's actually caused by something happening.

And that alerts the amygdala and the amygdala alerts the rest of our system to be on high alert.

Using Self-Talk in the Moment

And and so I recommend that people just in the moment to themselves say that the phrase live today with joy, live today with joy, it can be in almost any situation.

And you'll find that amazingly, that changes how you feel even in the moment. It gives you a longer range perspective. It it immediately says, hold on, wait a minute, I have a choice.

Either get to let this bother me and get me down. My anxiety. Anxiety goes through the book or I can do something about it. Now, that one simple message actually tells you those things and it works really well today with joy.

It works so well that I use it myself. I I'm a good self talker and I've got a lot of good positive self-talk, but life happens and it happens to all of us.

So it's amazing how something that simple worked today with Joy can reframe your thinking in the moment. And sometimes that's all it takes, is just reframe your thinking in the moment, because most of us are pretty sure we're going to get through most of these things.

They're difficult. They may be new to us, may be tough, but we're pretty sure we're going to get through. We just let our our old negative programs tell us that we won't.

Oh, I love that, too. You're not saying I will live today with joy, but you're saying live today with joy. So it's like it's a commitment. It is what you're going to do.

It's right now. Zach, I love that so much. I think, you know, reflecting back on with patience, my time, a lot of times they would say, I will. I'll try Dr. Marcus to do this.

Or I, I don't know. I think I can. I'm like, well, you either can and you can't. I need a decision. You know, it's just fun to kind of maybe push yourself.

But I love that live today with joy because it speaks of joy and gratitude and love. That's amazing. Which I do want to also highlight. You have a new book and could you speak to that a little bit in?

You know, I'd really like for people understand you have a wide variety of resources that you've created over the years. Can you help us understand other things that might be helpful for people who are kind of discovering this new journey of positive self-talk?

Are you referring to my latest book? Yes. Your latest book or any book that you feel might be beneficial in this type of setting? Sure. It's one of my favorite books I've read it.

The name of the book is Having Meaning, Finding Purpose and it's it seems like it could be an overwhelming subject because meaning is such a huge thing and purpose is something that a lot of people really struggle with.

But I did I realized and that that this was something that people were looking for some help with, some guidance with. For some reason, in our culture today, people are feeling a sense of a loss of meaning, a loss of purpose.

They're not sure, maybe because so many things are changing so fast, but at any rate, when we start to look at the real meaning in our lives and when we take the time to identify what our purpose is or what our purposes are, we have more than one of them.

Usually what happens is it discovering our purpose puts us back on track. It centers us.

Finding Meaning and Purpose

We become more stable, and we're reassured by the fact that there's a reason we're here. There's a reason each one of us is here. I'm absolutely certain about that, and I'm certain about that.

Having worked with thousands and thousands of individuals over many, many years, that that that when we find we look for and we discover and then start practicing our purpose, life gets better in that book.

In fact, I made a list of things that happen when you find your purpose and all of them are good, then all of them are like we. Anxiety is a perfect example.

Anxiety goes down when our sense of purpose goes up, because if you think about that makes sense. If you think about it when you're not sure why you're doing what you're doing, that's, that's, that creates anxiety just in itself, that uncertainty that what do I really count?

Why am I here when we start and you can actually discover that I found that that the people who who have no sense of purpose are almost always people who aren't looking for it.

And that the people who look for it always find it. So and so I decided that I would make that particular book part information, part instruction and part workbook, so that anybody who goes through it can actually when you get to the end of that book, you have a good sense of why you're here and what you're doing, and you'll probably want to share it with somebody else.

Oh, wow. Okay. And I know it's a new book. I can't wait to get my hands on it. This will be fantastic. Well, I think, you know, understanding that these emotions and have this mind body connection really is one.

And how impactful just finding your purpose, decreasing anxiety. You're going to see benefits in your health and

everything gets better from there. Your relationships, even if they're difficult sometimes.

But any final words you like to share Dr. Helmsetter I think we can find it so insightful. Enjoyable to speak to you. I can't wait to see what people say about this interview, but any final words that you'd like to share?

I do have a I do have a final thought, and that is I mentioned just a minute ago that that I've worked with many thousands of people and I've never found anyone who didn't have its value and potential.

And if you think about it, when you when you see an infant and I often think about this and I talk about it, and when you see an infant like in the newborn nursery, when you when you look at that little miracle of life, you never think anything like a loser or you're go nowhere.

We never, ever think that. What do we automatically think? We think of unlimited potential when we look into that infants eyes. If they're awake, we can see them almost searching, looking to live out that incredible potential that they were born with.

So it's clearly there. When we were born, we're no one was ever designed to fail. It just nobody ever was designed to fail. We were we were designed in every way to to succeed were designed to be healthy, were designed to do well.

We're designed to prosper. And then life happens. And people we grow up, we're no longer the little infant with that and with that infant had unlimited potential.

We grow up and we begin to lose sight of that.

Closing Encouragement and Final Thoughts

And and what I have discovered and this is very, very clear and important, but I've discovered is that that potential never goes away. We think it did. We think it goes away because it gets covered over by bad programs and life itself.

But you still have that same incredible spark of life and potential that you were born with. And when you realize that, you think, Oh, wow, maybe it's not too late, maybe I could maybe I still could dream again.

Maybe I could do some of those things I would like to do. Maybe I could be that person I really wanted to be. So that's my encouragement. It's still there. You still got it I could talk to any anyone watching or listening right now for it wouldn't take me more than probably three or 4 minutes of talking to that individual.

And within minutes I could I could I could write a list of their qualities while longer than the list they would write for themselves. I could tell them things about themselves that were just amazing, wonderful, incredible that they probably either didn't know or they forgot.

So, yeah, that's what I would leave people with. You still got it. You can still do it. Don't stop. This is a great time to start. And is a fabulous way to end our conversation.

So not only live each day with joy, but know that you always, always, always have a purpose regardless of how deep in the hole you feel you might be. So thank you, Dr. Helmsetter.

That was perfect and really appreciate your time today. You're welcome. Thank you.