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"I Can't" – 4 Simple Steps for Overcoming Limiting Self Talk

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Have you ever caught yourself saying "I can't go to the gym", "I can't lose weight", "I can't because I'm too busy" or "I can't be successful"? When we say "I can't ..." to ourselves, we are often self-judging, and in turn we can be self-limiting. The words "I can't ..." lead us to believe that the statement is true – that we can't get to the gym, or we can't lose weight, or we are too busy, or we can't be successful. However, what we're not doing is taking **responsibility**. I wonder if you were really honest with yourself – could you re-arrange your day or even get up earlier to go to the gym – but instead you **choose** not to. Or could you make better food choices – but instead you're **choosing** not to because you feel stressed, or tired? Or maybe you could be successful – but instead your limiting beliefs of yourself are creating fear, and that fear is affecting you stepping outside of your comfort zone. If you're not sure, or even if you're saying you definitely "can't", then think of the following scenario.

A client ("Anthony") once told me that he was trying to get fit because he wanted to engage more with his children in playful activities. However Anthony said that he "just can't run". So we explored reasons why Anthony couldn't run ... "I've got two children under 5" "I work 50 hours per week" "I've tried running before and I hated it" "I don't have time". It was then that I posed the question – "If a lion was chasing you, could you run then?". We then discussed whether Anthony was 'choosing' not to run or whether he 'couldn't run'. For Anthony, he realised he was making a choice not to run, and finding excuses that supported his choice.

So how do you change this limiting self talk? Hopefully the following 4 tips will change your “can’t” self talk, into situations where you possibly “can”!

1. Notice

Becoming aware of when you’re using this language is the first important step. You may say it in your head, or you may even notice you’re saying it out loud to others. And it may not just be the words “I can’t ...”. Similar phrases which are also self-judging, and limiting your choices and potential growth are: “I’ll never ...” and “I’m unable to ...”. Sometimes our self-talk is so automatic that we’re not even aware when we’re saying it. So in this case, someone else might be able to point this out to you ... gently, of course. And don’t struggle or fight these phrases, accept that this is a natural part of your thought processes (at this stage).

2. Take responsibility

Whenever you say those phrases (“I can’t ...” “I’ll never ...” “I’m unable to ...” or variations of) ... stop ... take a deep breath ... and ask yourself whether you truly can’t (and being honest is really important here) or whether you’re making a choice not to. There will be some occasions where you truthfully can’t do something, i.e., drive a truck if you haven’t got a heavy vehicle licence; however you may find many more occasions where you could do something, yet you’re choosing not to (this might be because of fear, tiredness, doubt, old habits, etc.). So stop using “can’t” as an excuse, and take responsibility for what you can and cannot do in your life.

3. Change your language

When you notice you’re saying those phrases, and you’ve assessed truthfully that you actually can do something (such as find time for the gym, make different food choices) then change “I can’t ...” to “I’m choosing not to ...” or “I won’t ...” or “I don’t want to ...” or “I don’t need to ...” or “I haven’t learned how to yet ...”. Notice whether these are less judgmental statements, and whether you open up new possibilities or new ways of being because you’ve changed your limiting thoughts. Maybe you’ll feel more able to take a step towards “I can ...”.

4. Persist

Changing old patterns or habits isn’t easy – so you may find yourself slipping back into “I can’t ...” phrases when you actually can. That’s normal. So, maybe put a reminder in your phone to alert you once a day to think about whether you can or can’t. Or put a reminder on your bathroom mirror so that you can reflect on whether you can or can’t. Or even put a note on your steering wheel to remind you that you have choices. Persist, persist, and persist. Hopefully in a few days, weeks or months you’ll notice a difference in how you feel, and maybe what you’re doing.

So notice when you’re saying “I can’t ...” phrases to yourself or others, take responsibility and ask yourself if you truly can do something but you’re choosing not to, change your language to reflect what you can and can’t do, and most importantly persist!

“Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t - you’re right.” Henry Ford

However, if these strategies aren’t enough to shake your “can’t” self talk, and your life is negatively affected, seeking professional assistance could be useful.

If you would like help with your thoughts, feelings or behaviours, please contact us on 0488 954 195, amanda@awakenpsychology.com.au or [click here](#)