



DEBUNKING AND DISMANTLING DISEMPOWERING BELIEFS

Dr. Shirley Davis

We all have an inner critic. That's not a surprise.

What is surprising is the degree to which we entertain negative thoughts and allow them to inform our decisions, attitudes, and actions. Negative thoughts and self-doubt breed negativity. The more you put yourself down, the harder it will be to climb out. Self-talk isn't just idle noise. It reflects not only the way we think but how we feel and act. We create our own reality by the words that we speak. Telling ourselves that we can do something can cause it to happen. Telling ourselves that we can't do something can make it a reality. Sometimes the only thing keeping us from getting what we want are the messages we keep telling ourselves and those that we keep believing.

It's my opinion that we are the sum total of all of our thoughts, beliefs, and confessions. If we are serious about releasing the limits that keep us from realizing our dreams, we must start with exposing the questions that come from the negative thoughts, stories, and self-talk that we believe about ourselves. These are called disempowering beliefs and they can form at an early age, are often developed from our past experiences, and they are internalized. These beliefs can lead to hopelessness, powerlessness, and perceived worthlessness.

If we are honest, we have all allowed disempowering beliefs to hijack our opportunities.

There may have been jobs that we didn't apply for, trips that we didn't take, ideas that we didn't share, or leadership roles that we passed up, because we were afraid that they wouldn't work out, we might fail, we wouldn't be taken seriously, or we might be rejected, and so on. We talked ourselves out of taking on these opportunities because we allowed those proverbial questions of "What If?" to derail our purpose, our passion, and our possibilities.

If you are asking "What If I'm not good enough?" ask yourself "Where is this feeling coming from?" and "Why do I believe this?" Also consider "Who is the source that makes me feel less than good enough and why am I giving them so much power over my self-worth?" When I was told by my supervisors that I didn't have the qualifications for a position or a promotion when I knew that I did, or when they talked to me in a way that made me feel worthless and devalued, I had a choice to make. Sometimes I was caught off guard and allowed myself to have a pity party. Other times, I confronted the person and defended myself with the facts. Still other times, I ignored their comments and talked to someone else who knew my value and made me feel that I was valued.

Remember that all of us have something of value to offer and should not allow others to rob us of our uniqueness. It really comes down to having the right attitude, the right people around you, and making the right choices.

Instead of drowning in self-doubt, take inventory of your strengths and good traits, and work on developing and becoming better every day. Get healed of the disease I have coined "comparisonitis," and measure your success with your own purpose and goals. The only comparison you should make is to your past self and how you are evolving and getting better, wiser, and stronger from every experience.

If you are asking “What If I fail?” welcome to the club. This was of my most common disempowering questions. What I’ve come to realize is that failure is a natural part of life and it is something every single one of us has experienced. I’ve failed in relationships and in business. But I came to realize that some of the world’s most successful people had many failed attempts before they had success. We are shaped by both our failures and successes, but we get to decide which we define ourselves by.

I’d also like to challenge you to rethink failure. Many people have asked the question, “What would you do if you knew that you couldn’t fail?” The responses tend to be something like “I would accomplish all of the dreams that I put on hold.” Then they start to list all of them. But let’s dissect the question a bit. The question implies that failure is bad, that it is the one thing that gets in our way of realizing our dreams. What if we answered that question with a different perspective? What if the answer is “I would do nothing.”

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Instead of eliminating the possibility of failure from our life, how about developing the right attitude toward failure. Think of it this way. Failure is a part of the process of living. To live the life that we've imagined, we must confront the fear of failure, and even failure itself. What decides your future is what you choose to believe. If you believe that you will fail, you're right. And, if you believe that you will succeed, you're right.

Second, many of us may have been taught that "Failure is not an option." As I have grown through my own challenges, mistakes, and failures, I have come to believe that had I not failed at something, I would not have learned anything. Failure can be an option as long as we recognize that failure isn't final, and it isn't forever. Leadership expert and best-selling author John Maxwell wrote a book called *Failing Forward* in which he tells us that it's okay to fail at something and to fall—we just need to "fall forward." This simply means that we need to learn from our failures, and learn from our mistakes, and not be afraid to get back up and take our lives to the next level because we learned from that mistake. Falling doesn't mean that you've reached the end of the road. You can use it as a springboard to the next level in your life.

One of my mentors used to say, "If you fall down and you can look up, you can get up." There's an opportunity for all of us to learn from our mistakes, because we all make them. No one is exempt from failing, from making mistakes, or from having hiccups in their life. The difference between those who ultimately succeed and those who stay stuck is that those who succeed realize that failing is a natural part of the journey toward success. We must learn to deal with our fear of failure and not let it control us.

We must believe that anything worth having is worth fighting for, and sometimes worth failing at. There is no shame in failing; there is only shame in not accepting the challenge to keep trying. Grow from them and move on.

If you are asking “What if I don’t have enough money?” Do your homework. This may not be the case at all. One of the reasons that I avoided starting my business for years was because I thought that it would require tens of thousands of dollars up front. Maybe some business opportunities do, such as buying a franchise, opening up a nightclub, a day spa, a boutique, or a restaurant. But I wanted to open a consulting, training, and coaching business. I thought I would need a \$5,000 business plan developed, and that getting a business license was a tedious and long-term process. I thought that I would have to find office space and sign a long term lease, spend a lot of money on buying office equipment, hire a full-time staff person, and do a lot of advertising via newspaper and radio ads.

But after conducting some research, I found out that I could operate my business initially from my home, that getting a business license took just a few days to process, and the costs were minimal. I could get a post office box for a business address for a few hundred dollars a year and business cards for under \$100, get a WordPress website developed for less than a few thousand dollars and could hire a virtual assistant for a few hours a week based on my budget. So for years I operated under this “What if” question and an assumption that it was so far out of my reach financially. It turned out to be my lack of information and understanding driven by fear and a sense of inadequacy. And as a result, my dream was on hold for years until I finally jumped.

If after you do your homework you find out that your business does require a lot of money up front, devise a plan. Start putting money aside for it each pay period, investigate resources and financing options through organizations such as the Small Business Administration, SCORE, your bank, and industry associations, and consider friends, colleagues, and family members as your initial investors. There are also a number of “Startup Pitch Competitions” that will allow you to pitch your business idea to potential investors where the best ideas win financing.

What I learned after years of delaying my dream because I thought that I couldn’t afford it was that I didn’t have to start out in grandiose style. I didn’t have to start out with an expensive lease in an ivory tower; I could eventually grow into a building based on the business need. I didn’t have to hire a bunch of people to get my business started; I could start with contract workers, friends, and a part-timer then build my staff up to full time as the business justified it. I didn’t have to have an expansive and expensive marketing campaign, and I didn’t have to have a \$10,000 website to get started. I started out with word-of-mouth marketing, some social media announcements, and a WordPress website for \$1,000.

Another “What if” question that stifled my progress was “What if I get rejected or don’t get selected?” Even though I dealt with this when trying out for sports, pageant competitions, in relationships, and applying for jobs, I would still experience that sinking feeling and the impact that rejection had each time I was not selected, when someone told me “No”, or when the relationship didn’t work out. None of us likes this feeling and if we’re not careful, we can take it so personally that it paralyzes us from trying new things.

How I overcame this was that I learned how to shift my perspective to see that if and when I was rejected, that the job, the relationship, the opportunity wasn't meant for me—that something/someone better or different was coming along. I began to believe that things happened for a reason and even though we don't always understand why things happens, over time things have a way of working out a better outcome.

I remember getting turned down for a position that I thought for sure that I should have been hired for. It paid very well and would have been a promotion for me. I met every qualification that they listed, and I nailed all of the interviews. You know that feeling of pride and confidence you have when you've performed at your best, only to receive that dreaded rejection letter a week later that reads, "while your background and experience were impressive, we have decided to go a different direction." But sometime later, I was offered a better opportunity (more money, better benefits, and a better work environment). In other cases when I was rejected, I would find out later that things were not the way they were represented anyway, and it would not have been a good experience had I gotten in it.

There is no shame in failing; there is only shame in not accepting the challenge to keep trying.

I experienced this same thing with relationships that didn't work out. I have been married, I have been divorced and I have been rejected and betrayed on a number of occasions by people whom I trusted, loved, and respected. I took it a bit harder of course because it was more personal. There were times in the past when I felt the rejection so deeply that I would put walls up around my heart, making it hard to trust in the next relationship. But after experiencing several heart breaks I came to understand several realities. I had to be more selective in whom I chose to get involved with, and I couldn't allow someone else's indiscretions, or character flaws to redefine the core of who I was. As much as I wanted to, I rejected the temptation to get bitter, live in regret, or to get vengeful, but I would choose to get better, to forgive and move on, and to learn from it. As time would pass, consistently, I would see how much better I was without those kind of people in my life.

There is great power of having the right relationships and in how they can contribute to your ability to realize your dreams. So, the next time you have that question of "What if I get rejected," just know that it's not a bad thing, it's not always personal, and life has a way of giving us signs and symbols when some things are not meant to be. We just have to learn to read the signs and to follow their direction.

There are so many more experiences that I could share of how I faced every one of these disempowering "What if" questions, but for every disempowering question there is always an empowering response that you can use. If you are asking any of the "What If" disempowering questions below, so did I. This was one of the exercises that became a ritual in my journey to getting beyond my "What If." I would list the most common disempowering questions that would keep me stuck and then I would counter it with some of the actual statements that I would say to myself as an affirmation.

I invite you to start with three that you will focus on this week until your language changes. Then select three more empowering responses the following week and repeat this the week after that until you have identified and debunked every disempowering question that derails your destiny. Make a commitment to reprogram your mind to have an empowering response for every one of them.

DISEMPOWERING “WHAT IF” QUESTIONS AND EMPOWERING RESPONSES FOR EACH

What if I’m not good enough? I am unique and special. There is greatness inside of me and I have something of value to offer. I will give it my best and continue to grow. If someone doesn’t think I’m good enough, it’s only their opinion. Most importantly, it’s about how I feel about me, and I AM good enough.

What if I don’t have enough money? This is a temporary state. Money is a resource, but it doesn’t define who I am. I am on a financial management plan to save, increase my income, and to one day finance my dreams.

What if I’m not smart enough? What I don’t know now I am open to learning. I am a lifelong learner will continue to educate myself.

What if I get rejected or not selected? Things happen for a reason. This was not the right opportunity or the right person, so a better one is around the corner. Don’t stop trying because what one person may not see in you many more will.

What if I get fired? I would be released to pursue new opportunities. Everything has an expiration date so it must have been time to move on. When you ask or do something that is based on your personal conviction, don't be afraid of the consequences. Better opportunities will come along.

What if I fail? Failure is a part of life but it's not the end of the world. I will keep trying and I will learn from the experiences and get better the next time.

What if I am not qualified? I have many gifts and talents that I can contribute. I am continuing to grow new skills that will enhance my qualifications. I am person of value and I will find the right fit.

What if I don't have time? Everyone has the same amount of time in a day, and I will manage mine wisely. I will plan appropriately and learn to be a better steward over the time that I have. I will learn to say "No" and learn to delegate when it's necessary, and I will not take on more than I can handle.

What if I look stupid? I'm going to give it my best shot and be proud that I tried.

This was one of the exercises that became a ritual in my journey to getting beyond my "What If."

What if my heart gets broken? Hearts can heal and I deserve to find love. I will keep my heart and mind open. If I had it broken before, I will forgive; I will not get bitter; I will get bitter. I cannot assume that the next person will break my heart but may be the best thing to happen to me.

What if others don't like me? I don't live by the approval of others. I am not trying to win a popularity contest. I have a great network of people around me who support and like me. If I don't have the right people around me I will find them.

What if I'm too old or too young? There's an old adage that "I am never too young to teach or too old to learn." I have so many lived experiences to share; I bring a fresh new perspective. I am open to learning new things.

What if I succeed, then what? I'll learn from the things that worked and from those things that didn't. I will celebrate my successes and continue to work hard. If I succeeded once, I'll succeed again.

Overcoming our disempowering beliefs isn't easy. It takes a significant amount of work, introspection, and time. Moreover, it isn't a "one and done." You don't just go through this process once and be finished with it. Rather, it's an ongoing process of steps that we must revisit over and over. We must, therefore, commit ourselves to long-term change. And our beliefs are, of course, at the core of that transformation. They are the foundation of who you are. Remember that the beliefs that got you to where you are today won't get you to where you want to be tomorrow. As such, they influence every aspect of your life. Don't let your beliefs prevent you from living that life you've always imagined.

Remember what Mahatma Gandhi said:

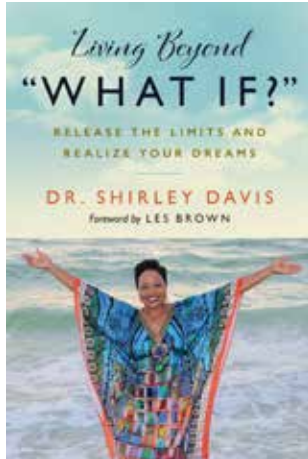
“Man often becomes what he believes himself to be. If I keep on saying to myself that I cannot do a certain thing, it is possible that I may end by really becoming incapable of doing it. On the contrary, if I have the belief that I can do it, I shall surely acquire the capacity to do it even if I may not have it at the beginning.”

Our beliefs must change with the times, they must also change alongside our goals. If *they* don't change, then we don't change, and our dreams will always remain on pause. 📖

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Dr. Shirley Davis is president and CEO of SDS Global Enterprises, a firm specializing in human resources strategy, talent management, leadership effectiveness, culture transformation, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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