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As a coach, I've seen a lot of self-doubt in athletes. What is self-doubt? Doubting your ability to accomplish something, or degrading yourself. When I was a young athlete, I struggled with it too. And not just in athletics, but in many aspects of my life.

But I learned something that changed my life. Applying what I learned has transformed mediocre athletes into Olympians. More importantly it can help you be your best self. And it all starts with your thoughts. I'll be honest, though—it took me a long time to learn. Let me share how it all started.

ACHIEVING YOUR POTENTIAL
IS PART OF THE WAY YOU
TALK TO YOURSELF.



HOW YOU TALK TO YOURSELF



When I graduated from high school, I was an accomplished tennis player, and I was selected to travel around Europe on a great team. While in France, we often played on fast indoor courts. I played well the first month and won a lot of matches.

Feeling really good about myself, I left France with my team and headed for Austria. The first tournament was on slow red clay. Going from fast indoor courts to slow red clay was a dramatic change. For the first time—and the only time in my 40 years of playing tennis—I lost 6–0 6–0, a double bagel, we call it. It rocked my world. Unwisely, I dwelt on my deficiencies from the match for days. A week later I was still dwelling on the loss.

I began to constantly doubt myself. Every time I messed up, I told myself I wasn't good at tennis. I would miss a backhand into the top of the net and say to myself, "Not again! Your backhand stinks. You can't make a backhand. Why do you even play this game? You just stink."

Then I had the opportunity to play tennis at Brigham Young University, and I thought it was the perfect time to reset. However, I quickly learned that the bad mental habit of self-doubt I had created wasn't going away anytime soon. I was working hard physically, but I wasn't working hard mentally.

The problem was that I didn't know how to fix my habit. How could I develop the belief that I could improve when I constantly doubted my God-given ability to do so?

And my doubts didn't just relate to sports.

I had often told myself I wasn't a good student.

As a result, I didn't study well and therefore didn't do as well in school as I could have. Receiving low grades just reinforced the cycle of self-doubt, negative talk, and negative performance. As I prayed and pondered about these things, the Lord taught me some valuable lessons that could apply in all areas of my life.



I NEEDED TO FILL MY MIND
WITH THE BELIEF THAT I
COULD EXCEL.

FILLING MY MIND WITH CONFIDENCE

One of the most important things I realized is how dangerous self-doubt is. When it gets into your mind, it hinders your ability to fulfill your potential and undermines confidence. However, confidence and fear, or positive and negative thoughts, cannot occupy your mind at the same time. To break my habit of self-doubt, I needed to fill my mind with the belief that I could excel.

I started working on thinking more positively. President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, said, “We develop our talents first by thinking we can.”¹

CONFIDENCE BEGINS WITH TRUSTING GOD

But positive thinking by itself isn’t enough. I realized that because I have a divine nature and destiny, I can trust



EXCELLENCE IS WITHIN YOUR REACH

“Men cannot really long rest content with mediocrity once they see excellence is within their reach.”

President Thomas S. Monson (1927-2018),
“To the Rescue,” Apr. 2001 general conference.

in God to help me improve in *all areas* of my life. And as I listen to the Holy Ghost, I can make good choices, develop my talents, and work to reach my divine potential.

What’s more, God *wants* me to become my best self as I strive to become like Him. As Elder L. Tom Perry (1922–2015) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught: “It matters not the size or the quantity but the effort we put forth to develop the talents and abilities we have received. You are not competing with anyone else. You are only competing with yourself to do the best with whatever you have received. Each talent that is developed will be greatly needed and will give you tremendous fulfillment and satisfaction during your life. . . .

“ . . . We are instructed not to idle away our time nor bury our talents and not use them. We are expected to make our lives better through our own initiatives and efforts.”²

As I exercise faith in
God, ask Him for
guidance
and

FAITH IN GOD BUILDS TRUST
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help to fulfill my divine potential, and trust that He *will* help me, I gain trust, confidence, and a growing sense of self-worth.

Of course, that doesn't mean things always work out the way you or I hope—you may not always win the game, the girl may not say yes when you ask her on a date, and you may not ace or even pass the test—but trusting God *does* sustain us through those circumstances.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE BY HOW YOU TALK TO YOURSELF

The Lord also taught me that increasing confidence has a lot to do with how you talk to yourself. Every time I caught myself thinking or talking to myself in negative, reactive ways like, “Your backhand stinks” or “Don't miss that backhand,” I would stop that thought and immediately replace it with thoughts such as, “I love my backhand” or “I am going to rip it down the line.” And instead of saying to myself, “School is tough; my classes are too hard for me,” I started telling myself, “I've got this; I can get good grades.”

It took some time, but everything started to change. I was playing amazing tennis (at least for me), and I was studying and getting better grades. More importantly, it chased out fear. This change in thinking was a continual work in progress, and I constantly battled to apply what I had learned. As my fear disappeared, my confidence grew.

The Lord also taught me that it was important to remind myself of my worth and potential when I started doubting or talking negatively about myself. I started thinking

of short phrases that would remind me of my divine worth when I am under pressure or discouraged. Doing this is a lot like using a scripture or hymn to lift you up when you feel down or want to stay strong in the

face of temptation—only personalized to your particular situation. When used at critical moments, doing this can flood the mind with positive, strong thoughts and instantly squeeze out any negative thoughts and emotions.

As an example, when I applied this process to my coaching, I was amazed by the dramatic increase in performance from the athletes I worked with. One was a U.S. Olympic mogul skier who was not ranked very high.

As I worked with her, she worked hard on training her thoughts to be positive and on using positive phrases to purify her thought patterns. As her thoughts improved, so did her performance. Eventually she was selected to join the World Cup touring team.

After the prequalifying races, this athlete was in fourth place. She told me after the event that when she had gotten on the chairlift to go up for her finals run, doubt had gotten into her mind. She began to accept her doubt, thinking, “It's OK. No one expected me to do this well. My family will still love me.”

But then she caught herself and said: “No! Today is my day! I am making it happen today!”

And guess what? She ended up skiing faster than she had ever skied before and finished tied for first place.

Here's the really cool thing: This doesn't just work for skiing. You can think of personalized, positive reminders to replace negative thoughts when you struggle with grades or feel like you don't fit in or that you are not worth much because you aren't popular.

DON'T DWELL ON DOUBT

Dwelling obsessively on what we do wrong prevents us from maximizing our potential. It is one of the adversary's greatest tools. But using language to build confidence and trusting in God to help you do your best no matter the result builds confidence in your abilities and chases away doubt. That concept has changed my life.

When we trust in God, we achieve our greatest potential because we become who *He* wants us to be. We can replace fear with confidence and pessimism with optimism as we strive to do our best. **NE**

NOTES

1. James E. Faust, “I Believe I Can, I Knew I Could,” Oct. 2002 general conference.
2. L. Tom Perry, Oct. 1998 general conference.