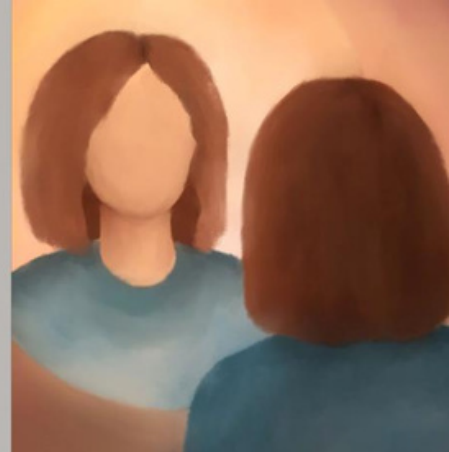


## A Powerful Therapeutic Tool for Defeating Negative Self-Talk

By Jim Davis on 2/14/23 - 12:13 PM



A client of mine was nervous for a meeting. That does not do it justice... she was anxious, biting her nails, and absolutely convinced that it was not going to go well.

This was not the first time. Often, even for 10-minute check-ins with leadership at her company, she would worry, daydream, and lose sleep the night before. After the meetings, she would admit something to the extent of, "it wasn't as bad as I thought."

I felt for her. This was an exhausting strategy. Although she convinced herself that this mental energy was being spent in service of preparation, to be ready for what was to come, the amount of bandwidth chewed up by worry was not propelling her to perform at her best, it was undercutting her ability to plan well, if at all. Then, on the day of the meeting, she would present as anxious, at least at first, until she realized that all would be okay.

Fear of the moment was significantly worse than the moment itself. Sound familiar? Many experience similar struggles with anxiety and negative self-talk. The brain is prediction mechanism. Lisa Feldman Barrett, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Northeastern University, notes that neurons in the brain are constantly firing, making "millions of predictions of what you will encounter next in the world," (Barrett, 2016).

These predictions are created based on previous experience. At least that is how it starts. Sometimes the prediction machine can move too fast or too far, spinning its wheels in what I refer to as a "traction-less" environment. It is possible to spend too much time predicting, imagining a situation, then imagining someone's reaction to an imagined situation, and so on... this sort of thinking cannot include data and feedback from the real world.



It is a slippery slope. Many report this sort of traction-

less thinking while laying in bed at night, when there is no one to talk to, no way to put ideas into the real world, no traction to gain.

With this particular client, we used a strategy called W.B.L. Instead of steering her away from negative thinking (which is precipitously close to telling someone 'how to feel'), we tapped into the brain's natural predisposition to predict, and created some parameters around it. It has proven to be a powerful tool in our work.

## **How to Use W.B.L.**

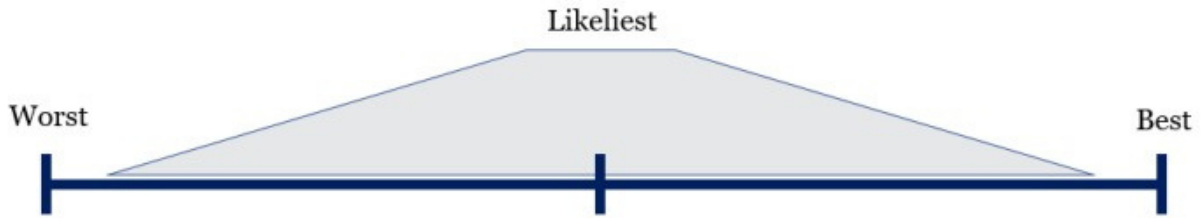
First, work to define the situation. Are you worried about a business meeting? Are you nervous about meeting someone new? What is it, exactly? The exercise of defining is a powerful one unto itself. Name the concern.

Once the concern has been named, we begin the WBL process. The W stands for Worst. Let yourself go to the ***Worst possible scenario***. There are only two limits: 1) take notes and 2) keep time. This is best with a pen and paper handy. Write it down. Be honest. You will likely find that it was not the business meeting that was bothering you, but the fear of getting fired. Or the fear of being called inadequate. Focus on that.

Do not focus on it for too long. Set a timer for no more than three minutes, and stick to it. It should not take that long. More often than not, the issue with considering the worst possible outcome is that we stay there. The longer we sit in that hypothetical, negative situation, the more we color our minds with negativity. It will influence our default state. In that state, as soon as we sense that the meeting feels "off", we will interpret it as a confirmation, (Feen and Byrne, 2013).

*Considering* the worst possible scenario is not the problem, *staying there* is. Which is why the immediate next step, B, asks us to consider the ***Best possible outcome*** of the situation. Maybe the meeting ends in a big promotion. What would that look like? Would it come with more free time? More money? More travel? Let yourself go there, and go all the way. This is not the 'Pretty Good' stage, it has to be the Best.

In practice, people can be hesitant to think big. They have no trouble going to the W but believe that the wonderful reaches of the B are not likely. Remind them that the best is, by definition, just as likely as the worst – they are two ends of a hypothetical spectrum that we create ourselves.



WBL Spectrum, © Bedrock Edu.

Now that we have identified the poles, find a spot in between. Take a moment to be truly sensible. The outcome of the meeting is not likely to be at the Worst pole and, unfortunately, not likely to be at the Best pole. So where is it most likely to be? At this point, people might lean back toward the W side of the spectrum. Do not allow it. Stay centered. If anything, make an intentional decision to learn toward the B and let your mind be colored by positive thoughts, as they will have an impact on the meeting.

Imagine going into a meeting expecting the worst. What sort of vibe will you present? How will that influence the response of the other participants? Instead, enter the meeting with the confidence that your approach is well-considered, and lean into the B. You have the power to influence the direction of the meeting by the energy you bring to it.

## **The Challenge vs. The Approach**

The WBL strategy will not make the challenge less difficult, no less important. What it will do is change your approach to the challenge, (Beck, 1974).

If you free up a little bandwidth (that would have otherwise been burned on worry) then you can prepare more thoughtfully. You will feel differently both in the preparation for the meeting and in the meeting itself.

The body of research supporting the value of positive psychology and deliberate gratitude is convincing. Psychologists Dr. Robert A. Emmons (University of California, Davis), and Dr. Michael E. McCullough (University of Miami) found that people who regularly wrote about positive moments in their lives (compared to negative and neutral moments) experienced improvements in a variety of well-being measures, most notably, "positive affect," (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Imagine sitting on the other side of the meeting table. If an employee walked in with a positive affect, compared to an anxious or fearful one, what kind of impression would that make?

Deliberately cultivating your mindset is not a soft, feel-good skill (though it does feel good). It can positively impact outcomes. That outcome is called feedback. The more positive feedback you receive, the more confidence is built, and the less likely you will be to default toward a worst-case scenario the next time around. The prediction machine will gain positive traction.

The brain is a prediction machine. The WBL tool helps us get behind the wheel of that machine and steer. It may not be easy to do, but it is always worth it.

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