

# Mike's Mailbag: Negative Little Voices

By Mike Gustafson//Correspondent (USA Swimming)

*Every Monday I answer questions from swimmers around the country.*

Dear Mike,

Recently I've been hearing those little voices in my head that we all hear every day. I think that I let all that negativity affect me and now that a championship meet is coming up, I might stink! This May I turned 13 which means that my whole swimming routine was about to change. In my team, when you turn 13, you get to move up to the next level. That means that I will have a new different coach and teammates. It was really hard for me to let go. I had these amazing memories and achievements in that group and a lot of friends. Now I had to go up alone. They said it was for the best and it will help me. It seemed to me that my new coach was impressed that I had moved up to one of the "fast lanes" in such a short time and she had great expectations. I was starting to enjoy it a lot.

However, during summer break we had morning practice and then afternoon practice. I was really sore and tired, but I was starting to get mad and frustrated and annoyed with everybody and swimming. Since then, these voices in my head keep telling me to give up my swimming career. When I was 12 and in my old group, I did amazing in my championship meet, but now I am 13. A whole new category of girls, 13-14 year olds. I am not even sure if I'll get to finals. Everybody is so competitive. My parents seem to be taking this very serious that they even put me in private swim classes to work on technique, dives and all those things. Then again these voices come that I didn't even try to improve on anything. I might lose to other swimmers. My whole point to this is that I am screwed up now. I don't know what else to do because I am tired. I don't mean like sleep tired, but just tired of everything. I know that you have to train hard to see great results, but something is holding me back and I want to get rid of it and continue to be that energetic happy girl that I used to be. Please, I need your help. Please respond. It's for my swimming.

-Negative Little Voices

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Hey Negative Little Voices,

I hear those little voices, too. Little negative voices. They don't talk to me all the time, but mostly when I'm about to do something stressful, like when I'm about to give a big presentation or a speech or when I'm about to embark on a new business venture (or sometimes right before I send in an advice column). I'll be walking through my day, and then I'll begin to hear them. They say things like, "You're not smart enough" or "You're doing everything wrong" or "Nobody likes you."

For a long time, I'd hear them, and I'd believe them. Not only did they speak loudly, but their echoes would last inside my head, bouncing around while I tossed and turned at night.

Then, one day I was talking about this "negative voices" issue with a friend, who happens to be a very successful businessman. He seemed to me to be one of those out-going guys who has all the confidence in the world, one of those guys who can walk into a room and dominate the conversation. But he surprised me. As I was telling him my confidence woes, he said, "Oh, I hear those negative voices, too. All the time. I just try to out-talk those voices."

“Out-talk?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“Say I’m about to go to a big meeting,” he continued. “I’ll hear these voices that say, ‘You’re not witty enough. You’re boring. You’re not smart enough to be here.’ Instead of worrying about these voices or letting them control my behavior, I’d acknowledge them, and then counter them.”

“Counter them?” I asked.

“I’d say to myself, sometimes out loud, ‘You’re going to do great. You’re ready for this. You’re smart and creative, and you’re as good as anyone else.’ I’m an introvert, but I began to out-talk all those little fears that I’d tell myself. And over time, I’d just start to believe my own voices, the positive ones.”

So, I tried this strategy. I have a problem with big groups of people where I feel overwhelmed, not smart enough, and not good enough. Remembering this out-talking strategy, I tried it an hour before a very large gathering.

I won’t say that I became this James Bond of social interaction, but it did help. For just a little while, I out-talked those negative little voices in my head, and I began to believe in myself.

Out-talking the negative voices helped.

Everyone hears these little negative voices in our heads -- voices that create fear and uncertainty and doubt. And I think it’s okay to acknowledge when they come, to analyze them, to hear them.

But we also need to doubt the doubting voices. Just because they’re there doesn’t mean they speak the truth. They come from a place of fear and insecurity, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we are naturally fearful or insecure. Every confident man sometimes feels unconfident. Every courageous woman sometimes feels fear.

We are what we choose to believe. It’s natural to hear these little voices in our head, but that doesn’t mean we have to believe them. As someone who has had ups and downs, I’ll tell you something: You are capable of more than you even know. The next time those little voices arise and begin to say, “You’re not fast enough” or “You’ll never be good at swimming again,” hear them, but don’t believe them. Instead, say things to yourself like, “You’re going to have the best practice you can today,” or “You’re strong and confident and capable.”

It may sound silly to be your own cheerleader, and at first, it may feel dumb, but it does really work over time. You’ll still hear those little voices, but they won’t be as loud, and they won’t echo around in your head as much, and they won’t dictate your behavior.

Just because you hear negative little voices doesn’t make them true. You get to choose what you believe. Choose to be your own cheerleader, and then, when you hear voices that say, “You’re going to do great,” believe it.