

Liar, Liar, Pant's on Fire

Well, darkness has a hunger that's insatiable, and lightness has a call that's hard to hear. Emily Sailers

You may not have downloaded the “You Totally Suck.” Podcast. Don’t worry. You don’t need to. It’s probably already been playing in your head non-stop for years. Some days, it plays quietly in the background, audible only in moments when you feel vulnerable, are trying something new, or feel pressure to perform. Other days, it plays in full volume on Dolby Surround Sound speakers in your brain. Like a sibling, it tells you the very things that push your buttons, cause you pain, and leave you wallowing in self-doubt. You might have episodes like, “Super Fat” or “Total Loser.” The “Super Fat” podcast says things like, “Look at you. You’re soooooooooo fat. You can’t even zip your jeans. And look at that belly roll hanging over. I can’t believe you’re even thinking about eating today. You disgust me. You are doomed to be lonely and miserable. You are a weak and despicable person.” The “Total Loser” episode beats you down in a different way. This podcast tells you things like, “You are a stupid, worthless piece of shit... a total loser... a failure. You can’t do anything right. You fuck everything up. Jeeze Louise, no wonder your ex dumped you. No one likes you. Did you really say that to him/her? Don’t even try to do _____. Spare yourself the embarrassment of making a fool of yourself yet again....”

The best thing to do when these podcasts start playing is silently shout in your head, “Liar, liar, pants on fire, hanging from a telephone wire,” just like you do when you hear politicians blatantly lying on camera. I know.... You can’t really argue with the podcast hosts. They can’t hear you. But it’s good for morale and sends a message to your brain that perhaps you don’t have to believe the podcast. This might free you up just enough to turn the volume down.

This is where the real work begins. You have to challenge the messages. Identify where the messages came from. For example, where did you get the idea that having a belly or curves or extra padding makes one despicable? I’m serious – name the people who told you, in one way or another, that being fat makes you, or people in general, unlovable and unlikable. Who told you that you weren’t smart, athletic, or successful enough? Was it your father? Your mother? Your sibling(s)? A supposed mentor? The mean girl in the 3rd grade who tortured you? What messages did you take in from TV, movies, magazines, and the internet that lead you to hate yourself? The more you can identify where you got the messages that play in your head, the more you can say, “Not mine” when the messages play.

It also helps to listen to the podcast with the same discerning ear you use when you listen to other podcasts you listen to. The copy is poorly written. Notice how it repeats itself and usually ends up on the fallback of a few key mean statements like, “You suck.” Heard this way, the “You Totally Suck” podcasts sound like they were written by an imbecile.

And reality check: You don't have to believe the "You Totally Suck" podcasts. Even if they contain grains of truth, the underlying message that you are not worth anything and don't deserve to be loved is a lie. You are absolutely lovable. It's helpful to come up with more positive messages – the kind that make you feel good when you hear them. Maybe start with something like, "I have nice eyes (or cute feet, or warm hands, or ...)" and, "I brushed my teeth today." Build up to more positive messages like "I'm kind," "I'm funny," "I'm smart enough." "I'm a great dancer." And finally, add the positive messages you wished you could believe, like, "You are brilliant!" "You are a great _____! (Fill in the blank with whatever it is that you'd like to feel great at.) "You are absolutely and completely lovable." Write these messages on sticky notes or notecards and stick them in places where you will see them. Put them on or next to your bathroom mirror. Put them next to your computer or on your desk. Stick them to your remote control. Put them on your dashboard. Read them. If you imagine that you believe them, someday you will.

*To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com . Her essay "Unequal Wedding" appears in ***Untangling the Knot: Queer Voices on Marriage, Relationships, & Identity***, published by Ooligan Press.*

This article originally appeared in Outlook Columbus in 2016.