

# Flipping the Script

How I stopped putting myself down.

By HATTIE RICE

"Listen to the beat," says Melissa, wincing at the sight of my dancing. "Now lean wit' it."

"Damn, how I'm black and I ain't got no rhythm? Ain't that supposed to be a given?"

"Sometimes I wonder about you..." Melissa says, sarcastically. "Let's keep it simple to just the snap." I try to snap and end up like a white person putting up the crip sign (it just won't work).

I zone out in thought: "Why am I so slow? Lord Jesus, why don't I get it? How stupid can one person be? It's just a snap. Then again, Lord Jesus can't help my dumb ass even with the Twelve Apostles. Why try? Is it really going to help? I can be quite the retard."

That's the type of thing I think at least three times a day—until I take a deep breath in and repeat the following words: "OK, I'm not that slow." Then I exhale all the negative energy.



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## Expecting the Worst

Whenever I try something new I feel very discouraged. I always think things are going to go wrong, maybe because in the past many things have. For instance, I liked my group home and was comfortable there. Did I think that was going to last? No! And it didn't. I was shipped off to a foster home. People predicted it would be good and I said it would be



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bad. Guess who was right? I was.

After years of disappointments, I don't have confidence that almost anything will have a positive outcome. I predict things will go wrong so that when they do, I'm not surprised. It's a way of getting used to the many shortcomings in my life and of protecting myself from getting let down.

I also constantly tell myself that I'm dumb so that insults from others don't hurt too bad. That started when teachers, kids at school and even my family teased me and called me names. Repeating those taunts to myself lessened the pain I felt when I heard them from others.

## Holding Myself Back

Although these are good strategies for handling disappointments, I recently realized that they're also holding me back from fully enjoying my life. I don't get excited about new experiences because I fear they'll go wrong. And I don't feel as much pride and joy about what I do well because I'm bracing myself for the good times to go bad.

These days, my life is a lot more stable than it once was. I'm living in a better foster home, coming up on high school graduation and already accepted to a good college—SUNY Binghamton in upstate New York. I don't need to brace myself for failure anymore.

I need to work on my pessimistic attitude so I don't prevent myself from growing and living my life to the fullest. I hope to act

more positive, enjoy things and attract positive people to me. I want to learn to accept the compliments people give me without using skepticism or sarcasm to downplay what they've said. And I want to stop beating myself up.

## Flipping the Script

So this winter I joined the *Represent Transitions Workshop*, a 14-week group where we learned new coping mechanisms (we called them "tools") to help us get through difficult changes. I chose to work on changing the negative script in my head.

Each week of the workshop we

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# Hatties' Transitions

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had to choose a new "tool" to work on our change. In the group, the five of us reported back about how the tool had gone. We also kept diaries of our journeys. Here is the diary of my attempts to change how I think about myself:

## March 16, 2006

This week I decided to keep tabs on myself and write down how often I criticize myself and what I say. Surprisingly, I found out I don't criticize myself as often as I thought, but when I do I'm really harsh. It's like, why do I need enemies when I've got myself? It shouldn't be that way.

As a way to motivate myself to eliminate the problem I decided to write down a reminder of why I need to make this change. I realized I've never been on a roller coaster or ridden a bike, and I can't swim or snap my fingers—all because I've never really tried. It was painful to face how I am holding myself back.

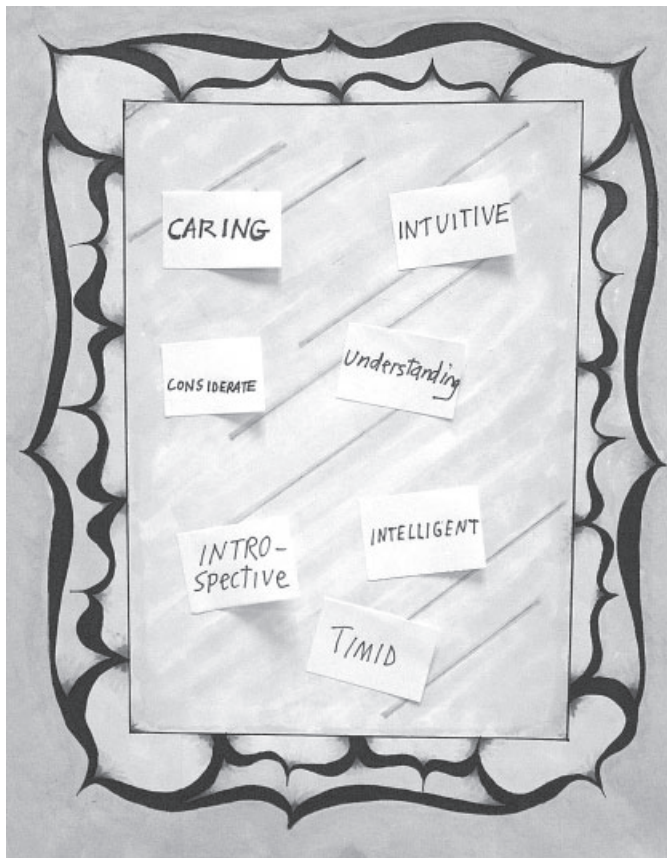
If I complete this change I may learn how to do all those things, maybe even whistle. Those are little things, but they're steps toward my overall goal of building more confidence in myself and my abilities. My writing was a wake-up call that my constant self-criticism is not only crippling my self-esteem but also damaging my ability to try new things.

## March 23, 2006

This week I wrote some more about my problem—this time putting down some of the terrible criticisms I heard as a child, like: "Why you sitting here talking to the quiet b-tch?" "I can't

even sit next to her. Yo, shorty a straight weirdo."

I was shocked to remember that a girl in my class had the audacity to talk about me to my face. But writing down those insults surprised me because my feelings were less intense than I thought they would be, which was good. I even



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reread what I wrote, which I never do.

My journal writing left me in such good spirits that I decided on the first action I would take to change. I decided that for the rest of the week I'd tell myself good things anytime something negative happened.

Trying this technique also surprised me because it somewhat worked. If I started to criticize myself, I was able to stop and tell myself good things.

The problem was I didn't believe a

word that was coming out of my mouth. I truly felt like a compulsive liar, and a bad one at that. Despite telling myself all these good things, I still felt incompetent deep down. But I think that I need to program my first thought to be positive, and eventually my feelings about myself might catch up.

## April 6, 2006

Continuing with my theme of telling myself positive things, I planned this week to put post-its on my mirror with my positive characteristics written on each. That way each morning I'll wake up with good feelings about myself, and I'll be able to study my positive qualities. I also wrote an on-the-go list of my positive qualities in my journal so I'd always have it with me.

The list included: introspective, intelligent, considerate, understanding, timid, intuitive, intricate, broad minded, caring, and able to disregard my emotions during times of stress.

I decided that I'd take a quiz about what's good about me. I know that may sound weird, but the best way to get an idea fixated into my brain is to study. I studied the list as if for a real test, and I kept repeating it to myself randomly. Sporadically during the day I would think, "I'm beautiful and an intellectual."

This plan was good because it helped me look in the mirror (which I hardly ever do). I'm definitely going to make this a routine.

Despite my list, I had a hard time when we discussed "self-esteem" in health class. It brought me back to my lowest moments of childhood; I kept remembering unpleasant memories that made me feel bad about myself.

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At least saying positive things about myself helped get my mind off those past memories.

### April 13, 2006

This week I chose to write a story about a time in my life when I used all the positive characteristics I posted on my mirror. The story was a way to remind myself of my strength.

Here's what I wrote:

"When I was at home with my mom, she refused to talk to me. In fact, she refused to talk to any of her family. (She has schizophrenia and was addicted to crack for years.) Everyone else left her alone and ignored her crying.

"Although I was only 12, I was intelligent and intuitive enough to realize that my mom wasn't OK and needed help expressing herself. So instead of going to school, I was considerate and sensitive of her feelings—I stayed at home with her every day.

"I wasn't sad to miss school. When I was younger, going to school was painful because I only had two outfits, my skin looked horrible, and my mom would mess up my hair. So you can imagine how much I got teased. (I am amazed that I go to school today.)

"That year I stayed home I was patient. I knew of my mom's violent nature, so I waited and eventually she opened up to me. She told me how she felt watched, and she pulled the blinds down. She told me that a boyfriend she had when she was 10 hypnotized her and was now having her watched. She claimed my father was in on it, telling 'Casper' of her whereabouts.

"As far fetched as the story was, I listened and did not interrupt. The story was unreal, but her pain was not. The situation made me feel strong yet scared. It was good that my mom had me to turn to, but who did I have?

"Soon after that I was placed in

foster care. I am involved with my family but remain detached emotionally so I am able to live and not let their needs consume me. I still visit them, to show them my loyalty and let them know that they are irreplaceable."

Writing all of this down, I reminded myself of my strength and resilience. It was good to remember that there are reasons I have trouble feeling positive about my life, but also that the worst times are behind me.

### April 20, 2006

This week I meant to "seek social support"—surround myself with friends—because one thing I don't think I do well is communicate with new people. Because of the criticism I've experienced, and the way I criticize myself, I usually believe that others won't like me.

I've realized that being pessimistic takes joy from my life, and trying to be more positive has been a change worth making.

I meant to hold a sleepover, but that didn't work out, so instead I went on a college tour with another *Represent* writer, Natasha. It went very well. I talked to kids on the bus, and Tasha and I talked to some college kids all by ourselves. We then finished the day off by going to my house and just chilling. I found out that I can communicate when I want to, if I'm around someone I like.

I also read a book called *The Joy of Doing Things Badly* by Veronica Chambers. The book helped me realize that I should focus on making myself happy, because I owe myself more of my attention than I owe anybody else.

Veronica wrote about doing what you enjoy, even if you do it by yourself, and explained that you'll feel more confident if you surround yourself with what makes you feel good. Her book was a

reminder to me that I'm not going to do everything well, and I don't need to criticize myself just because it takes time to learn new things.

### April 27, 2006

While participating in this workshop, and writing this story, I've uncovered some interesting things about myself. I've realized that I'm stronger than I thought I was. I feel inspired to work on other aspects of my life that bother me. Maybe it is possible for me to be happier day to day.

Sometimes the group was stressful. I learned that I could participate in an intense group without freezing up or isolating myself. I bonded with the other writers and, for the first time, I had a strong social circle. That's helped me realize that people aren't going to criticize me if I let them in. I can com-

municate with people, and I can try to deal with my worst struggles.

Throughout the weeks of this workshop, I thought negatively about my planned tools and then found out they were effective at making me feel better. As it turns out, there are alternative ways I can approach the problems I am facing, rather than simply writing about them.

Even after the workshop is over, I plan to continue to write letters to myself because they help me express my inner anger, and to put words on my mirror, which helps me recognize my inner beauty. I've realized that being pessimistic takes joy from my life, and trying to be more positive has been a change worth making. ■