Third Person Therapy

Third person therapy is a really important concept to understand in order to help yourself. This document sets out to give a brief introduction over the first page followed by the research behind it for anyone who is interested and has more time to read further. The first page or so is however enough if time is limited!

In recent years, a wide range of studies has found that third person self talk can improve emotion regulation and self control. It does this by facilitating self distancing and reducing egocentric bias. So, if there's something you are struggling with or an event that's disturbing you, write or talk about it in the third person.

Generally, we tend to write in the first person: I, we, our, etc., expressing ourselves straight from our own mind and heart, putting down on paper or keyboard, exactly what we are feeling. In the case of third person, it's a way to look at ourselves from the outside in, as we work through a particular event or situation. To do this you can try using words like:

He, She, They, or referring to yourself by your name.

This is a unique way to write because you get to look at yourself in a different way. You can view, how you handle what is happening in your life, in a more objective, open minded, non judgemental way. The ability to separate yourself from the emotions of the moment can really open your eyes to what you have endured at any given time.

How to help yourself by using third person language

Used correctly, inner language can focus thinking, enhance planning, and prevent unhelpful rumination later on.

Example 1:

Matt is sitting here at his desk, and after chatting on Skype with a friend about this very subject, he is already beginning to feel the anxiety flaring up. Matt needs to remember that he is safe now, he is capable of taking care of himself and he no longer needs to subject himself to invalidating situations. He's got healthy boundaries, which include low contact.

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Example 2:

"Jennifer (1), what are you nervous about? It's not the first date you've ever been on. I know you like this guy, but take it slow (2), and stay calm. Even if it doesn't go perfectly, it won't be the end of the world. You're capable (3), intelligent, accomplished, beautiful. Just do your best and let the chips fall. Chill, Jen."

1: Jennifer distances herself from the stress of a first date by addressing herself by name, seeing herself as she would a friend. The distance confers wisdom, confidence and calm she would never have if immersed in the situation as I or me.

2: She also taps the kinds of strategies children use when engaging in activities like building with blocks, only instead of instructing herself to put the small square on top of the big rectangle, she now tells herself to be calm. Her self-direction is precise.

3: Not least, Jennifer alleviates the gravity of the situation with a few self-affirmations, allowing her to see the date in the context of her whole being. She will not be devastated or ruminate endlessly on the experience if the date doesn't work out.

Further information: the basis for Third Person Therapy

Everyone engages in self-talk. But much depends on the way we do it. Scientists now find that the right words can free us from our fears and make us as wise about ourselves as we often are about others.

In a series of ground breaking experiments, Kross (a psychologist at the University of Michigan) has found that how people conduct their inner monologues has an enormous effect on their success in life. He found that people who don't refer to themselves in the first person during self-talk have an easier time dealing with stressful situations. Basically, treating ourselves as though we're other people can change how we think, feel and behave.

Talk to yourself with the pronoun I, for instance, and you're likely to fluster and perform poorly in stressful circumstances. Address yourself by your name and your chances of acing a host of tasks, from speech making to self-advocacy, suddenly soar.

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As the words of self-talk reach the amygdala, they either mire us in anxiety or free us of its constraints, allowing us to exert high levels of self-discipline under all kinds of demanding circumstances (say, athletic competition or speaking in public).

By toggling the way we address the self—first person or third—we flip a switch in the cerebral cortex, the center of thought, and another in the amygdala, the seat of fear, moving closer to or further from our sense of self and all its emotional intensity. Gaining psychological distance enables self-control, allowing us to think clearly, perform competently. The language switch also minimizes rumination, a handmaiden of anxiety and depression, after we complete a task. Released from negative thoughts, we gain perspective, focus deeply, plan for the future.

Along with addressing a body of research by others, Kross is forcing a whole new take on what has long been ignored or relegated to pop psychology—the use of self-talk to boost confidence. His work elevates self-talk to something far more significant: a powerful instrument of consciousness itself. When deployed in very specific ways at specific times, it frees the brain to perform its absolute best.

In a 2014 study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Kross and a research team explored how people use different styles of self-talk during stressful tasks. In two of the experiments, researchers challenged participants to deliver a speech with little preparation or help. Having to speak publicly with limited support and preparation is a powerful way to induce stress in a controlled research environment.

The experiments also required participants to practice self-talk before and after delivering speeches. All participants had to actively think through their feelings surrounding the speech. In one version of the experiment, the self-talk exercises involved only rumination (just thinking through feelings); in a different version, participants had to write down their feelings.

To compare the impact of language in self-talk, researchers divided participants into two groups: first person and third person. Members of the first-person group used "I" statements to guide their introspection. Members of the third person group also thought through their feelings, but ditched the first-person perspective.

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Here are examples of first-person versus third person self-talk from a writing exercise in the study:

First person: "I worry about giving a presentation to a customer at work. I am afraid that I will come across as unprofessional or not knowledgeable. I am nervous that they will ask questions that I will not know the answers for."

Third person: "You worry too much about what other people think. You need to focus on what needs to be done, and what you can do to execute it. The simple fact that other people will be around does not change what you need to do. Focus on you, and you will be fine."

In Kross' initial studies of self-talk he found that using one's first name minimizes social anxiety, the fear of being evaluated in a social context—the reason most people hate public speaking. It disables social anxiety not only before the stressful event but, significantly, afterward too, when people tend to chew over their performance and find themselves lacking—what scientists coolly call "post event processing." Overall, the third person group delivered better speeches, with more ease and comfort, than first-person participants.

Additionally, researchers saw distinct trends emerge in the two groups during self-talk. The third person group gravitated toward more positive messages — when addressing themselves by name or as "you," they built themselves up, like supportive friends do for one another before a nerve-wracking experience. Members of the first-person group, on the other hand, were harder on themselves and expressed more worry, shame and doubt over their speeches, both before and after they took the podium.

Those in the first person group wound up anchored in anxiety, apt to see the task as impossible. "How can I possibly write a speech in five minutes," was a typical comment. Those in the third person group felt less anxiety approaching the task and felt highly confident. "You can do it, Ethan," was a typical exhortation in the run-up to a speech.

But the acid test was what came afterward. Those using their name performed better on the speech (judged by independent evaluators) and engaged in far less rumination after it; they also experienced less depression and felt less shame. In other studies, Kross found that using a first name empowers participants, so what others see as a threat, they see as a challenge. In giving a speech, volunteers using I felt inadequate to the task.

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The public speaking experiment produced results consistent with the study's other experiments. Across the board, first-person group members got more worked up about stressful situations, performed worse in those situations and had more trouble bouncing back after the fact. Third person participants, however, adopted more can-do attitudes and exhibited better self-control while under stress.

"The only difference in their behaviour is that they're using their own names," Kross said of the third person group, "But they start to build themselves up."

What does all the psychobabble mean?

Most of us are better at giving advice to other people than to ourselves. By fine-tuning the language we use during self-talk, Kross believes we can gain enough emotional distance from our problems to become our own sages.

"When dealing with strong emotions, taking a step back and becoming a detached observer can help," Kross explains. "It's very easy for people to advise their friends, yet when it comes to themselves, they have trouble. But people engaging in this process, using their own first name, are distancing themselves from the self, right in the moment, and that helps them perform."

"When people are feeling anxious or stressed, they can try talking to themselves internally using their own names," he said. "Our data shows that when you do that, it enhances the ability to rationalise situations, which improves people's ability to control their thoughts, feelings and behaviour under stress."

So far, Kross says his research specifically concerns a way of thinking, not speaking. Self-talk is an introspective dialogue with oneself and this research does not extend to proving that third-person references in casual conversation have the same impact.

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Easy on the Brain

Talking in the third person also eases the workload of the brain, finds Jason Moser, a neuroscientist and clinical psychologist at Michigan State University. He measured electrical activity in the brain as subjects engaged in different varieties of self-talk.

Moser showed two groups of women photographs of a masked man holding a knife to a woman's throat. One group of women was prone to chronic worrying, the other was psychologically normal. Each group was then asked to elaborate about a positive outcome through self-talk while Moser measured electrical activity in the lobes of the frontal cortex and in the limbic system.

When women naturally employed the pronouns I and me in their self-talk, worriers had to work much harder than non worriers to talk themselves into a positive view—and even then they failed to calm themselves down. They dwelled on fears that the woman under attack had died. The harder their frontal lobes worked, the more anxious their limbic brain became; the task pitched them into a vicious circle of rumination, anxiety, and more rumination.

The same women were asked to repeat the self-talk exercise, only this time deliberately using their first names instead of personal pronouns. They reported a dramatic reduction in anxiety levels. Electrodes picked up the psychic improvement by documenting a vast reduction in energy consumed by the frontal lobes. What's more, the frantic cries of the amygdala quieted down as well, its activity reduced by just about half. The anxiety of the worrywart women—charted in their brain activity—was relieved.

This has implications for how to promote anxiety reduction in therapy. A change in language may have a big impact. Changing the way people talk to themselves—a simple shift from personal pronoun to first name may offer a more lasting way of reducing anxiety. A fear of lifts may be conquered by self talk such as "Now, Pam, go in that elevator and push 6." Change a word and you change the brain.

"It is like an automatic switch, in which the brain turns the self on and the brain turns the self off," Moser explains."It is programmed into us by our own evolution, built into us by language. This is not the way we have tried to calm ourselves down in the past, but the

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studies show it is not necessary to scold the emotional brain. Language creates a distance that is real."

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