The pain and sadness of a tough break-up or other adverse life event can result in more than downing a pint of ice cream or tearing through a box of tissues. It often can plunge a person into depression as they ruminate about the situation. Ethan Kross, an assistant professor in LSA’s Department of Psychology, is researching a way to alleviate this anxiety and depression, through a process called self-distancing.

Kross specializes in finding ways to control runaway emotions. He directs the campus’ Emotion and Self Control Laboratory, where the goal is to determine how to make people mentally healthier.

Kross says he’s always been fascinated by how people’s emotions “can run wild in ways that harm” them. He became intrigued with the power of detachment in classes he took in religious studies and Eastern philosophy, while an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. Later in his academic career, when he saw that healthy people managed stress using a technique called self-distancing, he was curious whether that could help those with major depressive disorders.

Self-distancing involves reflecting on past adversities with a third-person “fly on the wall” perspective.

After a rejection, people tend to recreate the event in their minds and continue visualizing that event, Kross says. Self-distancing allows a person to take a step back and think about the self as if that person is someone else. He explains that it can often be difficult to think rationally about a problem you’ve experienced, yet when a friend has a problem, you can help them think through it without getting stuck.

His latest study, published in the May 2012 issue of the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, found that those who used this technique had fewer aggressive thoughts and angry feelings. Kross says it offers promise to those who tend to obsess over negative experiences, which can contribute to extreme distress and anxiety. His findings come at a time when depression is prevalent. In 2010, 15.5 million adults in the United States experienced a major depressive episode, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Kross’ recent study had subjects think about themselves as if they were someone else, so they could take a step back and move away from the experience using visualization techniques. “You think about why your distant self felt the way he [or she] did during the experience” and that simple shift transforms thoughts about the event overall, Kross says. People who distanced themselves didn’t get caught up in the emotional details. This approach can even be used to dispel anger in the heat of the moment. And it has significant
ramifications, with people who distance themselves becoming less likely to be aggressive against a person who insulted them, Kross says. He says nudging people into thinking about the event from a slightly different perspective can have a powerful effect on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. He said the technique was helpful to both healthy and depressed people, though it helped those overwhelmed with stress even more.

Kross is pursuing two follow-up studies, due in three years. The first will develop an intervention that teaches people how to employ self-distancing and tracks its efficacy over time in daily life. Another study will look at how this plays out developmentally, starting with two-year-olds through those in their twenties, to see how early it is possible to intervene and use the method.

"It's attractive to think we can teach kids the skill to insulate them against the stresses they might encounter," he says.

He hopes the concept of self-distancing will be considered as a tool for use in a clinical setting. Kross has used the method when he's received bad news on a paper or in an argument with others. "I've absolutely tried it myself and it works."