

Coping with depression: Step back and analyse

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People can cope with depression by controlling their emotions and analysing the upsetting event as a person watching it happen, an approach widely associated with Buddhist philosophies.

Ethan Kross, a psychologist at the University of Michigan in Berkeley, describes this approach as analysing one's feelings from a "psychologically distanced perspective". He and his colleague Ozlem Ayduk have conducted a series of studies that provide the first experimental evidence of the benefits of analysing depressive feelings from a psychologically distanced perspective.

"We aren't very good at trying to analyse our feelings to make ourselves feel better," says Kross, a faculty associate at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR) and an assistant professor of psychology.

"It's an invaluable human ability to think about what we do, but reviewing our mistakes over and over, re-experiencing the same negative emotions we felt the first time around, tends to keep us stuck in negativity. It can be very helpful to take a sort of mental time-out, to sit back and try to review the situation from a distance," he adds.

Kross insists that anyone can do it with a little practice. "Using a thermostat metaphor is helpful to many people. When negative emotions become overwhelming, simply dial the emotional temperature down a bit in order to think about the problem rationally and clearly," he says.

His research has revealed that self-distancing techniques improve cardiovascular recovery from negative emotions and protect against depression. During the course of study, Kross and Ayduk randomly assigned 141 participants to one of three groups that required them to focus or not focus on their feelings using different strategies in a guided imagery exercise, which led them to recall an experience that made them feel overwhelmed by sadness and depression.

In the immersed-analysis condition, participants were told, "Go back to the time and place of the experience, and relive the situation as if it were happening to you all over again...try to understand the emotions that you felt as the experience unfolded...why did you have those feelings? What were the underlying causes and reasons?"

In the distanced-analysis condition, they were told, "Go back to the time and place of the experience...take a few steps back and move away from your experience...watch the experience unfold as if it were happening all over again to the distant you... try to understand the emotions that the distant you felt as the experience unfolded...why did he (she) have those feelings? What were the underlying causes and reasons?"

In the distraction condition, the participants were asked to think about a series of non-emotional facts that were unrelated to their recalled depression experience. After the experience, the participants completed a questionnaire asking how they felt at the moment, and wrote a stream-of-thought essay about their thoughts during the memory recall phase of the experiment.

The researchers found that people who used the distanced-analysis approach had lower levels of depression than those who used immersed-analysis, but not distraction, suggesting that both distraction and distanced-analysis were equally effective in the short-term.

When the participants returned to the lab either one day or one week later, they were asked to think about the same sad or depressing experience, and their mood was reassessed. The researchers observed that the participants who had used the distanced-analysis approach continued to show lower levels of depression than those who had used self-immersed analysis and distraction.

The finding supported the hypothesis that distanced-analysis not only helps people cope with intense feelings adaptively in the short-term, but critically also helps people work-through negative experiences over time, they concluded.

As part of their future research, Kross plans to investigate whether self-distancing is helpful in coping with other types of emotions like anxiety. He also wants to study the best ways of teaching people how to engage in self-distanced analysis as they proceed with their lives, not just when they are asked to recall negative experiences in a laboratory setting.

The study has been published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

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