

Life

Talking in the third person lowers anxiety: Study

You talk about yourself in your head by name, you've got a psychological edge that could help you perform better and be less anxious.



DREAMSTIME PHOTO

The man in the red tie can do it. Yes he can. He's going to nail that presentation.

By: Nancy J. White Living Reporter, Published on Tue Feb 04 2014

If you talk about yourself out loud by name, people think you're a little loony.

But if you talk about yourself in your head by name, you've got a psychological edge that could help you perform better and be less anxious.

In times of social stress, the small language shift from "I" to "you" or to your name as you think about the situation can enhance your ability to regulate thoughts and feelings, according to a study in the February issue of the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

To think about yourself as if you were another person provides psychological space, which helps people exert self-control, says lead author Ethan Kross, associate professor of psychology at the University of Michigan.

It's sort of a way to tap into your inner coach. "Think of a friend who comes to you for advice with a problem that she's super anxious about," explains Kross. "You're not in the situation so it's relatively easy for you to see the bigger picture, to not get hung up on the details. That's what we're doing here, using language that almost automatically gets you to think about yourself as if you were another."

Kross and other researchers set up socially stressful situations, instructing some participants to prepare psychologically using "I" and others to use "you" or their names.

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In one experiment, participants had to make a favourable first impression. In another, they had to give a public speech about why they were ideally suited to their dream job. They had only five minutes to think about the speech and were not allowed to take notes. “That’s a powerful induction of anxiety,” says Kross.

Their performances in both situations were rated by judges unaware of how the participants had been divided. In both experiments, those who used “you” or their names in self-talk performed significantly better and displayed less stress than those in the first-person group.

“I think that’s a consequential finding,” says Kross. “People who give a better speech are more likely to land the job they’re interviewing for.”

They also brooded less afterwards about their performance. “We often stew in misery,” says Kross. “That’s not good for psychological or physical health.”

Other experiments looked at how the forms of self-talk affected the way people thought about events that provoked social anxiety. Those who talked to themselves with “you” or a name tended to see future stressors more as a challenge and less as a threat.

Researchers analyzing the data found that highly-anxious participants – those with levels high enough to be rated as “social phobic” – benefitted similarly to those with low anxiety by using non-first-person introspection.

So should people start using this self-talk technique?

“There’s the caveat, of course, that lots more research is needed. But there’s no reason to believe it’s harmful,” says Kross. “But it should be done internally not externally. To talk to yourself out loud in the third person violates all sorts of social norms.”