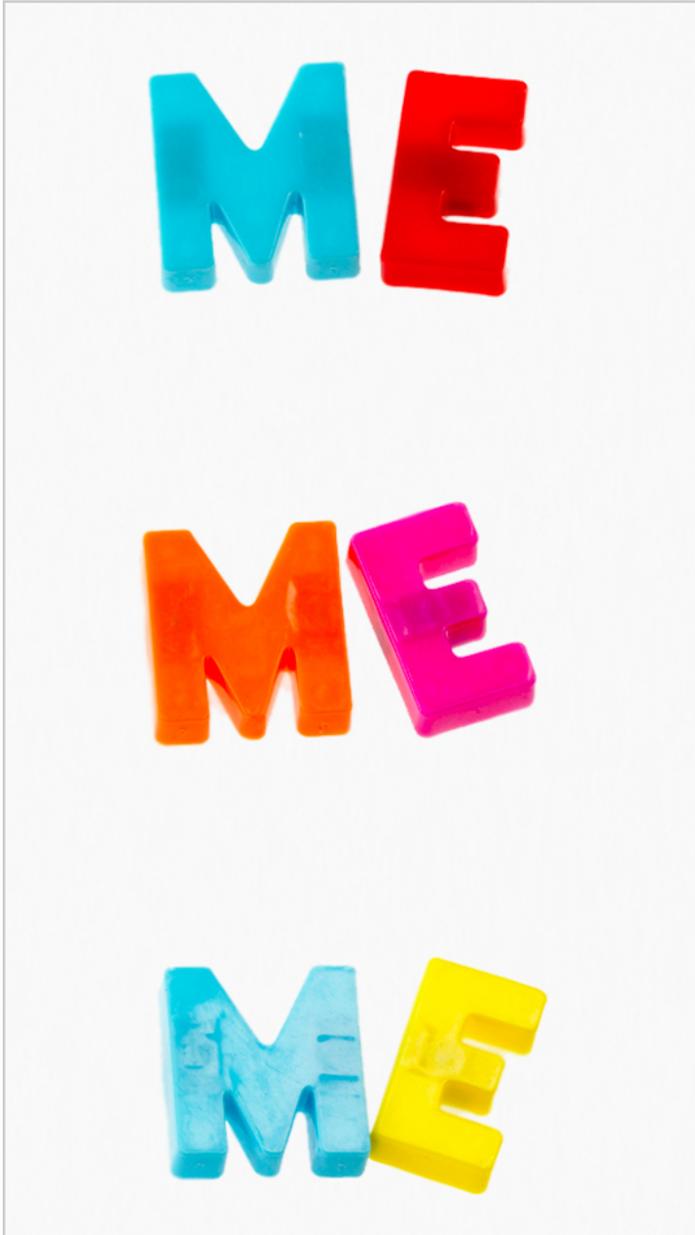


Pronouns Matter when Psyching Yourself Up

by Ozlem Ayduk and Ethan Kross

FEBRUARY 6, 2015



Some people seem to have an amazing ability to stay rational no matter what. They efficiently make good, clear decisions while the rest of us waste energy doing things like panicking about upcoming tasks, ruminating pointlessly, or refusing to move on from our failures. Those cool-headed rationalists also seem adept at getting ahead, while we're mired in our all-too-human, biased habits of thinking. Could we ever become like them? The gulf between the two types of people seems vast and unbridgeable.

But it's not. It can be crossed, via a simple linguistic shift.

"You." Or "he." Or "she." Or even via your own name.

It's a matter of how you talk when you silently talk to yourself, as you probably do often, especially when you're confronted with a difficult task. Do you say something like "It's up to me"? Or "I can do it"? Or do you say "It's up to *you*" or address yourself by your own name?

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just take a shoe and hit him.”

Does this shift from “I” to “Malala” represent a simple quirk of speech? Or does it reflect something deeper – a process that helped her manage the intense threat that confronted her?

Nobel Prize-winner Malala Yousafzai demonstrated the use of the latter approach when she was asked by Jon Stewart how she felt upon finding out that she was on a Taliban hit list. She was fearful, but then she imagined how she'd respond if she was attacked: "I said, 'If he comes, what would you do, Malala?' ... Then I would reply [to] myself, 'Malala,

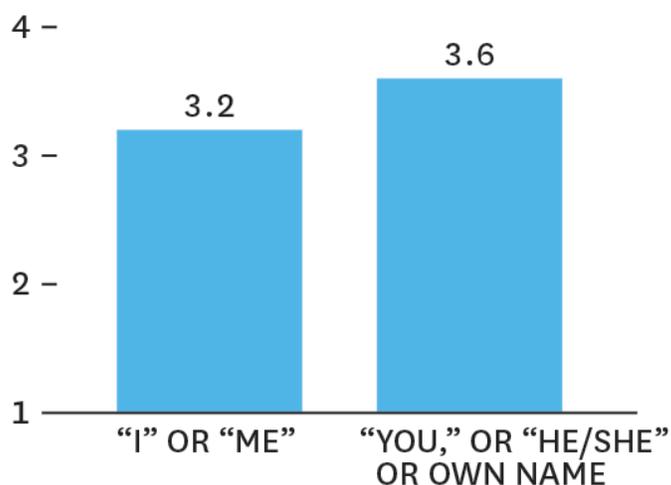
We, along with seven of our colleagues – Jiyoung Park, Aleah Burson, Adrienne Dougherty, Holly Shablack, and Ryan Bremner of the University of Michigan; Jason Moser of Michigan State; and Emma Bruehlman-Senecal of UC Berkeley – recently addressed this question in a series of experiments. We found that cueing people to reflect on intense emotional experiences using their names and non-first-person pronouns such as “you” or “he” or “she” consistently helped them control their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

For example, in one study we found that participants who silently referred to themselves in the second or third person or used their own names while preparing for a five-minute speech were calmer and more confident and performed better on the task than those who referred to themselves using “I” or “me.”

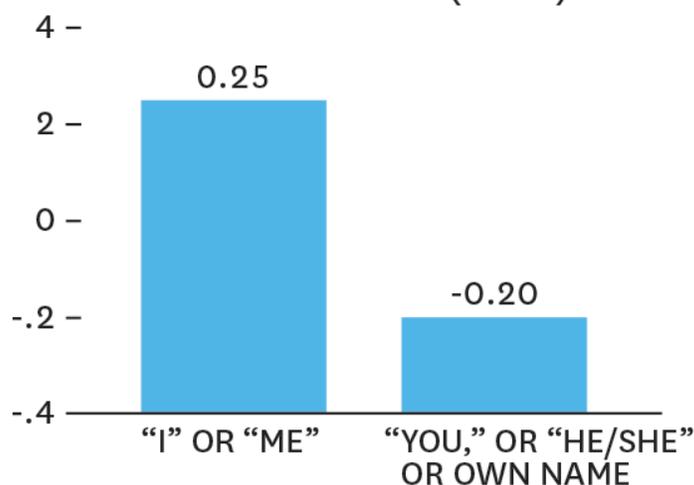
PRONOUNS MATTER WHEN PSYCHING YOURSELF UP

People who thought about themselves in the second or third person before giving a speech turned in better performances and ruminated less afterward than those who thought in the first person.

SPEECH PERFORMANCE RATING



EXTENT OF BROODING OVER PERFORMANCE AFTERWARD (INDEX)



SOURCE ETHAN KROSS, OZLEM AYDUK, AND THE JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY.

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The effects extended beyond the task, too: People who had used non-first-person pronouns or their names felt more positively about their performance on the speech once it was over. They also experienced less shame about it and ruminated about it less. Those are big pluses – ruminating endlessly over past experiences can hurt not only your psychological well-being but also your physical health.

It didn’t matter whether the research subjects were anxious or calm at baseline; both types of people benefited from the subtle shift in language.

Nor were there different effects for use of the second- or third-person pronouns or their own names. All that mattered was whether the participants did or didn’t use first-person pronouns.

It was impressive to see how a simple change in language could produce these effects. Having observed the power of this subtle shift, both of us now intentionally make use of it. One of us (Ozlem Ayduk) has even been known, when facing a difficult task, to write herself emails using her name. The other (Ethan Kross) regularly prompts his five-year-old daughter to use her own name in thinking about why she feels distressed when she doesn’t get her way.

Our findings are just a small part of a much larger, ongoing stream of research on self-talk, which is proving to have far-reaching implications for altering the way people think, feel, and behave. Not only does non-first-person self-talk help people perform better under stress and help them get control of their emotions, it also helps them reason more wisely.

Our past research indicates that a self-distancing effect can be achieved by cueing people to mentally adopt a “fly on the wall” perspective on their problems. Shifting visual perspective like that may work in situations where people have the time to reflect on experiences that have already occurred. What’s exciting about the self-talk effects we found is that they lend themselves to real-time situations that are unfolding quickly. When you’re in the midst of performing a task or interacting with others, the substitution of “you” for “I” can be done quickly and easily, and the results may surprise you.



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