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## CHAPTER 63

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# Distancing

## WHAT IT IS, HOW IT WORKS, AND WHERE TO GO NEXT

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There has never been a moment when, at least in public,  
[Barack Obama] seems gripped by inner turmoil. . . .  
At every challenging moment, his instinct was to  
self-remove and establish an observer's perspective. . . .  
—DAVID BROOKS (2008)

The ability to “step back” to reflect on one’s circumstances from a more objective perspective has been touted as a desirable human attribute that aids emotion regulation throughout history and across disparate philosophical traditions (Herold et al., 2020; Trammel, 2017). Yet, it is only within the past 20 years that scientists have begun to rigorously evaluate this claim, providing evidence linking the general process of “stepping back” with adaptive emotion regulation outcomes (see Kross et al., 2023, for a review). For example, the largest meta-analysis to date on this topic demonstrated that a medium-size effect characterizes the impact of distancing on emotional reactivity (Moran & Eyal, 2022) and several studies have linked distancing with causal increases in people’s ability to reason wisely about difficult social dilemmas (e.g., Grossmann et al., 2021).

But as is often the case in new areas of work that bring together scientists from different areas, the groundswell of research on this process has also created confusion. Is distancing an avoidance tactic that should be shunned? Or is it simply another word for reappraisal or mindfulness? Does distance refer to one tool or many different tactics? And when we talk about distance are we referring to a specific tool people use to manage their emotions or a more general psychological process? Our main goal in this chapter is to address these and a host of related questions to explain what distancing is and what it isn’t to help guide future research. Before wading into these questions, however, we begin by addressing what is perhaps the most fundamental question of all: What is distancing?

### Distancing: Definition and Relationship to Other Emotion Regulation Concepts

We human beings possess the ability to shift perspectives. We can reflect on our circumstances from alternative points of view. Distancing refers to a specific type of perspective shift that involves moving away from the narrow, self-immersed first-person point of view through which we typically experience life to adopt a broader perspective. As we explain in more detail below, there are many ways to cultivate this perspective shift. Some tools directly manipulate people's perspective (e.g., using the word *you* generically to refer to the self; adopting a third-person visual perspective; thinking about how one's actions will impact the person over time rather than in the here and now), while others activate distancing indirectly (e.g., experiencing the emotion of awe leads to a shrinking of the self; expressive writing leads people to adopt a more objective perspective when they think about their circumstances). The common theme between these different routes of inducing distance is that they involve a broadening of one's perspective beyond a self-centric, here-and-now framework.

One question that often arises about distancing is whether it is synonymous with avoidance, a process that has long been vilified as an emotion-regulatory tool that is detrimental to healthy functioning (e.g., Foa & Kozak, 1986). The key difference between avoidance and distancing concerns the focus of attention. Distancing involves shifting the perspective people adopt when focusing on an experience; it does not involve changing the object of attention. Thus, in a distancing experiment half of participants might be asked to focus on how they feel after a rejection experience right now (i.e., immersed condition) versus a week from now (i.e., distanced condition). In both cases, the focus of attention is on the rejection experience. The difference is the perspective from which they're focusing on this element of their history. Avoidance, by contrast, involves focusing one's attention on another facet of one's experience, or on a different experience altogether (see Kross et al., 2012, for a discussion).

Another question concerning distancing is how it relates to *reappraisal*, a term that is commonly used to refer to a specific emotion regulation strategy (e.g., Gross, 1998), as well as a general process that involves changing the way one thinks about their circumstances (Kross & Ayduk, 2017). To the extent that shifting from an immersed to a distanced viewpoint involves changing one's perspective, distancing *de facto* involves reappraising. Indeed, a large amount of research indicates that when people adopt a distanced perspective, either because they are asked to do so in the context of experiments or because they do so spontaneously, they change how they think about their circumstances. That said, there are a potentially infinite number of ways one can reappraise a stimulus, and many commonly studied strategies of this sort (i.e., positively reinterpreting a stimulus) differ substantively from distancing (e.g., Webster et al., 2022).

The issue of how distancing relates to mindfulness also comes up frequently. Mindfulness is a multifaceted construct, encompassing multiple psychological processes, one of which is "decentering": the act of mentally stepping outside of the self and recognizing one's thoughts and feelings as processes happening in the mind, not as true reflections of reality (e.g., Moore et al., 2022). As such, decentering invokes the process of distancing, but typically additionally involves having people adopt a nonjudgmental nonreactive attitude toward how they relate to inner mental events (see Ayduk & Kross, 2018, for a more detailed discussion). Among other processes involved in mindfulness are present-focus awareness and cultivation of acceptance, as well as engaging in particular practices such as focusing attention on momentary bodily experiences, breathwork, and mantra

recitation. Thus, mindfulness is a broader and more heterogeneous construct than distancing (e.g., Baer, 2016).

### Distancing as an Emotion Regulation Process

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In an early article published on cognitive therapy, Aaron Beck (1970) suggested that distancing was a key mechanism that enables therapeutic change. The idea he advanced was that distancing was a necessary precondition for a client's ability to reframe how they think about aversive experiences. Beck's discussion of distancing differs markedly from the way many researchers have since studied this construct. The bulk of research in this space conceives of distancing as an emotion regulation *tool*, a type of psychological lever that can be pulled to help people manage their emotions. Beck's discussion by no means precludes distancing functioning in this capacity. It additionally suggests, however, that distancing functions as a condition that allows people to successfully implement cognitive reframing operations.

Far less research has tested Beck's (1970) thesis in the intervening years compared to work examining the role that distancing plays as a tool to promote emotion regulation. Yet, evidence has begun to accumulate supporting his assertion. For example, people's attempts to cognitively work through negative experiences typically elicit rumination when done from a first-person perspective—however, engaging in the same cognitive operation from a psychologically distanced perspective reduces emotional reactivity, leads to cognitive change, and adaptive meaning making over time (see Kross & Ayduk, 2017, for a review).

Beyond examining the role that distancing plays as an enabling condition that promotes cognitive change, researchers have also begun to examine whether distancing functions as a central process, or mediating mechanism in statistical terms, that explains how various cognitive interventions have their benefits. For example, researchers have found that psychological distancing partly explains how several cognitive interventions promote emotion regulation, including expressive writing (Park et al., 2016), reappraisal (Nook et al., 2017), mood disorder treatment (Bennett et al., 2021), and mindfulness interventions (e.g., Moore et al., 2022).

As we discuss below, accumulating evidence also suggests that distancing may play a role in explaining the benefits of additional behavioral strategies. For example, growing research suggests that the psychological mechanism that explains the impact of awe on prosocial outcomes (e.g., ethical decision making, generosity) is the “shrinking of the self”—a perspective shift in which one feels smaller when contemplating the vastness of an experience and the primacy one's egocentric concerns are diminished (Piff et al., 2015). Distancing may also play a role in partly explaining how rituals work (Hobson et al., 2018). In this vein, researchers speculate that one of the ways rituals improve emotion regulation is by helping people broaden their perspective, bringing them in touch with forces that are larger than themselves. Finally, the large literature on the down-regulatory effect of foreign (vs. native) language processing on emotional reactions has long speculated that psychological distance is a key mediating mechanism (e.g., Pavlenko, 2012).

### Distancing as an Emotion Regulation Tool

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So far, our discussion suggests that distancing serves as a common underlying mechanism that explains how a variety of emotion regulation interventions partly accrue their

benefits. Yet, it is also possible to conceive of distancing as a tool itself—that is, several lines of work have shown that distancing can be directly manipulated. Although early research on distancing focused on a small number of tools to help people shift their perspective, over the past 20 years we have learned that there are many ways of cultivating distance directly. Table 63.1 lists these tools, reviewing how they’re commonly referred to in the literature and operationalized.

For heuristic purposes, we organize our presentation of distancing tools into three categories: linguistic tools, conceptual tools, and behavioral tools (see Kross et al., 2023, for a more detailed exposition of this framework). Linguistic tools rely on capitalizing on existing linguistic structures to induce distance (e.g., foreign language use: Caldwell-Harris, 2015; distanced self-talk: Kross et al., 2014; generic “you”: Orvell et al., 2017; expressive writing: Pennebaker & Chung, 2007), conceptual tools directly manipulate the perspective people adopt when reflecting on emotionally evocative experiences (e.g., temporal distancing: Bruehlman-Senecal & Ayduk, 2015; detached reappraisal: Gross, 1998; visual self-distancing: Kross et al., 2012; mindfulness: Moore et al., 2022; big-picture appraisals: Travers-Hill et al., 2017), and behavioral tools include broader behavioral activities that indirectly cultivate distancing (e.g., “awe” activities: Anderson et al., 2018; rituals: Hobson et al., 2018).

Recognizing that there are multiple ways of inducing distance is important because it is possible that different types of distancing tools function differently for different people in different situations. For example, although some work has shown that adopting the perspective of a third-person visual observer provokes social anxiety (Schultz & Heimberg, 2008), other work has shown that using one’s name and other non-first-person singular pronouns, such as “you” (vs. thinking in the first-person using “I,” “me,” “my”) to work through anxiety prior to giving a public speech, alleviates such feelings (e.g., Kross et al., 2014).

Furthermore, different distancing tools may uniquely impact people’s appraisals. For example, temporal distancing operates by activating *appraisals of impermanence* (i.e., recognizing that the implications of a stressor and one’s emotional reactions to it will lose their significance with the passage of time). Distanced self-talk functions by activating *challenge* (e.g., “I have enough resources to deal with this situation”) versus *threat* (e.g., “The difficulty of the situation exceeds my resources”) appraisals. And awe works by shrinking how central one views the self in the world. These differences highlight the need to carefully study the nuances that characterize the operation of different distancing tools. They also raise questions about whether there are additive or multiplicative effects associated with the use of multiple tools jointly.

### Distancing via Others

The tools we list in Table 63.1 have been mostly studied at the intrapersonal level (i.e., people activating each tool on their own to regulate their emotions)—however, as Beck’s (1970) insightful commentary intimates, other people can themselves act as a distancing tool in at least two, often intertwined, ways. First, in situations where we do not access distancing tools on our own, either because we lack the motivation to do so or the know-how, other people can help us activate them by providing reminders or direct instruction (e.g., “Think about how this will feel in 10 years,” “Remember to become a fly-on-the-wall and watch yourself”), much like a therapist or coach does in professional settings.

**TABLE 63.1. Distancing Tools: Nomenclature, Operationalization, and Type of Distancing Manipulation**

Tools	Operationalization	Manipulation type
<u>Linguistic tools</u>		
Distanced self-talk	Referring to the self with second- or third-person singular pronouns and/or one's name while reflecting on a current stressor	Direct
Generic "you"	Using the word <i>you</i> generically to refer to the self (e.g., "You win some, you lose some") while reflecting on a current stressor	Direct
Foreign language use	Using a foreign language to reason about emotional issues	Indirect
Expressive writing	Writing repeatedly about one's deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding negative experiences	Indirect
<u>Conceptual tools</u>		
Temporal distancing	Taking on the perspective of a far-future (e.g., in 10 years) self while reflecting on a current stressor	Direct
Big-picture appraisals	Applying to a current stressor a series of big-picture appraisal themes (e.g., "This won't feel as bad in the future"; "Good things can even come out of bad events"; "What would you say if this were happening to someone else?")	Direct
Visual self-distancing	Reasoning about an emotional experience while visualizing the self in the experience from a third-person observer perspective	Direct
Detached reappraisal	Reflecting on a negative experience while adopting a neutral, nonemotional, third-party point of view	Direct
Mindfulness	Adopting a nonjudgmental, nonreactive stance to inner experience, observing and describing experiences, and acting with awareness	Direct and indirect
<u>Behavioral tools</u>		
Rituals	Enacting a predetermined order of actions and are often tied to socially and culturally shared meaning systems	Indirect
"Awe" activities	Engaging in activities (e.g., nature walks) that lead participants to perceive vastness to such a dramatic degree (particularly in comparison to the self) that it forces them to alter their default frame of reference	Indirect

Second, because other people often aren't going through the same emotionally trying issues that we are experiencing (and hence are distanced observers by definition), they can do the distancing for us—for example, by nudging us to consider alternative interpretations, or by role playing different perspectives (e.g., Lee et al., 2020).

### Moving Forward

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Numerous questions surrounding the concept of distancing persist. Here we highlight four future research directions that stand out to us as particularly urgent for moving work in this area forward.

The first direction involves examining how different distancing strategies interact, both in the laboratory and in daily life. The overwhelming majority of work in this area has focused on carefully profiling how the individual distancing tactic operates. Yet, in daily life people often use multiple strategies (e.g., Ford et al., 2019). Thus, understanding whether people benefit additively or multiplicatively from using specific combinations of distancing tools is important. Future research should also examine more broadly how distancing tools interact with other strategies (e.g., attention deployment, situation selection). It is possible that the most beneficial emotion regulation outcomes accrue from utilizing multiple types of tools together.

Another important future research direction is to examine the role of individual differences. Different people might respond differently to the same distancing interventions (e.g., Kross et al., 2017) and the effectiveness of any one distancing tool may be both person and situation specific. For example, under highly stressful situations, the use of distanced self-talk over other distancing tools might be strategically advantageous because the former is less effortful and thus, easier to implement (see Orvell et al., 2019, for a discussion). Similarly, temporal distancing might be useful for facilitating self-reflection when facing stressful situations that are limited in duration, but less effective for chronic stressors. These considerations suggest that adopting a “toolbox approach” to emotion regulation (Fujita et al., 2020) might be instrumental in allowing researchers to ask interesting questions about person  $\times$  situation  $\times$  strategy “fits” that underlie patterns of adaptive emotion regulation.

Research also needs to examine when distancing is suboptimal. To the extent that distancing is a process, its utility should depend on the circumstances under which it is activated. If, for example, one's goal is to amplify (vs. reduce) positive feelings, adopting a distanced perspective is less functional than an immersed perspective (Gruber et al., 2009). Similarly, if a person's goal is to increase their negative feelings to stoke collective action against discrimination, distancing may not be the emotion regulation strategy of choice (Green et al., 2019). Thus, identifying when distance helps people achieve their goals and when it does not is important.

Finally, more work is needed to examine the real-world implications of distancing for alleviating suffering. The bulk of work on distancing has been performed in the laboratory. Although there are exceptions (e.g., Nook et al., 2022; Orvell et al., 2022), we need to understand how these strategies operate in daily life amid the competing forces that might work to reduce the potential salubrious impact of these tools that has been demonstrated in the laboratory. Understanding what the roadblocks are for translating basic scientific research on distancing into scalable, efficacious interventions is an urgent need if work in this area is to move beyond having a basic science impact.



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