



The
**Chatter
Toolbox**



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Chatter is a common problem that many people experience: We try to think through our problems logically but our minds run amok instead. We focus our attention inward, hoping to tap into our inner coach, but find our inner critic.

Fortunately, science-based tools exist to help people resolve the tension between getting caught in negative thought spirals and thinking clearly and constructively. Scientists have identified how these tools work in isolation. But different tools work for different people in different situations. **The challenge for you is to figure out which combination of these practices works best when you find yourself getting stuck.**

The 10 Chatter Tools listed below represent a small sample of the techniques you can use to help quiet your mental chatter—and hopefully harness it to make your inner voice work for you rather than against you.

You can learn more about the science behind these techniques and many others in *Chatter: The Voice in Our Head, Why it Matters, and How to Harness It* by Ethan Kross (Crown, on sale January 26, 2021) or at ethankross.com.

Tool One

Use Distanced Self-Talk

The ability to “step back” from the echo chamber of our own minds so we can adopt a more objective perspective is an important tool for combating chatter. One way to create distance when you’re experiencing chatter involves language. When you’re trying to work through a difficult experience, use your own name to coach yourself through a problem. Doing so is linked with less activation in brain networks associated with rumination and leads to improved performance under stress, wiser thinking, and less negative emotion. Another way to think about your experience from a distanced perspective is to imagine what you would say to a friend experiencing the same problem as you. Think about the advice you’d give them and then apply it to yourself.

Tool Two

Zoom Out

Chatter involves narrowly focusing on the problems we’re experiencing. A natural antidote involves broadening our perspective. To do this, think about how the experience you’re worrying about compares to other adverse events you (or others) have successfully endured, and how other people you admire would respond to the same situation.

Tool Three

Rise to the Challenge

Chatter is often triggered when we interpret a situation as a threat—something we can’t manage. To aid your inner voice, reinterpret the situation as a challenge that you can handle by, for example, reminding yourself how you’ve succeeded in similar situations in the past, or by using distanced self-talk in Tool One.

Tool Four

Write Expressively

Write about your deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding a chatter-provoking experience for fifteen- to twenty-minutes a day for one to three consecutive days. Really let yourself go as you jot down your thoughts; don’t worry about grammar or spelling. Focusing on your experience from the perspective of a narrator provides you with distance from the experience, which in turn helps you make sense of your feelings in ways that improve your inner conversation and how you feel over time.

Tool Five

Perform a Ritual

Performing a ritual—a fixed sequence of behaviors that is infused with meaning—provides people with a sense of order and control that can be helpful when they’re experiencing chatter. Although many of the rituals we engage in (e.g., silent prayer, meditation) are passed down to us from our families and cultures, performing rituals that you create can likewise be effective for quieting chatter.



Tool Six

Build Your Chatter Board

Finding the right people to talk to, those who are skilled at providing both support and advice for how to manage your chatter, is the first step to leveraging the power of others. Depending on the domain in which you're experiencing chatter, different people will be uniquely equipped to do this. While a colleague may be skilled at advising you on work problems, your partner may be better suited to advising you on interpersonal dilemmas. The more people you can turn to for chatter-support in any particular domain, the better.

Tool Seven

Minimize Passive Social Media Usage

Voyeuristically scrolling through the curated newsfeeds of others on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms can be a potent trigger of self-defeating, envy-inducing thought spirals. One way to mitigate this outcome is to curb your passive social media usage. Take a break from social media or, if you have to use it, use the technology to have meaningful social exchanges with members of your network at opportune times (i.e., not when you have work or other engagements to attend to).

Tool Eight

Create Order in Your Environment

When we experience chatter, we often feel like we're losing control. Our thought spirals control us rather than the other way around. When this happens, you can boost your sense of control by imposing order on your surroundings. Organizing your environment can take many forms: Tidying up your work or home spaces, making a list, and arranging the different objects that surround you are all common examples.

Tool Nine

Make Room for the Great Outdoors

Spending time in green spaces helps replenish the brain's limited attentional reserves, which are useful for combating chatter. You can surround the spaces in which you live and work with greenery to create environments that are a boon to the inner voice.

Tool Ten

Seek Out Awe-Inspiring Experiences

Feeling awe allows us to transcend our current concerns in ways that put our problems in perspective. Of course, the experiences that provide people with awe vary. For some, it is exposure to a breathtaking vista. For someone else, it's the memory of a child accomplishing an amazing feat. For others, it may be staring at a remarkable piece of art. Find what instills a sense of awe within you, and then try to cultivate that emotion when you find your internal dialogue spiraling. You can also think about creating spaces around you that elicit feelings of awe each time you glance at them.



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