

let's talk

Our inner voice is incredibly powerful, says Ethan Kross, Ph.D., the author of *Chatter*. It can make us happier and more successful—or it can hurt our health and even make us age faster.

Here, he explains how to transform negative self-talk into positive. *by Pam O'Brien*

What exactly does our inner voice do for us?

At the most basic level, we use it to keep nuggets of information in our heads. If I were to ask you to memorize a phone number, you would be using your inner voice to do that. It also acts like a reminder app: A verbal thought will pop into your head about something you have to do. The inner voice is considered a part of our verbal working memory system.

But I often refer to it as a Swiss Army knife of the mind because in addition to memory, we use it for lots of things, like creativity and planning. We might silently rehearse what we're going to say before a big presentation, for instance. We also often have an inner monologue running through our head so we can make sense of experiences. It helps us find meaning in ways that shape our identity. And we use our inner voice to coach ourselves and say, Here's how you're going to handle this situation. Giving yourself a pep talk—that's your inner voice at work.

Then how does it become a liability?

Ironically, when we try to use our inner voice to work through problems or make sense of a negative situation, it often backfires. That's because we tend

to focus narrowly on the situation at hand, like why did that person insult me? And that just ends up magnifying the negativity. One bad thought leads to another, and soon we spiral into ruminating, and we get stuck there. Another example is when we start criticizing ourselves and we get sucked into a loop of thinking how terrible we are. This is what I call chatter—the dark side of our inner voice. Chatter is a big problem. It undermines our performance at work, and it damages our social relationships and our health. And during the pandemic, the uncertainty and loss of control we've all been feeling has fueled chatter.

In what ways does chatter hurt our health?

It plays a role in prolonging our stress response, and when stress remains chronically elevated over time, it exerts wear and tear on the body. That can result in negative conditions like sleep problems, cardiovascular disease, and even certain cancers.

What's really interesting is the science showing how chatter, in the form of chronic stress, can affect our DNA. Emerging evidence suggests that it plays a role in turning on genes that are

involved in inflammation and turning off genes that fight viruses. Not only that, but chronic stress can also affect how fast our telomeres, the protective caps at the end of our chromosomes, start to shorten, which is associated with cellular aging.

How can we redirect our self-talk and make it healthier and more positive overall?

Fortunately, there are different tools we can use. When you're dealing with a problem, take a step back and reframe the way you see

it. Just as it's easier to give advice to other people, if we can talk to ourselves in the second or third person, it distances us from the emotion and allows us to be more objective. So in your head, speak to yourself using your name.

Interestingly, a number of famous people have said they do this, like Jennifer Lawrence and LeBron James. Research shows that when you use this technique, you're less likely to ruminate and more likely to think wisely. It's psychological jujitsu. It changes your perspective so you can give yourself better advice on how to deal with problems.

Also, impose order in your surroundings. When we experience chatter, we feel like we are out of control. Regain it by tidying your desk or clearing your kitchen table. Organizing your physical space provides you with a sense of mental order.

Go outside. Spending time in nature helps replenish your brain, which can help reduce chatter. Take a walk through a leafy neighborhood, or go hiking in the park. If you can't get out of the house, gaze at a photo of a nature scene—science finds it has a similar effect. And buy some plants. Incorporating greenery into your space can help too. ■



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