

Silent Third Person Self-Talk Facilitates Emotion Regulation*

By Christopher Bergland. Adapted from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201707/silent-third-person-self-talk-facilitates-emotion-regulation>

(Thank you Lyman!)

During times of distress or when you're reminiscing about painful experiences from your past, talking to yourself in the third person—by using non-first-person pronouns or your own name—can help you stay calm, cool, and collected without much additional cognitive effort, according to a new dual-pronged study. This third person self-talk research was published online ahead of print July 3 in *Scientific Reports*.

When using third person or "non-first-person" pronouns during self-talk, you *do not* use pronouns such as I, me, or my. Instead, you speak to yourself (either in a hushed tone or silently inside your own head) using pronouns such as you, he, she, it, or your own first or last name. In recent years, a wide range of studies have found that third person self-talk can improve emotion regulation and self-control by facilitating self-distancing and reducing egocentric bias.

The latest neuroscience-based collaborative research on third person self-talk was conducted by legendary pioneering researcher, Ethan Kross, in his Emotion and Self-Control Lab at University of Michigan, and Jason Moser, who is Director of the Michigan State University Clinical Psychophysiology Lab. Each of these labs used different methods to monitor brain activity during the cognitive process of speaking silently to oneself using the study participant's own name or the first-person pronoun "I" while viewing neutral and disturbing images or recalling a negative autobiographical memory.

In the abstract of this study, the authors describe the impetus and hypothesis behind their latest self-talk lab experiments: "Does silently talking to yourself in the third-person constitute a relatively effortless form of self-control? We hypothesized that it does under the premise that third-person self-talk leads people to think about the self similar to how they think about others, which provides them with the psychological distance needed to facilitate self-control."

As an ultra-endurance athlete, I stumbled on the power of using third person self-talk to facilitate emotion regulation and self-control early in my career. Anecdotally, I can corroborate everything that Kross and Moser report in their July 2017 paper. As an example, during physically grueling and emotionally taxing endurance races such the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon through Death Valley in 120° F (or hotter) temperatures, I would constantly speak to myself using non-first-person pronouns or my own name.

More specifically, instead of psyching myself out by having a defeatist first person monologue such as: "There's no way I can make it to the finish line. My body is overheating and the soles of my feet are on fire. I can't take it anymore. I have to stop." I would flip the script of my silent inner dialogue and talk to myself (like a broken record) in a bold, third-person coaching voice: "You can do this, Chris!! You've lived through other painful experiences in your life, you'll live through other painful experiences in your life, you'll live through this. Don't give up now. Dammit! You have to keep going. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and acting like a wimp. Move it!"

In the first experiment for the recent third person self-talk study, researchers at Moser's MSU Clinical Psychophysiology Lab monitored emotional brain activity using electroencephalography (EEG) and found that emotional distress decreased very quickly (within 1 second) when someone began referring to him or herself in the third person.

Moser's research team at MSU also measured participants' effort-related brain activity and found that using third person self-talk was a seemingly effortless on-the-spot strategy for instantaneously regulating one's emotions. The cognitive effort related to changes in brain activity using third person self-talk was minimal. In contrast, previous research has found that other forms of emotion regulation tend to require considerable thought and cognitive effort.

Jason Moser summed up the main takeaway of his EEG third person self-talk experiment in a statement: "Essentially, we think referring to yourself in the third person leads people to think about themselves more similar to how they think about others, and you can see evidence for this in the brain. That helps people gain a tiny bit of psychological distance from their experiences, which can often be useful for regulating emotions."

In the second experiment of this dual-pronged study, psychology professor Ethan Kross and colleagues in the [Emotion and Self-Control Lab](#) at the University of Michigan had participants reflect on negative or painful autobiographical memories using either first person or third person language. Participants were instructed to either use "I" or the person's own name while recounting emotionally painful past experiences as their brain activity was being monitored using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

Kross and U-M colleagues found that study participants using third person self-talk displayed less brain activity in the self-referential processing region (i.e., medial prefrontal cortex) that is commonly associated with reflecting on painful emotional experiences and rumination. Additionally, talking to oneself silently in the third person required no more cognitive effort than first person self-talk. These findings corroborate the empirical evidence from Moser's arm of the study and suggest that third person self-talk improves emotion regulation without engaging cognitive control.

In a statement, Kross acknowledges that more research is needed before drawing any conclusions. He sums up the most important takeaway from both of these experiments: "What's really exciting here is that the brain data from these two complementary experiments suggest that third-person self-talk may constitute a relatively effortless form of emotion regulation. If this ends up being true—we won't know until more research is done—there are lots of important implications these findings have for our basic understanding of how self-control works, and for how to help people control their emotions in daily life."

In May 2017, I wrote a Psychology Today blog post, "[Gutsy Third Person Self-Talk Utilizes the Vagus Nerve](#)," which is part of a nine-part [Vagus Nerve Survival Guide](#). For this series, I curated countless clinical studies into a one-stop resource of various techniques to improve vagal tone and reduce "fight-or-flight" sympathetic nervous system responses. In the 'gutsy third person self-talk' post, I reference Ethan Kross' seminal work, along with giving other practical actionable advice on ways to improve third person self-distancing and reduce egocentric bias. As an example, this includes techniques such as [narrative expressive journaling](#), "fly on the wall" methods used in the operating room by surgeons, or creating a sense of "[the small self](#)" by seeking awe-inducing experiences in nature.

It's nice to have more neuroscience-based evidence that corroborates previous findings on the emotion regulation benefits of third person self-talk. Stay tuned for more on this topic. Moser and Kross are continuing to join forces. And their labs are currently conducting more collaborative research to pinpoint best practices for using third person self-talk as a readily accessible emotion-regulation strategy you can use discreetly just about anytime or anywhere.

*Technically, this seems more like 2nd person than 3rd person, but who's counting?
