GAINING PERSPECTIVE ON NEGATIVE EVENTS

Difficulty: MODERATE | Frequency: VARIABLE | Duration: 5 MINS

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Research suggests that it can be beneficial to process and reflect on our negative feelings. But when we try to do so, it's easy to start ruminating—to get caught in the loop of repetitive, painful thoughts.

Gaining perspective on negative events, or "self-distancing," is a practice that allows us to view our feelings and experiences from an outsider's perspective. Sometimes this is accomplished with language—saying "you" or "she" rather than "I"—and other times it's accomplished by imagining an experience from a distance rather than through our own eyes.

Studies have shown that taking this more distanced perspective can help reduce anger, sadness, and other negative emotions around a distressing event, as well as minimize recurring thoughts.

TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes. You can repeat this exercise each time you find yourself ruminating on a negative experience.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Take a few moments to bring to mind a difficult experience you are dealing with: some event in the past that made you sad or angry, for example, or some anxiety or worry you have about the future.
2. Try to understand your feelings using "you," "he/she," and "[your own name]" as much as possible. If your name is Jane, for example, you would ask yourself, "Why does Jane feel this way? What are the underlying causes and reasons for her feelings?" If you begin to see the event in your mind, try to watch through the eyes of a distanced, third-party observer, rather than through your own eyes.
3. The goal here is not to avoid or separate from your feelings, but to analyze them from a clearer and more helpful vantage point. Spend three minutes reflecting in this way, writing down your thoughts if you feel so inclined.
4. Although it may feel unnatural to talk to yourself in the third person, research suggests that it can help you confront difficult feelings without becoming overwhelmed by them. Eventually, you might be able to use this kind of self-talk during difficult events as they're unfolding, such as a stressful task at work or a particularly challenging social situation.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Kross, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Park, J., Burson, A., Dougherty, A., Shablack, H., Bremner, R., Moser, J., & Ayduk, O. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*, 304-324.

Researchers told participants that they would have to engage in a stressful task: either trying to make a good first impression on someone or giving a videotaped speech. Some participants were instructed to reflect on their feelings from a self-distanced perspective (referring to themselves as “you,” “he/she,” or “[their own name]”), while others reflected on their feelings in the usual way (using “I”).

The self-distanced participants saw the stressful task as more of a positive challenge than a threat, performed better on it (as rated by judges), recovered from their anxiety more quickly, felt less shame about their performance, and ruminated less afterward than the other group.

WHY TO TRY IT

In everyday life, we typically think and talk about ourselves using first-person pronouns like “I” and “me.” Using self-distanced language—like “you” or “he”—means that we’re referring to ourselves the way we usually refer to others. This linguistic shift seems to create a cognitive shift, allowing us to gain perspective on whatever is going on.

Some studies also suggest that self-distancing encourages us to think in more abstract terms: Rather than focusing on the concrete details and feelings involved in a particular event, we’re more likely to have realizations, generate deeper understanding, and find closure. This allows us to deal with negative feelings constructively, without getting swept up in them.

SOURCES

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This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.