lexoshpejt

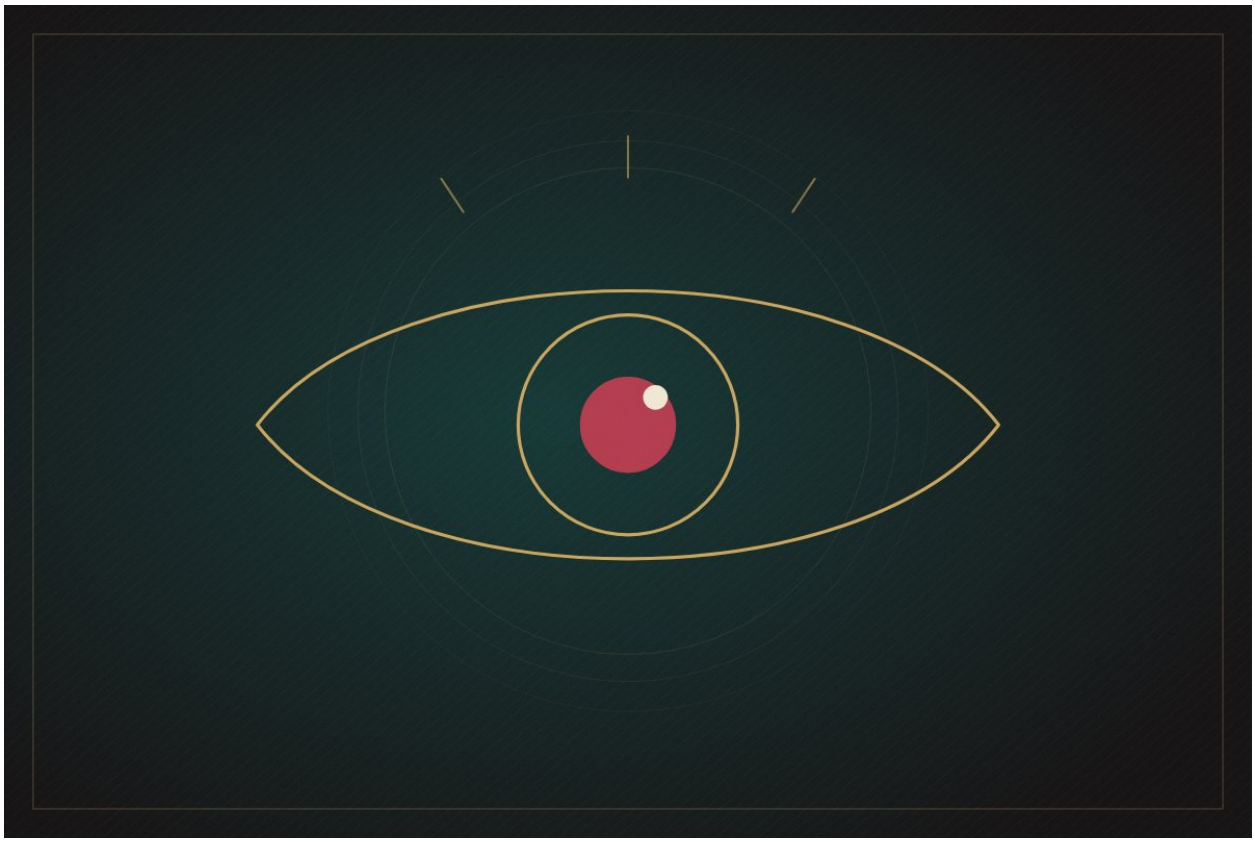
Awareness

Talk to yourself as to a friend: self-distancing according to Ethan Kross

Why using your own name instead of "I" changes how you cope with stress, and other ways of seeing yourself from a distance

3 November 2026 / 5 min read

Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



Original illustration by the lexoshpejt editors. Not a historical photograph or object.

When a friend tells us about a problem, we often see the solution clearly. When the problem is ours, our mind fills with emotion and we find it hard to think. Psychologists call this the difference between an immersed perspective and a distanced one.

Kross's research

The American psychologist Ethan Kross and his colleague Özlem Ayduk have studied for years the ways we can see ourselves "from outside". They call this **self-distancing**. In their studies, people who recalled a painful experience by seeing themselves as if from afar, as an observer, reacted with less negative emotion and understood the experience better, compared with those who relived it from within.

Talking to yourself in the third person

In a series of experiments in 2014, Kross and colleagues asked participants to prepare for an unexpected speech in front of a panel, a task that causes great stress. Some were told to think about the situation using "I" ("why am I anxious?"), others using their own name ("why is Ana anxious?"). Those who used their name reported less anxiety, appraised the situation more as a challenge than a threat, and their speeches were rated as better by observers.

> *When you speak to yourself by name, you give yourself the same clarity you would give a dear friend.*

Other ways of distancing

- **The observer perspective:** imagine the scene as if you were watching it from a corner of the room.
- **Time travel:** ask "how will I see this in a year? In ten years?".
- **Advice for a friend:** "what would I say to someone I love, if they were in my place?".
- **Writing:** writing about a problem puts it a little further from the mind.

The limits

The effects in these studies are usually small to medium, and not all have been replicated in every context. Distancing should not turn into avoidance: the aim is not to stop feeling, but not to drown in what we feel.

Solomon's paradox

King Solomon of the biblical stories was known for the wisdom with which he advised others, but, according to the same stories, his personal life was full of poor decisions. Igor Grossmann and Ethan Kross used this figure to name a familiar phenomenon: we reason more wisely about other people's problems than about our own. In their 2014 study, they found that when people thought about a conflict in their own relationship as

if it belonged to a friend, their reasoning became just as wise as when advising someone else. Distance removed the difference.

A quick effect

In 2017 Jason Moser and colleagues measured brain activity while participants looked at disturbing images or recalled painful experiences, talking to themselves in the first or the third person. Using their own name reduced brain activity linked to negative emotions within one second. At the same time, there were no signs of great mental effort in the brain areas linked to control. This suggests that linguistic distancing may be a relatively easy way of regulating emotions in difficult moments.

"This too shall pass"

Distance need not be only spatial or linguistic. Emily Bruehlman-Senecal and Özlem Ayduk studied **temporal distancing** in 2015. Participants who thought about how they would feel about a distressing event in ten years' time, rather than tomorrow, reported less distress. The question "How will I see this in a few years?" helped them realise that their state was temporary. According to the authors, the feeling that "this too shall pass" is one of the main mechanisms behind the effect.

The superhero effect

Children can also benefit from distancing. In 2017 Rachel White and colleagues asked 4- and 6-year-old children to do a boring task on a computer, while an attractive game on a tablet sat beside them. Some children were encouraged to think of themselves in the third person, using their own name, and others to pretend to be a favourite character, such as Batman. The children who played the role of the character stayed on the task longer. The researchers humorously called it the "Batman effect".

Writing as distancing

Another well-known way of creating distance is writing. The psychologist James Pennebaker has shown in a series of studies since the 1980s that writing about difficult experiences for 15 to 20 minutes a day, for three or four days, is associated in many cases with small improvements in health and well-being. Kross and others have suggested that one of the reasons may be that writing forces us to organise the experience into a story and see it from outside. The effects in later studies have been more modest.

How to try it today

1. The next time you feel overwhelmed, pause and say to yourself: "[Your name], what is going on?"
2. Continue with the question: "What would I tell a friend in this situation?"
3. Finish with: "How will I see this in a year?"

Sources

Kross, E. & Ayduk, O. (2017). Self-distancing: Theory, research, and current directions. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 55, 81–136. doi:10.1016/bs.aesp.2016.10.002

Kross, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Park, J. et al. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(2), 304–324. doi:10.1037/a0035173

Kross, E. (2021). *Chatter*. New York: Crown. WorldCat

Grossmann, I. & Kross, E. (2014). Exploring Solomon's paradox: Self-distancing eliminates the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning about close relationships in younger and older adults. *Psychological Science*, 25(8), 1571–1580. PubMed

Moser, J. S., Dougherty, A., Mattson, W. I. et al. (2017). Third-person self-talk facilitates emotion regulation without engaging cognitive control: Converging evidence from ERP and fMRI. *Scientific Reports*, 7, 4519. PubMed

Bruehlman-Senecal, E. & Ayduk, O. (2015). This too shall pass: Temporal distance and the regulation of emotional distress. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108(2), 356–375. PubMed

White, R. E., Prager, E. O., Schaefer, C. et al. (2017). The "Batman effect": Improving perseverance in young children. *Child Development*, 88(5), 1563–1571. PubMed

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychological Science*, 8(3), 162–166. WorldCat

Read online: https://www.lexoshpejt.com/en/article/self-distancing