

**Mindset**

Exercise



20 mins.



Client



No

Using Self-Distanced Language to Gain Perspective on Negative Events

Negative experiences are an unfortunate yet unavoidable part of life. While it is necessary to reflect on one's reactions to negative experiences, we must not become ensnared in an unhelpful rumination cycle that only intensifies negative affect [1]. We must learn to look at these experiences objectively. Self-talk that facilitates emotion regulation across a range of emotionally intense experiences is an effective way to take a step back and reflect on experiences objectively [2].

The way we refer to the self during reflection and introspection influences our ability to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behavior [3]. For instance, when reflecting on a negative experience, immersed self-talk that applies first-person pronouns like "I" and "me" increases self-criticism, anxiety, feelings of shame, and rumination [3]. However, referring to oneself by name or using third-person pronouns, also known as *illeism*, creates psychological distance between the self and the experience. This kind of self-distancing language enhances self-regulation, improves self-control [2], aids adaptive self-reflection, and decreases emotional distress within one second of using non-first-person pronouns [3]. In short, distanced self-talk facilitates emotion regulation during distress and when recalling past negative experiences.

Self-distanced language enables individuals to better understand their reactions to negative experiences. Indeed, third-person self-talk involves less brain activity in the regions of the brain associated with rumination [3] and emotional reactivity [4] and reduces shame when remembering negative events weeks or months later [5]. Moreover, self-distancing helps shift the focus from recounting the emotionally evocative details of a negative experience to recasting it in ways that nurture insight, growth, and closure [3]. This exercise will help clients adjust their internal monologue and employ third-person pronouns to promote a new, objective perspective on negative experiences. In doing so, clients can create a psychological distance between themselves and their experiences that enables reflection without rumination.



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help clients gain perspective on negative experiences by using self-distanced language as a regulatory mechanism. Taking a step back to analyze and reflect on their feelings allows clients to better process negative events without getting caught in a rumination cycle of repetitive, unhelpful thoughts.



Advice

- This is a simple and effective exercise that clients can repeat when ruminating on a negative experience. This exercise can effectively change one's perspective on potentially negative future events that are a source of anxiety or worry. The steps can be rephrased to address a future rather past event.
- While it may initially feel unnatural for some clients, referring to oneself in the third person has been shown to help individuals gain perspective on negative experiences and manage intense emotions. In time, self-distanced language will become easier and feel more natural.
- Third-person self-talk is a relatively simple, low-effort emotion regulation strategy. However, it is important to emphasize that the goal of this exercise is not to avoid unpleasant emotions or experiences but to acknowledge and analyze them from a clearer, more objective vantage point.



References

1. Kross, E., & Ayduk, O. (2011). Making meaning out of negative experiences by self-distancing. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20, 187-191.
2. Orvell, A., Vickers, B. D., Drake, B., Verduyn, P., Ayduk, O., Moser, J., & Kross, E. (2021). Does distanced self-talk facilitate emotion regulation across a range of emotionally intense experiences? *Clinical Psychological Science*, 9, 68-78.
3. 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.
4. Orvell, A., Ayduk, O., Moser, J., Gelman, S. A., & Kross, E. (2019). Linguistic shifts: A relatively effortless route to emotion regulation? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28, 567-573.
5. Ayduk, Ö., & Kross, E. (2010). From a distance: Implications of spontaneous self-distancing for adaptive self-reflection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 809.



Using Self-Distanced Language to Gain Perspective on Negative Events

Sometimes, you might experience things that make you feel strong negative emotions. It is easy to dwell on these experiences and become stuck in a cycle of unhelpful thinking that can leave you feeling overwhelmed. However, gaining a more objective perspective will help you think clearly and rationally about difficult times and manage the associated intense emotions. Self-distancing is a simple and effective way to gain this perspective.

Self-distancing involves talking to yourself in the third person. This means referring to yourself using your name or pronouns like “he” and “she” instead of “I” or “me,” for example.

Self-distancing will help you take a step back from a situation so you can think about it logically and reflect on difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them. In doing so, you will see the bigger picture and recognize that things are, perhaps, not so bad after all.

This exercise will guide you through the practice of using self-distanced language to gain perspective on negative experiences. It is important to note that self-distancing is not about avoiding your emotions - it is about learning to consider them from a more objective and helpful perspective.

Step 1: Identifying a negative experience

First, take a moment to think about something negative that you have experienced in the past. Perhaps something related to your career, home life, finances, relationships, or any other area of life. While this does not have to be something you are currently going through, it should be an experience that caused you to feel negative emotions, like anger, shame, guilt, or anxiety, for example.

When you have identified a negative experience that you would like to gain perspective on, write it down in the space below.



Step 2: Self-distanced reflection

In this step, you will reflect on the negative experience using third-person pronouns and/or your name. Third-person pronouns include she, her, he, him, they, them, and their. It may feel a little strange to use this kind of language at first, but it will help distance yourself from experience detailed in the previous step so that you can look at it from a more rational, objective, and neutral perspective.

Now, take some time to reflect on the following questions and, when you are ready to do so, write your responses in the space provided. Remember, you should avoid using first-person pronouns like “I” or “me” and only use third-person pronouns and/or your name. If required, examples of self-distanced responses can be found in Appendix.

1. How did this experience make [your name] feel?

2. Why did [your name] feel this way about the experience?

3. What thoughts does [your name] have when looking back on this experience?



4. How do these thoughts make [your name] feel?

5. What would [your name] say to someone else who experienced the same experience?

Step 3: Reflection

- In what ways has this exercise helped you gain perspective on this negative experience?
- After completing the exercise, how do you feel about the experience?
- What insights have you gained since completing this exercise?
- How did it feel to look back on the negative experience from a third-person perspective?
- What did you find most challenging about this exercise? And why?

Appendix: Examples of negative experiences and responses to questions

Example 1:

Susan argued with one of her oldest friends.

1. How did this experience make Susan feel?

Susan felt terrible. She made a fool of herself, and she was upset about what was said.

2. Why did Susan feel this way about the experience?

She felt this way because she knew the situation didn't need to unfold like this. She could have addressed the issue in a more calm and open-minded way.

3. What thoughts does Susan have when looking back on this experience?

Susan thinks she should be ashamed of what she said to her closest friend.

4. How do these thoughts make Susan feel?

These thoughts make Susan feel terrible. She is so remorseful.

5. What would Susan say to someone else who had the same experience?

Susan would say that everyone has disagreements, even with those they love. What matters now is how to move on from the argument - friendship is stronger than one bad experience.

Example 2:

Robert delivered an important presentation to his managers and colleagues that did not go well.

1. How did this experience make Robert feel?

He felt embarrassed and disappointed in himself. Robert never wants to give a presentation again.

2. Why did Robert feel this way about the experience?

Robert did not treat the presentation professionally. He can do better and is frustrated because he didn't prepare enough.

3. What thoughts does Robert have when looking back on this experience?

Robert thinks the whole thing was a shambles, and he let himself and his team down.



4. How do these thoughts make Robert feel?

These thoughts make Robert feel overwhelmed and worthless - he wants to avoid giving presentations in the future.

5. What would Robert say to someone else who had the same experience?

If someone else had this experience, Robert would tell them: "Sometimes things don't go to plan. It's a fact of life. Your colleagues know this and understand that you are very capable and skilled at your job. Next time, spend more time preparing and rehearsing, and things will go better. You can do this!"

Example 3:

Rory was going through a difficult divorce, and his friends were not there to support him through his experience.

1. How did this experience make Rory feel?

Rory felt alone and betrayed by his friends.

2. Why did Rory feel this way about the experience?

Rory felt this way because friends should be supportive - they abandoned him when he needed them most.

3. What thoughts does Rory have when looking back on this experience?

When Rory looks back at this experience, he thinks his friendships are not as strong as he assumed.

4. How do these thoughts make Rory feel?

These thoughts make Rory feel sad, isolated, and unloved.

5. What would Rory say to someone who had the same experience?

Rory would tell them: "Your friends might not have known that you needed more support. You were always putting on a brave face. In the future, you could explain your needs to friends so they can be there to help you."