
**Chatter**

The Voice in Our Head, Why It Matters, and How to Harness It

By Ethan Kross

13-minute read

***Synopsis***

*Chatter* (2021) directly addresses our inner voice, which, too often, turns into our inner critic. Backed with information from countless studies, *Chatter* delivers a wealth of strategies to help free us from the negative thought spirals that dominate our lives.

***Who is it for?***

- People who have trouble finding mental quiet
- Those hoping to learn how to give support to loved ones
- Anyone interested in how our brains function

***About the author***

Ethan Kross attended the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University and is a leading expert on the behavior of the mind. Currently, Kross is the director of the Emotion & Self Control Laboratory at the University of Michigan. His work has been published in the *New York Times,* the *New Yorker*, and the *Wall Street Journal* – and he's given policy advice to the White House.

### *What's in it for me? Learn how to turn down your nagging inner voice.*

Nowadays, we're constantly urged to "be present." Yet humans spend more than a third of our lives caught up in streams of self-talk, as we reflect, reminisce, or play out scenarios in our heads.

Our inner voices are an evolutionary adaptation and have enabled humans to become the only species on Earth with the ability for introspection. But while they allow us to problem-solve and make wise decisions, too much introspection can be a bad thing.

That's because all too often, introspection turns to *chatter* – a loop of negative self-talk. Luckily, our brains are built with all the tools we need to turn down the chatter. These blinks will teach you how to turn your worst critic into your best friend.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- different thinking strategies to get distance from your chatter;
- why connecting with nature helps you recharge; and
- how to find the appropriate advisors to help you with your problems.

### *Humans developed an inner voice so we could evaluate our past and prepare for the future.*

Let's admit it: we all talk to ourselves. While that might not be a shocking thing to do, it *is* shocking just how fast we do it. One study published in 1990 analyzed people's rate of inner speech and clocked it at roughly four thousand words per minute. To say those same words out loud would take close to an hour!

Our inner voices have been annoying humans for a long time; both the early Christian mystics and Chinese Buddhists were frustrated by their inner voices' ability to incessantly interrupt their meditation. It's also interesting to note that people who stutter out loud say their inner voices speak clearly. And deaf people report using sign language to speak to themselves.

Clearly, our inner voices are an inherent part of our minds. But why? According to the rules of natural selection, introspection must come with an evolutionary advantage.

**The key message here is: Humans developed an inner voice so we could evaluate our past and prepare for the future.**

Unlike other species, we find meaning in our experiences. That's because our inner voices facilitate our ability for introspection, which allows us to learn from our mistakes and plan for future events.

We develop this voice during infancy, and – as we learn to speak – it helps us with self-control. Studying toddlers speak to themselves aloud; Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky posited that by mimicking the instructions received from parents, children were learning to manage emotions. Then, as they grow older, they begin to use their own words to harness self-control.

In adulthood, our inner voices help us keep track of the goals we strive for. Whether we're working toward a promotion or winning the heart of our crush, verbal thoughts pop up to remind us of our purpose. And we can also run mental simulations. For instance, considering various texts we could send to that crush and what effect they might have.

Ultimately, our inner voices greatly contribute to how we shape our identities. That's because, through the process of introspection and reflection, we create meaningful narratives about ourselves. And having a solid identity helps us to mature, understand our values, and weather tumultuous times.

### *Chatter routinely gets in the way of our functioning in the world.*

What's easier to memorize, 800-520-6755 or 8005206755? The first, right? That's because it's only three pieces of information, while the second set is an unbroken string of ten. This is a classic example of how our minds can only hold three to five pieces of information at any single moment – and that's under optimum conditions. If there's too much chatter, our minds tend to slow down dramatically.

Our brains' executive functions are a little like a computer. They enable us to focus on what's relevant, tune out distractions, and direct our energy to the task at hand, whether that's writing an email or cooking an elaborate meal. These functions kick in when instinct alone isn't enough to drive our behavior. But, like a computer, they can only handle so much data at any one time; when we ruminate too much, we sap the neurons needed for our executive functions. You've experienced this if you've ever tried to concentrate on a book after a fight with a romantic partner. And in situations when the stakes are higher, chatter *really* gets in the way.

**The key message here is that: Chatter routinely gets in the way of our functioning in the world.**

Besides undermining our executive functions, chatter also gets in the way of our social relationships. In the 1980s, psychologist Bernard Rimé discovered that we're driven to talk about our negative thoughts. In other words, when there's too much chatter, we have to get it out. But ironically, the more we share with sympathetic friends, the more we push them away. After all, relationships demand that we listen, too. But people

suffering intense negative emotions have trouble knowing when it's time to stop talking.

What's worse, chronic chatter can have a negative effect on our health.

In 2007, the author conducted an MRI study which found that physical and emotional pain are triggered in the same parts of the brain. And that wasn't all they have in common – emotional pain causes stress just like physical pain. While stress is an adaptive response helping us deal with urgent situations, chatter makes it become chronic. Countless studies have shown that chronic stress can lead to cardiovascular problems and cancer.

Which is all to say that too much chatter presents serious negative consequences. The more chatter consumes us and the more we express it, the more isolated and painful our lives become.

***The quickest way to turn down chatter is to get some distance.***

In 1841, Abraham Lincoln was having some romantic problems. Engaged to be married, he'd fallen in love with another woman. A year later, Lincoln was happily married and had moved on, but his friend Joshua Speed had fallen into the same dilemma. With some distance from his past troubles, Lincoln was easily able to give Speed advice.

That's because getting distance from chatter is the easiest way to put it into perspective. Chatter involves zooming in – emotions raging, we single-mindedly focus on the problem. This causes us to be totally consumed, which encourages depression and anxiety to kick in. Our stress response is activated, and, seeking to resolve the crisis, we zoom in more and more. Pretty soon, we've lost all perspective.

**The key message here is: The quickest way to turn down chatter is to get some distance.**

Picture one of your negative memories as if it were a video on your phone. Now, picture that event as if it were happening to someone else and you're just another person in the room. The author refers to this as the fly-on-the-wall perspective. In various studies, participants who used this technique emerged with more clarity about their problems, while also showing lower stress and emotional responses in the brain.

In a study the author conducted prior to the 2008 US election, participants were asked to imagine themselves living in another country and finding out that their chosen candidate had lost. The result? Participants showed a greater desire to cooperate with the opposing candidate's supporters. Another study, about relationship infidelity, found that participants who imagined the situation happening to a friend were more likely to counsel for compromise with the cheating partner.

Another helpful perspective-taking technique is *temporal distancing*. Say you're under a stressful work deadline – thinking about how little it will matter in ten years helps put it in perspective. The author has found that temporal distancing works for stressors big and small. For instance, considering that pandemics have come and gone throughout history can help you realize that COVID-19 will also pass and things will return to normal.

Over time, learning to look at ourselves at a greater distance – similar to the way we see others – leads to more wisdom. That's because wisdom is based on the ability to see the big picture, as well as acknowledging the limits of our knowledge.

***Addressing yourself as if you were someone else can help you get some distance from chatter.***

In 1979, children's television host Fred Rogers – creator of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* – wrote himself a letter. It began, "Am I kidding myself?" and continued with a stream of recriminations and doubts regarding his ability to write a good TV show. But toward the end of the letter, something funny happened. He wrote, ". . . the hour cometh and now . . . I've got to do it. Get to it, Fred."

Why was Mr. Rogers speaking to himself in the third person?

Unconsciously, he was practicing distanced self-talk – a technique that has been repeatedly shown to help lessen shame and embarrassment, lower stress, and promote wiser reasoning. And it all starts with saying your name.

**The key message here is: Addressing yourself as if you were someone else can help you get some distance from chatter.**

Normally, our chatter comes in the first person singular – what's known as *I-talk*. For example, we might think *Why did I get so angry earlier?* or *Why was I so stupid?* I-talk has been closely linked with negative thought spirals. For instance, one study found that bouts of depression could be predicted by analyzing the frequency of I-talk in people's Facebook posts.

But a study conducted by the author found that when people used distanced self-talk to address themselves – whether by saying their name or using second and third-person pronouns – emotional turmoil decreased. When the author measured this method using an electroencephalogram machine, which registered electrical activity in the brain, he was amazed at how quickly it worked. Within just one second of employing distanced self-talk, emotional activity decreased.

Now let's get back to Mr. Rogers. By using distanced self-talk, he was reframing the threat of failure as a challenge. And a challenge, unlike a threat, is something that a person can tackle. This not only helps reduce chatter but, as studies have shown, it also makes a difference on a cardiovascular level. When people are stressed, arteries tend to constrict, but in a challenge mindset, they're more relaxed.

Lastly, let's not forget the "universal you" – that's the "you" that addresses norms, not personal preferences. Like, "you gotta step back" or "you gotta be cool with it." We actually hear this all the time. Just think about song lyrics or athletes during post-game interviews, talking about how "you" have to play. And we can use the "universal you" to invoke the difficulties everyone faces. Doing so allows us to step back and gain perspective, quieting chatter at the same time.

***To reduce chatter, we need to meet both our emotional and cognitive needs.***

In 2008, after the shootings at Northern Illinois University and Virginia Tech, University of Illinois researchers tracked how the students were coping with grief. They found that most students joined Facebook groups and shared their emotions online. While the students found such engagement comforting, it didn't decrease their long-term depression and PTSD symptoms.

But how can this be? Aren't we taught that sharing our emotions is healthy? Aristotle and Freud both thought so, urging people to purge themselves of their inner pain. We learn this as babies, too, when we cry and scream until our parents come and meet our needs.

So why does sharing our feelings make us feel bad?

**Well, the key message here is: To reduce chatter, we need to meet both our emotional and cognitive needs.**

When we feel bad, we want to feel consoled because this makes us feel safe. This is how we fulfill our emotional needs. And when these needs are met, our brains produce a whole range of feel-good chemicals. The problem is, to deal with chatter, we not only need support, but also someone who can help us gain some perspective on the situation.

Unfortunately, when we're in pain, we tend to focus on empathy over perspective. And the people we look to for help tend to go along with this, in a practice called *co-rumination*. They ask us for the play-by-play of the situation, offering condolence and empathy. But as we relate what happened, we relive the negative event and feel worse. They ask more questions . . . and so on.

The solution to this is to find supportive people who can make us feel heard, but also guide us toward a solution. A great example of this balance was created by the FBI for hostage negotiations. Its strategy advises the use of active listening and empathy to build rapport and influence a behavioral change.

In other words, when you go to loved ones for support, look for those who help steer you toward a solution rather than encouraging you to stay focused on the problem. Also keep in mind that while your brother is great to talk to about family problems, he may not be the best person to talk to about work issues. So try to build a "board of advisors" of sorts to help deal with the chatter in the various parts of your life.

***Engaging with the outside world helps us reduce chatter.***

In the 1990s, University of Illinois researcher Ming Kuo found that people living in Chicago housing projects had greater attention spans when their windows looked out onto green views. Their greater focus, In turn, led to more positive thinking. Later studies done in England and Canada backed up these findings, showing that exposure to green space leads to more happiness.

Why? Because nature engages our attention in a very particular way, one that draws us away from chatter and allows us to recharge.

**The key message here is: Engaging with the outside world helps us reduce chatter.**

Not all attention is created equal. In fact, there are two types: *involuntary* and *voluntary*. Voluntary attention requires your willpower to engage it, as it does when you do a crossword puzzle or drive a car. Because of that, voluntary attention costs you energy. It can even be exhausting.

Involuntary attention, on the other hand, is engaged when something draws you in – a beautiful sunset, for example – and it actually helps you recharge. In the 1970s, psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan posited that exposure to nature helped refresh people's attention spans. How? Well, nature engages your involuntary attention and fills you with a sense of awe – a powerful and transcendent emotion that helps you get outside of yourself. This lets your voluntary attention levels recharge.

Countless studies have since backed up the Kaplans' work, showing that a short nature walk helps people do better on cognitive tests afterward. This makes perfect sense; after all, if you couldn't concentrate and maintain voluntary attention, how could you possibly follow through with any of the techniques that help you manage chatter?

Now, you don't just feel awe in nature. The same feeling can arise from watching an amazing concert or a baby take her first steps. And there are other ways to get outside of yourself, too. One is to exert some order. Take tennis champion Rafael Nadal who has a set of

customary habits he performs on the court, like lining up his water bottles in just the right way. By putting attention into organizing his physical environment, he's able to still the voices in his head.

But the benefits of instilling order go beyond high-stakes situations. Feeling in control helps you believe you can achieve your goals and affects how much effort you put into doing so. And one of the easiest and most effective ways of instilling order is to organize your physical environment – something to consider the next time you're tempted to put off cleaning the house!

### *If we believe something can make us feel better, it will.*

In 1777, Franz Mesmer used what he called "animal magnetism" – a technique that involved magnets and a lot of babbling – to cure the pianist Maria Theresia von Paradis of her blindness. Or so it seemed. Mesmer was eventually outed as a fraud. The only thing his technique was really effective at was proving the power of the placebo effect.

While placebos are generally used in medicinal studies, objects imbued with power have long been a part of human tradition. Back in medieval times, it was believed that King Solomon's seal could ward off demons, and today people are still attracted to lucky charms – Michael Jordan, for example, always wore his old college shorts underneath his uniform.

**The key message here is: If we believe something can make us feel better, it will.**

According to studies, placebos – whether in the form of pills or totems – can relieve both physical and emotional symptoms. Why? Because the human brain loves prediction. Even walking successfully is based on predicting where you can safely put your foot. And when you take a pill to cure a headache, you tell yourself that doing so will bring relief – right there, your inner voice begins to shift.

We pick up a lot of these beliefs from our families and our culture. Often, these come in the form of rituals. For instance, think of all the different funerary rituals, from memorials to mourning rites, that help people deal with grief. People create their own rituals, too, like Wade Boggs fielding 150 ground balls before each game, or Steve Jobs speaking to himself in the mirror each day.

The author calls rituals a "chatter-reducing cocktail," because they work to reduce chatter on many levels. For starters, by carrying out a ritual our attention is pulled away from the problem, thereby reducing anxiety. And since they're something within our control, rituals provide a sense of order. Lastly, the meaning behind the ritual helps to connect us with our inner values and our communities, helping us feel less isolated.

Rituals are also easy to establish. For instance, when the author is working and feels stuck, he makes a ritual of doing the dishes. It's an easy way to sidestep stress and chatter.

In the end, all these techniques strive to put distance between you and your chatter. Because while chatter may be an unavoidable byproduct of your inner voice, there's no reason to let it make your life unmanageable.

### *Final summary*

The key message in these blinks:

**No matter how bad your situation seems or how negative your thoughts get, things will always seem a little easier if you manage to put a bit of distance between you and your chatter. You can do this either by reframing your thoughts or by changing your environment. Ultimately, try to see your problem in the bigger scope of things – doing so is sure to make it seem smaller.**

Actionable advice:

**Do some expressive journaling.**

Research has found that writing about negative experiences brings relief. That's because writing about yourself as if you're the narrator helps to create distance from whatever's bothering you. So next time negative thoughts start swirling, sit down and write them out for 20 minutes. You're sure to feel better.

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