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How to Have Better Conversations with Yourself When Under Stress.

You believe you have been treated unfairly at work. Your inner voice screams, "They are being unfair to me! I can't stand this! I deserve better." It is affecting your work and your relationships.

Today we will suggest a new way of talking to yourself under stress.

"Ethan, You Have Survived Worse"

Humans may be one of the few species capable of self-reflection. Is self-reflection positive? Like most things in life, it depends. University of Michigan psychologist Ethan Koss relates this story in his book *Chatter* (2021):

After being interviewed about his research in the media, Ethan received a letter at his home. The letter was unsigned and threatened harm to Ethan and his family. He examined the postmark and concluded that it had been sent from a post office near his home.

Ethan went to the police to ask what they could do. The police responded that Ethan was suffering one of the negative consequences of media exposure. 99% of the time, the writer intends to frighten the reader. Follow-up with violence is rare.

This explanation did not satisfy Ethan. He asked what the police could do. Not satisfied with their response, he purchased a baseball bat. Every night his wife and children went to bed. Ethan stayed in the living room with his baseball bat waiting for the intruder.

By the third night, Ethan was sleep-deprived. It was impacting his work. An inner voice said, "Ethan, you have been in more actual stress situations before and survived. You will survive this stressful situation.

"The police said 99% of those who send hate mail do not commit violent acts.

“Go to bed, Ethan.”

Ethan went to bed.

Balancing Self-Immersion and Self-Distancing

Ethan’s inner voice provided him more than sleep. It also provided Ethan with an exciting research topic: self-reflection.

Ethan and his colleagues have been conducting research on self-distancing conversation and comparing it to self-immersion conversations.

In self-immersion conversations, the words “I” and “me” are frequently used. Self-distancing, on the other hand, involves imagining oneself having a quiet conversation with a third party who calls you by your first name.

There is research showing that self-distancing conversations are linked to fewer reported negative emotions. Self-distancing conversations are more likely to focus on positive behaviors that will lead to closure. Self-distancing tends to result in lower levels of rumination. (2017)

Self-distancing has been shown to reduce neural firings from the subgenual anterior cingulate cortex. This is a region of the brain associated with depression. (2017) In other words, the more you engage in self-immersion, the more depressed you will become.

Presenting Your Self-Distancing Script

Imagine having a conversation with a calm and neutral third party. Have this imaginary person address you by your first name.

1. Acknowledge that you are hurt or threatened by the events that have triggered these thoughts.

2. Calmly remind yourself about similar or worse events where you endured, survived, triumphed.
3. Ask yourself to imagine yourself at a specific date in the future. How important will today's pain be?

Mary's Story

Mary is a physician who is married and has a six-year-old son named Adam. Mary's in-laws have booked a cabin for ten days in rural Michigan. They have invited Mary's family to join. Mary has been ruminating about what an awful time she will have.

She thinks her 82-year-old father-in-law is starting to show signs of dementia. For example, instead of complimenting Mary on her recent weight loss, he said, "Mary, you are deteriorating."

He tends to insert his face too close to Mary's face. Mary finds the father-in-law's breath offensive. She constantly thinks about how threatened she feels when her father-in-law gets too close to her.

After being shown an outline for how to engage in self-distancing inner talk, Mary came up with the following self-distancing conversation:

"Mary, you are about to have a vacation that will be uncomfortable for you. As bad as you think this week is going to be, you have survived worse times. There were times in your life that you survived more dangerous physical threats. Remember that camping trip when those drunk teenager boys came at you?"

Mary, you will know how to protect yourself against an 82-year-old man. Mary, you may not have the best vacation of your life, but you will survive it.

"Mary, five years from now, your father-in-law may not be alive. This may be one of the last summers that Adam will have quality time with

his grandfather. Happy family memories for Adam is your mission on this trip.

Notice that the self-distance talk led to a positive reframe of the trip to Michigan.

Upon returning from the vacation, Mary said she had an “8” experience on a scale ranging from 0 (worst vacation in my life) to 10 (best vacation in my life).

Summary and Conclusion

If your self-talk is full of “I” and “me,” you run the risk of ruminating too much and taking too little positive action. You may be setting yourself up to be depressed.

Based on research done by psychologist Ethan Kross and colleagues, consider engaging in self-distancing talk.

References

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