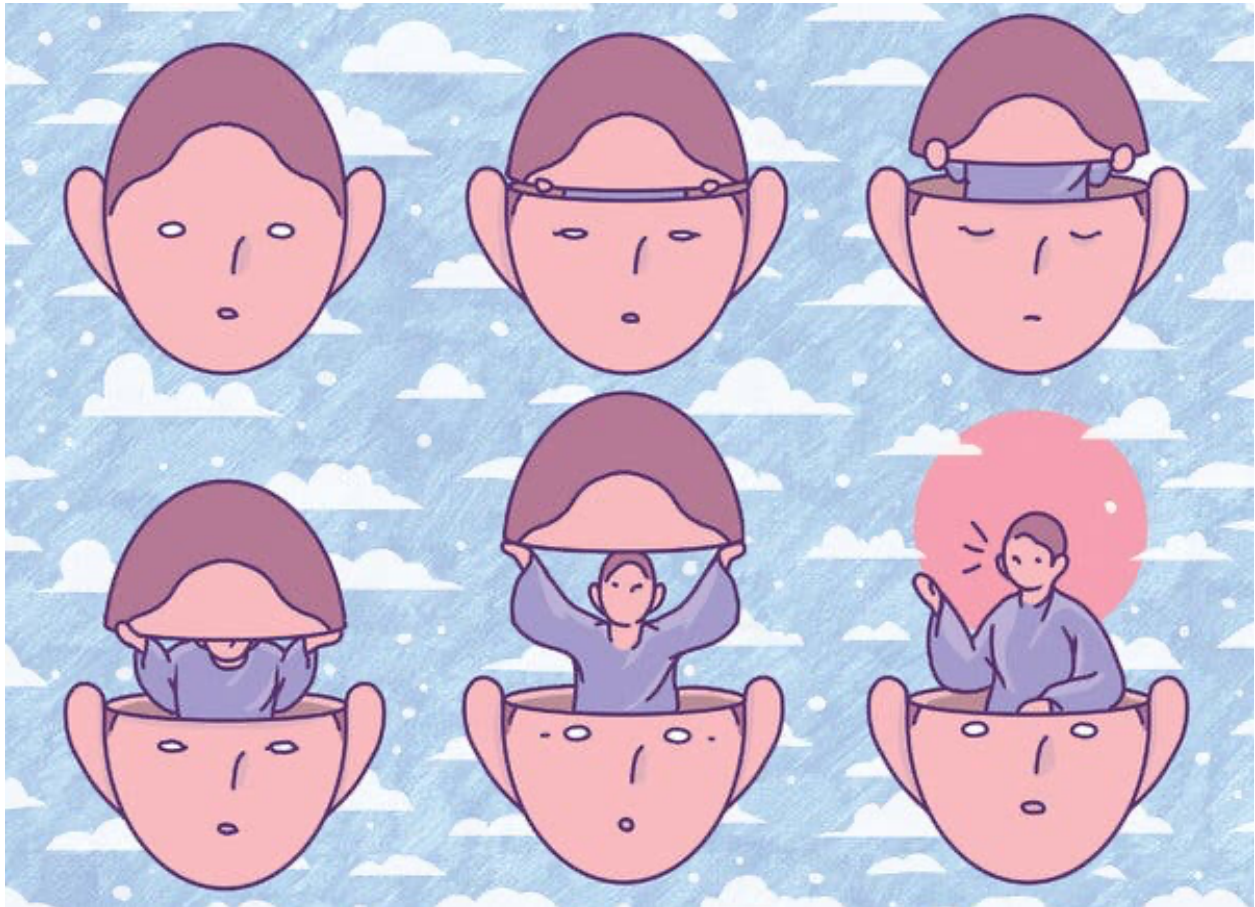


# The Power of Talking to Yourself

“External self-talk,” as it’s clinically known, gets a bad rap. But it can be great for pushing through all sorts of obstacles.



Credit...Illustration by Evan M. Cohen

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Trembling in bed at night, my blankets pulled tight over my head save for an opening I left my face, I would whisper my troubles to my closest confidant: Wall. Wall was the wall nearest my childhood bed and, other than the occasional stray bang or muffled skittering, a nonverbal communicator. That didn't stop me from hearing and heeding his counsel. Nor did his cheap facade — brownish faux-wood paneling littered with stickers — temper my belief in his tender depths. Wall was a boy like me, but calmer, cooler, more reflective. He listened to me, debated me, grasped the ends of sentences I didn't finish. Off him I could bounce ideas as well as balls until sleep finally conquered fright.

I no longer speak to Wall or to any of his relations: Laces, Ceiling, cantankerous Floor. We seem to have forgotten how to communicate with one another. Besides, we hardly see each other anymore. Instead, I speak aloud to myself. At the museum where I work, I enumerate the day's tasks and the tools they require: *drill, star bit, mag tip, level*. In the supermarket, I interrogate my mental shopping list and disparage myself for its illegibility: *We need, um ... noodles? Eggs? Do we? (Expletive.)* I've become what I always was: my own Wall.

Psychologists call what I do "external self-talk" to differentiate it from regular self-talk, otherwise known as one's internal monologue or dialogue. Plenty of people do it — just watch a tennis match if you don't believe me. It's viewed as normal within certain bounds, even beneficial, though speaker discretion is advised. Like many normal behaviors, it's also weird if the wrong person observes it, especially when you're young.

As a kid, I knew that if I talked to myself on school grounds, I risked becoming That Freak Who Talks to Himself, and that the act's popular associations — acute psychosis, maladjustment — tend toward the negative. Stigma kept me quiet, but its potency diminished as I aged. Also: Look around. People walk the streets talking and gesticulating, tiny white buds in their ears. They pontificate to phone cameras. Determining which unseen audience a pedestrian is addressing has become too difficult a calculation to bother solving; fading self-consciousness and the strange effects of consumer electronics have freed me.

Still, I tend to be alone in my apartment or office for my liveliest conversations. They often kick up when I reach an impasse while writing and follow a regular loop. Pressure accumulates until release becomes inevitable. No longer will my internal monologue suffice. The harder reality of spoken language starts to steam out of my mouth. I curse myself. I catch myself. My mutterings invert to a plastic positivity: *You're not the worst person; you needn't disappear into the ether. Rather, you are good and capable and quite possibly fine*. Referring to myself as "you" happens unconsciously, as the voice speaking and the ear hearing edge apart. The gap widens. First person jumps to second. When my assurances fail to assure me, I try a Beckett impression and general advice: *You must go on, you'll go on*. As stuck as ever, I gradually transform my pep talk into a kind of psychodynamic session with the self through which I discern the shape of my blockage. I get practical: *Break your problem into parts, describe what's missing, incorporate what impedes you*. The distance of "you" finally affords perspective and authority. I make a change. I call it progress. Bubbles of genuine self-belief surge: *You can do this*; then, *I can do this*; then, *Let's do this*. How could I have doubted myself? Later I'll sight another impasse, and the process will repeat.

Others might prefer to call a friend for help. Why not turn outward? Isn't this talking to yourself a little antisocial? While I have yet to forswear friendship and its succor entirely — maybe one day! — I have found that vocalized self-analysis, and the willingness to trudge through intellectual and moral quandaries in noisy solitude, is a valuable complement to

more traditional conversational outlets, especially when it comes to creative thinking. When I asked friends if they talk to themselves, one described free-associating and playacting to prepare for high-stakes meetings. Another friend, a photographer, refines his intended aesthetic for a job by talking it through, out loud, and anticipates how he'll deal with hypothetical difficulties come shoot day.

Clearly, the twin phenomena of wellness and self-optimization thrum under the hood here. One can imagine the S.E.O.-inspired headlines: "How Talking to Yourself Can Help You Work Smarter, Faster." Fair enough, but external self-talk is also a means of negotiating who one is and might be. The fear we associate with a person who publicly talks to themselves at length, and without apparent concern for or awareness of the impact their performance has on those around them, is the fear of an eroding self, its supposed constancy and singularity unraveling, its loose threads chatting with each other chaotically. But the act of speaking to myself is a reminder that constancy and singularity are illusory to begin with. That my multiplicity is, in turn, a kind of promise: I needn't be as I am. You needn't, either. We might be different than expected in a minor way. Or we might be able to formulate a difficult sentence, which might lead to a paragraph, then a fresh piece, then a new person. Probably not — very probably talking to yourself will not change the world. It may not even radically change you. But the dialogue between current and potential selves is small proof that such change is possible. Or maybe that's just something I like to tell myself.