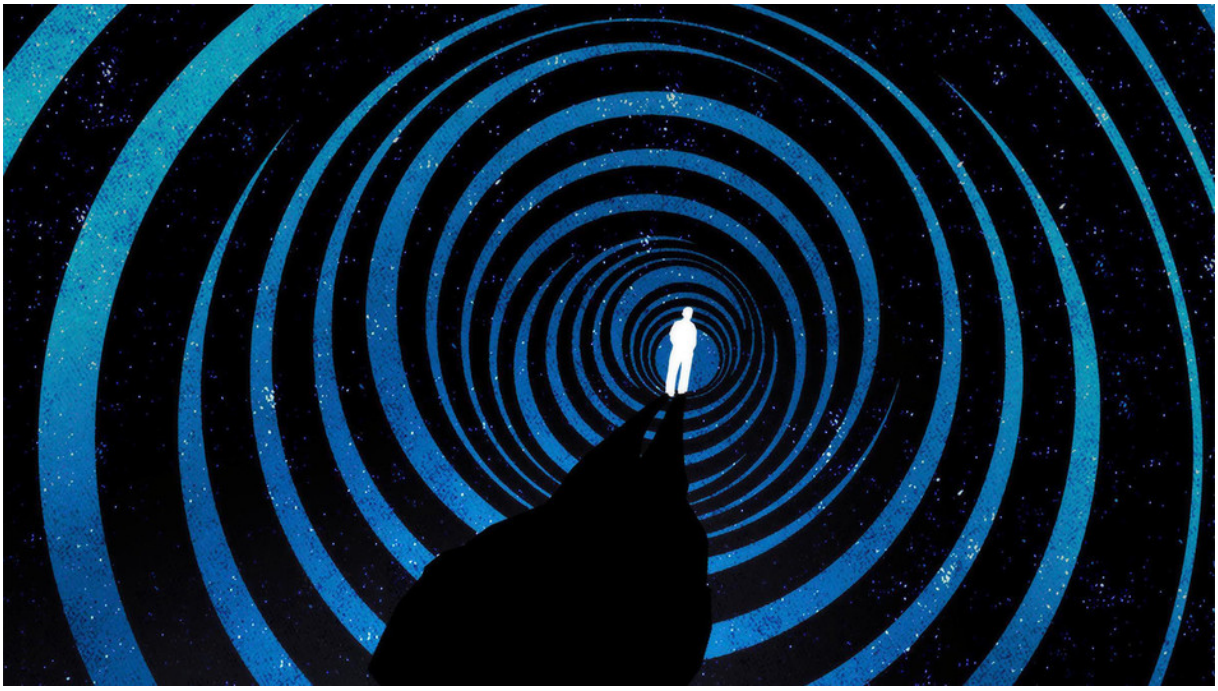
Books

The Best Way to Stop a Negative-Thought Spiral

By
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|
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Brian Stauffer

In his new book, *Chatter,* psychologist Ethan Kross ’07GSAS suggests strategies to root out the self-talk that sinks our moods, tanks our health, and saps our resilience.

You direct the Emotion and Self-Control Lab at the University of Michigan. Tell us about your work at the lab.

We study the science of introspection and the ways in which self-control, self-reflection and self-talk can shape our lives for better or worse. In the most basic sense, introspection simply means actively paying attention to your thoughts and

feelings. But the ways in which we use the mind to reflect, remember, interpret, and interrogate certain life events and experiences can be a blessing or a curse.

But most of us think of self-reflection as a good thing.

It can be. Deliberate self-reflection can help us solve problems, make better decisions, and gain wisdom. But there's a lot of research that shows that when we are under stress, introspection can do more harm than good. Our inner voice can indulge in a lot of judgment. We think about that screwup at work or that fight with a loved one and end up flooded by how bad we feel. Then we think about it again and again. This type of repetitive negative thought, which I call mental chatter, concentrates our attention on our emotional distress and can send us into a downward spiral. It encourages us to catastrophize the inevitable daily challenges we face, it undermines our confidence, and it's an incredible saboteur. It leads students to perform worse on tests, causes athletes to choke, turns romantic relationships into battlegrounds, and if you don't get it under control it can create constant stress and seriously undermine your health.

How can you possibly measure the voice in someone's head?

My colleagues and I use tools from psychology, medicine, philosophy, biology, and computer science. Technologies such as EEG and fMRI help us measure the brain's response and behavior. We use the experience sampling method which is a structured way to get people to monitor their thoughts and feelings as they unfold throughout the day. In the lab, we employ think-aloud paradigms, asking people to tell us their thoughts in real time. We analyze journals and increasingly look at what people are writing about on social media.



Ethan Kross illustrated by Jonny Ruzzo.

So what are some strategies for controlling that inner voice?

Many of the techniques I outline in my book involve stepping back from the echo chamber of your own mind so you can get a more objective perspective. One way to do that is to use distanced self-talk and silently refer to yourself in the third-person. For example, I can often snap myself out of chatter by saying “Come on, Ethan.” It’s also helpful to put myself in the role of a good friend giving advice.

Another way to gain perspective is to visualize moving away from any upsetting scene in your imagination, like a camera zooming out. This technique will literally widen your focus. You can also do a little time-traveling — think about how you will feel about this problem a month, a year, or even longer from now. Journaling works for some, since it allows people to create a more nuanced narrative about an experience.

You can also calm chatter by inviting a feeling of awe and wonder. Some people feel awe when they stare up at the stars at night or take in a spectacular view. Others might find it in a piece of art or the sight of a sleeping child. Find what instills a

sense of awe in you. Feeling awe allows us to transcend our current concerns, giving us the mental space to recharge and reset.

One of the most famous experiments in self-control was Walter Mischel's marshmallow test. Wasn't Mischel your adviser at Columbia?

Yes, that was one of the reasons I chose to get my PhD at Columbia. He was like royalty in psychology for his studies on delayed gratification and self-control. In the early 1960s he began bringing kids into his lab and presenting them with a choice: they could have one marshmallow immediately, or if they waited a little longer they could have two. Long-term studies showed that the children who exercised self-control and waited for the bigger reward performed better on their SATs as teens and were healthier and more resilient in adulthood. That test laid the foundation for future research, because it encouraged scientists to study the tools people can use to exercise and boost self-control, which of course also encompasses how we can manage our thoughts and feelings. It helped us understand that if we can find a way to manage chatter, we have the potential to improve our lives.

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