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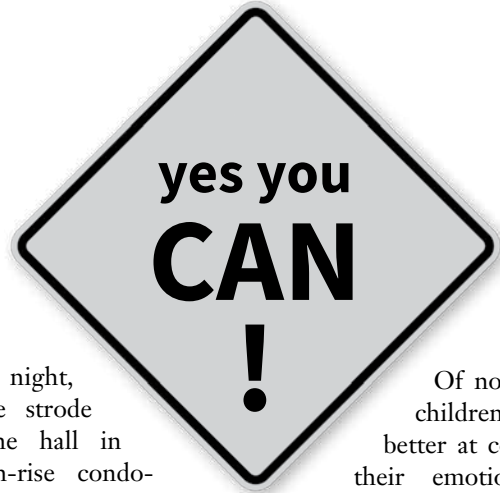
## **The Stepping Stone**

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# Use Your Name, Change Your Brain

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.



**H**ow regularly do you call yourself an idiot? Once a month? Once a week? Once a day?

Five years ago Dr. Ethan Kross heard himself scolding himself like that after he ran a red light in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Because Kross is a psychologist, he noticed something else, too: *He heard himself using his own name when he rebuked himself.*

“Ethan, you idiot,” he’d said.

He wondered why he had used his own name when talking to himself.

A few months later, Kross heard future Hall of Fame basketball player LeBron James use his own name when he was interviewed on TV about his decision to leave the Miami Heat for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

“One thing I didn’t want to do was make an emotional decision,” James told the interviewer. “I want to do what is best for *LeBron James*, and to do what makes *LeBron James* happy.”<sup>1</sup>

As others rolled their eyes at James’ unusual wording, Kross noticed the famous basketball player had used his own name in talking about himself, similar to Kross’ experience when he’d

shot through the red light in his hometown.

Then Kross heard similar phraseology from Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, when she explained her decision to resist the Taliban’s ban on girls being educated in Pakistan.

“If the Taliban comes, what would you do, *Malala*?” she’d asked herself. She shared this with Jon Stewart when she appeared on “The Daily Show.”

“*Malala*, just take a shoe and hit him,” she told Stewart she’d said to herself.<sup>2</sup>

These observations propelled Kross, director of the University of Michigan’s Self-Control and Emotion Lab, to conduct a series of studies to investigate the effects associated with using our own names when talking to ourselves (versus using “I” in our self-talk). Other studies considered the effects associated with self-talk.<sup>3</sup>

## DO ALL OF US TALK TO OURSELVES?

Before going forward, let me get this out in the fresh air: We *all* talk to ourselves. Sure, most of us are not as obvious as my 80-something neighbor

was last night, when he strode down the hall in my high-rise condominium building. At first, hearing his voice, I assumed he was wearing a Bluetooth headset. However, as I drew closer I noticed no such device. I also observed that once he saw me, the man stopped talking and started humming instead.

Likewise, most of us don’t talk to ourselves as audibly as 2- to 7-year-olds, who use “private speech” to guide themselves, regulate their behavior, and develop early literacy skills.<sup>4</sup> As early as the 1920s, Drs. Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky identified the role of private speech in increasing problem-solving in young children and also in goal attainment.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, young children use private speech to help them regulate their emotions. On that score, Dr. Laura Berk discovered that one way children control their emotions and soothe themselves is by mimicking their parents’ comforting speech. Picture a child calming himself or herself down by repeating bedtime phrases, like “Sleep-tight, don’t let the bed-bugs bite,” or by singing lullabies to themselves.

Of note, young children who are better at controlling their emotions have shown an increase in the amount of private speech they use.<sup>6</sup>

Private speech starts to decrease when children start school, and researchers have found that preschool-aged children are *least* likely to use it in the presence of a teacher.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps children become just as self-conscious as my neighbor did last night when he became aware that I could hear him talking to himself.

Nonetheless, the ability to talk to ourselves is integral to human consciousness.<sup>8</sup> It’s one of the most important characteristics that separate us from other species. It makes us who we are.

## NEW WAYS OF TALKING TO OURSELVES

Just as we can learn French, Spanish or Chinese in our 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond, we can change our self-talk. Recent articles in *Psychology Today*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and *The Wall Street Journal* have described how “*the right words can free us from our fears and make us wise about ourselves as we often are about others.*”<sup>9</sup>

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## USE YOUR NAME, CHANGE YOUR BRAIN

Think of the times you've given friends and relatives excellent advice, wishing you could be equally objective about yourself.

Recent research from Michigan's Self-Control and Emotion Lab has found that using our names to address ourselves (using third person rather than first), allows us to gain the psychological distance we more often apply to others.

Using your name when you talk to yourself encourages detachment, thus enabling self-control.

"It would be a good idea, Hildregard," you might say to yourself, "to finish the project you're working on before having that glass of wine."

That way, you become a wise friend, rather than a nattering nag.

## HELP RATHER THAN HARM

The most effective self-talk helps you perform at a higher level. Young children can be overheard in a preschool class repeating advice they've re-

ceived from their parents and/or teachers about how they might solve a 30-piece puzzle: "Put all the pieces with the same color into a pile," they might say. Or "put all the pieces with a straight edge into a pile."

"Then spread out the pieces in each pile. Pick up one piece at a time and hold it next to the other pieces in the pile. That way, you can find one that will slide into the one in your hand."

"After the two pieces slide together, keep matching puzzle pieces. Have fun, Hildregard, and remember it will ALL work out."

## TAKE-AWAY

You have a strong ally inside yourself. You can re-energize your work and personal life by mobilizing your wise inner self to support you. Use your given name when talking to yourself. Also rehearse how to complete projects in your self-talk, rather than scolding yourself for not doing things as well or as fast as you would like.

You'll be surprised that projects will become easier to complete, you'll enjoy working on them more, and your results are likely to improve dramatically. ■

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> [www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201505/the-voice-reason](http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201505/the-voice-reason).
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> [http://selfcontrol.psych.lsa.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/KrossJ\\_Pers\\_Soc\\_Psychol-2014Self-talk\\_as\\_a\\_regulatory\\_mechanism\\_How\\_you\\_do\\_it\\_matters.pdf](http://selfcontrol.psych.lsa.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/KrossJ_Pers_Soc_Psychol-2014Self-talk_as_a_regulatory_mechanism_How_you_do_it_matters.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private\\_speech](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_speech).
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consciousness>.
- <sup>9</sup> [www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201505/the-voice-reason](http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201505/the-voice-reason).



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