

# Improving Your Decision Making by Observing Your Inner Speech

When we turn our awareness onto ourselves, we often make an astonishing discovery: everyday consciousness appears to have a continual stream of inner dialogue. In the research literature, it is sometimes referred to as *inner speech*, and we can observe these barely conscious voices in the same way we listen to other people.

Inner speech preoccupies most of our waking life. It gives us the *interior* experience of relationship,<sup>i</sup> and as researchers at the University of Toronto have found, this “inner voice helps us to exert self-control by enhancing our ability to restrain our impulses.”<sup>ii</sup> Inner speech is also associated with lower levels of psychological distress.<sup>iii</sup>

Piaget first identified this phenomenon in the 1920s when he noticed that children between the ages of 3 to 5 begin to talk to themselves out loud. He called it “egocentric speech,” and we now know that it helps us to make conscious decisions. As adults, we often use our inner speech to rehearse what we are about to say.

Inner speech begins in the first few years of life, and we continue to have these internal dialogues throughout our lives.<sup>iv</sup> It appears to occur in the left hemisphere of the brain – where abstract language is processed – and it plays a specific role in orienting us toward other people in the world.<sup>v</sup> Inner speech also helps us to regulate our awareness of ourselves.<sup>vi</sup>



When you pay close attention to your inner speech, you’ll discover that some of these voices have different emotional “personalities.” Normally these inner voices blur with each other and are somewhat indistinct, but severe traumas can “unglue” these personalities, freeing them to act autonomously from one another.

Patients who experience these dissociative disorders often have profound difficulties dealing with everyday life. But many normal people have subtle voices that can undermine confidence and self esteem. Being self-critical is a perfect example: we do a job, but our inner speech whispers, “It’s not good enough.”

Sometimes we even argue with these voices. For example, you see a beautiful item in a store, and the inner speech kicks in: “You can’t afford it!” “But I deserve it!” “My spouse will complain,” and so on.

Each of these inner voices have an affect on your brain. A self-critical voice will stimulate error-detection circuits, whereas a self-reassuring voice will stimulate neural circuits involved with compassion and empathy.<sup>vii</sup> Negative inner dialogues can be particularly destructive. For example, anorexics often experience harsh and forceful inner voices.<sup>viii</sup> It helps them to stifle their impulse to eat, but the negative inner speech also erodes self confidence. When they learn to stop listening to these destructive voices, their eating behavior improves.

Procrastination is another form of destructive inner speech: "What if I fail? I don't know enough to succeed. Oh heck, I can deal with these problems tomorrow." How do you stop this kind of inner speech? By deliberately interrupting it and replacing it with repetitive statements that bolster confidence and self esteem.<sup>ix</sup> If you change your inner speech, you change your behavior, and this improves the functioning of your brain.

## Observing Your Inner Speech

We all have the power to change our inner speech in ways that will improve our life. But you must first learn how to listen with your "inner ear," which involves a separate brain system from the one that controls inner speech.<sup>x</sup>

Here's a little exercise that you can do right now that will help you to identify these inner voices, and to distinguish the useful ones from the disruptive ones. First, get a sheet of paper and a pencil, and find a quiet place to sit. Take a few deep breaths, then yawn and stretch for about 20 or 30 seconds. The more relaxed you are, the easier it will be for you to hear your inner speech.

Now, just sit back in your chair and remain silent. Most people quickly become aware of fragmentary thoughts drifting in and out of consciousness. When you notice these thoughts, write them down on your sheet of paper, along with any feeling or sensation you are aware of. Then let the thought float away, as though it were a cloud in the sky. This helps you to stay neutral as you observe the constant shifts in awareness.

Simply sitting there and observing these voices, *without judging them*, allows you to develop a powerful psychological tool called mindfulness. As eight randomized controlled studies have proven, this exercise is one of the fastest techniques for reducing stress, anxiety, irritability, and depression.<sup>xi</sup>

## Transforming Negative Inner Speech

Positive inner speech helps us to manage strong emotional reactions, and it gives us the power to modify inappropriate behavior.<sup>xii</sup> If you are feeling anxious, worried, or highly stressed, it can help you to feel calmer.<sup>xiii</sup> And in sports, positive self-talk improves performance.<sup>xiv</sup>

When inner speech turns chronically negative, it can stimulate eating disorders, passivity, insomnia, agoraphobia, compulsive gambling, sexual dysfunction, and low self-esteem, and depression. However, positive self-talk improves attentiveness, autonomy, confidence, and work performance.<sup>xv</sup>

Sara White, a professor at the University of California, San Francisco, and a distinguished leadership and communication coach for the medical community, recommends these steps for turning negative inner speech into positive self talk. It will enhance your performance, satisfaction, and professional success.<sup>xvi</sup>

- Observe your inner speech and keep a “thought record”
- Confront your inner critic and rewrite self-limiting scripts
- Replace negative thoughts with positive inner dialogue
- Look for the gift and opportunity in every obstacle you meet
- Focus on your accomplishments, not your setbacks
- Review, reinforce, and practice your new self-talk

Self-talk does have some drawbacks. For example, it can distract us from paying full attention to what the other person is saying. In fact, whenever our attention is split between our inner speech and outer activities, it can interfere with memory, cognition, and social awareness.<sup>xvii</sup>

## The Voice of Insight

Deep awareness of our inner speech can lead to a surprising discovery. A new voice will occasionally appear: the voice of intuition. Often, it is preceded by a long period of inner silence. Then a sudden insight may burst into consciousness. In that moment, you might get a glimpse of the larger picture.

These types of intuitional insights are often difficult to put into words, but it *feels* true. That’s the “Eureka” or “aha” experience which, for eons, has been associated with creative flashes of insight. This, too, turns out to be a unique language-driven experience, one that is governed by the right hemisphere of the brain.<sup>xviii</sup> The insula and anterior cingulate, which also govern our feelings of compassion, are stimulated,<sup>xix</sup> and in these moments of deep awareness, gamma brainwave oscillations spike as everyday consciousness falls away.<sup>xx</sup> Cognitive restructuring takes place, and suddenly the world looks different.<sup>xxi</sup>

The feeling may last a second, or stay with you throughout life, but the anecdotal stories are the same: a new consciousness emerges that allows us to function more fully, more efficiently, and with a deeper sense of personal satisfaction and inner peace.

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