

Chatter

by Ethan Kross (Crown Publishers January 26, 2021)

"Chatter reviews the different tools that exist for helping people resolve the tension between getting caught in negative thought spirals and thinking clearly and constructively. Many of these techniques involve shifting the way we think to control the conversations we have with ourselves. But a central idea of this book is that strategies for controlling the inner voice exist outside us too, in our personal relationships and physical environments. Scientists have identified how these tools work in isolation. But you must figure out for yourself which combination of these practices works best for you.

To help you in this process, I've summarized the techniques discussed in this book, organizing them into three sections: tools that you can implement on your own, tools that leverage your relationships with other people, and tools that involve your environment. Each section begins with the strategies that you are likely to find easiest to implement when chatter strikes, building up to those that may require a little more time and effort."

The Tools

Tools You Can Implement on Your Own

The ability to "step back" from the echo chamber of our own minds so we can adopt a broader, calmer, and more objective perspective is an important tool for combating chatter. Many of the techniques reviewed in this section help people do this, although some - like performing rituals and embracing superstitions - work via other pathways.

1. *Use distanced self-talk.* One way to create distance when you're experiencing chatter involves language. When you're trying to work through a difficult experience, use your name and the second-person "you" to refer to yourself. Doing so is linked with less activation in brain networks associated with rumination and leads to improved performance under stress, wiser thinking, and less negative emotion.
2. *Imagine advising a friend.* Another way to think about your experience from a distanced perspective is to imagine what you would say to a friend experiencing the same problem as you. Think about the advice you'd give that person, and then apply it to yourself.
3. *Broaden your perspective.* Chatter involves narrowly focusing on the problems we're experiencing. A natural antidote to this involves broadening our perspective. To do this, think about how the experience you're worrying about compares with other adverse events you (or others) have endured, how it fits into the broader scheme of your life and the world, and/or how other people you admire would respond to the same situation.
4. *Reframe your experience as a challenge.* A theme of this book is that you possess the ability to change the way you think about your experiences. Chatter is often triggered when we interpret a situation as a threat-something we can't manage. To aid your inner voice, reinterpret the situation as a challenge that you can handle, for example, by reminding yourself of how you've succeeded in similar situations in the past, or by using distanced self-talk.

5. *Reinterpret your body's chatter response.* The bodily symptoms of stress (for example, an upset stomach before, say, a date or presentation) are often themselves stressful (for instance, chatter causes your stomach to grumble, which perpetuates your chatter, which leads your stomach to continue to grumble). When this happens, remind yourself that your bodily response to stress is an adaptive evolutionary reaction that improves performance under high-stress conditions. In other words, tell yourself that your sudden rapid breathing, pounding heartbeat, and sweaty palms are there not to sabotage you but to help you respond to a challenge.
6. *Normalize your experience.* Knowing that you are not alone in your experience can be a potent way of quelling chatter. There's a linguistic tool for helping people do this: Use the word "you" to refer to people in general when you think and talk about negative experiences. Doing so helps people reflect on their experiences from a healthy distance and makes it clear that what happened is not unique to them but characteristic of human experience in general.
7. *Engage in mental time travel.* Another way to gain distance and broaden your perspective is to think about how you'll feel a month, a year, or even longer from now. Remind yourself that you'll look back on whatever is upsetting you in the future and it'll seem much less upsetting. Doing so highlights the impermanence of your current emotional state.
8. *Change the view.* As you think about a negative experience, visualize the event in your mind from the perspective of a fly on the wall peering down on the scene. Try to understand why your "distant self" is feeling the way it is. Adopting this perspective leads people to focus less on the emotional features of their experience and more on reinterpreting the event in ways that promote insight and closure. You can also gain distance through visual imagery by imagining moving away from the upsetting scene in your mind's eye, like a camera panning out until the scene shrinks to the size of a postage stamp.
9. *Write expressively.* Write about your deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding your negative experience for fifteen to twenty minutes a day for one to three consecutive days. Really let yourself go as you jot down your stream of thoughts; don't worry about grammar or spelling. Focusing on your experience from the perspective of a narrator provides you with distance from the experience, which helps you make sense of what you felt in ways that improve how you feel over time.
10. *Adopt the perspective of a neutral third party.* If you find yourself experiencing chatter over a negative interaction you've had with another person or group of people, assume the perspective of a neutral, third-party observer who is motivated to find the best outcome for all parties involved. Doing so reduces negative emotions, quiets an agitated inner voice, and enhances the quality of the relationships we share with the people we've had negative interactions with, including our romantic partners.
11. *Clutch a lucky charm or embrace a superstition.* Simply believing that an object or superstitious behavior will help relieve your chatter often has precisely that effect by

harnessing the brain's power of expectation. Importantly, you don't have to believe in supernatural forces to benefit from these actions. Simply understanding how they harness the power of the brain to heal is sufficient.

12. *Perform a ritual.* Performing a ritual - a fixed sequence of behaviors that is infused with meaning - provides people with a sense of order and control that can be helpful when they're experiencing chatter. Although many of the rituals we engage in (for example, silent prayer, meditation) are passed down to us from our families and cultures, performing rituals that you create can likewise be effective for quieting chatter.

Tools That Involve Other People

When we think about the role that other people in our lives play in helping us manage our inner voice, there are two issues to consider. First, how can we provide chatter support for others? And second, how can we receive chatter support ourselves?

Tools for Providing Chatter Support

1. *Address people's emotional and cognitive needs.* When people come to others for help with their chatter, they generally have two needs they're trying to fulfil: They're searching for care and support, on the one hand (emotional needs), and concrete advice about how to move forward and gain closure, on the other (cognitive needs). Addressing both of these needs is vital to your ability to calm other people's chatter. Concretely, this involves not only empathically validating what people are going through but also broadening their perspective, providing hope, and normalizing their experience. This can be done in person, or via texting, social media, and other forms of digital communication.
2. *Provide invisible support.* Offering advice about how to reduce chatter can backfire when people don't ask for help; it threatens people's sense of self-efficacy and autonomy. But that doesn't mean there aren't still ways of helping others when they experience chatter and don't ask for assistance. In such situations providing support *invisibly*, without people being aware you're helping them, is useful. There are many ways to do this. One approach involves covertly providing practical support, like cleaning up the house without being asked. Another involves helping broaden people's perspectives indirectly by, for example, talking in general terms about others who have dealt with similar experiences (for example, "It's amazing how stressful everyone finds parenthood") or by soliciting advice from someone else but without signaling that the questions are meant to help the person in need. For example, if my colleague was struggling to connect with their graduate student and we found ourselves at a function with other advisers, I might casually ask a group whether they've experienced trouble connecting with their students and, if so, how they managed the situation.
3. *Tell your kids to pretend they're a superhero.* This strategy, popularized in the media as "the Batman effect," is a distancing strategy that is particularly useful for children grappling with intense emotions. Ask them to pretend they're a superhero or cartoon

character they admire, and then nudge them to refer to themselves using that character's name when they're confronting a difficult situation. Doing so helps them distance.

4. *Touch affectionately (but respectfully).* Feeling the warm embrace of a person we love, whether that be holding someone's hand or sharing a hug, reminds us at the conscious level that we have supportive people in our lives whom we can lean on - a chatter-relieving psychological reframe. Affectionate touch also unconsciously triggers the release of endorphins and other chemicals in the brain such as oxytocin that reduce stress. Of course, for affectionate touch to be effective it has to be welcome.
5. *Be someone else's placebo.* Other people can powerfully influence our beliefs, including our expectations about how effectively we can deal with chatter and how long it will last. You can utilize this interpersonal healing pathway by providing the people you're advising with an optimistic outlook that their conditions will improve, which changes their expectations for how their chatter will progress.

Tools for Receiving Chatter Support

1. *Build a board of advisers.* Finding the right people to talk to, those who are skilled at satisfying both your emotional and your cognitive needs, is the first step to leveraging the power of others. Depending on the domain in which you're experiencing chatter, different people will be uniquely equipped to do this. While a colleague may be skilled at advising you on work problems, your partner may be better suited to advising you on interpersonal dilemmas. The more people you have to turn to for chatter support in any particular domain, the better. So build a diverse board of chatter advisers, a group of confidants you can turn to for support in the different areas of your life in which you are likely to find your inner voice running amok.
2. *Seek out physical contact.* You don't have to wait for someone to give you affectionate touch or supportive physical contact. Knowing about the benefits they provide, you can seek them out yourself, by asking trusted people in your life for a hug or a simple hand squeeze. Moreover, you need not even touch another human being to reap these benefits. Embracing a comforting inanimate object, like a teddy bear or security blanket, is helpful too.
3. *Look at a photo of a loved one.* Thinking about others who care about us reminds us that there are people we can turn to for support during times of emotional distress. This is why looking at photos of loved ones can soothe our inner voice when we find ourselves consumed with chatter.
4. *Perform a ritual with others.* Although many rituals can be performed alone, there is often added benefit that comes from performing a ritual in the presence of others (for example, communal meditation or prayer, a team's pregame routine, or even just toasting drinks with friends the same way each time by always saying the same words). Doing so additionally provides people with a sense of support and self-transcendence that reduces feelings of loneliness.

5. *Minimize passive social media usage.* Voyeuristically scrolling through the curated news feeds of others on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms can trigger self-defeating, envy-inducing thought spirals. One way to mitigate this outcome is to curb your passive social media usage. Use these technologies actively instead to connect with others at opportune times.
6. *Use social media to gain support.* Although social media can instigate chatter, it also provides you with an unprecedented opportunity to broaden the size and reach of your chatter-support network. If you use this medium to seek support, however, be cautious about impulsively sharing your negative thoughts. Doing so runs the risk of sharing things that you may later regret and that may upset others.

Tools That Involve the Environment

1. *Create order in your environment.* When we experience chatter, we often feel as if we are losing control. Our thought spirals control us rather than the other way around. When this happens, you can boost your sense of control by imposing order on your surroundings. Organizing your environment can take many forms. Tidying up your work or home spaces, making a list, and arranging the different objects that surround you are all common examples. Find your own way of organizing your space to help provide you with a sense of mental order.
2. *Increase your exposure to green spaces.* Spending time in green spaces helps replenish the brain's limited attentional reserves, which are useful for combating chatter. Go for a walk in a tree-lined street or park when you're experiencing chatter. If that's not possible, watch a film clip of nature on your computer, stare at a photograph of a green scene, or even listen to a sound machine that conveys natural sounds. You can surround the spaces in which you live and work with greenery to create environments that are a boon to the inner voice.
3. *Seek out awe-inspiring experiences.* Feeling awe allows us to transcend our current concerns in ways that put our problems in perspective. Of course, the experiences that provide people with awe vary. For some it is exposure to a breathtaking vista. For someone else it's the memory of a child accomplishing an amazing feat. For others it may be staring at a remarkable piece of art. Find what instills a sense of awe within you, and then seek to cultivate that emotion when you find your internal dialogue spiraling. You can also think about creating spaces around you that elicit feelings of awe each time you glance at them.

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