

# Making Meaning out of Negative Experiences by Self-Distancing

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## Abstract

Both common wisdom and findings from multiple areas of research suggest that it is helpful to understand and make meaning out of negative experiences. However, people's attempts to do so often backfire, leading them to ruminate and feel worse. Here we attempt to shed light on these seemingly contradictory sets of findings by examining the role that *self-distancing* plays in facilitating adaptive self-reflection. We begin by briefly describing the "self-reflection paradox." We then define self-distancing, present evidence from multiple levels of analysis that illustrate how this process facilitates adaptive self-reflection, and discuss the basic science and practical implications of this research.

## Keywords

self-distancing, rumination, self-control, emotion regulation, self-regulation, meaning

Common wisdom suggests that it is helpful to introspect when bad things happen—that people should try to understand their feelings when they feel upset in order to improve them. This idea is deeply entrenched in Western popular culture as any trip down the local bookstore self-help aisle quickly attests. Is it true?

## The Self-Reflection Paradox

Although this question has been the focus of much research, the results reveal a paradox. On the one hand, countless studies indicate that encouraging people to reflect on why they feel upset leads to important physical and mental health benefits (Pennebaker, 1997; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). The assumption behind much of this work is that by reasoning about why one feels a certain way, people develop explanations for their negative experiences that provide them with closure and emotional relief. On the other hand, an equally large body of research indicates that people's attempts to understand their feelings often backfire, entangling them in ruminations that make them feel worse (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Thus, the question is: Why do people's attempts to make sense of their negative feelings sometimes succeed and at other times fail? We address this issue by reviewing findings from a research program on *self-distancing*, which focuses on explicating the psychological mechanisms that enable people to reflect on negative experiences adaptively, in ways that allow

them to make meaning out of them so that they cease to be ongoing sources of distress.

## What Is Self-Distancing?

Human beings possess the capacity to transcend their ego-centric point of view. Consider Tom, for example—a heartbroken adolescent who is mired in despair after being dumped by Jennifer. Motivated to understand his feelings, Tom might recall his rejection experience and replay the event happening all over again through his own eyes. From this perspective, Tom might think, "Why did *I* feel that way during that situation?" Here Tom is focusing on his feelings from a *self-immersed perspective*—the self that is reasoning about the rejection and the self that is experiencing the rejection are one.

It is also possible for people to take a step back when thinking about past experiences and reason about them from the perspective of a distanced observer, akin to a fly on the wall. From this perspective, Tom might think: "Why did *Tom* feel the way he did during that situation?" Here, Tom is focusing on his feelings from a *self-distanced perspective*—the self

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that is reasoning about the rejection is psychologically removed from the self that is experiencing the rejection.

What might the implications of adopting a self-distanced versus a self-immersed perspective be for facilitating adaptive self-reflection? Drawing from prior research on self-control and psychological distance (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Trope & Liberman, 2003), we reasoned that a self-immersed perspective would predispose people to focus narrowly on *recounting* the concrete details of their experience (i.e., what happened?; what did I feel?) rather than on taking the big picture into account in order to make meaning out of their experience (Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). In contrast, we hypothesized that adopting a self-distanced perspective would allow people to focus on the broader context in order to *reconstrue* their experience in ways that would reduce distress. Thus, we predicted that self-distancing would facilitate adaptive self-reflection whereas self-immersion would undermine it.

## Experimental Evidence

These predictions have been tested in multiple experiments, using a well-developed paradigm. We first ask participants to recall an intense negative experience, usually an event involving anger or sadness. We then cue them to analyze their feelings from either a self-immersed (e.g., Visualize the experience through your own eyes . . . try to understand your feelings) or a self-distanced (e.g., Visualize the experience from the perspective of a fly on the wall . . . try to understand your “distant self’s” feelings) perspective and examine the effect of these manipulations across multiple levels of analysis.

### Short-Term Effects

We find that immediately after people analyze their feelings, those who do so from a self-distanced perspective report less distress than those who adopt a self-immersed perspective (Kross & Ayduk, 2008, 2009; Kross et al., 2005). How does self-distancing lead to these changes in emotion? We consistently find that adopting a self-distanced perspective transforms the way people make sense of their experiences. To illustrate, consider how participants in one experiment described their stream of thoughts as they analyzed their feelings:

- *Self-Immersed 1*: “I was appalled that my boyfriend told me he couldn’t connect with me because he thought I was going to hell. I cried and sat on the floor of my dorm hallway and tried to prove to him that my religion was the same as his . . .”
- *Self-Immersed 2*: “Adrenaline infused. Pissed off. Betrayed. Angry. Victimized. Hurt. Shamed. Stepped-on. Shitted on. Humiliated. Abandoned. Unappreciated. Pushed. Boundaries trampled upon . . .”
- *Self-Distanced 1*: “I thought of the days and months running up to the conflict and was reminded of the academic

stress and emotional turmoil I was going through combined with a lack of satisfaction with things in general. All these underlying currents and frustration led me to be irritable and thus sparked the conflict over a silly argument . . .”

- *Self-Distanced 2*: “I was able to see the argument more clearly...I initially empathized better with myself but then I began to understand how my friend felt. It may have been irrational but I understand his motivation . . .”

As these examples illustrate, people who self-distance focus less on *recounting* their experiences and more on *reconstruing* them in ways that provide insight and closure. This shift in thought content leads participants who self-distance to experience less distress, and this is true regardless of whether people reflect over anger or sad experiences (Kross & Ayduk, 2008, 2009; Kross et al., 2005). Whether these findings generalize to other types of emotional experiences awaits further research.

### Buffering Effects

Does the meaning making that self-distancing promotes have buffering effects? Findings from short-term longitudinal experiments suggest that it does. For example, in one study we found that participants who analyzed their negative experience from a self-distanced perspective experienced less distress when they thought about the same experience again up to 1 week later and ruminated less about their experience over time compared to people who initially self-immersed (Kross & Ayduk, 2008).

The effects of self-distancing have also been compared to distraction. In the short-term, self-distancing and distraction are equally effective at reducing negative affect relative to self-immersion. Over time, however, the beneficial effects of distraction and self-distancing diverge. Compared to people who initially distract, those who reflect over their feelings from a self-distanced perspective report ruminating less about their experience over time and become less distressed when they think about their negative experience again up to 1 week later (Kross & Ayduk, 2008).

A real-world analogy for these findings is that when people go to the movies to stop thinking about a problem they feel better during the film (assuming they see an entertaining movie). However, when they are reminded of their problem after the movie ends, distress returns. This is precisely what we see happening when people distract. In contrast, people who self-distance while reflecting derive both immediate and delayed benefits.

### Individual and Cultural Differences

Do some people *spontaneously* self-distance while analyzing their feelings, and does doing so lead to similar consequences as when we manipulate this process in the laboratory? Initial findings suggest that the answer is yes to both questions (Ayduk & Kross, 2010). In these studies, participants are asked to reflect over a negative experience and then rate the extent to

which they adopted a self-immersed or self-distanced perspective as they analyzed their feelings. The more people report spontaneously self-distancing, the less distress they report both immediately after analyzing their feelings and when they reflect on the same experience again approximately 7 weeks later. They also report ruminating less about their experience over time. Consistently, people higher in spontaneous self-distancing score lower on trait rumination.

Recent evidence has also linked spontaneous self-distancing with adaptive behavioral outcomes. For example, in one study, the higher people scored on a daily measure of spontaneous self-distancing administered over a 3-week period, the less likely they were to act with hostility toward their romantic partner when their partner was hostile toward them during a laboratory conflict-discussion task (Ayduk & Kross, 2010).

Research is also beginning to explore cultural differences on this dimension. For example, Grossmann and Kross (2010) found that Russians experience less distress than Americans when they reflect over negative experiences. Why might this be? Russians are more holistic in their cognitive orientation than Americans (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011), so the researchers predicted that Russians would spontaneously self-distance more than Americans do when they reflect over their negative experiences, which should lead them to experience less distress (Grossmann & Kross, 2010). They found that this was indeed the case.

These findings demonstrate that people and cultures vary in their tendency to spontaneously self-distance. Furthermore, variability on this dimension is meaningfully related to whether people reflect adaptively over their negative feelings in daily life.

Do people spontaneously self-distance consistently across situations and can this process be enhanced through training? What cognitive mechanisms underlie spontaneous self-distancing, and how does it develop and correlate with other traits? These questions await further research.

## Impact Across Multiple Levels of Analysis

Psychologists have known for some time that when people think about negative experiences it is not just their feelings that hurt—their bodies respond as well. For example, when people think about an argument, their blood pressure rises momentarily. From a health perspective, experiencing such temporary blood pressure increases is not particularly worrisome. What is worrisome is when people's blood pressure levels increase and remain elevated over time. This is precisely what happens when people ruminate (Brosschot, Gerin, & Thayer, 2006).

Does self-distancing attenuate such prolonged cardiovascular reactivity? Recent findings suggest it does. Regardless of whether people are cued to analyze their feelings from a self-distanced perspective or engage in this process spontaneously (Ayduk & Kross, 2008, 2010), they display less cardiovascular reactivity when they analyze their feelings. They also

“recover” more quickly after analyzing their feelings. That is, their cardiovascular reactivity returns to baseline faster than that of people who self-immersed (Ayduk & Kross, 2008).

Research has also begun to explore the neural substrates of this process. For example, Kross and colleagues (Kross, Davidson, Weber, & Ochsner, 2009) found that when participants reflected over negative experiences using a distancing strategy that was conceptually similar to the one used in our behavioral research, they displayed less activity in a network of cortical midline regions (including subgenual cingulate cortex) than when they reflected concretely on their emotions from an immersed perspective. Interestingly, depressed individuals display increased activity in a similar set of regions at rest (Greicius et al., 2007). These findings offer a psychological explanation for why this might be: At rest, depressed individuals may be reflecting on their feelings from a self-immersed perspective, which activates these regions.

## Translational Implications

An important question raised by these findings concerns the issue of translation: Do the beneficial effects of self-distancing extend to vulnerable populations? Research has begun to address this question in a number of ways.

In one line of recent work, we examined whether depressive symptomatology influences the effectiveness of self-distancing (Kross & Ayduk, 2009). We found that the people who benefited the most from self-distancing were the participants who felt the most depressed (i.e., people who scored in the “moderate to severe” range on the Beck Depression Inventory). These findings suggest that self-distancing may facilitate adaptive self-reflection among clinically depressed individuals, highlighting the need for future research on this issue.

The implications of self-distancing for children are also being explored. Children's chronic tendencies to ruminate are closely linked with factors that contribute to the development of psychopathology (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). To the extent that self-distancing buffers children against rumination, teaching them how to engage in this strategy may have important translational benefits. Toward this end, we recently found that 10-year-olds can be instructed to self-distance while analyzing their feelings and that utilizing this strategy leads to short-term benefits similar to those observed in adults (Kross, Duckworth, Ayduk, Tsukayama, & Mischel, in press).

Connections between self-distancing and bipolar disorder (BD) are now being drawn as well. Individuals with BD often experience dangerously high levels of positive affect when they think about positive experiences. Might self-distancing enable such individuals to reflect over positive events without experiencing excessive emotional and physiological reactivity? Gruber, Harvey, and Johnson (2009) tested and found evidence to support this hypothesis. Their findings highlight the therapeutic value that self-distancing may have for individuals with BD. They also demonstrate that self-distancing attenuates reactivity to both positive and negative experiences—a finding that

has an important take-home point for everyday life: Namely, if you want to savor positive experiences (and don't suffer from BD), reflect on them from a self-immersed perspective.

Overall, the results from these studies suggest that the beneficial effects of self-distancing may generalize to vulnerable populations. Additional work is needed to examine whether the long-term benefits associated with this process in healthy individuals generalize to these and other vulnerable groups. In this vein, it is noteworthy that certain therapies for depression (Beck, 1970), borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993), and post-traumatic stress disorder (Resick et al., 2008) utilize techniques that are conceptually similar to self-distancing. Because these techniques are packaged with other tools, however, the specific role they play in alleviating distress requires explication.

Future research is also needed to examine when self-distancing may be harmful or ineffective (c.f., Foa & Kozak, 1986). For example, in one study we found that cueing people to self-distance and then focus on *what* they felt did not alleviate distress. Beneficial effects were observed only when participants self-distanced and analyzed their feelings (i.e., focusing on “why”), suggesting that how a person focuses on their feelings when they self-distance is important (Kross et al., 2005). We suspect that people who self-distance and then avoid their feelings in order to escape them will likewise not benefit from this process.

## Conclusion

Human beings are motivated to understand their feelings (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Under most circumstances, this meaning-making process works well. We experience events, explain them, and move on. But in some situations, particularly those that arouse intense negative emotion, this meaning-making process short-circuits. Our goal in this paper was to explain why this happens and present a solution for how to overcome it. The capacity to self-distance while analyzing negative experiences may provide one promising route.

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- Kross, E., & Ayduk, O. (2008). (See References). Experimental work examining the delayed effects of self-distancing in comparison to self-immersion and distraction.
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- Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Wisco, B.E., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). (See References). A comprehensive review of the rumination literature.
- Wilson, T.D., & Gilbert, D.T. (2008). (See References). A theory that discusses the role of meaning-making for dampening emotional reactions.

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