

Scientists Aren't Sure How the Inner Voice Works

March 31, 2022

Many of us have a consistent dialogue running in our heads that we use for a variety of mental tasks, such as working memory — reciting phone numbers or new friends' names — and reading. Despite its important presence in most people's daily lives, we know surprisingly little about how it works — or how many of us actually have one.

Investigating Inner Speech

Everyone knows we can't read other people's minds. But as anyone who has tried meditation can tell you, it's surprisingly difficult to figure out what's going on even in our own heads. Russell Hurlburt, a psychologist at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, wants to change that. As a graduate student in 1973, he came up with something called Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES), a way to investigate inner speech. Long before most of us had smart phones all but glued to our bodies, Hurlburt designed a beeper that research subjects wore in their ears and sounded randomly throughout the day. When the beeper went off, the subjects jotted down what was going on in their minds just before.

According to Hurlburt, it's so difficult to study inner voices because people have what he calls "presuppositions" about what's going on in their minds. Respondents will typically describe what they think researchers want to hear rather than their genuine thoughts, he says.

...