

Healthier Eating is Possible Even During a Pandemic, If You Simply Talk to Yourself

September 30, 2020



As the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) drags on and people continue to spend more time at home, closer to the refrigerator, maintaining a healthy diet can become a significant challenge.

Research published in the journal [Clinical Psychological Science](#), however, offers a relatively simple technique to resist temptations and make better food choices: Talk to yourself in the third person.

The study, “[Distanced Self-Talk Enhances Goal Pursuit to Eat Healthier](#),” finds that a technique known as “distanced self-talk,” which refers to an internal dialog using either one’s name or third-person pronouns such as “you, he, or she” is an effective strategy for making healthier food choices.

“Reflecting on a person’s decisions using their own name might enhance their ability to follow through with their goals, which can often be undermined by strong situational lures, such as tempting foods,” said lead author Celina Furman, a former University of Michigan researcher who is now a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota.

Furman and two researchers from the University of Michigan, APS Fellow **Ethan Kross** and **Ashley Gearhardt**, found that psychological distance facilitates self-control by shifting people’s focus away

from the highly arousing features of a stimulus, like the sight of chips or the smell of baked goods.

For example, you might perceive a piece of chocolate cake as highly delicious, but a distanced perspective may lead you to pay more attention to abstract features relevant to health goals, such as its high calorie and fat content.

Participants in the study, who were all young adults, initially disclosed whether they were currently dieting or trying to lose weight. They were then randomly assigned to watch a 2-minute video of either health-related commercials that emphasized eating healthy and exercising (health video) or home improvement commercials (control video).

After watching the video, the participants chose between healthy and unhealthy food items on a computer screen. For each pair of foods, participants were instructed to use either first-person self-talk (“What do I want?”) or distanced self-talk (“[Name], what do you want?”).

Among participants on a diet, the researchers found, those who viewed the health video chose fewer unhealthy foods when they used distanced self-talk than when they used first-person self-talk.

Among nondieters, distanced self-talk led to [healthier food choices](#) regardless of the video viewed.

“Since people are regularly confronted with cheap and accessible tasty foods, self-control strategies that are easy to implement when encountering these foods are more likely to be effective for improving dietary choices,” said Kross, who has extensively researched distanced self-talk.

The researchers noted that even minor changes in eating can make a difference in people’s lives, so using distanced self-talk to turn away from unhealthy behaviors could lead to appreciable improvements in health.

“We do know that even reducing caloric intake by a couple hundred calories a day can be important for preventing unhealthy weight gain and promoting weight loss,” said Gearhardt. “We need to do additional studies in the future about the impact of distanced self-talk on actual caloric intake, but even small improvements can lead to big public health gains over time.”

Reference

Furman, C.R., Kross, E., Gearhardt, A.N. (2020). Distanced self-talk enhances goal pursuit to eat healthier. *Clinical Psychological Science*. 8(2): 366-373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702619896366>