

How to Cope: Step Back and Get Some Distance

By Tim Jarvis

Try This Coping Tool the Next Time You Get Bad News



Illustration: Carmen Segovia

Certain announcements ("You're fired," "I want to break up," "There's been an accident") have a way of slamming into your life like a wrecking ball. When they do, researchers have discovered a healthy way to cope: a simple technique called self-distancing.

Rather than immersing oneself in the bad news and sinking into obsessive analysis, "self-distancing essentially gives you a psychological time-out," says Ethan Kross, PhD, an assistant professor in the psychology department at the University of Michigan, who has co-authored studies on the subject. "It involves taking a mental step back from a painful episode. You become a fly on the wall, watching yourself in the experience and reflecting on it from a distance."

In one experiment, Kross and his colleagues asked students to think of a difficult episode from their past. Those in one group were told to relive the event as if it were happening again; the others were instructed to visualize moving away from the situation to a vantage point where they could watch themselves in the unfolding drama as if it were a video. The self-distancing group not only felt less distressed but registered notably lower blood pressure. "This distancing," Kross says, "facilitates the ability to work through the

event, leading people to have insights that buffer them against future negative reactions. If you ask them to recall the same experience a week later, they don't become as upset as people who don't distance. They also ruminate less."

Kross acknowledges that his research is informed by Eastern practices aimed at detaching yourself from your thoughts and feelings. Sharon Salzberg, a co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, says that meditation techniques can be useful. "Always remember to breathe," she advises. "And look for what you're adding to a difficult feeling. Is it humiliation? Anger? Are you projecting about how things will be in the future? Try to let go of all that and come back to what's actually going on." Ten to 15 minutes of meditation a day can help build emotional immunity.

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