

# Try Self-Distancing

*Sometimes we get so caught up in our own thoughts and emotions that we have a hard time considering someone else’s point of view. To avoid this trap, try to think about yourself or talk to yourself in the third- or second-person instead of the first-person. Research suggests that “self-distancing” through this simple change in pronouns can help us better regulate our emotions and engage in difficult conversations with greater equanimity and less distress.*



## HOW TO DO IT

It can be hard to practice self-distancing in the heat of a disagreement. For starters, it might be easier to try these steps on your own, removed from a conflict, then eventually work your way up to applying them in the midst of an argument or debate. This can be a conflict you’re having with someone close to you, like a romantic partner, or you can apply this skill to the way you’re thinking about members of a group with whom you have differences or disagreements.

1. First, think about this conflict from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved—a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement?
2. As you think about the conflict, shift your perspective of what is happening from the first-person to the third-person. For example, if your name is Leo, instead of asking, “Why do I feel this way?” ask yourself, “Why does Leo feel this way?”
3. Taking this third-person perspective can be challenging, especially around intergroup conflicts—and especially in the heat of the moment. Ask yourself:

What obstacles do you face trying to take this third-person perspective? What might help you overcome them? For example, if you find yourself getting caught up in the heat of the moment, it might help to pause and take a deep breath.

4. Despite the obstacles to self-distancing by taking a third-person perspective, people can be successful in doing so—but it takes practice.

Over the next few months, try your best to take this perspective during disagreements. What effect does it have on the interaction? What effects can you feel it having on your body and thoughts? How could you be more successful at it? Allow these reflections to inform your future interactions, make your disagreements more constructive, and prevent them from escalating.



### WHY TRY IT

When we experience conflict with others, we typically take a first-person perspective, preoccupied with our own thoughts, feelings, and values. That can overwhelm us with emotions like anger and resentment, making it hard to engage in constructive conversation, especially around charged or polarizing issues with someone who we might see as an adversary or a threat. But when we take an outsider's perspective on the situation, and get some distance from ourselves, we can respond from a place that is more calm and conciliatory. Distancing ourselves from the problem also helps us recognize that alternative viewpoints exist outside of our own.



### KEEP IN MIND

If it feels too awkward to refer to yourself by your own name, you can use a third-person pronoun, like he/she/they, or even try a second-person pronoun (“you”). And you don't have to do so out loud—changing your perspective in your inner monologue is more than enough.



## THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

Learn how John Sarrouf, co-executive director of Essential Partners, **applies the skill of self-distancing** to their work fostering constructive dialogue across divides.

Teresa F. Frisbie, the director of the Dispute Resolution Program at the Loyola University Chicago School of Law, promotes self-distancing **as a tool to enhance mediation** and resolve disputes.



## RESEARCH BEHIND IT

Kross, E., & Grossmann, I. (2012). **Boosting wisdom: Distance from the self enhances wise reasoning, attitudes, and behavior** Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 141(1), 43.

Ayduk O., Kross E. (2010) **From a distance: implications of spontaneous self-distancing for adaptive self-reflection.** Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98, 809–29.



## TO READ MORE

**How to Get Some Emotional Distance in an Argument** Getting angry? Try a practice called “self-distancing” to help resolve conflict.