

## Referring to one's self in the third person <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

Why do some people refer to themselves in third person view? Like they'll say, "Bob likes that" instead of, "I like that."

Sounds wacky to me,

— Confused

### **Answer**

Dear Confused,

Hearing someone refer to themselves in the third person may seem "wacky", but you may be surprised to learn that it can actually be pretty helpful to the person doing it. Some people find that speaking in third person improves their self-esteem, their ability to perform well under stress, to manage their emotions more favorably, and to think through complex situations in a more rational and calm manner. Though it's possible that speaking in third person may be a sign of a personality disorder, unless there are other significant symptoms, it's not usually considered a tell-tale sign of one. Still curious about third person speech? Read on!

For some, speaking in the third person comes in the form of self-talk, be it aloud, written, or to themselves. When you hear someone refer to themselves in the third person, are they using it as a form of self-talk or referring to a time when they used self-talk? If so, they may be doing it to boost their confidence. Over the course of a person's life, it's common to occasionally grapple with their confidence — whether it's confidence in their abilities to achieve a particular task or to overcome certain hurdles. Because of this lack of confidence, some people may perform poorly in some situations. But some people find they can overcome their anxiety by referring to themselves in third person. This allows them to psychologically distance themselves from their preconceived fears and worries about the situation and adopt a more objective stance. Typically, when people think about their perceived shortcomings, they're likely to be too emotionally invested and wrapped up in the situation to properly analyze their current state of affairs. In other words, they tend to be their harshest critic. However, through what is referred to as self-distancing, they may feel compelled to treat themselves with the kindness and understanding

they would afford their friends. With this added comfort, they could become less inclined to ruminate over negative events, preventing themselves from spiraling into negative emotions such as sadness, anger, frustration, and guilt. Additionally, those with predispositions for anxiety may find that a language shift may alter their perception of anxiety provoking events.

Researchers tested the notion of third person self-talk improving confidence by having people engage in public speaking tasks, where some people were instructed to silently refer to themselves in third person, and others could speak in first person. They found that people speaking in third person were calmer, carried themselves with more confidence and felt less stressed during their speech. As compared to people who spoke in first person, they ended up performing better. Afterwards, they continued to speak of themselves with positive and encouraging language and felt more satisfied with their performance. Research has indicated this may be particularly helpful for people with any form of social anxiety disorder.

With all this said, it may be worth mentioning that there are known instances of third person speech being an indication of dissociative identity disorder (DID) [2]. This is a disorder that is characterized by people switching between one or more identities. They may feel as though multiple voices are trying to take control of them, and each identity has its own persona. Some of the symptoms for DID can include memory loss, feeling detached from their own thoughts and body, having out-of-body experiences (as though they're watching themselves from the outside), and other mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression. But, unless someone is experiencing other symptoms of DID, chances are referring to themselves in the third person is unrelated to any diagnosable concerns.

So, even though talking in third person may be unfamiliar to you, there are benefits to keeping an open-mind when considering different reasons people may do it. Hopefully now you can say "Ah, Confused isn't so confused anymore!"

Alice!

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Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [12]

Published date:

Oct 05, 2001

Last reviewed on:

Oct 06, 2017

## Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
  - Content Use
  - Media Inquiries
  - Comments & Corrections
- ▼ Syndication & Licensing
  - Licensing Q&As
  - Get Alice! on Your Website
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### Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/referring-ones-self-third-person-0>
- [2] <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Dissociative-Disorders>
- [3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/emotional-health>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/communication-concerns>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationships>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relating-communicating>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/so-i-says-myself-talking-yourself>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/why-does-public-speaking-produce-panic>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/building-self-confidence-0>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/stress-anxiety-and-learning-cope>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>