

How to Control, Reframe and Change the Chatter in Your Head – Ethan Kross, Ph.D. – #899

Dave:

You're listening to The Human Upgrade with Dave Asprey. I've done a lot of work this year and over the last couple years in making these episodes really worth your time. And part of that is going forward I'm going to talk upfront about why the episode is here so you can decide right away, "Hey, this is an episode for me." Or you can say, "I'm going to take my time and I'd rather watch Breaking Bad yet again or take a nap." Because the deal here is you should get more back from this show than you invest in listening to it, just in terms of your time and energy. Part of that is we have a live studio audience from my mentorship group called the Upgrade Collective. You can go to daveasprey.com and learn more about the Upgrade Collective. This is a mentorship group where we meet every week to talk about biohacking, where I teach all my books and things like that. But there is a live audience here who will be whispering questions in my ear and maybe asking some live questions.

With no further ado, here's why this show is happening today. It's because you have a voice in your head and it's probably a mean son of a bitch, to be perfectly honest. Certainly mine was. And right now, the voices in most people's heads are louder and more annoying than normal. Especially if you watch the news. And if you're like some people, you see the news and then the voice in your head says, "Red rum, red rum," you're not alone either. That's a Stephen King reference, if you're missing it. So if you don't know it, then go read some Stephen King already.

Now what you're going to do when you walk away from the show after you've listened to it is you're going to have a set of tools to change your behavior, to change the voice in your head, which is something that's really, really valuable. I say it's valuable because like I said, I've turned mine off. I've done extensive trauma stuff as well as all the neurofeedback from my company 40 years of Zen. But today, we're not going to talk about neurofeedback in that context. We're going to talk about how you can use research from a university professor to change relationships, to change your career, to improve your physical performance, to control your stress levels and basically to do what you want to do, show up the way you want to show up.

Our guest today is named Ethan Kross. He's one of the world's top experts on controlling the conscious minds. He's the founder of the Emotion and Self-Control Laboratory at the University of Michigan. And he studies your relationship with emotions, with your mind and with your self-control. Ethan, it's an honor to have you on the show today. Thank you for showing up.

Ethan Kross:

Thanks for having me. Been looking forward to the conversation and delighted to hear there's a live audience. Please folks, if you have questions, pepper away.

Dave:

All right. What was the voice in your head saying when I read all those cool things you've done?

Ethan:

The voice was totally quiet. I was just listening to what you were saying. It was not activated, thankfully.

Dave:

So I didn't stoke your ego and you're like, "Look at me. I'm such a big professor"? None of that happens?

Ethan:

I try to not put too much into any of that. If I do, I can hear my mom's voice very easily just reminding me about how sometimes I'm a little bleep.

Dave:

I hear you. That's cool. That means that it works. By the way, your new book, for listeners and for our Upgrade Collective audience, it's called Chatter: The Voice in your Head, Why it Matters and How to Harness It. Is the voice in your head actually you or is it someone else?

Ethan:

It most certainly is a feature of you.

Dave:

Is the voice in your head actually you or is it someone else?

Ethan:

It most certainly is a feature of you. So when I use the term voice in our head, what I'm talking about is our ability to silently use language to reflect on our lives. It's interesting, several years ago, there was a brouhaha on the internet about whether some people don't have an inner voice. And when you think about what we know about silently using language, the answer to that question is like, "Does some people not have it?" No, everyone has an inner voice, we just may use it differently. So we use our inner voice to do lots of really important things. Did you describe it as the bastard? What was your favorite phrase for ...

Dave:

A mean son of a bitch.

Ethan:

Mean son of a bitch. It's funny. Lots of people have pet names for their inner voices. It's not always a mean son of a bitch. We evolved the ability to silently use language for a reason. So let me just rattle off a couple of the key functions it serves because they're really quite astounding. At the most basic end of the spectrum, you use your inner voice to keep information active in your mind. So you go to the grocery store, you walk down the aisle, you think to yourself, "What do I have to buy? Eggs, cheese, yogurt, coffee, butter." You're priming me here with your drink. That's you using your inner voice, right? It's part of our working memory system. A basic system of a human mind that you need to navigate the world effectively.

Then we use our inner voice to do other things like coach ourselves through problems. When I'm exercising, I'm, "Come on, three more sets, 10, 9, 8." We use our inner voice to simulate and plan. Before an interview, people will often think, "Hey, what are they going to ask me and then how am I going to respond?" And we do that in our head that we run that simulation. And that's an amazing thing to be able to do. Then finally, we use our inner voice to tell stories. Bad things happen in our life, we experience adversity.

When that happens, we often turn inward to try to make sense of that adversity, come up with a story that gives us a sense of who we are and we use our inner voice to do that, too. So these are all wonderful things that your inner voice can do for you. And it's why when people tell me, "Hey, Kross, I

got this son of a _ in my head. Shut it up. Get rid of my inner voice." My answer to them is always, "You don't want to get rid of your inner voice. You want to figure out how can you harness it. How can you harness its dark bastardly side," which is what I call chatter. That's the dark manifestation.

Dave:

The mean part of it, right?

Ethan:

That's the mean part of it. It's the mean part, the self-disparaging, the anxiety-provoking, the depressogenic side. What happens with chatter is when we experience problems, we've got this amazing tool, this voice in our head. So we try to activate it but we don't use it effectively. Instead, we start getting stuck in a negative thought loop. We worry, we catastrophize, we ruminate. And getting stuck in those negative thought loops, getting stuck in that chatter, I think this is one of the big problems we face as a culture because I know what it does to us. It makes it hard for us to think, it creates problems in our relationships and it undermines our health. That's the problematic terrain we're dealing with. And that's where we start doing our research to figure out, "Hey, what are the science-based tools we can use to really harness that chatter?"

Dave:

There's a mean part and there's a useful part of the voice in your head. You've studied how to turn the mean part into a more useful, maybe kinder part. Is that a good way to sum your life's work?

Ethan:

Yeah. I would say more productive. It's interesting, sometimes we hear a lot about being kind to ourselves. Hey, I'm a big proponent of being kind to myself. Self-compassion is great. There are instances though where what I would call tough love can be quite useful, too. For example, sometimes when I'm experiencing chatter, one of the tools I use that we've studied here is something called distant self-talk. It's a simple linguistic tool. And what it involves doing is talking to yourself like you would give advice to another person and using language to help you do that. What I mean is try to coach yourself through your problem using your name and the second person pronoun you. "All right, Ethan, what are you going to do here?"

That's a really useful tool because one of the things we know about people in general is we're much better at giving advice to others than we are taking our own advice. So language can help switch our perspectives. Now, when I do this myself, when I'm getting a little anxious, let's say about, a big performance, "All right, come on, Ethan. Get your act together." I'm not bringing the verbal equivalent of cupcakes and hot tea to that internal dialogue. I'm channeling my high school wrestling coach who's telling me, "You did this before. Suck it up. You're going to do it again and you are going to nail it." And that's a little bit different from just be ... It's being supportive, but it's not unadulterated warmth per se. I think there's a time and place for that.

Dave:

It's one of the things that I do even with my kids. It's like, "Actually, you really did screw that up," and admitting it. Versus saying, "It's okay." So using the voice in your head to self-soothe and tell yourself something that's not real, that seems to be a feature of reality right now where there's lots of people telling themselves batshit crazy stories that they want to be true as if they're true. How do you keep

yourself from using the voice in your head to either lie to yourself or to allow yourself to be lied to from an outside influence?

Ethan:

Well, I think having a really good understanding of the role that negativity plays in our lives can be really useful. It's interesting. I've been talking about this content, this book for quite a few months now. What I've learned is that there is this what we call toxic positivity movement out there. There's this idea that we should try to rid our lives of negative emotions. Now, one thing that I hope listeners understand is that we evolve the capacity to experience negative emotions for a reason. Negative emotions in small doses are elegantly adaptive. If I don't experience a little ping of anxiety before a big presentation, those are the presentations that don't go off spectacularly well. So when I have a little bit of those butterflies that energizes me in ways that allow me to really nail the routine.

What makes negative emotions useful is they grab our attention with their negativity. If you didn't experience any negative emotions, you probably wouldn't be very successful in your life. What makes negative emotions toxic is when those negative emotions go up and then they remain activated over time. That's when we get into dangerous territory. And that's exactly what chatter does because something crappy happens and we don't just experience it, learn from it and move on, but we keep rehearsing it over and over in our minds. That maintains our stress response and it distracts us. And those ways can really sink. So you don't want to get rid of negative emotions, you want to manage them.

Dave:

There's a waiting problem, pardon me. Shouldn't inhale my coffee. There's a waiting problem, and I talk about this in terms of the four F words that drive our unconscious behaviors. And I would argue, even many of the voices in our head. But if something is scary, it might be a threat, we'll put 10 times more focus and weight on it than it really needs. And 10 is a rough number, I don't have a study that says that, but it feels about right. So that's fear, and then we put about five times more on making sure we get food and three times more on making sure we get laid. The three F words, you can imagine what the third one was.

So these are all running in the background before the voice in our head really has a chance to form itself because that's a conscious step that happens a little bit after we decide whether something is a threat. It feels like we overweight in our cells, subcellular kind of things, we overweight the negative things to the point that when we're doing our self-talk, you get a negative thing that comes up, you're going to believe it and give it 10 times more mass than it really deserves. Is there a hack for that? Is it about having less talk or about believing it less? How do I lighten the load of that?

Ethan:

Well, here's something I find really fascinating, Dave. I think a lot of hacks emerge simply from understanding how this remarkable thing sitting right here actually works. Once you understand how the brain and mind work, it becomes a lot easier to modulate your behavior. So what you're describing is this bias we have. There's a phrase I like to use, "Bad is stronger than good." We know that from lots and lots of research, that we are much, much more sensitive to the potential bad things in our lives than the good things.

When I teach really large classes, let's say there are 300 students in the class, I can get 299 glowing reviews and one person, one little gives me the crappy response. I'm up all night talking to my wife, "Do you believe that? What if ..." We overweight the negative. Now there is an evolutionary

reason for why we do this, because the negative stuff, if we go back to cave person days is the stuff that can kill us. The positive stuff feels good, but isn't going to necessarily wipe us out. So we have this negativity bias.

Knowing that, just knowing that I think is step one, is very powerful. Because what it means is when those reviews come in, I know that I'm going to overweight the negative and that then allows me to start discounting it. So that I would argue, I think just knowing about how all of this works, knowing, "What does it even mean to have a voice in your head?" Does the fact that you can hear your mom's voice right now ... If I asked you to imagine your mom telling you to clean up your room, can you conjure up some representation of your mom in your mind?

Dave:

I certainly can. I've done a huge amount of forgiveness and family systems work and all that stuff. In fact, I would say I don't ever hear my parents' voices in my head anymore.

Ethan:

Well, it doesn't matter what the person is, I'm just using-

Dave:

You can conjure though.

Ethan:

You can conjure it. The whole point here is that some people don't understand how that works. That's a perfectly well-functioning brain, the fact that you can simulate different voices. Nothing wrong with you. That's the human mind. One of the reasons I wrote this book was really to open up the hood and just explain how the heck does all this work. If you experience chatter, what does that say about you? What it says about you is that you're a human being, welcome to the human condition. And then give people some tools to manage it

Dave:

One of the things that I found works and something that I do when people are going through my neuroscience company is not just talk. Talk is an auditory sense, but even Napoleon Hill, you visualize a round table. You actually see the person there and like, "What does it smell like? What does it feel like? Can you taste it is? Is the hair on the back of your hand standing up?" All of the sensory things in order to more instantiate it in the brain, is that a part of your work? It feels like talk is one of the senses that you might deal with.

Ethan:

Well, the phenomenon that I explore in the book is the inner voice. So language and what's happening when that underlies our worries and rumination. There's certainly a lot of work on our senses though and the role that our senses play in generating and regulating emotional responses. I think that's a fascinating line of work. It's interesting because our senses are so foundational and their automatic links is, as you're no doubt aware, between our senses and networks in the brain that generate emotional responses. So when you smell a particular odor or encode an affectionate touch or hear a threatening sound, there are direct inputs from those sensory systems to brain regions that are involved in

generating emotional responses like the amygdala, just as one example, that bypasses all conscious thinking.

So if you can think strategically about how to harness your senses, that's another tool that you can use to manage your emotional life. I'll give you a very quick anecdote to this effect. I think about it often. A couple of weeks ago, before the tundra descended on Michigan where I live, my youngest daughter was playing this Little League soccer and I love just watching her play and coaching her from the sidelines. The whole family was going to the game, but the mood in the car, she didn't ... It was an early game. She wasn't really into it. So what did I do? I turned on a song. It was a pump up song. Journey, if you like that kind of thing.

Dave:

Don't Stop Believing.

Ethan:

There you go. I did it. It's classic. Maybe corny, but it works. Within five seconds, all of us were bouncing within the car. I pull up to the soccer field and she's like a horse out of the gates. The door opens, she runs on the field and it was great. That's music, that's another kind of sensory hack. Think about the playlist that you can expose yourself to if you're feeling down. Sensory system is a very powerful tool, I think, for augmenting our emotional reactions.

Dave:

What if the voice in your head is actually playing Nine Inch Nails songs repeatedly or some other equally negative thing? What is the deal with recurring music that you hate in your head? I don't have that anymore. It was a common thing for me when I was younger.

Ethan:

It's an earworm, I think what they're often called. That's really interesting. What you want to do ideally is ... One way to think about this is imagine you've got attention, right? We all have a certain amount of attention, but it's limited. And so if Nine Inch Nails is consuming your attention, what you want to do is find a way to take that mental flashlight, if you will, and put it on something else. So doing something engaging can often be useful.

Dave:

Right [crosstalk 00:20:50] or ...

Ethan:

Well, I'm not going to go there, but I'll allow you to discuss that with your students after [crosstalk 00:20:57]

Dave:

What's going to get out of your head? Something worse, of course.

Ethan:

Well, Nine Inch Nails obviously has some lyrics that stretch in that direction.

Dave:

They sure do.

Ethan:

Try some other music would be an immediate antidote to that.

Dave:

Like some Eminem. Wait, that's equally dark, [crosstalk 00:21:18] one.

Ethan:

I'm thinking Taylor Swift is probably safer territory for the crowds that I hang out with.

Dave:

There you go, Taylor Swift it is. All right. I'll tap her on the show to sing a song for the voices in our heads.

Ethan:

There you go. She actually talks about the voices in her head. She could sing one of those.

Dave:

She really does, actually. It's kind of cool. I love it when famous people are willing to talk about their inner life. But how do you know it's not all bullshit? Okay. This is what I see. What everyone puts on their Instagram filters and all that stuff and I could be sitting here saying, "I don't really have this negative voice in my head." But maybe I'm lying. I actually had a real problem with it for a lot of my life. I really feel like I don't, but maybe I'm deceiving myself or maybe I'm deceiving you. How do you, as a researcher, know whether people are just telling themselves toxic positivity?

Ethan:

Well, I must say in the studies that we do, it's pretty uncommon to find people who don't have experiences with chatter. It's a pretty common experience. And people are further often really motivated to learn about how to manage it because it is so incredibly distressing and disabling. So we haven't really had issues with people telling us that they ... We'll often induce chatter in our studies by stressing people out. So we'll try to take control of the situation. There are a lot of tools we have at our disposal for doing that in a relatively humane way. Actually, we have to get the chatter going a little bit to study how to manage it. But that's one way that we can address this is by just hand delivering the chatter to you.

Then we have lots of ways of measuring indirectly the degree to which people are becoming agitated. We do look at what they tell us because I think subjectivity and self-report is a really valuable piece of information. But we'll also look at physiological responding, how their blood pressure and heart rate is reacting to what we're asking them to do. We'll do brain scanning studies. We'll actually measure their behavior. We'll see, "All right. If we put you in a performance situation ..." And we have one group, we give them instructions to manage their chatter, another group, we don't. Are the people who are doing what we ask them to do, are they performing better? So there are lots of ways we try to triangulate on what we think is truth.

Dave:

If you're including physiology and brain scans, that's very objective. And I know very well if I have a heart rate variability monitor or EEG electrodes, in fact, part of the whole 40 years of Zen program is showing someone what their negative self-chatter does, because suddenly their brainwaves crash and they shift from one state to another and they become less coherent. Well, there you go. It's funny. That happens every time you think about your mom. You think you might want to let that go already. But you talk about time travel in your book or mental time travel, which is a really powerful way that I've found in my own experiences to deal with the voice in my head. Can you walk listeners through what is mental time travel? How do you use that to make the voice in your head behave itself?

Ethan:

It's one of my go-to strategies as well. What it involves doing is the following, when you're experiencing chatter, when that negative voice is acting up, we tend to zoom in on the problem at hand to the exclusion of everything else going on in our lives. We're fixated on the thing that is driving that negative voice. So broadening our perspective in that instance can be really helpful and mental time travel's one way to do that. So rather than focusing on how annoyed I am and irritated about that email exchange I just had and did I say the wrong thing and are they going to escalate, I think to myself, "How am I going to feel about this tomorrow or a week from now or a month from now or a year from now?"

When you engage in that mental simulation, when you transport yourself in time and then think about how you're going to feel about this one incident, what often happens is we realize that as awful as what we're experiencing is right now, it's temporary. It'll eventually pass because most of the things that trouble us, not all, but most of those things do eventually fade with time. And when we become aware of that, that does something really powerful for the human mind. It gives it hope, and hope's a powerful antidote to a chatter-prone psychology. Now that's going into the future. You can also go into the past. I actually do this a lot with the COVID19 pandemic. It's, "Oh God, we're back to quarantining and blah, blah, blah. When is it going to end?" I think, "Well, this stinks, but what about the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918?"

Dave:

The real pandemics where people died in large numbers. Those ones? [crosstalk 00:26:25] 30% of the population?

Ethan:

That's right. Or the bubonic plague. It was so much worse and guess what? It was so much worse and we survived. We're here today.

Dave:

There you go.

Ethan:

Now that just broadens the scope. That ability to step outside that zoomed in narrow view of our circumstances, that is something that human beings are uniquely equipped to do. It's there waiting for people to do it, you just need to know how to do it. And it's simple and so that's mental time travel.

Dave:

Okay. It makes so much sense. When I do it, I literally visualize my body in that time. So it's not like you're just thinking about it, but you're actually seeing it and sensing it. And if you've ever read history, things like the bubonic plague and all of that, and I'm going to give a plug to Neil Stevenson, his book, *The Confusion* has three large books about the enlightenment that are fiction, but they're historically accurate fiction. That's just paints the picture right. There were bodies in the streets. They weren't talking about hospital overwhelm. It was severe, and we are not in that world right now.

I'll go back, but you have to have a picture of, at least, I have to have a picture of it in order for it to be real. But if I just use the words, I'm not getting enough resonance for me to just reset this. Then I'll do the really big time travel and say, "Well, we have a rich abundance of life two miles below the surface of the earth with every kind of metabolism you can think of." So if we screw this up the way we are right now for another couple hundred years, don't worry, Mother Nature will just replace us with some three-eyed, six-tentacled weird beings.

We just won't be around to watch it but some of our DNA will probably be there. You have a choice, but it's all about your timeframe. But I'm weird, and it seems like most people have lost their minds right now. How do you use the techniques in your book *Chatter* for someone who's really in a state of fear where they're amygdala's making all their decisions, they're not doing what we just talked about. How do you handle that situation?

Ethan:

Well, before we get to that situation, I want to stop and pause on your weirdness because I think that's an interesting topic to explore. And what I mean by that is you described one way of using mental time travel that is specifically useful for you, that is a little bit more visual. I think that touches on a really important point because people are often looking for one size fits all strategies. Just tell me the one thing I need to do to get through this.

Dave:

Depending on your brain.

Ethan:

They don't exist. They just don't exist. When I comb through the science and I think, "What have we learned about managing our chatter?" I came across 26 or so different tools. What I can do is I can tell people what those tools are because science has defined them and describe them. What I cannot do yet because we don't have the scientific tools to do so at this point, I can't say, "Hey, Dave, knowing what I know about you, these are the seven tools you should use. But they're different from the three that my wife should use." We're not at that point yet. So what that means, and this takes us to the amygdala firing fear filled individual is we give them the tools and then we give them the opportunity to start experimenting in their lives. Try a tool out, see if it works. If it benefits you, keep using it. And if not, don't. Move on to a different tool.

So that's what I've been doing. I've been talking to people about these tools and hope is that they're finding combinations that do, in fact, work for them. I could tell you that when it comes to myself, when I experience some chatter, there are probably five things I do. I use language to coach myself through the problem like I'm talking to someone else. I do mental time travel. I call up individuals who are particularly skilled at helping me broaden my perspective. My chatter advisors, I've got three or four of those. They're not mental health professionals, they're friends. I get out in nature and I organize my spaces. That's what works for me, but that may be very different from where it works for you.

Dave:

It comes down to the same thing with supplements, with nutrition, where different techniques work for different people. The basic algorithm behind it that seems to work for personal development and nutrition and biohacking, all of it is first thing, stop doing the stuff that makes you weak and then do the things that make you strong. So it's removing the burdens, toning down the negative voice in your head before you necessarily say, "I'm going to do something that strengthens me." A lot of us though are going to naturally say, "Well, I'm just going to lift more."

Well, maybe you could set down the 50 pounds of crap you're carrying on your back before you decide you want to lift more. So that algorithm has always worked for me and for the many followers of the show and all my other books. Does that jive for you for personal development? Are there times when you just need to go do good stuff and not worry about all the bad stuff? Or is it more like let's just drop some weight?

Ethan:

Well, what makes chatter a little sticky in this regard is the stickiness of chatter.

Dave:

Are there times when you just need to go do good stuff and not worry about all the bad stuff? Or is it more like let's just drop some weight?

Ethan:

Well, what makes chatter a little sticky in this regard is the stickiness of chatter. It's hard to tell people, and studies have looked at this, when you tell them, "Just stop worrying about this. Stop ruminating." Unless you give them something to serve as a counterweight to that, they'll just keep going because they have this goal, a goal to work through a problem to make sense of it. And when that goal is activated, it's really hard to turn it off. That's where these other kinds of ways of channeling that energy become very helpful.

Dave:

Maybe the chatter works really well for some people, but it doesn't work for others so I'm not going to mandate chatter or anything else. But I'm happy to provide really strong guidelines about what will work for most people. Which I think you did a good job in your book as well of just saying, "Hey, these are the tools, that works." This is why you can manage the voice in your head, which is really cool. But the personalization in your answer there I think is something that we can all learn something from.

Ethan:

Yeah, I hope so.

Dave:

Now, one of the things that happens with chatter and one things you talk about in the book is the voice in your head, when it backfires. Maybe you take out aggression on other people, for instance. What's going on with that and what are the counter strategies to make sure that you don't yell at your kids or cancel someone you don't even know on social media?

Ethan:

Well, one of the ways that ... Chatter can create friction in our relationships with others. And there are two key pathways through which this works. One thing that happens is when experiencing chatter, we're often motivated to share it with other people, to talk about it, because we want to get help. A couple of exceptions to that rule, we tend to not want to talk about certain forms of trauma or shame. But usually, we want to get it out. But because the chatter keeps playing, we just find someone to talk to and then we keep on talking about it over and over and over again. And that can have the effect of pushing away people who really care about us because there's only so much that they can listen to before we start to bring them down as well. So that creates a feedback loop of we push other people away and then we feel isolated and rejected in return, which isn't very good.

The other way it can harm our relationships is by leading us to what we call displace our emotion or take out our frustration on someone else. The way this works is I'm experiencing chatter. I'm at my computer and I'm trying to get through a couple of emails. My daughter comes in and she's like, "Dad, I want to tell you about what happened." "Not right now. I got to finish up." And of course, she doesn't wait for me to finish up, but she innocently chimes in again. Then I unload on her. She becomes a target that I can take the emotion out on, and that's not good for relationships either. The tools for managing that are the same as for managing the other features of chatter. If you nip the chatter in the bud, then these relational problems, these health problems, these thinking and performance problems, they all are minimized. So the tools aren't very different, but chatter certainly has lots of negative effects.

Dave:

Part of your research and part of what you write about in the book is that when people spend more time on social media, they overshare, they turn on social comparison hardware and they become miserable. Tell me more about why that chain happens.

Ethan:

Well, social medias really adds a whole new layer to the study of the inner voice because it's really the inner voice becoming the outer voice. If you look at some platforms, they actually encourage you. The prompt says, "Hey, write down what is on your mind." And that can get us into trouble in a few different ways. Now, I do want to be clear, I don't think social media is de facto toxic. There are ways of interacting with it that are helpful. One thing that social media does is it makes it easier for us to just express our emotions, our frustration in a very unfiltered way. There are no empathy cues on many platforms.

As I'm talking to you right now, I'm getting information from your face. It's hitting my sensory system. It's leading me to constrain how I'm talking to you. If I say something hurtful, I'm going to see that in your face and modify my behavior accordingly. That doesn't exist on social media. So that makes it easier for us to do things like cyber bully and troll, which are really quite harmful for the targets of those behaviors and can also have negative effects on the people who are perpetuating the behavior, too. The other way social media can create chatter though is we have so much ownership over our ability to present ourselves in social media. We have this ability to curate the way we present ourselves in these glorified ways.

And when you're logging into Instagram and seeing all these amazing images of other people's lives and you have full access to the ordinariness of your own life, that can lead you to feel envy, even when you know that other people are curating their feeds. You still know, but it is so acute. The sensory impact of this is so strong that you still can feel bad. And that can be problematic, too, if you're spending

a lot of time on these sites, especially if you're someone who's prone to making social comparisons. So you want to be careful.

Dave:

Robert Greene, who I think is one of the modern day masters of just human behavior in general, the guy wrote 48 Laws of Power and many other books, came on the show and he talked about the antidote for envy and how to know when you're experiencing it, which is the same as social comparison. Are they better or worse than me? His antidote was visualize yourself as the other person and how happy the other person would be, how grateful they would be for whatever good thing happened. Then that tends to turn off the social comparison switch and replace it with gratitude. Given all of your research and what you know about the voice in the head, good strategy, bad strategy, can we modify it? Can we improve it?

Ethan:

Well, I think it's a really interesting strategy. There may well be some data on it. If there isn't, someone should do a study to test it.

Dave:

He tends to be pretty data driven, but also historical precedent driven. That came from the Laws of Human Nature, I would say his opus, his most recent book.

Ethan:

Well, I think it's really interesting. If you were pitching me that in a lab session as a potential antidote, it would pique my attention and motivate me to say, "All right, let's do an experiment to see if that actually works," if those studies haven't been done. It does touch on another, I think, really fascinating tool for managing feelings of inadequacy and just not feeling great about ourselves, which is helping others to help ourselves. There's a lot of work showing that ...

Actually, one of the best ways to feel better about your own life is to help another individual. Helping other people can be a useful tool to help oneself. There's a lot of data showing that. And what I find really interesting about this phenomenon though is that anecdotally, I think a lot of people express some resistance to doing that. We may feel envious of someone else. And if you actually just help them out, you'll feel better. But there's ego that prevents us from sometimes taking that step, and I think overcoming that can be important.

Dave:

Service to others, it also puts you in a flow state as a side effect of one of that. It's one of the many ways to get into a flow state. And it certainly does help you when you do that. So it's a selfish act to help another person. How weird is that? Whatever Mother Nature algorithm, [inaudible 00:41:31] creator thing that you think about, whoever it is, it's a very odd and mean-spirited thing if you think about it. Because why would it be that in order to help you, you have to help another person? It doesn't make any sense, but it is how it works. And they don't teach that, that an active charity is an act of improving yourself and helping self. So it's a selfish act to help another person. My reality is that way, anyway.

Ethan:

It's not just that that they don't teach, Dave. I mean, we don't teach a lot of things about the human mind and emotion that I think we would all benefit from knowing. Not in a prescriptive sense, not in saying, "Hey, here are the things about emotion. Here's what you should do." But really just opening up the textbook in schools and saying, "Hey, we all have a brain. We all experience emotions. Here's how they work." Giving people information about that so then they can make choices for themselves about what to do with respect to regulation if they are so inclined. I spend a lot of time thinking about this issue.

I find it remarkable because when you think about what we teach our kids, we teach them about information that we think is going to serve them well in this world that they're about to step into once they become an adult. We teach them about things like the digestive system. I always pick on the digestive system in this example, but it's relevant here because I remember learning about the digestive system. The one finding that stuck with me all these years is peristalsis, how food gets from one hole to the other. Really cool, I mean, amazing feat of the body. But if you ask me how many times have I had occasion to use that information in my adult life, the answer is not zero.

There have been two specific incidents. Incidents is maybe the wrong word. They both involve my daughters. Both of them independently asked me how they can swallow food upside down. I had the answer. I was able to tell them that but that's it. Then you think about things like anxiety, anger, depression, joy, love, empathy. I mean, these concepts that speak to the richness of our experiences navigating this world. Why aren't we teaching people about how those work? About what they are? What's going on in our minds and brains when we're experiencing those states and how can you amplify or diminish them if you so choose? That, to me, is a big mystery. I hope moving forward, it changes.

Dave:

I'm going to do a time travel to what we were just talking about. "It's the monster in the closet. Your chatter has COVID." You guys are not helping me here. All right? Let's see. One of the most successful parenting things I ever did was when one of my kids was probably five or six and was just having a lot of emotions. Kids just have random emotions as they're developing stuff. And I said, "Well, this is great. You're having some emotions. Can you draw a picture of them?" So it was just a way to get her to think about and just to have an observer of the emotion instead of being ...

It turns out there was this great picture of the emotion with colors and all this kind of stuff. And it totally allowed the study and the experience of it, and I think it was great. I think they did that thing in all of these things, "All right, let's just look at how this part of it works." But it's entirely suppressed and not talked about. I don't think I've ever seen any classes on that in my own experience. And even for the kids, they talk about behavior and kindness, but they don't really talk about the dark stuff that happens. Are you hopeful of this is going to change in the next little while or is it just [crosstalk 00:45:56]?

Ethan:

I'm trying to make it happen. I've been working over the years with curriculum designers to develop curricula that teach kids about the mind in this regard about what emotions are, how they work, how they can be managed. Again, not prescriptively, but descriptively. Just laying out what we know about these issues and then leaving it up to people to do what they want with it. My feeling is if you're motivated to reduce your chatter and regulate your negative emotions, you'll likely evaluate yourself of these tools. But I'm not going to tell you when to do that. I think that oversteps in this context.

So we've developed this curricula, we've pilot tested them. We're actually getting ready to do a massive study with thousands of high school students in Georgia to assess what effect it has on these

high school kids over time. I do think the culture is increasingly receptive to the importance of these ideas. And I think part of the reason is we see that they can make a difference in people's lives.

Dave:

I was just about to ask about high school and age suitability for these tools. How young can you be in order to start making use of an understanding of chatter?

Ethan:

Well, I think we targeted in these intervention curriculum studies that we're doing, we targeted junior high/high school. These are times that are rife with emotion and chatter so they make sense. A lot of the tools that I talk about, not all of them, but there is some developmental evidence for many of these tools. So it makes sense to look at how they work there. I think going earlier can be really useful, too. We'd want to just tread carefully with respect to how you do that. You don't want to start talking about chatter necessarily if it doesn't really exist yet.

But if you look at things like Sesame Street or Daniel Tiger, those are programs that, I think, that is where you're getting this kind of education right now. Because those programs are talking about these big feelings and what you can do to manage them. The tool you describe with your daughter, I think you say it was your daughter.

Dave:

Yeah.

Ethan:

That's a distancing tool. We study that, and it's a really useful tool, that ability to adopt an observer perspective. That can be very helpful when people are struggling with big emotions. Those are the kinds of things that would be taught, I think, at a younger age.

Dave:

I'm hoping that you succeed with this study in high schoolers, because there's so much emotional development happening. The prefrontal cortex isn't quite baked yet to cause that. So you see these huge swings and also just to be comfortable that that's normal and healthy. But there's some things you talk about in your book that aren't necessarily normal and healthy that also cause chatter. And one of those, and what I've dealt with a lot is PTSD. So how do you know if you're dealing with a clinical thing like anxiety or PTSD versus a voice in your head? Is it a degree of the voice? Is it a traumatic brain thing? What's going on in drawing the line there?

Ethan:

It is usually a matter of degree. So how long is a chatter lasting and how loud is it? How much is it interfering with your ability to essentially live the life you want to live, be satisfied and happy each day? If the chatter's ongoing incessant for more than two weeks and it's really causing impairments, that's a cue that you want to take the next step to speak to a licensed professional, to get a take on how you're faring. But there is no specific line to draw.

Chatter is an incredibly common feature of the human condition. One of the things I hope the book does is normalize that experience for many people to make it clear that, "Hey, if you experience chatter at times, that doesn't mean that anything is "wrong with you". It means you're dealing with life

and the curve balls that it throws at us. And that can sometimes be a little challenging to do. And here are some things you could do to manage that more effectively. But again, if it's getting really loud and really interfering and tools aren't working, no reason, I mean, you should avail yourself with help because really good help is out there.

Dave:

Thanks for saying that. As someone who had actually pretty strong PTSD, you probably don't know you have it. So it's just the reality and you find you really react, you feel like you can't stand it or whatever. Not everyone has the same processes in your brain that you do, but you always imagine they will. So if people think there's something that's going on, maybe you should listen and just go talk to someone and people who work with PTSD, whether it's someone who does EFT or EMDR or any kind of therapist, they're going to know from 10 miles away that you have PTSD, because you have it all over, you just don't know it. True statement?

Ethan:

Well, I think it varies. For some people-

Dave:

Some people [crosstalk 00:51:34].

Ethan:

I think there's just such variability and our ability to just identify these states ... We don't have blood tests to do it just yet, and I don't know. We'll see if we ever get to that point. Maybe we will, maybe we won't. That just speaks to the incredible richness of this human mind and the unique experiences that we all have navigating the world. I think the most important thing is if you feel like you are not thriving, you're not living the life you want to live and the steps you're taking to remedy that on your own aren't sufficient, absolutely avail yourself of help because it's out there, it exists. And there's a lot of reason to be hopeful that it can make the situation better.

Dave:

I like that a lot. And I think that's the ultimate way of measuring it. I know that with a SPECT scan, Daniel Amen, who's a friend who's been on the show many times, he can usually spot it. I know with the neuroscientist of 40 years, we can usually spot it, but not always. So to your point, that there are some times when you won't, but much of the time you can. And a really good therapist can probably feel it in an hour long conversation. They're trained to see the signs. But you're right, some people are sneakier than others, including me. When I went in to see a psychiatrist in my 20s, because I recognized something was going on, he didn't believe me.

And when he saw my SPECT scan results, he just said, "You have the best camouflage of anyone I've ever met. You don't present to someone with the brain you have." I'm like, "It's a little bit of work to run that human emulation mode thing with all the chaos in there." I've since changed my brain quite a lot so I don't have to do any of that stuff anymore. But it was tough, and one of the things that motivates me to have the show and to talk with you about this stuff is that I was probably relatively far out in the spectrum of things there.

But there's a lot of people listening who have some of that going on and it's not that hard to fix it if you look at it. And you said something else in the book that I thought was profound, I wanted to dig

in with you about. You talk about how when people are upset, that they overfocus on receiving empathy. Like, "I feel your pain." Rather than finding, "Well, here's what to do about it." So we stop thinking and start just wanting a giant virtual hug. Why does that happen with chatter and what do we do about that so we don't have to solve the problem, we just want to feel good?

Ethan:

There's a strong tendency that many of us have to want to just vent our emotions, just express them to other people and let it out. Our culture tells us that this is a good idea, and it has for quite a while. This idea goes back to Aristotle, was popularized by Freud and has stuck around ever since. What we know about chatter and other people is that other people can be an amazing asset when it comes to our chatter, apropos what we just talked about with respect to getting help if you're really suffering. But they can also be a liability if they don't know what they're doing.

So here's how it works. If all you do is vent in a conversation with someone else, that can be really good for strengthening the friendship bonds or relational bonds between two people. It feels good to know that there's someone out there that's willing to take the time to hear about my problems and to connect with me empathically. That feels good. But if all we do is vent or what I often call co-ruminate, "He said what? Oh my God." "I was so pissed off." Back and forth, ping ponging, back and forth. That just keeps all the negativity active. So you're just rehearsing all the bad stuff. You're not actually reframing how you're thinking about this in any constructive way that allows you to move on.

The best kinds of conversations about chatter do two things. First, the person you're talking to does allow you to express your emotions to a point. They learn about what you're going through, they empathize, they validate. But then at a certain point in the conversation, they start working with you to try help you reframe that experience. Now there is an art to doing this well. There's an art because it goes back to, I think, the theme of this conversation with you today, which is that we're all different. Depending on the person and the situation that you're struggling with, some people may need more time just expressing before they're ready to shift into getting that perspective, advice from their friends.

So you want to feel that out. If my wife comes to me with a problem, I'll listen empathically, actively. And at some point I'll say, "I totally get it. Hey, I have an idea. Can I share it with you?" And sometimes she'll say, "No, I'm not done. Let me keep going." And then I'll just let her keep talking. In other situations, I'll say that, "Hey, can I offer you my advice?" "Please tell me what to do. That's why I'm talking." So you want to feel that out. The take home here for listeners, how can you use the science in your life? I think it's very straightforward and very potentially powerful. Number one, think really carefully about who you call for chatter support. Don't just call anyone. There are many people who I love, I care about, I never talk to them about my chatter because they don't help. They make it worse.

Dave:

They amplify it.

Ethan:

Exactly. There are three or four people in my life who are incredibly skilled at doing what I just described for me, listening and then helping to broaden my perspective. They're not trained clinicians. They have the intuition for how to do this and they do it well. So think carefully about who you call. And then on the flip side, use this science as a roadmap for giving good chatter support to others. So when someone comes to you to talk about something that they're struggling with, don't just get them to talk about it over and over and over again, but listen and then try to help broaden their perspective. That gives you the potential to be a better advisor to others as well.

Dave:

These are core skills actually for coaching, in general. If you're a good life coach or executive coach, you should know how to do this. We have a few of the Human Potential Institute coaches in the audience here like Larry. And this is my coaching program where we've taught more than 1,000 coaches over the past eight or so years. Because otherwise, you get caught like, "I feel your pain." Scott Barry Kaufman has been on the show. I really like his work. He talks about victim narcissism, which is when, "I believe that I have suffered. Therefore, I deserve a bunch of stories that aren't actually things you deserve."

He talks about group narcissism where a group's, "Because I'm in a group, I deserve blah, blah, blah." But when you combine those and you get a group of several people all bitching about the same thing and feeling co-amping each other up, you end up with a really toxic environment. And then you walk out to, "I didn't get what I deserved and now I'm even more upset." Then it just amplifies and amplifies. And pretty soon, you just have screwed up social situations that we don't need.

Ethan:

That's right. That's right. There is a seductive allure to getting yourself in those kinds of situations because of those relational bonds that are satisfied by venting and co-ruminating about things. It feels good to know that you feel the same way about this problem. We both can't stand this son of a bleep who said this about us. But that doesn't help solve the problem. Actually, what I'm trying to get input on issues that I'm struggling with, I want to see it from all of the different angles. I want to see was I jackass the in that situation, perhaps? It's happened.

I don't want to just be pander to, I want to actually get to the bottom of this situation in a way that's going to help me resolve it because that's what this is all about. The chatter persists when we haven't resolved this thing that's bugging us and I want to get to the bottom of it. And that's what this coaching team, if you have it, this board of advisors that I would advocate we would all benefit from has a potential to help us do.

Dave:

Thanks for saying that. It's such a good way of putting it. What about our physical environment? I know that if I eat bad food, I have a couple shots of sake with whatever, the next day, the voice in my head is not only forgetful but mean. Or if I'm in a boring cubicle environment with bad lighting and bad air like a typical office, I don't really have that happy, nice voice in my head. What are your recommendations around changing what's outside of you to get the results you want inside of you?

Ethan:

This is some of the most fascinating research that I reviewed when I was writing the book. I just love this idea that we can influence the conversations we have with ourselves by changing our physical environments. And there are a few different pathways through which you could do this. I'll rattle them off in short order. One thing you could do is something that I realized I had been doing for much of my life but not realizing it. I'm not a particularly organized guy. The office looks okay here, but I do a lot of these interviews usually. And if you could look right over here, you would see a pile of papers and books, and maybe it's the same for you.

Dave:

Why do you think behind me there's all this cool tech gear? Because on the other side of the tech gear is piles of weird vitamins.

Ethan:

There you go. You can sympathize. Usually, clothing on the floor in the bedroom and dishes, all that stuff. When I experience chatter though, I've always done something unusual for me, I clean, I organize. I put things away really carefully. What we've learned, and there's science behind this, a lot of it is that when you're experiencing chatter, you feel like you don't have control. Your mind is racing. It's in control of you. And human beings, we love control. We like to know that the world is predictable and ordered. Organizing your space allows you to compensate for not feeling in control because you are exerting control around you. That's one thing you could do proactively when you find yourself beginning to worry or ruminate. Just tidy up, organize your space, make it more orderly. That's one thing you could do.

Another thing is enhance your exposure to green spaces. Go for a walk in a safe, natural setting. What this can do is it gives us the opportunity to restore our attention. Our attention is limited, we only have so much of it. And one of the reasons why chatter can be so damaging is because it consumes our attention. It doesn't leave anything over to do the things that we often want to do, like our jobs or be good listeners to our friends or loved ones. What nature does is it acts like a recharger, if you will. Because when you go for a walk in nature, you're surrounded by really interesting things, trees and bushes and flowers. Now, they're interesting.

You're not fixating on those surroundings. Like, "Let me study the geometrical structure of that flower petal." That's not what we're doing. We're just taking it in. But our attention gently drifts onto those surroundings, on those nature walks. And our attention is then captured by our natural surroundings. And that gives us the opportunity to restore this attention in ways that can be helpful. The third and final way that you can try to benefit from your surroundings is by trying to seek out experiences that provide you with a sense of awe, that trigger this emotion of awe. Which is an emotion we feel when we're in the presence of something vast and indescribable. So an amazing sunset, a tree that's been living for hundreds of years.

You could also get this in the human made world. I experienced awe when I walk down the streets of New York City and I look at these skyscrapers. Like, "How the hell did we figure out how to build these structures?" We used to live in these fat roofed huts, and now we can build these sky ... Or when I think about the fact that we recently landed a rover on Mars. I mean, come on. How did we figure out how to do interplanetary travel? I can't contemplate it. Here's what happens when you're experiencing awe. It's the ultimate perspective broadener. When you're contemplating something vast and indescribable, you feel smaller. And when you feel smaller, we call this the shrinking of the self, so does your chatter. That's another way you can try to regulate yourself from the outside in.

Dave:

That's pretty much why I go to Burning Man, in a nutshell. You experience a sense of awe, of just things that are too improbable and amazing to really exist, but they do. And all of a sudden, it flips a switch that lasts for months and months. Same reason you might go to Yosemite or something like that but it's the real deal. That also leads us into ketamine psychedelic therapy, LSD. Stan Grof has been on the show talking about the rich history of that. I've done an event with them. What are the role of psychedelics in regulating the chatter in your head?

Ethan:

Well, we should know in a couple of years, because there's a lot of research money that's being invested in this right now. I dipped into this literature very, very lightly when I was writing Chatter. And I say lightly because there wasn't a whole lot of rigorous research on this topic yet. That's about to change very quickly because as I said before, there's a lot of money being devoted to doing this work. But it was

interesting, there were some studies I came across that described certain psychedelic experiences as sharing a number of features of the awe experience. This perspective broadening experience, this disillusionment of the self, the sense of getting distance from the self. I don't know, but I'm really eager to find out what kinds of similarities there are between the self-initiated chatter attenuating experiences and the pharmacologically triggered versions of that as well.

Dave:

My sense is that it's probably going to be beneficial both because it increases BDNF, brain-derived neurotrophic factors, stuff that makes the brain grow more easily so you can have more synaptic plasticity. And also the perspective thing that you write about in your book, whether it's because you had an awe-inspiring experience, you did some holotropic breathing or you went and you used substance, whether it's legal or not, depending.

But the rule that I came up with in my book Game Changer is one of 46 rules that made sense from talking with a lot of people was get outside your head, find some way to do that. And it can be just heavy duty breathing. It could be a sweat lodge. It doesn't have to be drugs. In fact, I think some of the drugs like ayahuasca probably have more risk than people talk about publicly. But that there's some value in somehow finding a way to get that perspective. What is your favorite way to get that perspective? I'm not saying what's your favorite drug at all, just what's your favorite way to get outside your own head?

Ethan:

I take a cocktail, but not an alcoholic one. It is a cocktail of tools. It's using language, it's using distance. I'll talk second person, pronouns, names, "Ethan, what are you doing?" That gets me out of my head. It's like, "Oh my God, here I am giving advice to my body." That's my first line. I go out in nature. That works, too. And I would say talking to other people and mental time travel, that's the foursome that I probably engage in most consistently. And usually, for me, that is enough to nip the chatter in the bud. Sometimes it's not if it's really an acute experience that I'm grappling with, and then I'll use some of the other tools but usually that does a trick.

Dave:

Okay. So those are your four favorites. The whole lists from my notes from the book are these are ways to calm down the chatter. There's distant self-talk. Imagine advising a friend, broadening your perspective, reframing your experience as a challenge, reinterpreting your body's response to the chatter and then normalizing your experience of having the chatter. Did I miss any in there?

Ethan:

That covers some of the things you could do on your own? How many? That was six. There are 26 tools and they're actually all listed in the back of the book.

Dave:

The very, very back. Okay. Got it. I didn't want to go through 26.

Ethan:

Yeah, no, no, no. I mean, it's not pleasant to rattle them off like that. But here is the thing, a lot of these tools are just different ways of getting perspective, but different tools work for different people. Exactly

as you describe before, there are lots of ways of getting out of your head. There are lots of ways of getting perspective. The parting note I always like to leave people with is learn about the tools and try them out and figure out which are the tools that work best for you. Use those, don't use the other ones. And then share the tools with other people and encourage them to do the same because that's how we actually start getting help with this massive problem that I think we face.

Dave:

Well, that's the service to others. When you share the tools with other people, you're actually benefiting yourself as well. And speaking of tools, the book is called Chatter: The Voice in our Head, Why it Matters, How to Harness It. But just remember Chatter so you can look that up on Amazon or wherever you like to buy books. And your website, Ethan Kross, E-T-H-A-N-K-R-O-S-S.com.

Ethan:

That's right.

Dave:

Well, thank you for this just intriguing conversation about something that we all know is there. We don't know how much of it is there in other people and whether ours is normal or not normal or whether it even matters that it's normal or what normal is. So not only do we get to talk about it, you studied the heck out of this for a long period of time. And I'm extra grateful for the fact you're doing work with teenagers, where this is probably going to have the most impact. I think that's incredible. So thank you, Ethan.

Ethan:

Well, thanks for having me on for a truly stimulating conversation. Look forward to doing it again.

Dave:

Count on it. If you read Chatter, you actually would tip someone who makes you a cup of coffee. The way you tip an author is you leave a review. And as Ethan said, if you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all. I'm kidding. If it's a really bad book, you should warn others. But most authors like Ethan and me, we look at our reviews to see how do we do, what you're doing in your next book. So just take five seconds and leave a review because it actually matters. It's what motivates authors. I'd ask you to do that. Book is called Chatter. If you have a problem with a voice in your head, read the book and maybe it'll change. See you all for the next episode. Thank you, Upgrade Collective members for being in our live audience and suggesting questions along the way. I'll see you all on our next call.