

Some people don't talk to themselves. Are they better off?

They say they don't have an inner monologue helping them decide what to do.



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By Meghan Holohan

As Megan Day goes through life there's a narrator in her mind. Sometimes it's helpful, reminding her what she needs from the store or what's on her to-do list. Other times, it's introspective and she plays out an emotionally-charged debate in her head.

"A lot of times, I don't actually follow through, but I feel better afterwards because I've had the internal dialogue with myself on how I'm feeling," the 40-year-old mom and Stella and Dot consultant in Cincinnati told TODAY.

Like others, she was really surprised when she came across [a blog](#) a week ago about "internal monologues" that dropped a bombshell: Not everyone has one.

"I was totally shocked," she said. "I can't imagine not having that in their brains, like the voice in your head isn't coming through. It just blew my mind."

When Molly Muldowney read about it, she was also stunned – but for a different reason. She had no idea she was unusual. The stay-at-home mom and massage therapist from Cleveland Heights said she doesn't hear a voice in her head. At first, she felt badly about it, like there was something wrong with her. She even experimented with adding a narrator.

“I'm like, ‘OK, well, let me try to give myself an internal monologue’ and I've tried and I must tell you it's like hot mush in the brain,” the 27-year-old told TODAY. “It's totally exhausting and I can't do it.”

Instead, Muldowney suspects she'll do what she's done in the past and simply talk out her thoughts.

“I tend to have to vent to people about it,” she said.

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While the blog sparked debate between the haves and have nots, experts agree that everyone has some sort of internal monologue.

“We do all, in fact, have what we colloquially refer to as an inner voice,” Ethan Kross, director of the Self-Control and Emotion Laboratory at the University of Michigan, told TODAY. “If I were to ask you to read a passage in your head or silently repeat the phone number when you're trying to memorize it or rehearse something that you're about to say to someone else, you're activating that inner voice.”

That's the basic function of an inner voice – completing tasks. As toddlers, children start developing their own voice by repeating [out loud](#) what a parent tells them. That's how they learn to manage themselves and they soon realize it should be a quiet conversation.

“They eventually learn you have *internal* dialogue,” Jennifer Beckjord, senior director of clinical services for UPMC Western Behavioral Health told TODAY. “(Internal self-talk) helps them make sense the world around them, to evaluate situations ... to engage in a protective mechanism or to create.”

For those like Muldowney who don't generally self-talk, they might simply experience their i
lives differently.

“Internal monologue probably comes in degrees of abstractness – some people may simply use the most abstract form that does not ‘sound’ like speech. Other people may tend to rely more on visual imagery,” Mark Scott, an assistant professor of linguistics at Qatar University, told TODAY, via email. “Not having an internal monologue does not mean that there is something wrong with a person.”

Research backs this up. Kross says people who are hearing impaired have internal monologues that involve signing and some people see images instead of hearing words.

“Everyone has thoughts going on,” Thea Gallagher, clinic director at the Center for Treatment and Study of Anxiety in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, told TODAY. “Some people don’t have it in their own voice. They are more abstract.”

Research hasn’t examined why some people have a more narrative tone to their internal monologues. But some studies have looked at the stories people tell themselves.

“There are countless studies on autobiographical reasoning that look at people's tendency to tell stories about their lives,” Kross said. “That capacity to tell a particular story is often crucial to helping people adjust to negative life experiences.”

An inner voice can help people understand the world and engage in it. But, sometimes, that inner monologue turns negative or becomes fixated on a thought. This obsession can be a sign of something else.

“Some of that ruminating that people can do is more of an anxiety process,” Gallagher said. “If you find that you are over-analyzing and going through scenarios (that can be a problem).”

People often worry that “hearing voices” is a sign of serious mental illness. Pop culture equates these voices with schizophrenia or serial killers like Son of Sam, who claimed his neighbor’s dog told him to kill. But, for most people, hearing a voice, even if they believe it is divine, isn’t a sign that anything’s wrong.

“Many (religiously) observant individuals report hearing the voice of God,” Kross said. “These are people who are perfectly well-functioning, but who simply represent their inner voice in that way.”

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