



Guest

Ethan is one of the world's leading experts on controlling the conscious mind. He is an award-winning professor in the University of Michigan's Psychology Department. His research has been featured in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker, The New England Journal of Medicine, and Science. He has recently published the book – Chatter. The book goes deep into talking about the voice in our heads and how we can harness it. Through the book he shows that instead of trying to silence your monkey mind, you can learn to educate it, motivate it, and even reason with it.

All of us have experienced what Ethan calls "Chatter". A never-ending loop of negative thoughts that engulf us and paralyse us at certain periods of time. Ethan speaks about the criticality of how we can work with these emotions and harness them without getting stuck in a vicious loop in their grip. Some of the topics that we covered include: a) The role of rituals and how Rafael Nadal uses it in a tennis match b) The fine line between inner voice and inner chatter c) How we can use techniques like Time-travel, Distancing and Experiencing Awe to deal with Chatter d) Role of Journaling in reducing Chatter e) How we should balance out listening and allowing venting and providing coaching while engaging with someone experiencing Chatter.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 96th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast, a series of reflective conversations from leading people from various domains on three broad themes – Leadership, Transitions and Careers. Just like businesses think about where to play and how to win in the context of their strategy, we all think about the two questions – where to go and how to grow at various points in our lives. These questions become that much harder in a world of abundance, multiplicity of options and limited feedback. Through this podcast, I hope to share some insights that might help you navigate these questions in a more thoughtful way.

While podcasting accounts for 10-20% of my time and effort, my primary vocation is that of an Executive Coach and a Discreet Sounding Board with CEOs/Entrepreneurs. I engage with leaders and organizations with a growth mindset and help them play to their unique potential. You can learn more about the podcast and my work at www.playtopotential.com.

My guest this time is Ethan Kross. Ethan is one of the world's leading experts on controlling the conscious mind. He is an award-winning professor in the University of Michigan's Psychology Department. His research has been featured in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker, The New England Journal of Medicine, and *Science*. He has recently published the book – Chatter. The book goes deep into talking about the voice in our heads and how we can harness it. Through the book he shows that instead of trying to silence your monkey mind, you can learn to

educate it, motivate it, and even reason with it. Without further ado, let us jump into the conversation with Ethan Kross.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Ethan, thank you so much for making the time on the Play to Potential podcast, really excited to talk to you.

Ethan Kross (EK): Really excited to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

DJ: In this podcast, we talk about people's journeys, Ethan; before we dive into your book *Chatter*, I would love to talk a little bit about how you got here. So, can you talk a little bit about your journey to doing what you do now?

EK: Sure, happy to. The journey began in Brooklyn, New York and it started probably around the age of somewhere between 3 and 5, when I first started talking to my dad about life, because he liked to talk to me about such things and my dad was a really interesting character. On the one hand, he fit the stereotype of a classic, I would say, middle class New Yorker growing up in the 1970s, when he did, and he loved watching the New York Yankees and he was aggressive when he drove his car and uttered all sorts of expletives when he did, even though I was in the back seat. So, on the surface, he had this very gruff exterior, but in his spare time he would love to read about eastern philosophy and so, like one of his favourite texts was the Bhagavad Gita. And he was deeply, deeply immersed and I should say he was not an academic, he didn't graduate from college, he was a salesman, but he was enamoured with the science of mind. And he used to talk to me beginning from around the time I was 3 about what he was reading about and learning. And one of the first lessons he shared was he would say to me, hey, whenever something bad happens, go inside, find the kernel of truth and try to get to the bottom of it. So, go inside was this little phrase that he would utter to me throughout my childhood and adolescence. And I found this terribly embarrassing, when I was growing up, my dad would talk to me about these things like often in front of my friends when they would come over. But like so many things in a young child's life, the things we hear our parents talk about and talk to us about have an interesting way of penetrating our consciousness, and although I didn't realize it at the time, those conversations he was having with me played a role in shaping the kinds of things I would become interested in later on in life. And so fast forward, I get to college and I take my first psychology class at the University of Pennsylvania and about halfway through the semester, we get to the topic of introspection, the science of turning your attention inward and regard to that topic, I thought, finally this is the stuff that I spent so much time talking to my dad about, I have got this, but what I learned in that class was that a lot of people do exactly what my dad told me to do and they are struggling, didn't try to turn their attention in order to try to find a solution to their problems, but they often end up stumbling instead they don't get better. In fact, these attempts to go inside make their problems worse. And so, for me this became a real puzzle, why did my dad tell me that this was so helpful. I had my own positive experiences with introspection as many others have as well, so why did it work for some people some of the time, but not for others at other moments in time. And that paradox, that puzzle really energized me, let me to go to graduate school to learn and use the tools of science and neuroscience to try to answer it and that is what I have been doing ever since.

DJ: Wow, and a couple of things, right? One is the fact that your dad was having these conversations from the age of 3 or 5 you said, it's fascinating, it's never too early. I mean, my kids are 8 and 12 so it's an early reminder...

EK: Get, get, get going... you might want to not do it when their friends come over wanting to play.

DJ: Got it, got it, that's true, true, discretion advised. The other thing is the last podcast conversation I had was with a gentleman who studied the Mahabharata of which Bhagavad Gita is sort of a subset. So, we spoke at length about sort of the right versus right kind of dilemmas that the Bhagavad Gita often touches on, got it. Let's dive into the book, Ethan, you say that chatter consists of cyclical negative thoughts and emotions that turn our singular capacity for introspection into a curse rather than a blessing. Can you sort of expand on that for us and define what you mean by chatter?

EK: Sure. So, we have this remarkable tool, we can use language to work through our problems, and we could do it silently. We call that capacity our inner voice. So, you turn your attention, we try to verbally work through a problem, you may think about rehearsing a speech or what you might say to someone else, trying to motivate yourself, trying to create a story to explain your circumstances. This all involves turning your attention inward and using language to work through a problem. It's an incredible tool, a very valuable asset. Yet sometimes we try to activate this tool when we are struggling, we have big, big problems and it doesn't work well for us instead it in a certain sense jam up. So, we have got a problem, let's say we were just rejected or insulted by someone and we are, why did this happen? We try to think through that problem often because we want to learn from our experiences and move on, but instead of coming up with that solution we start stumbling, we just keep on rehearsing what happened to us and why we felt in ways that keep our negative emotions alive. And so that cycling over what happened to me, why do I feel this way and that inability to work through and resolve the experience, that is what I call chatter. And I think it's one of the big problems that we face as a species.

DJ: One of the people I spoke to on this podcast was a lady called Tasha Eurich who has done some work on self-awareness and she uses a phrase "rabbit hole of rumination" and she says, sometimes introspection if we don't do it well, we can end up going that rabbit hole and it can be counterproductive.

EK: That is exactly right. That's... so chatter, you know, chatter is a term that encompasses rumination. So, in case you haven't figured this out yet, I am sure you have and many of your listeners have as well. Scientists are really good at creating distinctions between slightly different things and coming up with different phrases to describe them. So, rumination, perseveration, worry and there is a whole host of additional terms that are often used to refer to this process of getting stuck in a negative thought. And so, I use the term chatter to capture the breadth of those different experiences all of which the common feature is looping over the negative thoughts, going down the rabbit hole, sucked into that vortex of negativity that won't let you free.

DJ: And you say that while the inner voice functions well most of the time, it often leads to chatter precisely when we need it the most, when our stress levels are high, when the stakes are high and when we encounter difficult emotions that call for the utmost poise. So, can you talk a little bit about that paradox in terms of when we need it most and when it lets us down the most?

EK: Yeah, so we often need the tool the most when we are struggling with big emotions that command our attention and don't let us focus on anything else until those emotions are essentially resolved and subside. The problem is that experiencing stress often engages many of the brain

networks that we use to manage the stress. So, if you think of the frontal cortex, which plays a key role in helping us down regulate negative emotions, it also plays a role in keeping those negative emotions active. So, it's as though the very resource that we possess that is useful for helping us manage the mind is depleted when we most need it. And that is where I think it's so valuable to understand what tools exist for helping people navigate this impasse so that they can in fact regain control of their mind so to speak when they find themselves slipping down this rabbit hole.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host, Deepak Jayaraman. Here is the clip from my conversation with Tasha Eurich (TE) where she speaks about the Rabbit Hole of Rumination. She talks about the language we use for introspection and suggests that we use the WHAT question rather than the WHY question. She refers to some of the practices of what she calls Self-Awareness Unicorns – individuals who have taken really applied deliberate practice to enhancing their self-awareness.

TE: *"I call it the rabbit hole of rumination and so what we wanted to do in our study was understand if why is the wrong question what is the right question you know what are these unicorns doing differently than the rest of us and it took us a little while to find this pattern but we discovered that when unicorns introspected they almost never asked why question they asked what questions and at first sight I thought ohh that just a weird sort of fluke or weird nuance but as we started to look into it started to make a huge amount of sense. So, one example would be you are going back to the question why I didn't get that promotion unicorns if they were in that situation wouldn't ask themselves that question. Here is some question they might have asked instead. What did I learnt that can help me be better positioned in the future? Or what can I do to close the gap between you know where I thought I was and where I need to be? Or what support can I enlist from the people around me to help me you know to achieve this goal the next time I set it? Or they are going back to why am I so upset about that conversation with my co-worker they might instead ask what part of that situation did I own or what can I do differently in the future to avoid that kind of conversation with that person and so what we found was asking "What" instead of "Why" really helps us avoid so many of the pit falls of introspection where we you know what excavating for the truth that we are never gone find and we are focusing on our problem and feeling victimized and disempowered."*

DJ: As Ethan says, the challenge is that the same leg that is supposed to press the brakes in the car is busy pushing down on the accelerator.

Let's get back to the conversation with Ethan to understand some of the tools and methods that we could use to apply the brakes on the Chatter!

DJ: And let's talk about some of the tools, Ethan. I did have a few things I wanted to dive deep in but maybe just to present an overview to the listeners, what kinds of tools do we have access to when we encounter chatter in our lives?

EK: We have access to an enormous set of tools and when I say tools everything, I am talking about is science-based, I think, that is an important feature to distinguish because this is obviously a topic that has captured many people's attention and sometimes the advice given is great and grounded in science, but sometimes it's not. And in fact, I review a few instances in my book of cases in which advice that is often given can be somewhat harmful and we will probably get to that at some point. But one thing to know about the tools before I start going into individual ones is that there is no single magic pill and I think this is a really important point for people to be aware of. What we have

learned is that we have evolved to possess many different tools for managing our mind. And the flexible use of different tools is something that many scientists believe is really useful. So, people often ask me hey what is the one thing that I should do to manage my chatter? I can't answer that question based on science because what we know is different tools work for different people in different situations. So, yes, I guess the way I would answer what's the best thing I can do to manage my chatter would be educate yourself about the range of tools that are out there, and you can follow the ones that work best for you. Okay, so that is my disclaimer, let's dive into the tools. I like to organize this space into three categories. There are tools you can move on your own, tools that involve other people and our relationships, and then tools that are relevant to the world, tools that you could find in your physical environment. So, ways of interacting with your physical spaces that impact the way we talk to ourselves and can help alleviate rumination. So, do you want to get started with one category?

DJ: Sure, sure, the first one was sort of intuitive. The second and third if you want to sort of give a couple of examples for us to get a sense of what kinds of tools do you have in mind when you say physical space and when you say relationships?

EK: Yeah. So, let's start with physical space. I find this quite magical in many ways that there are tools that are just waiting for you to find and use out there, they are freely available and if you know where to find them in the world around you, they can benefit you. So, let me give a couple of examples. So, here's a little personal reveal, when I am not dealing with chatter which fortunately is most of the time, my office is usually pretty messy and there is usually a trail of clothing in the bedroom to my wife's dismay, like a towel on the floor, my underwear and then a sock, come on, pick up, you know, the little tiff is about cleaning up. When I have chatter though, I have always done something very out of character for myself, which is I put everything away, I make sure everything is nice and neat. When I finish cleaning up for myself and organizing my own space, I will go and organize the kitchen and when I am done with that, I will engage in the masochistic feat of cleaning up my children's room. Now, there is science that explains what I am doing and it actually has a role to play in reducing chatter and it's something that many people do. Many people clean and organize when they are experiencing chatter. One of the things we know about human beings is that human beings crave order and control. We like to know that the world is a predictable orderly place. We like to know that because it's much easier for us to navigate contexts that are orderly, that we know what's going to happen. When you are experiencing chatter, you feel like you don't have order and control because your mind is taking over, it's taking you to places where you don't necessarily want to be and you don't know where you are going to go next. So, you don't have control of what's happening in your mind; that is the feeling. What we have learned is that people can compensate for feeling out of control of their mind by exerting control on their surroundings. So, when I create order around me, when I organize my space, that gives me a sense of control which helps me feel better about my circumstances more generally; we call this process compensatory control. It's also one of the reasons why people often engage in rituals and many athletes, for example, when they are in situations where they can't predict what's going to happen, they are competing, they will often spontaneously engage in rituals for a very similar reason. They provide them with a sense of control. I can, you know, twirl my hair three times and bounce the ball four times. That is something under my control, can't determine whether my serve is going to be in check or how my opponent is going to return it but I can control this. So that is one example of an environmental tool.

DJ: And you talk about Rafael Nadal in the book, I guess, he fits that example of sort of really organizing your right from the water bottles when you when you are sort of taking a break between games, right?

EK: That is exactly right. Nadal is... Nadal is a really interesting example. He is one of the greatest tennis players of all time, if not the greatest, I guess it depends where your allegiances lie but...

DJ: I am still in the Federer camp but yeah, I would have to grudgingly admit... yeah...

EK: Let us give it a couple more years and during an interview several years ago a journalist, sorry, I think, I believe, it was a journalist, I asked him what was the hardest thing he struggled with on the tennis court? And his answer surprised a lot of people because he didn't say the hardest thing, he struggled with was maintaining his endurance or returning his opponent's backhand, it was managing the voice inside his head. It was the mind game that was the most difficult component for him. And if you have ever watched him play you actually know what he does to manage that chatter. Nadal is famous for engaging in elaborate rituals. So, from the time he walks on to the court, how he carries his bag and walks to his bench to the way he positions his water bottles, to the routines he engages in before every single serve, he's highly ritualistic and when asked why he does that, he has said and something to the effect of I order my surroundings to match the order I seek in my head. So, he is using this tool. I should add that this is an ancient tool. I mean ancient in the sense that cultures have relied on rituals to help deal with chatter provoking experiences for quite a long time. Like mourning the loss of a loved one, how do you deal with that uncertainty and distress? Well, cultures don't wait for you to figure out the answer to that question; they give it right to you. But I know exactly what ritual I should engage in when someone close to me passes away. And so, this is a way that society has evolved to help us manage chatter, it's one way that it has helped us evolve. So, I think, rituals are fascinating, there is a caveat people often ask, hey, wait a second, what about things like obsessive compulsive disorder and certain kinds of anxiety disorders that are characterized by rituals and my response to that is there are certainly cases in which rituals can be over-relied on and overused to the point that they become harmful. If you feel that you have to perform a ritual and if you don't perform it, something bad is going to happen and that becomes destructive to your life; that is not good. But in that sense a ritual is really no different from many other tools which if taken to an extreme can be harmful. If you think about the kinds of tools we are talking about as akin to a physical tool, I think this all comes full picture. So, if you think about a hammer as an example, a hammer can be the source of enormous innovation and creativity like I am sitting in a home right now that was built largely by a hammer. Hammer being used to erect the home I live in but a hammer can also be the source of destruction if it is used in the wrong context or the wrong degree. So, what we want to figure out is how to use these tools appropriately in the right proportions and that is something I think the science can help us figure out.

DJ: Got it. One of the things you said triggered something, you spoke about rituals to manage chatter. I think the other thing I have noticed is around key phases of transition, whether it's in the transition in the context of losing someone or even in our phases of life when you move from being a bachelor to getting married or different transitions, I find that they are often marked with rituals. It's interesting that you frame it as an opportunity to manage chatter; I hadn't quite framed it that way, positioned as a celebratory, in some cases celebratory, in some cases grieving, but chatter is an interesting frame to see the need or the use case for some of these rituals.

EK: Yeah, I think that is the activator of many of these tools. So, we, like transition periods are we know that these are among the most stressful times of life that human beings experience and many of us seem to reflexively engage in tools to help us deal with that kind of uncertainty that surrounds those transitions. I find it fascinating that many of us intuit what to do without really knowing why or how. And so, in my book I talk about close to 30 different tools. I think, some people may have spontaneously stumbled on some of those tools in their lives without knowing why, but they have used some of them. And my hope is that educating people about the science surrounding those tools, what it gives people the prospect of doing is being more deliberate so that you don't have to

wait to stumble on a tool, but you can rather be more proactive and how you utilize it. So, to make that concrete, whereas, before I knew about all of this science, I might, find myself organizing when I really overcome with chatter not knowing why I just kind of reflexively do it now. I know immediately as soon as I see the chatter begin to brew, I have got a plan, I start cleaning up a little bit, I do some other things and what that has done for me is it shortens the amount of time that I spend in chatter; I am able to bypass it before it elevates and that is a great service that knowing about the science provides.

DJ: And from a self-awareness perspective, Ethan, just for me to understand where is the line between let's say the inner voice and inner chatter? When does it tip over to becoming unhealthy? Did you have sort of a rule of thumb for it?

EK: Yeah, it's a great question, I wish I could, it would be a dream if I could do a blood test to figure that out or have a little chatter thermometer that physiologically indicated that oh, you are in a harmful zone right now. The best we can do at the moment is it is a more subjective appraisal of where you stand and the indicator for me is, it's not about whether you are engaging in negative self-talk. Many people think, I want to rid my life of all negative self-talk. That is not actually a goal that I would argue is a healthy goal or an attainable one. What I mean by that is this. Negative emotions are functional when they are experienced in the right proportions. It is healthy and adaptive to become angry for a short period of time when insulted. The experience of envy when you come across some colleague or friend who has achieved in a way that you haven't, that can be very motivating and it has been shown to be such. The anxiety that I experience when I think about all of the things, I have to do next week, that is useful because what it allows me to do is not just watch TV and read for fun but actually do the work that I need to do to prepare. So, negative emotions in small doses are great. And with those negative emotions comes that negative self-talk. What makes those emotions harmful is when they are prolonged. So, if you find yourself turning over the same negative experience in your mind in a way that is not in your progress forward and take constructive action, that is an indication that chatter is taking hold. If you find yourself sitting at the dinner table with your family asking your family questions that they answer and respond to but which you don't hear; you hear physically of course what they are saying but you don't attend to it, so you ask them to repeat themselves whereupon they say, I just told you that. That is an indication that the chatter is becoming harmful. If you find yourself unable to sleep at night because your mind is racing over the negativity, not allowing you to turn off your brain for the eight hours that you need to get the slumber, that is a sign that the chatter has taken over.

DJ: Got it. Just moving to one of the, some of the tools that you talk about in the book, Ethan, the one that caught my attention was time travel. You talk about mental time travel. I was also trying to reconcile that with this notion of being present and this whole discourse around mindfulness. So, can you talk a little bit about the effectiveness of time travel and dealing with chatter but also how you think about that in the context of this discussion that is happening around mindfulness today?

EK: Yeah, happy to. So, we hear a lot that you want to be in the present, focus on the present and that message is often delivered, it's wrapped around the kind of mindfulness industry and so my feelings on that are this. I think mindfulness is wonderful as a practice and I think there are many moments in life where being focused on the present, being able to refocus our attention on the present can serve a boon to our well-being. I should disclose by the way that I have been meditating on and off since the time I was five-years-old. I think I have mentioned this in the book but my dad on my fifth birthday, I desperately wanted, like, you know, a bicycle and instead he picked me up from school and said, I got a great surprise for you and he took me to the Transcendental Meditation Centre in Manhattan and I got a mantra, I learned how to meditate. So, I genuinely...

DJ: Evolved parenting I think for that time I must say.

EK: Yeah, yeah, he was an interesting guy. So, I say this to genuinely communicate that I am pro-mindfulness, pro-meditation, I have researched it myself, shown some benefits and I have done it myself. I say that because now I am going to give not a critique, but I want to make the situation a little bit more nuanced. I think mindfulness is an example of one tool amidst many that people can use to manage chatter. Likewise, I think, focusing on the present can be useful in certain contexts, but I think it is incredibly important for people to know that the human mind did not evolve to be fixated on the present, in fact, we evolved to be able to travel in time in our mind. And this capacity, I would argue is an essential feature of a human mind that lets us do remarkable things. My ability to travel in time in the mind lets me do things like learn from my past experiences so I don't repeat mistakes. My ability to travel in time in the mind lets me prepare for future engagements so I perform well. It lets me fantasize about things that might happen in ways that enrich my well-being. Now, there is nothing wrong with mental time travel on its own. The problem is that we often get in our mental time travel machines. We go back in time to figure out something to try to learn from a past mistake and our time travel machines break down, right? That is when we get stuck in ruminating, or we go into the future to try to prepare for something maybe negative but we get stuck there too, just what if this happens, what if that happens? And when that happens, we have got a couple of options. One option is all right, well, let's just bring the time machine back to the present and that can certainly be useful for helping us. And I think that is what certain pieces of mindfulness help teach us how to do. But there is also another option which is not to come back to the present but to figure out how can you travel in time more effectively without your time travel machine getting stuck. And many of the tools I talk about in the book are designed to help us do that. They are designed to help us figure out, for example, how do you go back and think about a really painful event so that you can learn from it but without getting stuck in that moment in ways that are harmful. So, that is my feeling about mental time travel, being in the present, I don't think they are mutually exclusive, I do think however that an exclusive focus on living in the present is an unattainable goal that probably wouldn't be healthy actually.

DJ: And picking up on the point about not getting stuck, Ethan, are there easy wins, are there one or two thoughts around bringing it back that is helpful for the listeners either from the past to the present or the future to the present?

EK: Yeah, so I mean there are probably 28 more so or spare you and listeners from laundry listing them all...

DJ: Or the ones that work for you maybe if I make it simpler?

EK: Yeah, let me give you a couple of highlights. So, another physical tool, physical environment tool involves enhancing your exposure to green spaces and nature, and that can help us in a few different ways. On the one hand, there has been a lot of research which shows that going for a walk in a serene safe setting can help restore our attention. Our attention is often depleted when we are experiencing chatter because we are focusing so intently and trying to work the problem through or not making any progress. And so, we end up burning through our attentional reserves and what happens when you go for a walk in a green setting is your attention drifts away gently from the problems you are struggling with to the beauty that surrounds you. And we start focusing on the surroundings, the green spaces, but we are not doing so in a very deliberate way. It's not like when I go for a walk in the park, I am carefully studying the geometrical shape of the tree leaves and looking at their patterns I am just kind of taking it, that gives rise to this what we call a restoration effect. So, you leave the walk and you feel like you have more resources to manage the adversity you are dealing with. That is one way that nature can help. Another thing that it can do is it can put us in a

position to experience the emotion of awe, which is an emotion we experience when we are in the presence of something vast and indescribable. A tree that has been here for hundreds of years or an amazing view. What happens when we experience awe is we go through something that scientists call shrinking of the self. So, you feel smaller when you are contemplating something vast and indescribable and when you feel smaller so does your chatter. So, I will give you a real-world example here. I am worried about some work, I go to the local park a few blocks from my house, I go for a walk and I look out and I am looking at this river that has been here for how many thousands of years, I am looking at these trees. Actually, in the arboretum by my house some of the trees have like a little plaque that says, how long they have been here. And I am thinking to myself, these trees are decades older than me, they have weathered so much adversity and then I think about the little problem I am dealing with. Experiencing that emotion of awe has the ability to broaden our perspective in ways that can be really helpful for keeping our chatter at bay. So, those are a couple of physical things. You asked me about some of my other go-to strategies, when I am experiencing chatter. Mental time travel is definitely one. So, that is what I do if I wake up at 2:00 in the morning with some chatter, it happens every four to five weeks, I don't know why but I will randomly wake up in the middle of a night wide-eyed and worried. And when that happens, I will engage in a specific mental time travel strategy that we call temporal distancing. I will think about how am I going to feel about this thing that is bothering me tomorrow morning or next week and what that does for me is it makes me realize that whatever I am going through right now as awful as it feels, it reminds me that it's temporary and it will eventually pass which gives me hope that I will feel better, which makes the chatter better. Because what I have learned in my life as I think most listeners have been that we all experience adversity at times, we all experience the big emotions and deep chatter but eventually we come out of that, we move on to something else, sometimes another bout of chatter but we do eventually come out of it. We lose sight of that fact when we are in the midst of chatter and that can be really upsetting. So, I will do temporal distancing in that way, I will also do something that we call distance self-talk, which is I will try to give myself advice like I would give advice to a close friend and I will use language to help me do that. So, I actually use my name to coach myself through a problem. I won't do this in front of others out loud, of course, that would be very strange, but in my mind, I would say, Ethan, here's how you are going to manage this situation. One of the things we know about people is we are much better at giving advice to other people than we are giving advice to ourselves. And this tool, this distance self-talk, it really capitalizes on that mechanism. Because if you think about it, when do we use names and words like you, we use those parts of speech when we think about referring to other people. So, when you use your own name to refer to yourself that in a certain sense turns on the mind machinery for thinking about others, it makes you, puts you in this more objective standpoint, which makes it much easier for you to coach yourself through your problems. So, those are some of my go-to's.

DJ: Lovely. On the last point, Ethan, when I was in McKinsey, we would often say, Marvin Bower was one of the early Partners who played a big role in shaping the values and the culture of the firm. So, a tool or a ritual that the partners would urge the youngsters to engage in is what would Marvin do, you know, in this situation ask yourself the question. I don't think it's quite what you just described, but I guess that some of it is that distancing thing.

EK: It's a distancing mechanism for sure, because you are broadening the perspective and looking at it from a different angle. The difference between the tool that I described and the Marvin, Marvin?

DJ: Marvin Bower, yeah.

EK: Marvin tool is that when I am using my name, I am still thinking about the circumstances from my own perspective. So, it is freeing me up to weigh in on the situation from my own unique vantage point which would be different than had I said, what would Marvin do, what would my dad

do here? That could be, that could also be quite useful but then you are adopting the lens of that other individual. Now, I assure you if I picked the wrong person to engage in that perspective taking exercise, I might not come up with the best solution.

DJ: That's a great point.

EK: But it certainly falls under this category of distancing tools.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. I must say that of the various things he says, I find that Nature is often a challenge when it comes to cities like Mumbai. I also find that some phrases that we use casually have a deeper meaning. For instance, the phrase "Go take a walk" has an interesting history to it. One of our earlier guests, Jennifer Goldman Wetzler (JGW) speaks about it here.

JGW: "Take a walk, ask someone to go take a walk rather than sitting and talking to each other, the movement, there is something about movement, especially if you are someone who you know about yourself that you are kinesthetic person. And also, you can ask yourself who are the other people involved here and who will I be talking to and are they someone who might appreciate nature or the outdoors or getting a breath of fresh air, the movement as well, that is a great question to ask."

DJ: Like Ethan says, taking a walk – being exposed to nature and some sort of movement can help break the Chatter, I guess.

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Let's now get back to Ethan Kross.

DJ: And in the book, you use a phrase which stayed with me, you say that we can think of the mind as a lens and our inner voice as a button that zooms it either in or out. I just thought that notion of the voice is the one that sort of controls how close or how remote we are to a situation and I thought, when I read it, it felt agentic, the fact that we have control over, do we want to be zoomed in or zoomed out?

EK: I think this issue of control is a really interesting one, and individual differences are bound on people's assessments of the extent to which they have such control. There is actually research, which has looked at a), is there variability in whether and how much people think they can control their emotions; the answer to that is yes, there is tremendous variability. But then the work shows well does it matter if you simply think you can control your emotions for bringing about positive outcomes. And compellingly, the answer is yes, which makes a lot of sense to me. One of the first things I learned in graduate school is the ability to manage our emotional lives has two pieces or two core components. There is motivation and there is ability, and you need both of those pieces to be successful. You can know about every single tool that is out there, but if you are not motivated to use those tools, nothing is going to happen. On the flip side, you can be super motivated to manage your emotional life and believe it's possible, but if you don't know what the tools are, you are not going to be successful. So, you really need both of those pieces and I think they are easily attainable.

DJ: One of the other guests on the podcast was a gentleman called BJ Fogg of Stanford who actually talks about this almost like an indifference curve, where you have got motivation and ability and how you sort of in the realm of habit-forming you need to ensure that you are sort of operating on the right side of the curve. Got it.

EK: Yeah, BJ, I am familiar with BJ's work and I am a great admirer of it and I believe this motivation ability distinction factors heavily into his model of habit formation; he has an additional element of triggers but I think at its core it taps into something very fundamental and also easy for people to remember. And I think that is also... one of the things it's important I was going to close a thought, a lot of the science that we are talking about today and I talk about in my book is science that has been built on the shoulders of decades of very complicated, deep, nuanced research, but often the take homes from that work are really, really simple. And I think that is in many ways great because I think for communicating this work for folks like there are some simple nuggets to use your phrase that we can remind ourselves of when we are experiencing adversity and that is not always the case in science. Sometimes you have really complicated research that is also really complicated to describe, and I don't think that is necessarily the case in this story.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host, Deepak Jayaraman. Building on what Ethan says, one of my earlier guests, BJ Fogg (BJ) of Stanford who has authored the book *Tiny Habits*, speaks about the role of Prompts in addition to Motivation and Ability.

BJ: *"So, I knew motivation ability how they work together and I knew that making something super simple would let you be consistent in creating a habit but then it was like, how do you prompt it? How do you prompt it? And then that just happened like a lot of breakthroughs, you know, literally it was getting out of the shower and it's like, oh my gosh, it's after you figure out what this comes after and use you the preceding behaviour to remind you of the next thing this new habit that you want. And so, then it was, then it all clicked and then I knew I had all the pieces in place because it always comes back this motivation ability prompt and then I knew I had... here is this breakthrough way of habits where you are hacking three things. One, you are making the behaviour super tiny, so you don't need much motivation. Two, you are prompting it through something you already do, an existing routine that we call an anchor in tiny habits. And then three, you manipulate your emotion, so your brain takes notice and goes, wow that feels good, I want to do that again in the future. And so, you don't leave that to chance, you deliberately celebrate and cause that emotion to fire off which then changes the regulation of dopamine in the brain."*

DJ: He goes on to speak about different kinds of prompts, whether internal or external that could help us get things done. To know more you can go to playtopotential.com and visit the Guests section and look up the conversation with BJ Fogg. Let's now get back to the conversation with Ethan Kross.

DJ: Another phrase you use in the book, Ethan, is a phonological loop and you make a distinction between the inner voice and inner ear. Can you sort of talk about the distinction for us here?

EK: Yeah. Well, let me give you the frame on this distinction. So, every few months or more there is always a debate on the internet about whether some people have an inner voice or don't have it at all. And I think that debate emerges in part from thinking defining the inner voice differently; people define it in different ways. I think any well-functioning mind has an inner voice in the following

sense. A fundamental feature of the human mind is that we have a working memory system, basic system of the human mind that lets us keep information active in our heads for short periods of time. We often think about memory as the province of things that happened long ago but actually things that happened just seconds ago also fall into this train of memory. And so, working memory is that capacity to keep nuggets of information active. So, like memorizing a phone number or repeating a grocery list in your head. And one facet of working memory is what we call verbal working memory, which is essentially the province of the inner voice and scientists have discovered what they call this phonological loop, which is this capacity to keep verbal information active and reverberating in your head for short periods of time so that when you go to the grocery store and you initially forget what you were supposed to buy and you walk down the aisle and then you remind yourself, you go down the list, eggs, cheese, apples; now don't forget, eggs, cheese, apples, you are rehearsing that. That is you activating that phonological loop. And there are two components. There is this inner voice component, which involves articulating the word, but there is also this inner ear so we can actually hear the information we are uttering in our minds and if you look in the brain there are somewhat dissociable neural networks that characterize some of these processes.

DJ: And what's the link with chatter here, Ethan? How do these helps manage chatter?

EK: Well, there is nothing about the phonological loop per se that helps us manage chatter. What the phonological loop does is it makes it clear that the inner voice and your ability to use language silently to reflect on your lives is a very, very basic and fundamental feature of the human mind. And so, the phonological loop is a kind of substrate that explains how this inner voice operates.

DJ: Got it.

EK: You know, you could argue that when people are experiencing chatter that loop is just filled with really harmful information.

DJ: The other piece that got my attention, Ethan, was you talk about journaling. You say that even simply asking people to write about their most negative experiences for 15-20 minutes leads them to feel better, visit the doctor less and have a healthier immune function. Can you talk about the link between journaling, psychological distance and well-being?

EK: Yeah, so when we are talking about journaling in technical terms, we are talking about expressive writing which involves describing and writing your deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding a negative experience. And what we have learned over time is that creating a narrative around one's experience can often be really useful because what it does is it helps people put a structure on their experience, is they telling a story and stories usually have beginnings, middles and importantly ends. And so, telling those stories can provide us with a sense of closure and meaning that ultimately allow us to move on with our lives. There is some research, this is some work that we have done in our lab that has looked at links between journaling and distancing. One of the interesting things about writing about your own life is that you become the character in a story. So, an author is actually writing about a character but the character is you, so there does seem to be a distancing function that expressive writing has, you are almost stepping back and writing about your own life and there is a distancing feature associated with that. But there is lots of research which is that expressive writing can be very helpful; it's another tool in the chatter toolbox.

DJ: And when you say expressive writing, just for me to understand the nuance here, it's about expressing emotions around events...

EK: It's about writing about your deepest thoughts and feelings about an experience and like... so, that is the instruction that is given to participants in many expressive writing studies. And what eventually happens when you do that for 15 to 20 minutes for anywhere from one to three consecutive days, is that people start to tell stories about the event. So, they are going deep, they are going into it and they are creating these narratives which have increasingly some senses of coherence, meaning and structure and those narratives can be helpful.

DJ: Got it. The other theme that was interesting, Ethan, was you talk about how we provide support effectively when somebody is going through a rough patch and you say that we need to offer the right balance of listening and empathy and problem-solving. Once again, to understand how we walk that tightrope, I was curious about how you think about offering support if you are on the receiving end of chatter, what's your experience on that front?

EK: Well, I think this is a really important issue because in popular culture we are often told that what you want to do when you are experiencing chatter is just find someone to vent your emotions, you just get it out and there has been a lot of research on this process and what we have learned is that venting can be really helpful for strengthening the friendship and relational bonds between two people. It feels good to know there are other people there who are willing to take the time to listen and connect with us. The problem of venting is if all you do in a conversation is vent about your problems, you often leave that conversation just as upset, if not more upset, as when you start it, because all you have done is kept the negative stuff active in your minds. The best conversations when it comes to chatter allow us to do two things. First, it is important to find someone who allows us to express our feelings to a certain degree, establishing those relational empathy connections is really useful. But at a certain point in the conversation, the person you are speaking with ideally helps broaden your perspective. They help you look at that bigger picture in ways that ultimately allow you to find meaning and reach a sense of closure that allows you to move on. So, there is this balance between wanting to talk to people who can both empathize and connect but also help coach you through the problem. And I call those people in my life my chatter advisors and I don't have many, but I have enough and I think the take home here for listeners is two-fold. Its number one, if you are experiencing chatter, be really thoughtful about who you speak about it because speaking to anyone isn't necessarily going to be helpful. There are some people in my life who I am extremely close with, I love them, I respect them, I never talk to them about my chatter, because I know that the way that they are going to try to help me is by just allowing me to vent, which isn't going to serve me in the long term. So, the people I talk to instead are the three to five people who I know are adept at not just listening and getting me to vent but also helping broaden my perspective. And so, I have got those people on my speed dial list and it's a resource that I avail myself of when I am struggling. So, that is one take home. The second take home is if you are on the other side of the equation and someone is coming to you, a colleague, a loved one for chatter support, be mindful of these two principles: take the time to listen and connect, but at a certain point in the conversation, when you see your opening, try to help them work through that experience. Now, there is an art to doing this well; I wish I could tell listeners. Okay, the thing you want to do is listen and let them vent for 96 seconds and then shift into problem-solving. It doesn't work this way. We are way too complicated to expect it to be that simple. I think it does disjustice to the beauty of the human condition. So, the art to doing this well involves taking the time to listen and connect and then sometimes it can be apparent when you should start shifting into that coaching mode, but if it's not, my suggestion is to ask the person you are talking to, hey, I totally get it but I have an idea, can I ask you a question? Sometimes, I will pose that question to someone I am talking with and they will say, please, yes, tell me, what do you think, or where should I, what should I do about this, that is why I am talking to you. Sometimes, I will be ready for that feedback. Other conversations, the person I am talking to would say, no, I am not ready yet. And that is fine because depending on the person and

the circumstance they are dealing with some people may need to spend more time in that empathy zone before they are ready to shift into the cognitive zone. But those are the principles of providing and receiving good chatter support.

DJ: And back to your point about having, let's say, four to five chatter advisors on your speed dial, is there, if you had to sort of think about what sort of the, what are the three-four characteristics, unifying characteristics that they possess, are there things that stand out?

EK: There is, there are, there is, there is either an implicit or explicit awareness of how these principles operate. And what I mean by that is, there is some people on this list who have what you might describe as a high socio-emotional intelligence factor. They are in tune to the fact that the emotional connection is really important, but that you also need to help people actually concretely deal with problems and find solutions. Some people for reasons we don't know maybe some have it in-built or absorb from their early childhood experiences just have that intuition. There are a couple of people on the list like that. But then there are other folks on the list you actually are aware of this and these are colleagues, friends who are psychologically oriented and know how this stuff works and for that reason are quite deliberate in how they talk to you about these things. Now, I should add the people on this list, they are not doing therapy, there may be a therapist on it but just as a matter of coincidence I am friends with one, it's not a formal therapeutic exchange. What we are talking about in many ways is having really powerful relationships that you can rely on to help you work through chatter provoking circumstances. Other people are in an ideal position to help us because they have distance from the problem. They can be that objective guidepost that we can lean on. And so, it's just a matter of finding the right individuals who are capable of actualizing the potential they have.

DJ: Got it. Just a last couple of questions on this podcast, Ethan. You talk about the covid pandemic being arguably the most chatter provoking event of the century. What has been your observation about how it has played out on different lives and, you know, in terms of application of your research in the context of covid, what would you like to tell the listeners to sort of move forward into the into the new normal?

EK: Well, I think, it is an interesting time to publish a book on this topic when covid started because we know that some of the fuel that drives chatter are uncertainty and the lack of control, which I think have been the kind of guiding themes surrounding covid at least at the early stages, still to some extent now and we have seen the effects of that in data. Last time I checked there were 30+ percentage increases in various forms of anxiety and stress which we know chatter plays a key role in governing. So, we have certainly seen a huge rise. There is also data showing that a lot of the different tools I talk about and others can be quite useful for helping people manage this covid stress. And so, there are solutions, there are many good reasons to have hope. And I like to remind people is that although rates of chatter maybe up 30%, the overwhelming majority of people are still faring quite well. And so, there is a lot of room to manage ourselves more effectively and I think that is a remarkable thing.

DJ: Lovely. As we wrap up, Ethan, this podcast is titled, Play to Potential. When you hear that phrase, what does that mean to you, how do you think about play to potential?

EK: I think playing to potential means this is a fantastic aspirational goal and I think a key piece of that involves removing the obstacles that we sometimes put in our own way. Sometimes life throws obstacles in our way but I would argue we often create obstacles to living up to our potential and I think chatter is a perfect example of that. And I think availing, familiarizing yourself with the tools that are out there for managing it has the potential to help people live up to that ultimate potential.

DJ: Lovely. With that Ethan, thank you so much for making the time.

EK: Thanks for having me.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Hope you find the conversation purposeful.

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To know more about my work as an Executive Coach and a Discreet Sounding Board with CEOs/Entrepreneurs, you can go to www.playtopotential.com and see the About Deepak section.

Thank you and look forward to having you at a subsequent conversation at the podcast.

End of transcription

Nugget from Tasha Eurich that is referenced: [Limitations of introspection](#).

Nugget from Jennifer Goldman Wetzler that is referenced: [Real meaning of "take a walk"](#).

Nugget from BJ Fogg that is referenced: [Prompts - the low hanging fruit of change](#).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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