

Managing Internal Dialogue: Part 1

The Zero Point (Recognising patterns in your internal dialogue)

By Joe Cheal



Joe Cheal

There comes a moment when we 'stop the world' and access the extraordinary...powerful resources...amazing creativity...peak performance. Here we find our 'Zero Point', the place where we become truly present, experiencing the here and now. In this moment there is no distraction...no internal dialogue. We are in flow...in mindfulness...with infinite potential.

'Attending to anything in the present tends to withdraw our attention from an internal voice that talks about the past or future.'

*Steve Andreas(*1)*

Thinking, thinking, thinking...therefore I am!

Have you ever woken up in the night unable to get back to sleep...and realised that your mind is chattering away to itself? It seems that most of our thinking takes place 'out of awareness' (i.e. unconsciously), however, if you sit quietly for a moment without any external stimulus, you may begin to notice your internal dialogue.

I have found that for some people, the notion of internal dialogue makes them think of 'voices in the head'. This makes them a little reluctant to discuss the subject! However, when it is framed as 'thinking' they tend to be more open to exploring their inner language. The important point here is they understand that the voices are *internal* and not from an external source.

Why do we have internal dialogue? The philosopher René Descartes attempted to get to the core of our existence with his conclusion: 'I think therefore I am.' This 'first truth' of Descartes is a well-respected philosophical argument, however, if it is taken as a complex equivalence (i.e. I think = I am) we may be treading on troublesome ground. If we stop thinking, then what happens...do we cease to exist? Whilst it may seem silly, there is a part of us that may actually believe this! Eckhart Tolle(*2) suggests that becoming nothing is a fear of the *ego*...to stop thinking means ceasing to exist...and so it chatters away incessantly!

If we accept Antonio Damasio's(*3) 'embodied mind' suggestion (that our body and emotions are not really separate from our thinking), then if we stop the internal dialogue, are we left with just *feeling* (emotional and/or physical)? Does internal dialogue



“ We find our Zero Point, the place where we become truly present ”

help us to not *feel everything*? Does it take the edge off raw emotions? Even from the start of my journey in coaching and counselling, it was obvious that I and others had a tendency to 'talk over the top' of emotions sometimes (particularly painful ones). When asked to just *stop*, the feelings became very apparent!

Internal dialogue may also serve a number of other purposes, for example, planning and learning. We might reflect on a situation and when we move through it, we come out the other side with ideas on how to repeat or not repeat it. Research(*4) on daydreaming suggests that we have a 'default network' in the brain that kicks in if there is not much external stimulus (and/or if we are bored). When this neural system starts up, the brain becomes highly active. We may begin to develop plans and models and have all sorts of creative ideas! It is as if internal dialogue is keeping the brain busy when the outside world is not.

However, not all internal dialogue is positive and constructive. It appears that thoughts run the same neural pathways as spoken language. When we experience destructive language (spoken, thought, heard or read), the same pathways are strengthened in the brain. If the messages are significant enough to set off the 'alarm system' (e.g. the amygdala), then 'negative' thought turns into emotion and physiology. When destructive messages keep running the same patterns in the brain, the body reacts chemically (e.g.



“Thoughts run the same neural pathways as spoken language”

adrenaline) and mechanically (e.g. tensing muscles). Under these conditions it is hard work for the body to defend itself against such a constant but intangible threat. Whilst some of our internal dialogue may be useful and helpful, there may be times when we would benefit from stopping or transforming some of the things we say to ourselves.

The Zero Point

Some years ago, a couple of significant things came together at the same time. The first 'significant thing' was that Melody and I had begun to use the phrase 'Zero Point' as a way of anchoring the 'here and now'. If we were off talking about things that might happen, or replaying things that did, or fantasising about what could or might have been, we would gently suggest to one another to 'come back to the Zero Point'. There have been times when I have been out for a walk and realised that I have been yattering away about inconsequential things...and missing the view. Coming back to the Zero Point means enjoying the moment...stopping and smelling the roses!

We realised that internal dialogue (like our

sometimes random conversations) seems to take us in a 'direction' away from being in the here and now. Sometimes it takes us into the future, sometimes the past. Sometimes it is in a constructive direction, sometimes negative and destructive. Sometimes it is a fantasy of what we'd like more of, sometimes it is a rejection of what is.

The second 'significant thing' was listening to a series of talks by Eckhart Tolle(*2), along with reading his book(*5). He was saying the same thing about how we stop ourselves being present. We got so curious about being in the here and now that we began to model the nature of 'mindfulness', starting with Tolle's ideas. And so the Zero Point model was developed as a cousin to the Infinity Point(*6).

As far as we could tell, much of what Tolle refers to (i.e. how we avoid being in the now) could be mapped using three meta-programs.

- 1 Time Orientation:** thinking about the past or the future.
- 2 Motivation Direction:** thinking about what we don't want or want less of (away from) and what we want or want more of (towards).



→ 3 Relationship Sorting: thinking about how things are different or the same as other things.

These meta-programs could be imagined as continuums or axes on a graph. The three combined create a three dimensional X-Y-Z axes model (see Figure 1). The *content* of our internal dialogue (e.g. about self, others, things, events, actions) might take us anywhere in this three dimensional space. For example, we might think about a person we met in the past who we wish we had got to know better because we had so much in common with them. Or perhaps we might not be looking forward to an event that we are going to attend because it will be just like every other event we go to.

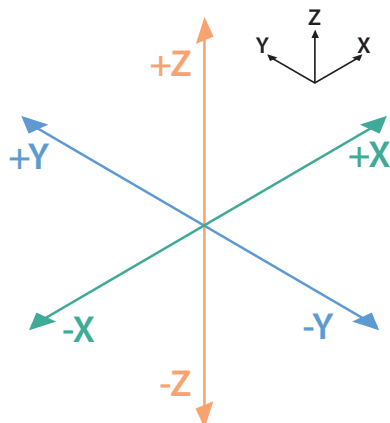


Figure 1.

The Zero Point model is the three dimensional X-Y-Z axes of the Time, Motivation and Sorting meta-programs. The *actual* Zero Point is the centre-point of all the axes. It is here that we are in the present moment, being in stillness and accepting ourselves or what is. From the Zero Point we can, with purpose, gather resources from anywhere in the 'field', including past, future, away from, towards, difference and same. The model is of course metaphorical, a map of concepts that is not designed to be taken literally. It is simply a reference point for exploration.

Where do you go?

If you take a minute or more to sit quietly and simply observe your internal dialogue, where does it take you? As you become familiar with your own patterns, you can map out where your thinking tends to lead you. It can give you a clue as to 'what's on your mind'! Table 1 gives some examples of language that would indicate where we go. Of course, the idea is that our thinking will take us to an area somewhere within a virtual 3D space, so some language will be indicative of more than one axis.

REFERENCES

- (*1) Steve Andreas, *Transforming Negative Self-Talk*.
- (*2) Eckhart Tolle, 'Living a Life of Inner Peace', audio.
- (*3) Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*.
- (*4) Catherine de Lange, 'Superdoodles', *New Scientist*.
- (*5) Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*.
- (*6) Joe Cheal, 'The Infinity Point'.

☺ Sit quietly; you may begin to notice your internal dialogue ☹

Axis/Meta-program	-	+
X: Time Orientation	Past then, if only, earlier, yesterday, this morning, wish I had/hadn't, nostalgia: how things used to be.	Future then, next time, later, next day, tomorrow, tonight.
Y: Motivation Direction	Bad, worse, wrong, no, rejection, don't like it, shouldn't be like this, not fair, wish it was another way. I can't believe it. This is a waste of time. This won't work. What a load of ****.	Affirming experience, this is good, better, great, ok, I want more of this! Nostalgia: I miss X and want it back again.
Z: Relationship Sorting	Different. Unlike, new, revolutionary, change, counter-, contra-. This doesn't relate to that. This doesn't equal that. This is not like that. This doesn't mean that. This is something else.	Same, similar, alike, as before, connected, akin, linked. This is like that. This is the same. This equals that. This means that.

Table 1: Example 'Linguistic Indicators' of being somewhere other than the Zero Point.

Handling internal dialogue

Whilst this particular article is about recognising the patterns of our internal dialogue, it is worth noting a couple of strategies that Eckhart Tolle suggests for stopping our incessant thinking. The first is to ask yourself: 'I wonder what the next thought will be?' This tends to create a mental space where the mind becomes aware of itself. The second is to say inside your mind to the internal dialogue: 'Stop it!' I find this phrase seems to work best when I use an assertive but gentle internal command tone. Using an irritated tone seems to exacerbate it. However, you will find what works for you!

This article is the first in a series based on managing internal dialogue. It is my intention to give you a range of strategies for working with the inner voice...to get back in the driving seat of your own thinking. We will be exploring submodalities, parts, levels of 'Ad' (auditory digital) and utilising the realm of the senses. And remember, if you are asking yourself: 'Do I have internal dialogue?' You have just answered your own question! ■

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Managing Internal Dialogue: Part 2

The Arena and the Quiet Mind (Shifting the submodalities of internal dialogue)

By Joe Cheal



Joe Cheal

In the previous article we began to explore our 'internal dialogue' through a model called the 'Zero Point' (i.e. being in the here and now). We will be continuing this time by developing the idea of the 'Quiet Mind' with a focus on utilising the submodalities of our inner speech.

'Free your mind.'
Morpheus (The Matrix)

The Arena: a personal account

As I sat quietly one afternoon, eyes closed in a light meditative trance, I chose to 'observe' the workings of my mind. Images flashed from time to time, but most prevalent was the internal dialogue. Firstly, there was the familiar 'mainstream' Narrator. To explain...this is usually in my own voice and is clear and 'near the surface' of consciousness.

This Narrator is me 'talking to myself'. It is often very practical, like a planner working out his to-do list and schedule. It can also be me thinking through an idea or model or theory. It is there when I write and I have often had the experience of articles and stories 'writing themselves'...as if they are not written by me but *through* me. From conversations with others, I believe this is quite a common experience...getting into the writing groove...in flow and on track as it were.

Sometimes, the Narrator can get carried away, sounding out imaginary conversations I might have to have with someone (or would never have!) or sometimes giving marvellous presentations. When the Narrator goes 'out of control', it acts as a worrier, particularly in the middle of the night if I wake up and can't get back to sleep.

However, when I quietened the Narrator, I found that other more random thoughts 'came to the surface' and submerged again. After a little while something dawned on me. The internal dialogue was not always a singular 'voice in the dark'. Sometimes I became aware of multiple layers and streams of thinking, coming from different directions with a range of tonalities (and submodalities). Some of it was audible and understandable; some of it was distant and mumbling... I'm not even sure that all of it was in English! As I stayed 'meta' to the noise, I felt like I

“As I sat quietly, eyes closed in a light meditative trance, I chose to 'observe' the workings of my mind”

was in the centre of an amphitheatre with thoughts coming at me from all around. As I came back into the room, the external world created a distraction and these thought streams became unconscious again. After repeating the process a few times and discussing it with others, I called this multi-directional panorama: the Arena.

I began to get fascinated with the qualities of the internal dialogue. Not just the content (which will be



“The unconscious mind is a curious thing”



the topic of the next article, along with the idea of ‘parts’), but the voice and tonality of each thought stream. Sometimes it was my own voice I could make out, sometimes it was other people I knew and sometimes voices that were unfamiliar to me. Of course, the notion of ‘voices in the head’ carries a kind of stigma to it, so you will be relieved to know that I knew it was all being generated from within and not coming from without.

The unconscious mind is a curious thing and it appears to be very creative. Consider your dreams for a moment, when the theatre of your unconscious mind is at play. You will find yourself interacting with a host of characters, some known to you and others unknown. Each dream-part will have a voice of its own. I believe that internal dialogue uses the same unconscious mechanism.

It’s not what you think: it’s the way that you think it

In the next article we will be eavesdropping on *what* our internal dialogue (and parts) might have to say, but this time we are tuning in to *how* our internal dialogue endeavours to be heard.

Each thought-stream of internal dialogue will have its own submodalities (qualities). Even if you are only aware of one inner voice at any given moment in time, take a moment to ‘observe’ it. Ultimately, if you want to experience a Quiet Mind, it will benefit you to familiarise yourself with what is actually going on in there! Then you can decide what you want instead and work with the submodalities.

So, if you wish to explore further, imagine you are entering the Arena of your mind. Listen to the qualities of the thought-stream(s) and use the questions below to determine (and write down) the particular characteristics.

- Where is the voice coming from – which direction/spatial location – in front, behind, left, right, up, down?
- What distance from you is the voice – close, far away?
- Whose voice is it – is it yours or someone else’s? Is it familiar or unfamiliar?
- If the voice had an age, what would it be? Adult, elderly, childlike?
- What state does the voice portray, e.g. angry, sad, authoritative, kind, worried, excited?
- What accent does the voice have?
- What language is it speaking?
- What is the intensity level – soft, gentle, harsh, light, heavy?
- What is the pitch – high, medium, low?
- What is the volume level – quiet, ‘normal’, loud?
- What is the speed or tempo – fast, slow?
- What is the musicality – melodious, grating?
- What is the duration – continuous, intermittent?
- What is the degree of clarity – clear, distorted, muffled, in ‘focus’, out of ‘focus’?
- Are there any other sounds linked to the voice – music, noises?
- Are there any significant images, feelings, smells or tastes associated with the voice (if so run through the submodalities of the other senses)? →

“ Each thought-stream of internal dialogue will have its own submodalities ”

→ If you have written down your responses, how do you feel about that thought-stream voice now? If you would like to feel differently about the voice and want to make changes, what submodalities could you play with? For example, most people find it harder to take a critical voice seriously if it sounds like Mickey Mouse, Scooby Doo or some other cartoon character! Alternatively, if the internal dialogue is harsh and unfriendly (e.g. saying 'what a silly fool!'), try changing the voice to soft and seductive!

You might really want to go to town here and use the 'submodality map across' process. Who would you prefer the voice to sound like? Go inside and run a positive outcome statement through your mind (e.g. 'you can do it') giving it a voice you would like to hear more of. It could be your own voice when you feel motivated and confident, or calm and relaxed. You might use the voice of someone you admire, or an actor/actress who is compelling and easy to listen to. Once you have a phrase and a voice that works for you, you can run the full map-across using the new voice as the improved 'template'.

The Quiet Mind: releasing internal dialogue

Some people find that their internal dialogue is intrusive, critical and negative. This could be the Narrator, which tends to be in 'I' form (e.g. saying 'Why have I done that? I'm such a fool!') or some other voice, which is usually in 'you' form, as if we have taken it from someone else (e.g. saying 'Why have you done that? You fool!')

If the internal dialogue is unwanted (or you wish to be free of it for a while), whether it is the Narrator or some other critical voice, you might for example: change the submodalities (as above), investigate the intentions (which we will be covering in the next article) or quieten your mind.

The Quiet Mind is a meditative, mindfulness type approach. It is about coming back to your 'Zero Point', the here and now. When you are ready to quieten your mind, firstly tell the internal Narrator to 'stop'. Then imagine stepping into the Arena. 'Observe' other internal dialogue (noticing the submodalities) and then use the Narrator to tell the other thought streams to 'stop'. This may happen initially by stopping each thought stream one by one, the Narrator acting like the conductor of an orchestra.

There will be gaps of true silence and then if another thought stream enters the arena, tell it to stop. After having done this a number of times, I can now say to myself 'Quiet Mind' and the whole Arena tends to hush! As a side note, this is the most effective way I have found of getting back to sleep if my mind is buzzing with activity in the night.

As an alternative approach, some people find they can turn the volume down on the internal dialogue, as if turning a volume control down to silent. I find this approach useful if I want to become more aware of the external sounds (which seem to come up in volume as the internal dialogue goes down, but maybe that's just me!)

So when you are ready: *Stop...* ■



FOR FURTHER READING AND EXPLORATION

Steve Andreas, *Transforming Negative Self-Talk*.

Richard Bandler and Will MacDonald, *An Insider's Guide to Sub-Modalities*.

Joe Cheal, *'The Zero Point'*.

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Managing Internal Dialogue: Part 3

Part of Me Says...

(What is your internal dialogue trying to tell you?)

By Joe Cheal



Joe Cheal

Typically, in NLP we focus on the process of *how* rather than the content of *what*. However, when it comes to internal dialogue, might there be a value in finding what it is trying to say? What if some of our internal dialogue repeats itself again and again because it has an important message to deliver?

While one part of a person may understand something, another part may not. One part of a person may believe something is important while another part may believe it unnecessary. As a result, an individual may have different parts with different intentions.(*1)

“Parts may harmonise and integrate, or compete and conflict”

The language of parts: where does it come from?

It is interesting to note that we call our inner thought streams ‘internal *dialogue*’. Why not, as some Zen Buddhists call it, ‘internal *monologue*’? A dialogue presupposes two parts in conversation. If this is the case, what are the two parts? Perhaps the two parts are in the roles of a speaker and a listener. Perhaps there are lots of conversations going on in our unconscious mind...parts nattering away to one another! However, it seems that some thought streams are more apparent,



compelling and consistent...as if they have a voice and want to be heard. This might require our conscious mind to be the listener.

Where does internal dialogue come from? On a purely neurological level, recent research suggests that our brain is a system of linked mini-networks that communicate via a system of 'hubs' which are, in turn, connected by a 'backbone' of lengthy neurons. When triggered, a mini-network may create an idea or thought stream. Colin Barras (*2) suggests: 'As your mind flits from thought to thought, it may seem as if dozens of sensations and ideas are constantly fighting for your attention... Here, though, the fight is not between just two competitors, but between multitudes of cognitive patterns. None ever manages to gain more than a fleeting supremacy, which...might explain the familiar experience of the wandering mind.' And so, at any given moment in time, there may be lots of these mini-networks competing for 'air time'. This competition for attention may explain the experience of the *Arena*, outlined in the previous *Rapport* article. (*3) The dominant thought streams are those that are more likely to be recognisable.

On a psychological level, it could be suggested that thought streams of internal dialogue are the voicing of 'parts'. Some 'practical' parts appear to be offering ideas, connections, plans and solutions. Some 'emotive' parts may be supportive and empowering (e.g. 'You can do it!' or 'Cool! That sounds interesting!') whilst others might be critical and disempowering (e.g. 'You can't do this!' or 'What a load of rubbish!'). Some of this internal dialogue may have been inherited from other people (e.g. parents) as if we accept certain comments and then replay them later (sometimes over and over...)

Creating a harmony of parts

Parts may harmonise and integrate, or compete and conflict. It could be argued that when parts are in harmony, we may experience flow and innovation but if parts are conflicting, we may experience 'stuck-ness', dilemma, polarity and paradox. If we use the neural 'level of integration' concept outlined above, NLP has some lovely processes for parts integration (including 'six step reframe' and 'visual squash'). If our internal dialogue is competing or conflicting, might we benefit from bringing it to one voice (or two in harmony)?

There is something that 'six step reframe' and 'visual squash' have in common: seeking the positive intention of the conflicting parts in order to create a synthesis or third way. It is likely that the positive intention of a part drives it to voice itself. There is a presupposition in NLP that every behaviour will have a positive intention. This would also be true of internal dialogue. Even the most critical, 'negative', destructive, stressful voice will likely have an (e.g.) protective element to it. A limiting belief is often there to stop us doing something that

could potentially make us vulnerable (physically or psychologically). Ironically, critical internal dialogue may be trying to prevent us from getting criticised or embarrassed by somebody else.

If you become aware of a limiting belief or internal critic, take a moment to find the words that are there. Go inside for a moment and talk to the part that generates the negative talk. What is it actually trying to say? Where is the *emphasis* in the language it is using (i.e. which words might 'stick out')? How might that language impact on you as a system (e.g. on your mood, state, physiology)? If possible, seek out its positive intention. Find out what it really wants or needs. What does it need you to know, learn or do in order for the message to be received and understood? If you want to, you might go through the six step reframe (usually better with someone else's assistance).



“An alternative approach might be to challenge the internal dialogue”





Challenging internal dialogue

An alternative approach might be to challenge the internal dialogue; particularly if it is in 'you' form. Steve Andreas (*4) makes the point that internal dialogue is easier to challenge if it is spoken 'at you' from a second perceptual position; for example, 'you are stupid' is easier to challenge than 'I am stupid' since 'I am stupid' is self-referential and circular, and indicates a stronger self-belief. When internal dialogue is in 'you' form, you might use some metamodel type questions to loosen the distortions and/or generalisations being made. For example, you might ask that part of you: 'What makes you think that?' or 'What events lead you to believe that?'

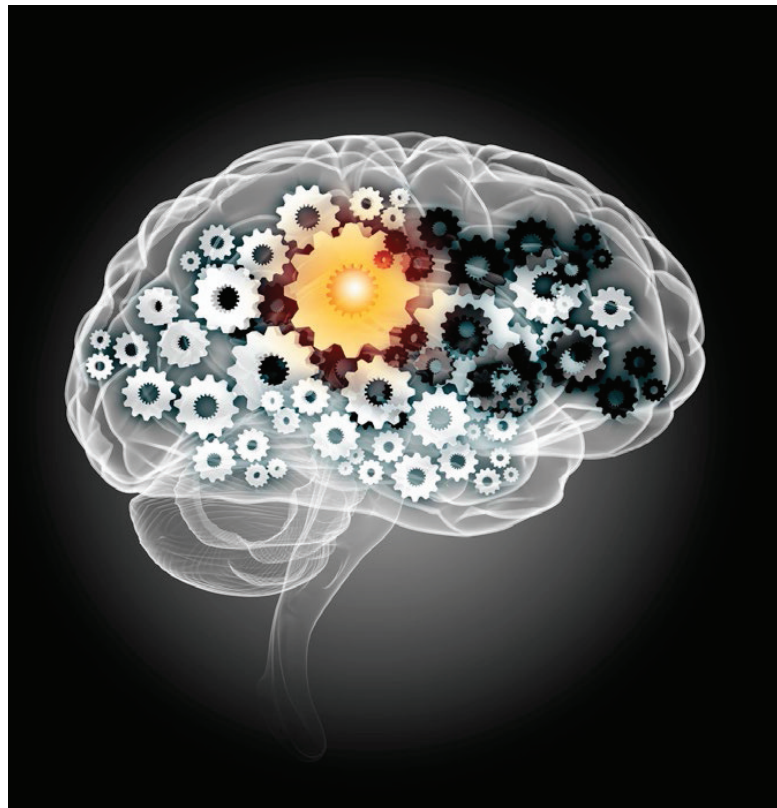
If the internal dialogue is self-critical and in 'I' form then it would seem that our 'internal narrator' has gone rogue for a moment! Here we are really talking to ourselves as a whole. The Narrator, introduced in the previous article,(*3) is perhaps the voice of the unconscious and is the main thought stream we have in our mind. It is the integrator of ideas and plans. It might also be the voice of beliefs and values we hold in and about a particular context. As an analogy, the Narrator is rather like a dog in that it seems to like having a job to do. If you ask it to search, it will search (unless you tell it what 'not' to search for, in which case it will search for what you are not looking for). If you need to solve a problem or want some ideas on a particular topic, it will work for you. However, if it is left to its own devices, it will find its own purpose. Rather than chewing slippers, it will wander or get stuck or get carried away on a sea of competing sub-network activity in the brain. Whilst this may sometimes be productive, have you ever caught yourself thinking negative, unhelpful things or woken in the night with your mind working overtime?

If just a part of us says: 'I am stupid' it is talking about itself and we might work with that part as if it were a friend who was giving themselves a hard time. However, when we criticise ourselves as a whole, here are a couple of options:

- 1 As Steve Andreas suggests we can challenge the self-reference with self-reference! 'I am stupid' must mean the statement is stupid! This is true of any negative self-talk in the 'I' form.
- 2 We may need to work with our self-esteem to create a more positive internal regard. Negative internal dialogue is often associated with confidence and self-esteem issues in particular contexts.

Of course, some critical internal dialogue might not be aimed at ourselves but at an external source (e.g. other people or things, the environment, the state of the world etc.). Whilst this may *appear* less 'self-destructive', it may still be worth challenging. Consider how this externally-oriented, negative internal dialogue may affect us on a personal level. If we bemoan the way the world is, we are rejecting reality and we may be confusing the map with the territory (i.e. the world is not what we expect or want it to be and so we wish *it* would change). If we are inactively making others wrong, we are really only distressing *ourselves*. However, if this internal dialogue drives us to action for positive change (in ourselves or in the world) then it has served its purpose. In that case, listen, take action and be the difference that makes the difference! ■

“It seems that some thought streams are more apparent, compelling and consistent”



References

- (*1) R Dilts, *Strategies of Genius: Volume 3*.
 (*2) C Barras, 'Elements of thought'.
 (*3) J Cheal, 'The Arena' (also see 'The Zero Point')
 (*4) S Andreas, *Transforming Negative Self-talk*

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Managing Internal Dialogue: Part 4

Return to the Senses...

(A sensory approach to mindfully handling internal dialogue)

By Joe Cheal



Joe Cheal

USING VAKOG TO QUIETEN INTRUSIVE INTERNAL DIALOGUE

'We lose our mind and come to our senses...to be fully present.'

*Michael Hall, paraphrasing Fritz Perls (*1)*

There is a presupposition in NLP, borrowed from Alfred Korzybski: (*2) 'The map is not the territory'. Language works at the level of the map, describing and analysing the territory. Words are not the things they describe. Internal (and external) dialogue takes us away from the territory and keeps us stuck in the map. In this sense, we treat our linguistic filters (generalisations, distortions and deletions) as if they are the truth and/or how things should be.

When we become enveloped in internal dialogue, we begin to 'lose touch' with our direct experience. Whilst this may be useful at times, it may benefit us to have ways and means of switching off the inner chatterbox for a while and just...be...present!

Beneath the layers of our internal dialogue we are sensory beings. Our senses are the closest thing we have to the 'world of the real' (i.e. the territory). By stopping and simply experiencing the world, we can let go of our internal dialogue and return to our 'Zero Point'.(*3)

This article will give you a set of simple exercises to utilise your senses (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory – 'VAKOG') to help achieve a more mindful state. These exercises can be done as a sequence or separately. If you experience any internal dialogue, let it go and return to the exercise.

Visual

- 1 Shift your attention from foveal vision (i.e. central, focused) to your peripheral vision. Relax your gaze and notice not just what is in front of you but also further out from the centre to the edges. This is like going into a 'wide screen' mode where you tend to notice more in your field of view.
- 2 Look around the room and become aware of what you didn't previously see.

- 3 Close your eyes for 10 seconds and then open them. What colours do you notice?

Auditory

- 4 Close your eyes and notice the sounds all around you...be aware of the direction and distance of the sounds. This might be called 'peripheral listening'. Open your eyes and continue listening to the sounds around. What can you hear now? And what else?
- 5 Listen to some music (uptime or downtime). Listen out for musical instruments, rhythms, vocals and harmonies that you may not have noticed before. Become aware of the collective of the musical experience.

“Words are not the things they describe”





- 6 Listen to someone else speaking without needing to construct a response. *Choose* to listen to them...prioritise what they are saying *above* your internal dialogue.

Kinesthetic

- 7 Become aware of your environment now...what physical sensations do you experience? Notice any internal sensations throughout your body.
- 8 Become aware of your breathing...follow it in and out...and feel the sensations of breathing. Notice your heartbeat...feel the rhythm of your heart directly or by placing your hand on your chest.
- 9 Tap your fingers together and feel the sensations. Rub your finger and thumb together gently and notice the nuances of touch.

Olfactory

- 10 Smell the air around you...what do you become aware of? Stand up and slowly turn 360 degrees. Can you get a full panorama of the scents around you? If it helps, try sniffing in and out rapidly like a dog for a few moments (if you feel light-headed then go back to normal breathing!)
- 11 Smell a particular scent, e.g. a flower, a perfume/ aftershave or a food...and notice the layers and tones.

Gustatory

- 12 Relax your tongue...let it rest for a moment. Let your jaw relax too. Breathe easily and quietly for a minute.
- 13 Take a small piece of food and eat it slowly and mindfully...roll the food around your mouth...notice the sensations, tastes and textures. Let the scent of the food get into your nasal cavity (e.g. by breathing out slowly through your nose). Notice the variety and subtleties of the flavours.

MIX IT UP...THE FULL SENSORY EXPERIENCE!

Whilst meditation is often perceived as a 'close your eyes and go inside' activity, it is also worthwhile experiencing a 'sensory meditation'. Go for a walk and allow yourself to remain aware of the sights, sounds and physical sensations around you. Try

slowing down and speeding up.

In a 'quiet mind' state, take a wander around a familiar place (e.g. your house or garden) and notice the details and intricacies of what you have created. Notice how and where you and others have placed things...but without comment. Just notice it as if it were a gallery or museum...perhaps allow yourself to experience an 'open-minded fascination' with what you experience.

From an ecology perspective...although this may seem obvious, please carry out these exercises when in a safe environment. For example, if you find this process hypnotic, avoid doing it whilst driving!

Embrace the world around you. We have five basic sensory channels...enjoy them. ■

“Beneath the layers of our internal dialogue we are sensory beings”



References

(*1) Joen Fagan and Irma Shepherd, *Gestalt Therapy Now*.

(*2) Alfred Korzybski, *Science & Sanity*, fifth edition.

(*3) Joe Cheal, 'The Zero Point'.

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Managing Internal Dialogue: Part 5

Rebuilding our Map

(Reframing internal dialogue with the READ Model)

By Joe Cheal



Joe Cheal

In this article we continue an exploration of our internal dialogue, how it affects us and how we might manage it. However, before we get into the main stream, consider a couple of scenarios:

- 1 Whilst heating some milk, you look away for a moment and the milk boils over. What do you say to yourself at that moment and how do you say it?
- 2 You are about to do something you have never done before, for example, present to the board, do a bungee jump or cook an unfamiliar meal for important guests. When you think about the task, what kind of things do you say to yourself and how do you say them? For example, do you think practically about the task itself? Do you think 'I can't do this' or 'Why did I agree to this'? Do you worry it will go wrong?

Of course, our internal reaction may depend on the context and the mood we are in, but how we talk to ourselves can affect our confidence, performance and ultimately our self-esteem. In this sense, it can be useful to establish what messages

“How we talk to ourselves can affect our confidence, performance and ultimately our self-esteem”

we are giving ourselves.

For some people, their internal dialogue is relatively factual and practical. It might even be enthusiastic and encouraging. For others however, their internal dialogue can be destructive and unpleasant, aimed at themselves or other people.

According to research by Pennebaker, (*1) the first step in managing your internal experiences may be to 'externalise' them by writing them down. The benefit of writing down internal dialogue is twofold. Firstly, it can be seen and analysed more objectively. Secondly, it can help to lessen the effect and power of the negative self talk.

'The very process of having a client describe fully his/her experiences has a profound effect on the client's model of the world.'

*Kim Kostere and Linda Malatesta (*2)*



FIGURE 1

How we use levels of internal dialogue to build our 'map of the world'

From early childhood, it seems likely that our internal dialogue will develop as our vocabulary and linguistic ability develops. Small children will often talk their 'internal dialogue' out loud, e.g. whilst playing alone. It is like a running commentary that eventually becomes internalised. Those things we say about ourselves become part of our constructive or destructive internal messages, usually expressed in first person (e.g. 'I am...').

Of course, many of the messages we take in will come from others (e.g. parents and siblings). Although still directed at ourselves, these messages will likely be in second person (e.g. 'you are...'). They may be pleasant or unpleasant. They may be identity statements ('you are clever' or 'you fool!') or directive commands (e.g. 'stop it' or 'don't be so silly').

Ultimately, our internal dialogue is likely to be an expression of our map (or model) of the world, which in turn, is constructed and maintained to help us function in reality. Our map of the world is the collective of our generalisations and beliefs. The problem arises when we come to believe that our map of the world *is* the way the world actually is. In addition, within the mix of useful beliefs, we may end up with some unhelpful beliefs too.

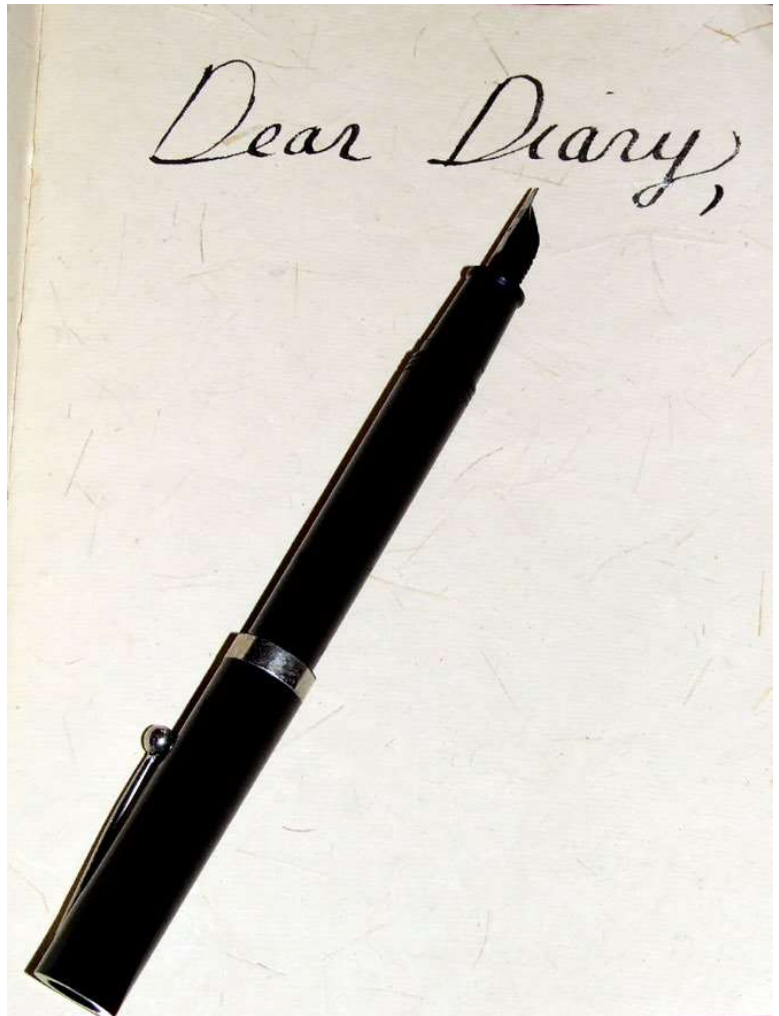
The READ Model (*3)

I am introducing the basics of the 'READ model' here as a way of explaining the levels we go through to create our map and also the levels (or types) of internal dialogue (see Figure 1).

The most concrete part of the model is the external world, our direct experience of that world and the internal representations we generate from our sensory data. At these levels, we are sensory creatures and without language. Beyond this, through the levels of description, analysis, evaluation and reflection we are utilising language.

To detail the layers a little more:

- **Description:** a relatively pure narrative of what things are and what is happening. It is sensory based in terms of describing what we see, hear, feel (physiologically rather than emotionally), smell and taste. There is no judgement or assessment.
- **Analysis:** a process of categorising, comparing and contrasting our experience with other experiences. We might also explore what caused this to happen and/or what effect it might have.
- **Evaluation:** a judgement process, attaching a value to our experiences (e.g. good or bad). Here we begin to develop our opinions about things (e.g. 'homework is a waste of my time!').
- **Reflection:** a generalisation of experiences, forming longer term beliefs about the world, unconsciously 'concretising' our map. Conscious reflection, on the other hand, may help us learn



and develop as we establish applications and action plans for what we learn.

When we use language we begin to abstract from sensory experience, shifting through different linguistic layers to eventually create our map of the world (at the levels of evaluation and reflection). With each layer we tend to add a new set of meanings to the original experience. In this sense we are adding more and more subjective frames (that will validate and 'concretise' our map). Our map will then, in turn, tend to direct and filter how we reflect on, evaluate, analyse and describe any further experiences.

Framing, reframing and rebuilding

Can we use our internal dialogue to reframe and hence rebuild our map of the world? If the messages we give ourselves happen to create or maintain an unwanted frame, perhaps we can choose to *reframe* them.

If you have transcribed some of your internal dialogue, which phrases are helpful and which are limiting (and/or unpleasant) in some way? At what level does this message appear to sit? It is likely that ➡

➔ most problematic messages will be at the levels of evaluation (e.g. in the boiling milk example: 'Oh crap, I'm so clumsy, what an idiot'; in the cooking example: 'this is awful, I'm not good at this kind of thing') and reflection (e.g. 'I'm/you're always screwing up', 'I/you can't do this kind of thing').

Start at the level of your internal dialogue and use the questions below to frame it back to the layer of description.

- *Reflect*: What do you believe/think is true about this situation? What do you believe about yourself in this situation?
- *Evaluate*: What do you feel about this situation? How are you judging it? What do you feel about yourself in this? How are you judging yourself?
- *Analyse*: What has caused you to think this about the situation/yourself? What type of situation is this? What is it like?
- *Describe*: What actually happened/what is happening? How would you describe it in sensory/factual terms?
- *Re-Describe*: How else might you describe this situation? What else do you notice?
- *Re-Analyse*: How else might you interpret this situation? What else is it like? What else might have caused it? What other effects might it have? What else might this be an example of? What other ways might this break down into component parts?
- *Re-Evaluate*: How else might you judge this? What is good (or bad) about it? Where else might this be good (or bad)? What else might you say about yourself?
- *Reflect*: What else can you learn from this situation? Where can you apply this learning? What else might you do next time you are in this situation?

And now use the following questions to reframe the experience in a more constructive and empowering light.

The next time you are in this situation having this experience, allow yourself to have new and different internal dialogue that supports and adds to your life. Challenge and learn from the negative messages and embrace the positive ones.

From this day forth, throughout the journey of life, may your internal dialogue be a welcome travelling companion. ■



References

- (*1) James Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What our words say about us*.
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