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Mentally Stepping Back from Problems Helps Youth Deal with Negative Emotions

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Spontaneous Self-Distancing and Adaptive Self-Reflection Across Adolescence

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Adolescence is a time of frequent and intense emotional experiences, but some youth handle their emotions better than others. Why do some young people react adaptively while others ruminate? A new study of adolescents shows that youth who mentally take a step back from their own point of view when thinking about something troubling can deal with negative emotions more effectively and become less upset by them.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Michigan, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers looked at 226 African American 11- to 20-year-olds from an urban public school in Washington, D.C., asking them about a recent event that made them extremely angry (such as a fight). The youth then reflected on their experiences and why they felt angry, then told researchers about how they felt and thought about the experiences. For example, the researchers assessed selfdistancing by asking the youth: “When you saw the fight again in your imagination a few minutes ago, how much did you feel like you were seeing it through your own eyes versus watching the fight happen from a distance (like watching yourself in a movie)?” and “When you saw the fight again in your imagination a few moments ago, how far away from the fight did you feel?”

Experiments performed primarily with adults show that self-distancing helps adaptive selfreflection. However, no research has investigated whether adolescents spontaneously engage in this process or whether doing so is linked to adaptive outcomes.

Youth who reflected on their experiences from a self-distanced perspective became less upset than those who reflected from a self-immersed perspective, the study found. In part, this was because adolescents who saw their experience from a distance thought about it differently. These youth were more likely to reconsider the events in meaningful and insightful ways, and less likely to simply replay the upsetting events in their minds. They were also less likely to continue to blame the other person involved in the event (though not less likely to forgive him or her). In turn, these new insights were associated with less emotional distress.

“Mentally stepping back from the event didn’t mean the youth were avoiding their problems,” explains Rachel E. White, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, the study’s lead author. “In fact,

they were dealing with them in a more adaptive way."

The study also found that self-distancing strategies seemed to grow more powerful with age. Older youth who self-distanced became even less upset than younger adolescents who did so.

"These results show that teens can use self-distancing strategies in much the same way as adults," White notes. "They also suggest that the teen years could be critical in developing this way to regulate emotions." Research suggests that adults could help youth learn and implement these strategies. Previous experiments have shown that even fifth graders can use self-distancing techniques when instructed to do so—and they handle their emotions better as a result.

The study was funded by the John F. Templeton Foundation and the National Institute on Aging.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Spontaneous Self-Distancing and Adaptive Self-Reflection Across Adolescence by White, RE (University of Pennsylvania), Kross, E (University of Michigan), and Duckworth, AL (University of Pennsylvania). Copyright 2015 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.