

Am I crazy? Talking to yourself has cognitive benefits, study says

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"One advantage of talking to yourself is that you know at least somebody's listening." - Franklin P. Jones

Most people talk to themselves at least every few days, and many report talking to themselves on an hourly basis. What purpose is served by this seemingly irrational behavior? Previous research has suggested that such self-directed speech in children can help guide their behavior. For example, children often talk themselves step-by-step through tying their shoelaces, as if reminding themselves to focus on the job in hand.

Can talking to oneself also help [adults](#)?

In a recent study published in *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, [psychologists](#) Gary Lupyan (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Daniel Swingle (University of Pennsylvania) conducted a series of experiments to discover whether talking to oneself can help when searching for particular objects. The studies were inspired by observations that people often audibly mutter to themselves when trying to find, for example, a jar of Peanut Butter on a supermarket shelf, or the stick of butter in their fridge.

In the first experiment, participants were shown 20 pictures of various objects and asked to find a particular one. In some trials, participants saw a text label telling them what object they should find ("Please search for the teapot.") In other trials, the same subjects were asked to search again while actually say the word to themselves. It was found that

speaking to themselves helped people find the objects more quickly.

In a follow-up experiment, participants performed a virtual shopping task in which they saw photographs of items commonly found on supermarket shelves and were asked to find, as quickly as possible, all the instances of a particular item. For example, participants would be asked to find all the bags of apples, or all the bottles of Diet Coke. Here, too, there was an advantage to speaking the name of the object when participants were looking for very familiar products. For example, saying “Coke” when looking for Coke helped whereas saying “Speed Stick” when looking for Speed Stick Deodorant actually slowed people down.

The next time you lose your keys, you may want to mutter “keys keys keys” to yourself while searching for them, and just ignore the strange looks you may be getting...

More information: Gary Lupyan & Daniel Swingley (2011): Self-directed speech affects visual search performance, *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, [DOI:10.1080/17470218.2011.647039](https://doi.org/10.1080/17470218.2011.647039)

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