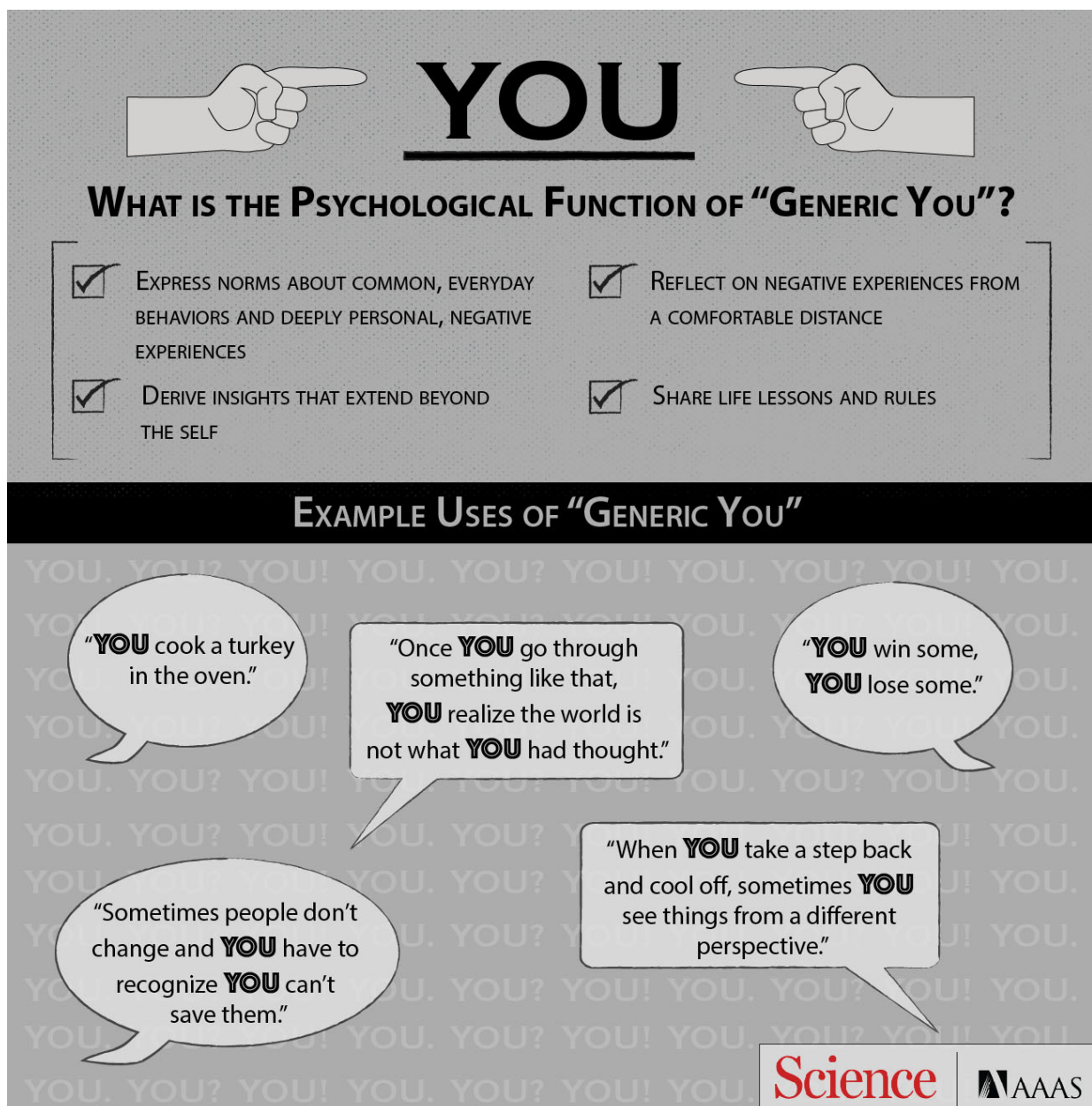


# It's really about me, not 'you': People often use the word 'you' rather than 'I' to cope with negative experiences

March 23 2017



**YOU**

**WHAT IS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF "GENERIC YOU"?**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXPRESS NORMS ABOUT COMMON, EVERYDAY BEHAVIORS AND DEEPLY PERSONAL, NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REFLECT ON NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES FROM A COMFORTABLE DISTANCE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DERIVE INSIGHTS THAT EXTEND BEYOND THE SELF	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SHARE LIFE LESSONS AND RULES

**EXAMPLE USES OF "GENERIC YOU"**

"**YOU** cook a turkey in the oven."

"Once **YOU** go through something like that, **YOU** realize the world is not what **YOU** had thought."

"**YOU** win some, **YOU** lose some."

"Sometimes people don't change and **YOU** have to recognize **YOU** can't save them."

"When **YOU** take a step back and cool off, sometimes **YOU** see things from a different perspective."

**Science** | **AAAS**

A new study by Ariana Orvell et al. demonstrates how people use the word “you” in a general sense to distance themselves psychologically – and extract meaning – from negative experiences. This infographic captures the various ways people may use “you.” Credit: Carla Schaffer / AAAS

To cope with negative experiences or to share an insight, people often use the word "you" rather than "I."

"You" is an overlooked word that people use to express norms and rules, new University of Michigan research found.

Researchers conducted nine experiments with 2,489 people to understand why people curiously use "you" not only to refer to specific others, but also to reflect on their own experiences.

"It's something we all do as a way to explain how things work and to find [meaning](#) in our lives," said Ariana Orvell, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology and the study's lead author.

"When people use "you" to make meaning from [negative experiences](#), it allows them to 'normalize' the experience and reflect on it from a distance," said Orvell.

For example, "you win some, you lose some" would indicate that a person has failed in a situation, but by using the word 'you,' they are able to communicate that this could happen to anyone.

"Or saying that 'when you are angry, you say and do things that you will most likely regret' might actually explain a personal situation, but the

individual attempts to make it something many people relate to," Orvell said.

In one experiment, researchers asked participants to write about a personal experience: 201 were asked to make meaning from a negative event, 198 were asked to relive a negative event, and 203 were simply asked to write about a neutral experience. Those in the meaning-making group used generic-you more in their essays (46 percent used the word at least once) than those in the Relive group (10 percent used the word at least once) and the neutral group (3 percent used the word at least once). The researchers also found that using generic-you led people to view the event as more distant.

The researchers say it may seem contradictory that a means of generalizing to people at large is used when reflecting on one's most personal and idiosyncratic experiences.

"We suspect that it's the ability to move beyond your own perspective to express shared, universal [experiences](#) that allows individuals to derive broader meanings from personal events," Orvell said.

Orvell collaborated on the study with Ethan Kross, psychology professor, and Susan Gelman, Heinz Werner Distinguished University Professor of Psychology and Linguistics.

The findings appear in the latest issue of *Science*.

**More information:** "How "you" makes meaning," *Science*, [science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi ... 1126/science.aaj2014](http://science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/10.1126/science.aaj2014)

Provided by University of Michigan

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