Frequent 'I-talk' may signal proneness to emotional distress

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We all know someone who seems to really enjoy talking about him- or herself. Yet while the chorus of "I, I, I" and "me, me, me" might convince us we are conversing with a classic narcissist, science suggests we shouldn't be so quick to judge.

Researchers at the University of Arizona found in a 2015 study that frequent use of first-person singular pronouns—I, me and my—is not, in fact, an indicator of narcissism.

Instead, this so-called "I-talk" may signal that someone is prone to emotional distress, according to a new, follow-up UA study forthcoming in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Research at other institutions has suggested that I-talk, though not an indicator of narcissism, may be a marker for depression. While the new study confirms that link, UA researchers found an even greater connection between high levels of I-talk and a psychological disposition of negative emotionality in general.

Negative emotionality refers to a tendency to easily become upset or emotionally distressed, whether that means experiencing depression, anxiety, worry, tension, anger or other negative emotions, said Allison Tackman, a research scientist in the UA Department of Psychology and lead author of the new study.

Tackman and her co-authors found that when people talk a lot about themselves, it could point to depression, but it could just as easily indicate that they are prone to anxiety or any number of other negative emotions. Therefore, I-talk shouldn't be considered a marker for depression alone.

"The question of whether I-talk reflects depression more specifically, or negative affect more broadly, was a really important question because if you're thinking of using I-talk as a screening tool, you want to know if it screens specifically for a risk for depression or if it screens more broadly for a tendency to experience negative affect, which is a broader risk factor for a suite of mental health concerns," said UA psychology professor and study co-author Matthias Mehl.

The researchers' findings are based on a large dataset of more than 4,700 individuals from six labs in two countries—the U.S. and Germany. The data included measures of individuals' use of I-talk—either in written or spoken tasks—as well as measures of depression and negative emotionality.

"Previous research had found the one link—between I-talk and depression—but it hadn't examined moderators in great detail in a large sample. That was the next step," Tackman said. "Our results suggest that I-talk may not be very good at assessing depression in particular. It may be better at assessing a proneness not just to depression but to negative emotionality more broadly."

So how much I-talk is considered a lot? The average person speaks about 16,000 words a day, about 1,400 of which are, on average, first-person singular pronouns, Mehl said. Those prone to distress may say "I, me and my" up to 2,000 times a day.

Researchers also looked at whether gender and communication context affected the relationship between I-talk and negative emotionality. They found that gender does not play an important role but communication context does.

"If you are speaking in a personal context—so you're speaking about something that's of relevance to you, like a recent breakup—then we see the relationship between I-talk and negative emotionality emerge," Tackman said. "But if you're communicating in a context that's more impersonal, such as describing a picture, we did not see the relationship emerge."

In addition, the researchers found that the specific type of first-person singular pronoun made a difference. Frequent use of the subjective first-person pronoun "I" and the objective first-person pronoun "me" was

linked to negative emotionality, but frequent use of the first-person possessive pronoun "my" was not. That may be because "my" connects a person to another individual or object on the "outside," effectively taking the "psychological spotlight" off the self, Tackman and Mehl said.

To better understand why I-talk may indicate distress, researchers suggest thinking back to your last "woe-as-me" moment.

"We've all gone through negative life events when we're feeling down or we're feeling anxious, and when you think back to being in those places, when you're just so focused on yourself, you may say things like 'Why can't I get better?'" Tackman said. "You're so focused on yourself that not only in your head are you using these first-person singular pronouns but when you're talking to other people or writing, it spills into your language—the self-focus that negative affectivity brings about."

The relationship between I-talk and negative emotionality, while present, is relatively small. However, researchers found that it's not that much smaller than the relationship between negative emotionality and negative emotion words, such as "sad," "unhappy," "hate" and "dislike"—which are key linguistic markers for traits such as depression. That indicates that the relationship between I-talk and negative emotionality is a meaningful one.

As Mehl says, regarding the research: "Stress can make you be caught in the metaphorical 'I' of the storm."