No, it's not weird to talk to yourself. Mental health experts point to pandemic, unrest as possible reasons

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As the coronavirus pandemic continues to keep much of the population in their homes for most of the day, it's taking a toll on our collective mental health.

In Baltimore, calls to the city's crisis hotline have doubled during the pandemic and Sheppard Pratt Health System, one of the nation's leading mental health care providers, has created a virtual walk-in clinic to help meet the demand for services.

But perhaps you've been able to handle it pretty well by yourself, albeit maybe with a few more conversations with your dog or your house plants.

Talking to yourself—referred to by mental health workers as 'self-talk,' an inner monologue vocalized either internally or externally—can be simply speaking out loud about a pending task or talking to the family pet a little more than usual.

Experts say it's common and that, with the added stressors of a pandemic alongside protests over police brutality and race relations in America, self-talk can be a way to feel control in a world that offers individuals very little.

"It starts in many ways … with the coronavirus itself," said Anita Wells, an associate professor of psychology at Morgan State University.

"We have this understanding of it as a living entity … this idea that we're in a battle with it, something we can't let win," she continued.

It might be why you find yourself speaking to your dogs or your plants, she said, because it can give people a brief tangible sense of agency they can't otherwise get.

"This sense of humanizing nonhuman things can help people feel a sense of control," she said, adding that she sees self-talk as a form of self-care where people "exercise that control over the things where we have it."

Take Alexander Freeman, a 21-year-old senior at Morgan State University and the president of the university's Student Government Association.

He said that while he was used to talking to himself through tasks prior to the pandemic moving classes online, he's noticed an increase of talking to himself in recent months while washing the dishes or completing school assignments.

And he said, as his workload has changed and increased during the pandemic, he'll talk to himself to keep his spirits up.

"I'll say 'You know, Alex, you can get through this ... You can knock this semester out,'" he said.

Mary Hodorowicz, a clinical assistant professor of psychology at the University of Maryland, said that speaking your goals out loud can help some people better actualize them.

"The more somebody talks about healthy change, the more likely they are to do it. As humans, we really need to think out loud a lot," she said.

Talking to yourself can also help you concentrate on the task at hand, she added, saying, "Even I might be like 'I need to go switch the laundry.'"

"Sometimes, hearing ourselves saying something is helpful in choosing the next thing," she said.

However, if you find yourself having conversations with people who aren't there or with a negative outlook, mental health professionals are available to help you.

Freeman said he started doubting himself while confined to his

apartment, struggling to adjust to an increasingly virtual environment while continuing his senior studies.

"Sometimes, it feels like I'm trying to run through a maze and at the end of this maze is going back to regular [life]," he said. "At first, I was really stuck on 'What do I do?'"

But he said he's been better able to handle the stress after speaking with the school's Counseling Center and taking a monthlong break from social media. The university now has a mental health task force and the Student Government Association is working with other historically Black colleges or universities to address the issues of isolation on a larger scale, Freeman said.

"You wake up and your school, your work and your living environment are in the same place," he said, adding it made his apartment feel more like a prison than a place to stay safe.

"You have to be able to break these things out ... otherwise, they start to blend together," he said.

Wells said if you start to notice yourself struggling to maintain relationships with friends and family while retreating more into conversations with yourself then you may want to seek out a mental health professional.

While Wells said it's "really a natural response" to converse with inanimate objects and pets, she added it's still important for people to value regular human interaction and retreating from that in favor of self-talk could be emblematic of a larger issue.

Hodorowicz said people should also try to stay aware of what they're talking to themselves about, especially if it involves potential self-harm

or feelings of despair.

"When someone asks 'How are you?' if you don't know how to respond ... that's a concern," Hodorowicz said. "What are you saying to yourself and are you listening to yourself?"

She added she's concerned about the extent to which people are taking illicit substances to combat the feelings of loneliness or depression, given Maryland's increase in opioid-related overdose deaths compared to last year.

The two said they've been encouraged by how the conversation around mental health has changed nationally and on social media, with more prominent figures such as Chrissy Teigen and Michelle Obama being open about their struggles with depression and anxiety during the pandemic.

But they also stressed that it's still key to seek out and nurture healthy relationships during the pandemic, even if it's for someone else more than yourself.

"We tend to only think about it when someone is in a crisis moment," Wells said. "How do we look at it from a preventative standpoint in the same way we look at physical wellness?"

"If you have the capacity, make sure to check in on those you care about and maybe even those you don't care about but are in your circle," Hodorowicz said.

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