

# UW-Madison: That little voice in your head may be aligning your thoughts

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MADISON – It's not uncommon these days to have some time alone with your thoughts. But what does that sound like, if it sounds like anything at all?

Many people feel their thoughts take the form of an inner voice, a sort of conversation with themselves in their mind, according to a new questionnaire on inner voices developed by University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers. Others discover (often through the internet) this way of experiencing thoughts, and are thoroughly confused by the idea.

"It's much easier to see physical differences, that someone can jump higher than you, or run faster," says Gary Lupyan, a UW-Madison psychology professor who studies language and cognition. "But the masked differences – differences in how you perceive something or how you think about something – those are much harder to discover. You sort of have to have people comparing notes."

Variations in the way our minds conjure images and spoken words are a recurring topic for posts on Facebook and Reddit. Software engineer Blake Ross posted to Facebook in 2016 an essay about what he described as "as close to an honest-to-goodness revelation as I will ever live in the flesh. Here it is: You can visualize things in your mind."

Ross wrote that he could not. Not a specific thing like his father's face, or a generalized beach scene. Thousands of comments poured in.

When a Reddit user posted a video about the various ways people describe their thoughts, many commenters expressed confusion. "Sometimes I react to something and say it in my head instead of out loud, but this is not an all-day, everyday

occurrence,” wrote one commenter. “Do I think as patterns? I don’t know what that means ... I’m feeling baffled by all of this.”

Previous questionnaires about inner voices have focused on different questions: say, does an inner voice serve as a method of self-assessment or to provide motivation.

“What we’re looking at is a propensity. How frequently do people report doing these things?” says Hettie Roebuck, a postdoctoral researcher in Lupyan’s lab and coauthor of the Internal Representations Questionnaire, published with its first results this spring in the journal *Behavioral Research Methods*. “This idea of inner speech has not been studied much at all, and our measure provides it in the context of things like visual imagery and orthographic imagery (visualizing text).”

The propensity tilts toward voice-hearers.

STORY CONTINUES AT <https://news.wisc.edu/that-little-voice-in-your-head-if-you--have-it-may-be-aligning-your-thoughts/>