



You aren't the problem – The Problem is the problem

What would you say, at this very moment, is The Problem that interferes with you having a better life? If it's impacting your mental health, a technique called externalization can help you separate your problem from yourself and help you approach a possible solution.

Hacking your problem in a different way

The first thing for you to do is drill down on The Problem and get to know it. You need to treat this examination of The Problem as if you are getting a master's degree in it. What are its main symptoms or features? Problems don't like you to study them in such a deserving way – they prefer that their fundamental nature (and their sneaky tricks) remain outside of our awareness.

Make a list of the main features of your problem. Remember that all problems manifest symptoms, and yours may differ from other people with the same problem.

Make a list of The Problem's negative influences in your life. Consider all the dimensions of your life where it could have an influence – behaviourally, cognitively, physically, emotionally, relationally and spiritually. You may also find you have one big Problem being fed by a myriad of other little Problems. You must decide which is the primary problem needing defeat.

Once you have nailed down your problem's main features, consider The Problem as if it was separate from yourself – as though it was a bad character that has made you its prisoner. This is called externalizing.

Give your problem a new name. This could be a nasty character from a book or movie you have seen. It sometimes helps to give the problem a funny name that disempowers its voice.

I sometimes ask people to try drawing a picture of The Problem – this helps you to increase your separation from it and gives you even more room to consider its scheming against you. If you find it hard to give The Problem a funny name, put a definite article in front of it when speaking or thinking about it. So, your dialogue when speaking about it takes the shape of The Anxiety or The Depression or The Bipolar Illness. In this way, you objectify it and you increase your separation from it. This is a better approach than saying My Anxiety or My Depression or My Bipolar Illness, which reinforces your connection to the problem.



Here are a few examples of externalizing questions you can ask yourself about The Problem.

1. Is The Problem a big part of your life?
2. How long have you been noticing this character interfering with you?
3. What are the main effects of The Problem on your life – especially in regard to how it gets you to behave? How does it influence your thinking? Does it get into your relationships and in what way? How does it make you feel emotionally, physically, spiritually?
4. Does The Problem also affect your partner or your children's lives? What are the obvious effects on them?
5. When are you most vulnerable to The Problem's influence?
6. Describe exactly how you would like things to be without The Problem.
7. What steps could you take to overcome The Problem?

How asking questions can change things

What impact has answering the above questions had on your perception of The Problem? Were you able to see yourself as separate from it? Were you able to give The Problem a funny name so that you could disempower its voice?

Did you discover ways that you have outwitted The Problem in the past and perhaps got some ideas about that for the future? Did asking those questions about The Problem provide any ideas about who could help you develop strategies to outwit it in the future?

Many problems convince their victims that they are hard-wired into their brains. A Problem can get into your life so completely that it will persuade you that relative to other people, you are flawed. Convincing people that they are fundamentally flawed is a major strategy of all problems – if it hooks you, its goal will be to lead you to conclude that resistance is futile. The fact is, that no matter The Problem,

even if it has physiological origins – it can still be externalized, and you can do things to take charge of it.

Once you see the problem as separate from your identity, you can take new action against it, instead of engaging in that unproductive conflict of fighting with yourself. Now, it becomes clearer that you have a relationship with The Problem and you become more able to perceive yourself as doing battle with a malicious, slippery trickster that wants to confound your life.

As you go forward opposing The Problem in your life, be patient with yourself, have compassion for yourself and apply that gentle persistence that ultimately will resist the gravitational pull of The Problem's influence.

– George MacDonald
M.A. (Psychology), Canadian Certified Counsellor (CCC)

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