Externalizing the Problem

Emotions: You Are Not the Problem

Externalizing the problem means talking about a problem as something outside of you, instead of as part of who you are. Family therapists Michael White and David Epston made it a central part of narrative therapy. In his early work with children who soiled, White named the problem "Sneaky Poo," so the child and parents could team up against it. This worksheet goes deeper into that one step, and our narrative therapy worksheet covers the whole approach.

1 Change the words

Listen to how you talk about the problem. Words like *"I am"* make it sound like part of you. Try describing it as something that visits you, talks to you, or pushes you around.

Instead of this	Try this
I'm an anxious person.	*Anxiety tells me something will go wrong, and it tries to keep me at home.*
I'm so lazy.	*Putting-It-Off talks me into waiting until tomorrow.*
I'm just an angry person.	*Anger grabs the wheel when I am tired and hungry.*

Something I often say about myself:

The same thing, said about the problem instead:

Why does this work? *When a problem seems to be part of who you are, it is easy to feel ashamed and stuck. Talking about it as separate from you gives you room to see how it works. White and Epston wrote that it also cuts down on blame, so the people around you can join you against the problem instead of arguing about whose fault it is.*

2 Who has more influence?

White called this relative influence questioning. First, list how the problem affects your life. Then list how you affect the problem's life, even in small ways.

How the problem pushes me around	How I push back on the problem

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Interview the problem

Therapists Sallyann Roth and David Epston described an exercise in which one person plays the problem and answers questions about how it works. Try it on paper, answering as the problem talking about you.

Example: "I am Worry. I tell Sam that everyone at the party will think she is boring, so she should stay home."

Ask the problem	The problem's answer
What tricks do you use to get your way?	
When and where are you strongest?	
Who or what helps you out?	
What are your plans for me?	
What are you afraid I will find out?	

4 Build your team

Think about who has been in charge lately, you or the problem. Where are you right now?

Who is in charge?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The problem is the boss *I am the boss*

In White's work, family members often teamed up against the problem. Who or what could join my team?

One way I will outsmart the problem this week:

Talking about a problem as separate from you does not mean blaming it for everything you do. It gives you room to choose how you respond to it. A therapist trained in narrative therapy can help you take these conversations further.

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