ADVICE & PERSPECTIVE

Why it’s easier to solve other people’s problems than your own.

By Jude Monte Updated October 8, 2026
Former Chief Marketing & Experience Officer

THE PSYCHOLOGY AT WORK

Framing changes judgment, even when nobody is selling us anything. Research on self-distancing suggests that stepping outside our own point of view can help us reason about a personal problem. This is a look at the psychology persuasion can draw on—not a claim that every difficult decision has a marketing tactic behind it.

I am exceptionally good at solving other people’s problems. Yours, for example.

I can see immediately that you should leave the job. Stop texting him. Charge more. Say no. Say yes. Buy the house. Don’t buy the house. Have the conversation. Cancel the dinner.

Your situation, from over here, is remarkably straightforward.

Mine is considerably more nuanced.

Mine has history. Competing considerations. Seventeen possible outcomes, six people whose feelings need to be considered and one highly improbable scenario that somehow receives more attention than the plausible ones combined.

I can spend three weeks analyzing a decision I would solve for you before the waiter brought our drinks.

I had always assumed this was some combination of hypocrisy and being annoying.

Psychologists have a more flattering name for it: Solomon’s paradox.

The name comes from King Solomon, famous for dispensing extraordinarily wise judgments to other people while making some fairly questionable decisions in his own life.

Which is comforting. This problem has excellent pedigree.

Solomon’s paradox, tested

Psychologists Igor Grossmann and Ethan Kross decided to test whether people really do reason better about someone else’s problems than their own. Across three experiments involving 693 participants, they gave people variations of a deeply unpleasant relationship problem: infidelity.

Some participants imagined discovering that their own partner had been unfaithful. Others imagined that a close friend’s partner had been unfaithful.

Then the researchers looked at how people reasoned about what should happen next.

And by “wise reasoning,” the researchers did not mean IQ or knowing the correct answer. They looked for things such as recognizing that you might not know everything, considering another person’s perspective, acknowledging that circumstances can change and searching for compromise.

People thinking about someone else’s relationship problem did better.

Of course they did.

> Your cheating boyfriend is a data point.

> Mine apparently requires a congressional inquiry.

The director’s commentary

But the interesting part of Solomon’s paradox is not simply that we can be spectacularly clear-eyed about someone else’s mess. It is what changes when the mess is ours.

When the problem belongs to someone else, I get the facts.

When the problem belongs to me, I get the facts plus the director’s commentary.

I know what happened three years ago. I know what she meant by that sentence. I know what this decision might say about me. I know who will be disappointed. I know the version of events I am hoping turns out to be true. I know the one possibility that is objectively unlikely but emotionally undefeated.

This is useful information.

It is also a lot of information.

We are not evaluating a clean little decision tree. We are evaluating the decision tree while sitting in one of its branches.

Someone else's problem comes without quite so much emotional furniture.

Move the camera

Grossmann and Kross suspected that this difference in perspective—what psychologists call self-distancing—might explain part of the gap.

So they changed the camera angle.

Instead of asking people to reason about their own relationship problem while fully immersed in it, they prompted them to imagine looking at the situation from an outside observer's perspective.

And the self-other gap disappeared.

> Same person. Same brain. Same problem.

> Different seat in the theater.

The participants had not suddenly become smarter. They had created enough distance to reason more like the people who had been considering someone else's problem.

That is what makes the finding useful rather than merely amusing. If distance is part of the reason we are better at other people's problems, perhaps we can manufacture a little distance from our own.

Change the grammar

Which leads to one of psychology's stranger practical suggestions:

> Talk to yourself like you are someone else.

> Not in a concerning way.

> Just grammatically.

Instead of asking, “What am I going to do?” try asking, “What should Jude do?”

It sounds almost insultingly small.

But researchers have tested this too.

Across seven studies involving 585 participants, Ethan Kross and colleagues examined what happened when people used their own names or non-first-person pronouns while thinking about stressful experiences. That small linguistic shift increased psychological distance. Under stress, people using distanced self-talk experienced less distress and were judged to perform better.

Apparently changing the pronoun can change the view.

It may be trainable

And this does not appear to be useful only as a five-minute mental trick.

Researchers later tested a more sustained version of the idea. In two preregistered longitudinal experiments involving 555 people, participants practiced reflecting on difficult experiences from a third-person perspective over time.

The people practicing distanced reflection subsequently showed greater wise reasoning about interpersonal challenges.

Again, that does not mean they became more intelligent.

They became better able to use the intelligence they already had while thinking about something personal.

Which raises an uncomfortable possibility.

Sometimes we don’t need more information. We don’t need another podcast, another book, another pros-and-cons list or four more people telling us what they think.

We may already possess perfectly decent advice.

We just can’t hear it very well while standing this close to the problem.

The part I recognize

I recognize this constantly.

A friend tells me something she has been worrying about for months and, within five minutes, I can see the shape of it.

Not because I am smarter than she is.

Because I am not afraid of her consequences.

I am not carrying her history. I am not trying to protect the version of events I secretly want to be true. I am not rehearsing what everyone will say if the decision goes badly.

Distance removes information, which sounds like a disadvantage. Sometimes it absolutely is.

But it also removes noise.

And that may explain one of life’s more irritating experiences: the advice we give other people is often suspiciously applicable to ourselves.

The test

So I have started trying a very simple test when I find myself circling a problem.

Not “What should I do?”

But:

> If someone I loved
> came to me with
> exactly this situation,
> what would I tell
> her?

> Same facts. Same problem. Different camera angle.

Usually, an answer appears remarkably quickly.

That does not mean I automatically follow it.

Emotion contains information. Personal context matters. Psychological distance does not make every decision better, and none of this research suggests outsourcing your life to an imaginary third person. Sometimes the details only you know really should change the answer.

The useful point is narrower.

Being close to a problem can change the way we reason about it. And sometimes creating a little distance lets us see what we already know.

So perhaps I am not actually smarter about your life than you are.

I am simply less entangled in it.

Which is annoying, because I was enjoying the first explanation.

But it also means that when I cannot see my own problem clearly, I may not need a new brain, another opinion or three more days of analysis.

Sometimes I just need to borrow the distance I already have when the problem belongs to someone else.

> Same facts. Different chair.

> And occasionally, the smartest thing I can do is move mine.

SOURCES + METHODOLOGY

This article draws on experimental and longitudinal research into Solomon's paradox, self-distancing, wise reasoning and third-person self-talk.

In this literature, "wise reasoning" does not mean intelligence or an objectively correct decision. Researchers operationalize it through characteristics including intellectual humility, recognition of uncertainty and change, consideration of multiple perspectives and attempts to integrate competing viewpoints.

The research does not establish that psychological distance improves every decision, that emotion should be removed from judgment, or that third-person self-talk supplies the correct answer. Personal context and emotion can contain important information. The narrower finding is that psychological distance can change how people reason about personally meaningful situations and can reduce the self-other asymmetry demonstrated in Solomon's paradox.

Grossmann, I., & Kross, E. (2014). "Exploring Solomon's Paradox: Self-Distancing Eliminates the Self-Other Asymmetry in Wise Reasoning About Close

Relationships in Younger and Older Adults.” Psychological Science, 25(8), 1571–1580. Three experiments; total N=693. DOI: 10.1177/0956797614535400.

Kross, E., et al. (2014). “Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: how you do it matters.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106(2), 304–324. Seven studies; total N=585. DOI: 10.1037/a0035173.

Grossmann, I., et al. (2021). “Training for Wisdom: The Distanced-Self-Reflection Diary Method.” Psychological Science, 32(3), 381–394. Two preregistered longitudinal experiments; total N=555. DOI: 10.1177/0956797620969170.

Kross, E., & Grossmann, I. (2012). “Boosting Wisdom: Distance From the Self Enhances Wise Reasoning, Attitudes, and Behavior.” Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 141(1), 43–48. DOI: 10.1037/a0024158.