

Why Am I So Much Smarter About Your Problems?

Why I can fix your life in five minutes and mine in six weeks.

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<https://driftednorth.com/articles/smarter-about-your-problems/>

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 nevertheless deserves approximately 40 percent of my attention.

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 hypocrisy with better timing.

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 requires a congressional inquiry.

The director's commentary

But the interesting part of Solomon's paradox isn't simply that we can be spectacularly clear-eyed about someone else's mess.

It is why.

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.

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.

THE PRACTICAL TEST

Change the grammar.

Which leads to one of psychology's stranger practical suggestions: talk to yourself like you are someone else.

"What am I going to do?"

"What should Jude do?"

Not in a concerning way. Just grammatically. It sounds almost insultingly small, but researchers have tested it.

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.

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

A friend tells me something she has worried about for months, and within five minutes I can see its shape - not because I am smarter, but because I am not afraid of her consequences. I am not carrying her history, protecting the version of events I secretly want to be true, or rehearsing what everyone will say if the decision goes badly. Distance removes information, which can be a disadvantage. 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:

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.

TRY THIS BEFORE ASKING ONE MORE PERSON

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 rather spoils 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.

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 .

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