

Need to Solve a Personal Problem? Try a Third-Person Perspective

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Why is it that when other people ask for advice about a problem, we always seem to have sage words at the ready, but when we ourselves face a similar situation, we feel stumped about what to do?

In a 2014 *Psychological Science* article, researchers Igor Grossmann (University of Waterloo) and APS Fellow Ethan Kross (University of Michigan) suggested that people's tendency to reason more wisely about others' social problems than they do about their own is a common habit — one they referred to as Solomon's Paradox. In a series of studies, the researchers not only found evidence of Solomon's Paradox, but also identified a way that this reasoning bias can be eliminated.

The researchers began by confirming whether people are wiser when considering another's problems than they are when considering their own problems. Participants in a long-term relationship imagined either a situation in which their partner had cheated on them or a situation in which their best friend's romantic partner had cheated on their friend. After imagining the specified scenario, participants completed several questions aimed at measuring aspects of wise reasoning — such as recognizing the limits of their knowledge, considering others' perspectives, and searching for a compromise. In support of Solomon's Paradox, participants who imagined the scenario in which their friend had been cheated on scored higher on measures of wise reasoning than participants who imagined that they themselves had been cheated on.

This first study confirmed that people were wiser when they reasoned about someone else's problem compared with when they reasoned about their own challenges. Could prompting people to distance themselves from their own problem and consider it in the same way they would a friend's problem increase wise reasoning?

To test this question, the researchers had a new set of participants imagine the romantic relationship dilemma from the first experiment, in which their partner (or best friend's partner) cheated on them (or their best friend); however, this time participants were prompted to take a first-person or a third-person

perspective when reflecting on their own or their friend's experience. Participants considering their own romantic problem from a third person-perspective scored higher in wise reasoning than those considering their own problem from a first-person perspective. Stepping back from their own problems, psychologically speaking, led them to reason more wisely — to think more like they would if they were giving their friends advice.

The researchers found this pattern of results held for people of different age groups when, in a third study, older adults (ages 60–80) and younger adults (ages 20–40) showed the same pattern of bias in wise reasoning and showed similar benefits from self-distancing (i.e., taking a third-person perspective) when considering a personal problem.

This research tells us that, regardless of age, people are more likely to think wisely when considering a close friend's problems than when considering their own problems — but that a self-distancing strategy can eliminate this bias. So the next time you find yourself dealing with a personal dilemma, maximize your wise reasoning skills by taking a step back and thinking about your problem the way an outsider would.