

How to give ourselves advice as good as we give others

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ANN ARBOR—Most of us find it easier to be wise about other people's problems than our own. But a new study identifies a simple way to close this gap.

The research, conducted by social psychologists Igor Grossmann at the University of Waterloo in Ontario and Ethan Kross at the University of Michigan, shows that the solution is self-distancing—considering your problems from the perspective of an observer. The study appears in the current issue of Psychological Science.

Grossmann and Kross asked study participants to reflect on a relationship conflict of their own or someone else's, such as a spouse's infidelity with a close friend. Participants were asked to think about this problem in the first-person and in the third-person, and offer advice on how to address the problem.

According to Grossmann, the results clearly show that when people think about problems in the first-person, people are wiser when reasoning about others' problems than their own, a bias that the researchers term "Solomon's Paradox," after the Old Testament king who was known for his wisdom but who still failed at making personal decisions.

The current study builds on earlier research by Kross and others on the impact that self-talk has on self-control. In one recent study, for example, Kross and colleagues found that people who talked to themselves as if they were another person reported less shame and worry than those who talked to themselves using the first-person pronoun. They were also more confident, less nervous and more persuasive.

"When people self-distance, they are capable of reasoning as wisely about their own interpersonal problems as about the problems of others," said Kross, associate professor of psychology and a faculty associate at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

Self-distancing is straightforward to do, Kross and Grossmann say.

"We simply asked our participants to use their own name and other non-first-person pronouns such as "you" when thinking about themselves," Kross said. "Instead of saying, 'Why am I feeling this way?' you adopt a distanced perspective by asking yourself, 'Why are you feeling this way?'"

Grossmann and Kross also examined how age affects people's ability to make wise decisions.

"The belief that with age comes wisdom is not true when it comes to reasoning about our own personal problems," Kross said. "Older people may be wiser in giving advice to others, but not necessarily in deciding what to do themselves. But if they adopt self-distancing techniques, they can be as effective as younger people in closing this wisdom gap."

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