

Writing In Third Person Helps Stressed People Understand Their Circumstances More Wisely

By [Anthony Rivas](#) | Jun 10, 2014 01:20 PM EDT

Step into your local bookstore and you'll probably find dozens of journals, with themes ranging from Ryan Gosling to Celtic imagery to grumpy cats. Why are there so many? It could just be that book publishers are cranking out journal after journal in an attempt to attract new writers. Or it could be that many Americans are trying to [deal with their stress](#) and are resorting to writing about it in journals. While this is already a good step in finding inner-peace, a new study finds that people who write in journals about stress may reap even better benefits by writing in the third-person.

Researchers from the University of Waterloo in Canada and the University of Michigan were interested in how people dealt with relationship issues when they wrote about their problems in a journal. They wanted to see if writing about a problem in third-person could produce the same kind of alternate perspectives as talking among friends. The issue: a cheating partner.

The study involved groups of younger adults aged 20 to 40 and older adults, ages 60 to 80, all of whom reported being in monogamous relationships. They were asked to consider a situation in which themselves or a close friend found out a partner was cheating. While they thought about it, they answered questions meant to assess how well they could detach themselves from the situation, and rationalize wisely. This included their ability to find a good compromise, consider the perspectives of others, understand that they only know so much about the scenario, and determine the various consequences that come with any subsequent actions, [Psych Central](#) reported.

Participants who answered questions about a friend's cheating partner were more likely to have wise responses than those who had to answer based on their own partner's hypothetical cheating.

A second experiment had the participants write about the situation, and hash out possibilities for a solution. They were told to write about the situation either in first-person perspective — where they were the person with a cheating spouse — or in third-person, where they had to write about their friend, using “he” or “she.”

The researchers found that writing about a friend eliminated any emotional bias that came with a cheating partner. Participants were able to rationalize the situation because their own feelings toward the situation were detached.

“These results are the first to demonstrate a new type of bias within ourselves when it comes to wise reasoning about an interpersonal relationship dilemma,” said psychology professor and study author Dr. Igor Grossmann, in a [press release](#). “We call this bias Solomon's Paradox, after the king who was known for his wisdom, but who still failed at making personal decisions.”

The findings held not only for the younger, presumably inexperienced-in-relationships adults, but also for the older adults. Grossmann and his team said that anyone who is trying to understand a personal problem might want to try writing about it as if it's their friend's problem. Naturally, this may take some practice, but for those who desperately want to understand a situation, it may help with charting all the circumstances, and bringing new insight.

The study will appear in an upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*.