

Feeling Trapped In A Life Conflict? Why "Leaving" It Helps

[PT psychologytoday.com/blog/the-new-resilience/201409/feeling-trapped-in-life-conflict-why-leaving-it-helps](http://psychologytoday.com/blog/the-new-resilience/201409/feeling-trapped-in-life-conflict-why-leaving-it-helps)

It's easy to become rigidly fixed and sclerosed within a view of who you are ("This is just the way I am") — unable to envision possibilities for expanding your personal capacities, thinking, and emotions, outside of that fixed view. Unfortunately, that disables you from enlarging your perspective, which is necessary to solve conflicts or problems that you feel stuck inside of; unable to change or alter.

President Eisenhower [reportedly said](#) that if you're having difficulty [understanding](#) a problem and how to solve it, "enlarge" the problem. And that applies to life beyond the battlefield. That is, "enlarging" how you envision the problem or situation you're stuck within can free yourself from the limitations of the perspective that imprisons you to begin with.

Some new empirical research demonstrates this. It shows that, in effect, distancing yourself from a problem or conflict enhances your reasoning, and helps you find new solutions through a broadened perspective. That provides greater [wisdom](#) to bring to bear on the conflict. Researchers from the University of Waterloo and the University of Michigan, reported in [Psychological Science](#), examined the ability to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge, search for a compromise, consider the perspectives of others, and recognize the possible ways in which the scenario could unfold. The research found that you may think about a conflict more wisely if you consider it as an outside observer would.

"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," says study author Igor Grossmann of the University of Waterloo. "We call the bias Solomon's Paradox, after the king who was known for his wisdom, but who still failed at making personal decisions."

In the experiments, Grossmann and Ethan Kross from the University of Michigan asked participants who reported being in monogamous [romantic relationships](#) to vividly imagine a scenario in which either their partner or a friend's partner had been unfaithful. Then, they were asked to answer a set of questions about the scenario. The results indicated that participants who were asked to reason about a friend's relationship conflict made wiser responses than those who were asked to reason about their own relationship conflict.

The results from a second experiment supported those from the first: Participants who thought about their own relationship conflict from a first-person perspective showed less wise reasoning than those who thought about a friend's relationship conflict. But taking an outsider's perspective seemed to eliminate this bias: Participants who thought about their own relationship conflict through a friend's eyes were just as wise as those who thought about a friend's conflict.

According to the researchers, these findings suggest that distancing oneself from a personal problem by approaching it as an outsider may be the key to wise reasoning. "We are the first to demonstrate that there is a simple way to eliminate this bias in reasoning by talking about ourselves in the third person and using our name when reflecting on a relationship conflict," said Professor Grossmann. "When we employ this strategy, we are more likely to think wisely about an issue."

I think this kind of research is useful, because it provides empirical underpinning to a psychological perspective emphasized in Eastern traditions in particular: that our conflicts in life reflect the limitations of our view of who we are — the "self" we have learned to define ourselves by — and the narrow perspective it encases us within. Stepping "outside" of ourselves expands our view of what we're capable of; our thinking and our emotional awareness. It broadens our view and understanding of reality. And that's a step towards greater wisdom.

dlabier@CenterProgressive.org

[Center for Progressive Development](#)

Blog: [Progressive Impact](#)

© 2014 Douglas LaBier