

Externalizing the Problem: Am I the Problem, or Living With It?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Externalization: you are with the problem... you are separate from the problem* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains how a small change in language separates us from a problem so we can look at it from a different perspective. Search “externalization” on the site to find it.

It is easier to change a problem that is not rigidly attached to our identity. “I am an anxious person” leaves only one thing to change, ourselves. “I am a person who carries anxiety” leaves room to change our relationship with the anxiety. This is differentiation in practice: anchoring in the observer instead of fusing with a thought, a feeling, or a label. Choose two or three labels that have been loud lately. A few words per space is enough.

STEP ONE Labels and verdicts	Write the “I am” labels we carry, and this week’s “so I’m” verdicts. Let them contradict each other. Smart and stupid can both show up in the same week.
STEP TWO Add a verb or a preposition	Rewrite each label: “I am depressed” becomes “I am living with depression.” Then rate how solvable each version feels. Word choice affects perception, and perception affects emotion.
STEP THREE Name the problem	Give the problem a name and a start date. Notice when it is louder and when it is quieter. A label says the problem is always here; the quieter times show it is not. <i>When was this problem with me less, or not at all?</i> <i>How did it protect me when I was not safe enough to choose differently?</i>
STEP FOUR Alive or inherited	Some labels are ours and alive. Some were handed to us. We ask of each: if this stopped being true, would I still be me? Then we name what we still own. Separating from a problem leaves our choices with us.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: SMART AND STUPID

THE VERDICTS	I built a fire on a flagstone and it exploded. So, I’m stupid. Later I diagnosed and fixed my broken oven. So, I’m really smart.
MORE VERDICTS	Telling you about myself to help you grow: so, I’m generous and humble. I also benefit from it: so, I’m selfish and arrogant.
REWRITTEN	I notice “stupid” moving through me after the fire. I notice “smart” after the oven.
THE OBSERVER	I am the observer and the observed. That feels more free and easy than being smart and stupid.
WHAT I STILL OWN	I can listen to that part of me, and I don’t have to obey.

ADDING A VERB OR A PREPOSITION

OVER-IDENTIFIED	I am an anxious person. I’m a bad parent. I am unhappy.
EXTERNALIZED	I am a person who carries anxiety. I am a person with underdeveloped parenting techniques. I am a person who notices unhappiness in my life.

Labels, verdicts, and rewrites

Write them as they sound inside. Contradictions are welcome.

STEP ONE

What I call myself

The "I am" labels I carry, and this week's verdicts after something went well or badly.

I AM ...

THIS WEEK: SO I'M ...

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

STEP TWO

Rewrite with a
verb or
preposition

I am living with _____. I am a person who carries _____. I notice _____ moving through me.

THE LABEL

THE REWRITE

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

HOW SOLVABLE DOES IT FEEL?

Rate each version for one label: 0 is not solvable at all, 10 is very solvable.

The label, as I usually say it

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

The rewrite

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

WHAT CHANGED BETWEEN THE TWO

In the body, in the mood, in what seems possible.

Naming the problem

The problem is with me. It is separate from me.

ITS NAME, AND WHEN IT ARRIVED

A name for the problem, the way we might name weather. Roughly when did it start keeping me company?

LOUDER

When it is loudest

Where, with whom, at what time of day, after what?

QUIETER

When it is quieter,
or absent

The times the problem had less or no impact on my life. What was different?

ITS LOGIC

What it once
protected

How did this problem protect me when I was not safe enough to choose differently? One line is enough.

ALIVE OR INHERITED?

For each label from the first page: if this stopped being true, would I still be me?

LABELS THAT FEEL ALIVE AND MINE:

LABELS THAT FEEL HANDED TO ME:

What I still own

I can listen to this part of me, and I don't have to obey.

THE OBSERVER

Who is noticing?

When the label speaks, who is listening? Describe the part of me that can watch the label without being it.

THE RELATIONSHIP

How I want to relate to it

If I am with this problem rather than the problem itself, what would I like my relationship with it to be?

MY CHOICES

What stays mine

I can listen to this part of me, and I don't have to obey. What will I choose the next time it gets loud?

THE QUIETER TIMES

One I can return to

Which of the quieter times from the last page could I make more room for this week?

A SENTENCE TO CARRY

Something like: "I am a person who notices ____ in my life, and I am more than that."

Externalizing is not a euphemism and it does not excuse harm. It lets us see ourselves as separate from the problem, so we can look at the problem from a different perspective.