Deconstructing a Symptom

> **Read the article first.** This worksheet accompanies *What Does It Mean to Think Systemically?* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which shows how a symptom is produced by the whole system around it, including the parts that never touch the person directly. Search "think systemically" on the site to find it.

The point of this sheet is the looking, not the fix. A presenting problem is the place where a system becomes legible, and the frame we draw around it is usually too narrow to change anything. So the sheet widens the frame on purpose: eleven variables, each with its own section and its own question. There is no symptom that all eleven do not touch, so push into every section, even the ones that seem far away, then rate each one. Solutions come last, and only for the variables that rated highest.

How to use it

Name it. Ask all eleven. Rate each. Then, and only then, look for entry points.

MOVE ONE Name the symptom	Write the problem the way it is being said in the house, not the way a textbook would say it. "We aren't communicating." "He is struggling in school." "She is smoking pot and skipping class."
MOVE TWO Ask all eleven variables	Each variable has its own section and its own question. Answer every one. A variable that seems to have nothing to say usually has something small, and the small things are how we learn to see systemically.
MOVE THREE Rate the influence	Under each section, mark 0 to 10 for how much that variable is influencing the symptom right now. Moving schools might be a 10. Dad's relationship with his own father might be a 3. The curriculum's constructs might be a 1. The number is a perception, not a verdict, and it can change next month.
MOVE FOUR Entry points	Only for the variables rated highest: how could we influence that variable, and how would the influence reach the symptom? Then name the high-rated variables we cannot change, which ask for a boundary or an acceptance instead.

WORKED EXAMPLE ONE: A MARRIAGE

THE SYMPTOM	We aren't communicating.
EMOTION, 9	One of us is grieving.
ENVIRONMENT, 8	Stress at work, carried home every evening.
TRIGGERS, 7	The hard topics are finances and substance use, and each brings up significant emotion.
FAMILY, 6	How each of our families talked, or did not.
ENTRY POINTS	The grief and the work stress first. They reach every conversation we try to have.

WORKED EXAMPLE TWO: A CHILD

THE SYMPTOM	He is struggling in school.
DEVELOPMENT, 10	An eclectic, creative kid asked to sit, listen, and recall.
RESOURCES, 7	How much the arts are encouraged, and where.
COMMUNITY, 5	How well the community holds boundaries around electronic devices.
ENTRY POINTS	A school with freedom within structure. A different school rather than a different child.

William Hambleton Bishop, MA, LPC, LMFT

Move one: the symptom

Write it the way it is being said.

THE SYMPTOM

What is the problem, as it is being named right now? Who is being called the problem?

Move two and three: the eleven variables

Answer every section, then rate its influence from 0 to 10. Nothing is too small to write down.

1. NEAR ENVIRONMENT

What is pressing on this from close by? Work, school, the neighborhood, time, safety, money this month.

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. RECENT CHANGE AND LOSS

What changed in the last year? A move, a separation, a death, a season, a team not made.

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. BODY AND PHYSIOLOGY

Sleep, food, substances, illness, pain. What is the body spending before the day starts?

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. EMOTIONAL STATE

What is being carried? Grief, fear, loneliness, resentment, a loss not yet named.

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The eleven variables, continued

Answer every section, then rate its influence from 0 to 10.

5. TRIGGERS AND TRAUMA

What does this topic bring up for anyone involved? What does the situation resemble?

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. CONSTRUCTS AND BELIEFS

What rules are being applied to this, and by whom? Rules about marriage, parenting, responsibility, gender, success.

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. FAMILY OF ORIGIN

What did the people around this learn about it growing up? Rules, modeling, expectations.

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. THE RELATIONSHIPS AROUND IT

Who regulates whom? Who is carrying what? How do the adults regulate each other?

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The eleven variables, continued

The last three, then a look at where the weight landed.

9. DEVELOPMENTAL FIT

What is being asked of this person, and does it fit how they learn, their stage, and their strengths?

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Peers, what the community holds boundaries around, what leaders and media model. What is encouraged here?

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. RESOURCES AND ACCESS

Finances, services, curriculum, support, time. What is available here, and what is missing?

How much is this variable influencing the symptom? 0 = barely, 10 = it is the main engine 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

WHERE DID THE WEIGHT LAND?

Which three variables rated highest? Which rated near zero, and is that because they are clear or because nobody has looked there yet?

Move four: entry points

Only for the variables rated highest. How could we influence that variable, and how would that influence reach the symptom?

Take the two or three variables with the highest ratings. For each one, write what could change that variable, then what that change would do to the symptom. For instance: the variable is dad's boss. What could change it: dad could quit, or change roles. What that would do to the symptom: dad has more emotional resources for his kid, and the kid absorbs less of dad's stress in the shared house. Some changes are large and some are small. Write both.

HIGHEST RATED	WHAT COULD CHANGE THIS VARIABLE	WHAT THAT CHANGE WOULD DO TO THE SYMPTOM
Variable: _____ Rating: ____		

SECOND	WHAT COULD CHANGE THIS VARIABLE	WHAT THAT CHANGE WOULD DO TO THE SYMPTOM
Variable: _____ Rating: ____		

THIRD	WHAT COULD CHANGE THIS VARIABLE	WHAT THAT CHANGE WOULD DO TO THE SYMPTOM
Variable: _____ Rating: ____		

HIGH-RATED, AND NOT SOMETHING WE CAN CHANGE

Dad cannot change his boss's character. Name the variables like that, and name what boundary or acceptance each one asks of us instead.

WHAT WE ARE ALREADY PUTTING INTO THE SYSTEM

Where are we already helping, and where might we be adding to the symptom without meaning to?