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# Why We Give Great Advice To Others But Can't Take it Ourselves

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We've all had friends in toxic relationships that came to us for advice. As a third-party observer, we generally have a decent perspective from which to give our thoughts. But many of us have also been that friend—the person in the toxic relationship. In those situations, it's much harder to give ourselves good advice. At least, it's much harder to do what we know we should. Why is that? Why are we capable of giving reasonable advice to others but struggle to apply good advice in our own lives?

My colleague Ethan Kross and I ran a series of studies using [Qualtrics](http://www.qualtrics.com/) (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>) to answer that very question. Our research disproved long-standing philosophical claims that wisdom comes solely through age and experience. As it turns out, looking at our own situations from an outsider's perspective can help us channel the wisdom we need to make good choices for ourselves.

## Solomon's Paradox

We chose the term Solomon's Paradox to identify the contradiction between thinking about other people's problems wisely, but failing to do so for ourselves. The Biblical King Solomon, known for his keen intellect and unmatched wisdom in guiding others, failed to apply wisdom in his own life, which ultimately led to the demise of his kingdom.

Our studies show that it wasn't just Solomon who dealt with this problem—many people show some wisdom when considering other people's problems, but when the time comes for them to tap into that wisdom, they fail to act on it themselves.

### **Stepping into someone else's shoes**

To solidify our observation that people reason through other's problems better than their own, we designed a set of experiments to see if there was a way for people to channel their own wisdom and advice. First, we instructed participants, all in long-term relationships, to read stories involving an interpersonal conflict.

Each study participant was randomly assigned to one of two groups. The first was told to envision their own partner admitting to acts of infidelity. The second group was asked to envision a friend's partner admitting to acts of infidelity. We then asked each group questions that measured the extent to which they engaged in the following reasoning processes:

- How interested were they in gathering more information about the infidelity to form a judgment?
- How did they attempt to consider the perspectives of other people involved?
- How many ways did they think the situation may unfold?
- To what extent did they attempt to integrate different opinions in the form of a compromise?

Each of these questions helped us identify if participants were engaging in reasoning that was central to wise judgment and that supported their individual well-being, in addition to the well-being of their relationship.

We found that when people talked about their friends' or peers' conflicts, they were 22% more willing to search for more information about the circumstances of the conflict. When talking about other people's conflicts, individuals were also 31% more likely to look at the situation from multiple perspectives. Perhaps most interesting, they were 15% more willing to

consider a compromise solution to others' problems rather than their own.

So, like Solomon, on average we seem to be better at giving advice than channeling our own. Does this mean we're doomed because we can't call upon our own judiciousness? Not quite.

### Third Person Self-Talk

In a second study, we explored why walking in someone else's shoes helps us make better decisions. We used the same condition from our first study (consider either yours or your friend's partner admitting to infidelity), but we split participants into two subgroups—those who would talk about the infidelity scenario using first-person pronouns (*I, me*), and those who would talk about it using third-person pronouns (*she, hers*). For example, someone discussing his or her own situation would discuss the scenario saying, "I recently discovered that my spouse is having an extramarital affair." Participants discussing their own situation as if it were a friend's would say, "She recently discovered that her spouse was having an extramarital affair."

Once again, we observed Solomon's paradox. Participants using first-person pronouns to discuss their own situation exhibited less ability to recognize the limits of their own knowledge, consider others' perspectives, and search for a compromise. Yet, every other subgroup—those using third-person pronouns, and those using first-person pronouns to discuss a friend's situation—exhibited comparably higher amounts of wise thinking.

It appears that by verbally removing their own personal interests from the scenario, participants were 35% more likely to offer similarly wise, well-reasoned advice to themselves that they would normally give to others.

### Does Age Matter?

After determining that verbal distance helped individuals tap into their own wisdom and reasoning, we wanted to know if age and maturity also contributed to wisdom. Traditionally, old age and wisdom are thought to go hand in hand, but is there actually a connection between age and the ability to reason wisely about one's own problems?

To test this, we ran a third study—conceptually identical to our second study concerning trust betrayal by a close friend—but this time, we split participants into two age groups: 24-40 and 60-75. As in prior studies, we asked



participants to indicate their levels of intellectual humility, consideration of others' perspectives, acknowledgement that the future could unfold in many different ways, and concern for a compromise.

Both age groups demonstrated Solomon's paradox when reflecting on their own scenario using first-person language, but those using first-person pronouns to discuss a friend's scenario showed 13% wiser reasoning—averaged across dimensions of recognition of limits of their own knowledge, consideration of different perspectives and ways the situation may unfold, and willingness to compromise.

Additionally, the two age groups behaved similarly when using third-person language. Both groups were able to eliminate Solomon's Paradox, displaying 7.9% more wisdom when verbally removing their own interests from the scenario as compared to the groups who verbally immersed themselves into the scenario. By splitting the groups this way, we could also measure whether or not older participants reasoned with more wisdom about their personal conflicts. The results showed no difference based on age.

Ultimately, we found that one's ability to reason wisely about personal problems is not a fixed characteristic, nor is it tied to age. It is the situation itself and the perspective we take that dramatically affects how we reason about problems in our lives.

So before you let your emotions run wild, consider taking a walk in someone else's shoes and think about how you would advise someone else handle the same situation. It will offer some perspective to help you give yourself the same good advice you would give to someone else. And that's better for everyone.

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