

# EXTERNALIZING NEGATIVE BEHAVIOR

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One of our favorite parts of Narrative Therapy is that it teaches people the skill of “externalizing the problem.” The idea is to use language that separates the problem from the person’s identity. For example ...

Instead of saying, “I am depressed,” you could say, “I am having a relationship with depression at the moment.”

Then, instead of asking, “How long have you been depressed?” the narrative therapist might ask, “How long has the depression been influencing you?” (Note it is referred to as “the depression.”)

“What does the depression want you to think about yourself?”

“What does the depression want you to do?”

“Can you think of a moment when the depression left you alone for a while?”

The idea is that you are not the problem; the problem is the problem.

Here’s an example of how you might help your child explore their shyness, for instance ...

Instead of saying, “Why are you so shy?” you might ask, “Would you like to talk about what’s going on with the shyness a little bit to see if I can help?”

If your child says, “yes,” you might ask, “What does the shyness tell you when you meet new people?”

“Is there a part of you that wants the shyness to go bother someone else?”

“Are there times when the shyness does leave you alone?”

“What do you want to say to the shyness?”

Again, the idea is to talk about the problem as something outside of your child, not part of your child’s identity.

Here is another example: “You are not insecure; insecurity sometimes tries to get you to think and behave in certain ways, and you are learning to think and behave in different ways.”

Notice that in both examples, you try to get the person to identify a time when they were NOT influenced by the problem.

This is another key concept of narrative therapy: identifying exceptions or times when the part of them that is not the problem prevails.

Noticing that there are times when the problem does not control your life helps drive home the point that you are not the problem. You are having a relationship with it but, it does not have to define you.

It is so important to avoid putting labels on our kids that make certain qualities seem like fixed personality traits.

These labels communicate that your child is a certain way and cannot change. On the other hand, when a child is experiencing shyness, acting on the anger that keeps showing up to harass him, having a relationship with certain emotions, or battling with forgetfulness, there is a possibility of changing their behavior.

Changing behavior is relatively easy. Changing a fix personality trait is not.

A child who is having a relationship with shyness could just as easily blossom into a child who has a relationship with gregariousness—and this is far more likely to happen if the child externalizes the behavior of shyness.

Give it a try. See if you can externalize your children’s behaviors. Instead of calling them “messy,” see if you can say that they are “experimenting with messiness.”

Instead of calling them “distracted,” see if you can say that they are “having a challenge with distraction.”

Instead of calling them “rude,” see if you can say they are “working on not letting rudeness hijack their manners.”

And then make sure to point out the times when they behave in ways that are not dictated by the problem.

“I see that messiness has taken a vacation today. You did a great job of cleaning up your room.”

“You seem to be winning the war with distraction at the moment. Excellent job finishing your homework so quickly.”

“I’m happy to see that you managed to banish rudeness for the entire day. I was very proud of your nice manners at the birthday party.”

These techniques can take some thought, but they are worth the effort.