

## INTRODUCTION

I'm so glad that you have decided to join me here- and I'm looking forward to being useful to you as soon as possible! But before we begin, let's talk a bit about talking.

I guess most of us would agree that some kinds of talk seem more useful to us than other kinds of talk. And because this workbook is about talk that deals with problems, I guess we could say that some kinds of talk make problems seem worse, while some kinds can make problems seem a whole lot better.

What I'd like to introduce you to in this workbook is a kind of talk that many people have found very, very helpful. Of course, because you are reading this workbook, and not talking to me or some other counsellor, this workbook will be useful for teaching or introducing you to a particular kind of 'self-talk'.

Most of us are familiar with the idea of 'self-talk'. That is, the chatter that can fill our own minds. Sometimes this talk is positive- but often it can be negative. Particularly when we are dealing with a situation or problem that is getting in the way of what we'd like to do or how we'd like to feel, then our self-talk can be very circular and self-defeating.

The kind of talk I'll be introducing you to comes from a way of working with people known as 'Narrative Therapy' or 'Narrative Practices', and it has helped thousands of people change their approach to problems and live fuller, richer lives as a result.

I'm so glad you've decided to explore Narrative therapy with me, just a little. This workbook can't do as much as I'd like it to- Narrative therapy is more than anything, a therapy of conversation and of story.

But what I do hope to do is introduce you to one of the most influential practices in Narrative therapy- the practice of "Externalizing the Problem".

Michael White and David Epston, considered to be the co- founders of Narrative therapy, developed this idea when working with children and families on problems that most therapists found 'impossible' to work with. In the process, and in subsequent years, they developed many innovations and ideas that were taken up by helping professionals all over the world.

By introducing you to the practice of "Externalizing the Problem" I hope to share with you what many people have found to be a liberating, energizing new way to think about and deal with the influence of problems and problem labels.

I won't go too much into theory- I want this to be a practical experience! And if you are interested in learning more about Michael White and David Epston, and many of the other wonderful practitioners of this kind of work, you will find links and resources at the end of this workbook.



## HOW TO USE THE WORKBOOK

I've struggled a bit with the best way to put this workbook together, and I'd like to share some of the reasons for that struggle.

You see, one of the main principles of Narrative Therapy is the principle of 'tentativeness'. This means that if you were in my office, listening to me talk, you would get used to an air of 'wondering' or 'curiosity' in the tone of my questions. That is because I really strive to be open to whatever answer you will have to the questions that I put forward.

This goes for any statements that I might make also. The idea is that while we may have some general notions of the way certain things work, we want to recognize that each person has their own experience, their own understanding. There is no "Truth" that will be passed from me to you.

And while we're talking about questions... if we were speaking together, you'd notice that my role seems to be a little more like a 'journalist' and a lot less like an 'advisor'. I believe wholeheartedly in rigorous, professional training, and I regularly reflect on what I read and hear and experience through my ongoing studies as a narrative practitioner- yet it is impossible for me to know what you know about your situation. The usefulness is all in the questions, and where that might take us.

When you combine 'tentativeness' with 'questions' you also get a lot of options. In conversation, I would offer you a choice of questions, and invite you to answer the one that seems most interesting to you.

On the page, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the number of questions, and to feel as if you have to answer all of them!

In a session with me, you would choose which question to answer and that would shape the next question that I ask- together, we would 'co-construct' our conversation, to take the path that seemed most useful to you.

On the page, the best I can do is offer some general directions, a couple of signposts and a compass.

So...

When you are using this workbook please: 1) read the questions and the statements in a 'tentative' tone, with an attitude of openness to whatever answers arise and 2) just follow along the questions that seem most interesting to you- make your own trail.



**ABOUT THE CONTENTS:**

So here is a brief outline of what you can expect in the pages that follow:

**What will you do?** You 'll learn how to separate the person (that's you) from the problems that you want to address.

**Why will you do this?** When the problem is 'inside you' it's easy to feel as if 'changing you' is the only way things will improve. When you see the Problem as 'outside of you' then you can look at the relationship between you and the Problem, and change that **relationship**. Much easier!

**How will you do this?** Three steps: 1. Name the Problem 2. Study the Problems Habits and Effects, 3. Take a Position.

Simple, right?

**What will happen if you do this?** The biggest result will be an increase, maybe even a HUGE increase, in your awareness of the choices that are available to you. More choices, different results.

Let's get started.



## **PART 1: NAME THE PROBLEM**

Here's a story:

*Sarah has a three-year-old girl. Her husband works abroad and she lives in the basement apartment of her parents' house. She complains that she cannot sleep, and is noticing a shorter and shorter fuse with her daughter. In our conversation, she decides that the biggest influence in the situation is "Worries". When I ask her how old "Worries" might be if "Worries" was a person, Sarah says: "age two or three- having "Worries" around is just like having another toddler!" Soon, Sarah is managing "Worries" in a new, creative way-like putting "Worries" in Time-Out, or reading "Worries" a bedtime story of reassurance before putting it to sleep for the night.*

### **Step 1: Name the Problem**

#### **Why bother to "Name the Problem"?**

Narrative therapists base many of their ideas and practices on the idea that Problems are defined, created and maintained through social and cultural standards, instead of being an internally-based flaw of personality. Rather than label a person with a 'problem diagnosis', Narrative therapy invites you to label and get to know the Problem, with all its habits, tricks and purposes. Then, you can relate to it as something that influences you, but is not a 'part' of you.

#### **What is "Naming the Problem"?**

Describing and naming the Problem is the first step in 'externalizing' it- making it separate from you. And, your experience of a Problem will be different than someone else's in some important ways. So, naming and examining the Problem gives it a character and identity that describes something particular about your specific understanding of the Problem in your specific life.

#### **How do you "Name the Problem"?**

Problem names often sound like the names of feelings. Sometimes a Problem name is connected to a particular habit. In my opinion, a feeling or habit becomes a Problem when it starts to interfere with 1) the way you want to live your life and 2) the way you think about yourself or others.

#### **What will happen if you "Name the Problem"?**

When you take this step, you will likely find that you have a less reactive relationship to the Problem, and instead develop a kind of interested and removed curiosity about the Problem and its ways. It is quite possible that you may begin talking back to the Problem in a very different tone. You may start off with a big, umbrella term for the



Problem, and then end up dealing with one aspect or characteristic of it. This often makes taking action feel more possible.



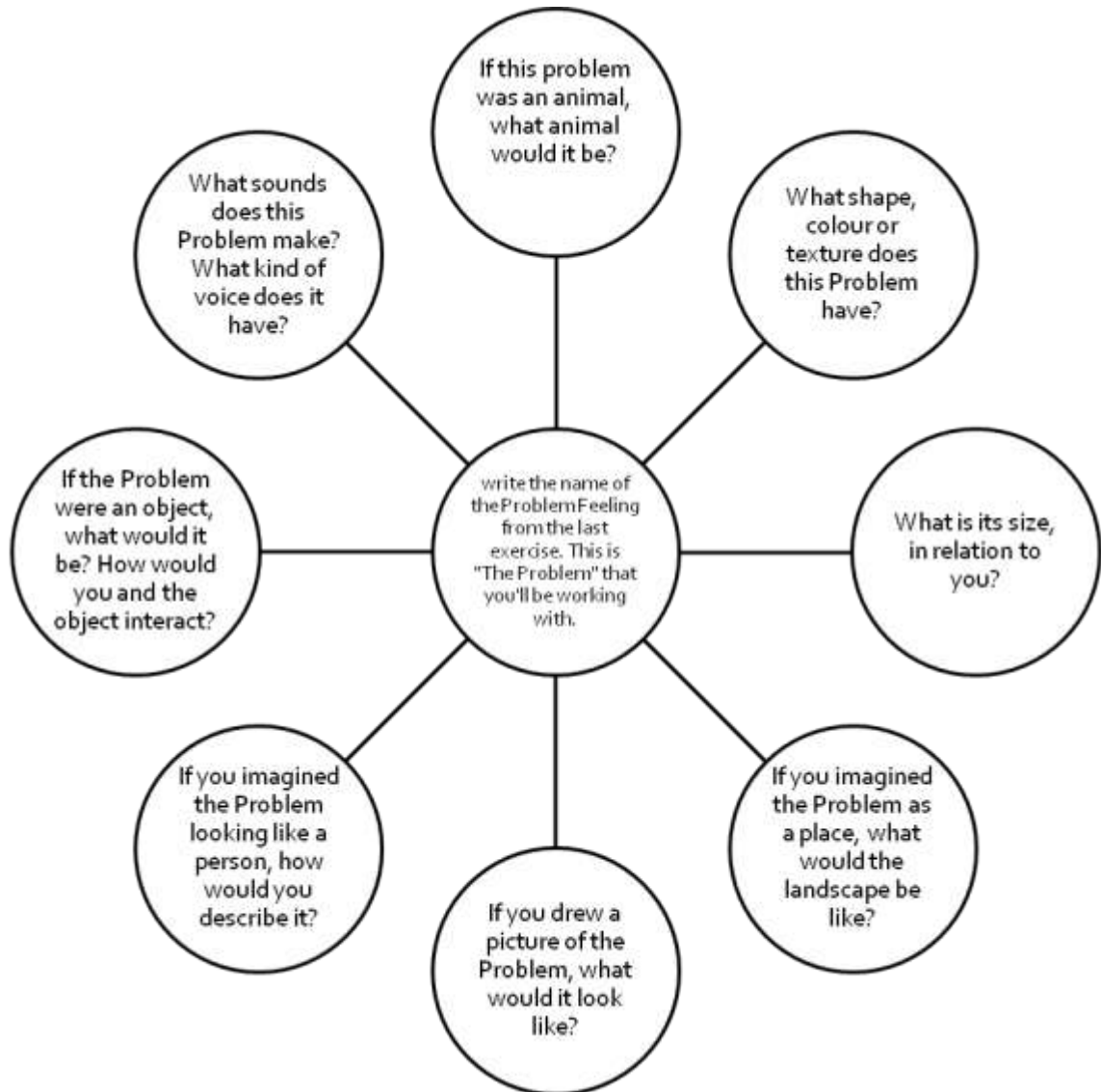
### Exercise #1 for "Naming the Problem"

This exercise will help you identify 'feelings' that have turned into Problems. First, pick a situation that seems to invite Problems into your life. Next, list all the feelings that come up for you in that situation. Finally, give each feeling a score out of 25. A high score means that this feeling has become a Problem. You can choose the highest-scoring feeling to use for the remaining exercises, or you can pick something less intense. You don't have to use the diagram- you can use a list if you prefer.



### Exercise #2 for "Naming the Problem"

This exercise is optional, but many people find it useful as a way to get a real 'picture' of the Problem. As you read the questions below, you may decide to answer in writing, or with drawing, or by making a sculpture with Plastercine! Remember, you don't have to answer all the questions- just pick the ones that interest you most.



## STEP 2: SPY ON THE PROBLEMS' HABITS AND EFFECTS

*A story: Eric is 39 and recently lost his job at a manufacturing plant. He comes to talk about how useless he feels and how hopeless his future looks. Very quickly, Eric decides to call the Problem "Depression"- and when we get some more detail, he further characterizes his experience of "Depression" as "the Uselessness". Eric describes "the Uselessness" as a 'wet blanket that drops onto me, heavy, cold and easy to get tangled up in'. In no time at all, we come up with a list of the speeches that "the Uselessness" makes to Eric ('you'll never get another job, you're too old, you might as well give up). We also discover some of the habits that "the Uselessness" encourages Eric to fall into, and the arguments for these habits that "the Uselessness" makes ('stay in bed- you need your rest; go ahead and eat a second lunch- there is nothing else to do; don't accept that invitation to dinner- what could you possibly talk about?') Once Eric begins to see how "the Uselessness" is 'dampening' his life, he begins to feel a bit indignant. He starts to think about how he can avoid the 'wet blanket' by talking back and taking some different actions.*

### What is "Spying on the Habits and Effects of the Problem?"

It is a process of noticing when and how the Problem moves into action. It involves catching the Problem when it gives routine, repetitive 'speeches', and observing how those 'speeches' affect your thoughts, feelings and actions. And it means getting interested in where the Problem gets its 'ideas'- what social or cultural values and expectations are being expressed via the Problem.

### Why would you "Spy the Habits and Effects of the Problem"?

Part of seeing the Problem as separate from you means seeing certain actions, thoughts and decisions as being influenced by the Problem- rather than as a natural result of an internal personality flaw. This idea is expressed commonly when people say "That's just the Anger talking!" This makes space for action, instead of re-action.

### How can you tell the difference between the Habits of the Problem, and your own habits?

The habits of the Problem are often encouraged by certain social ideas, expectations or rules. Specific people who had authority in your life- teachers, bosses, coaches or family members may have introduced the habits of the Problem into your life. The habits of the Problem usually get in the way of what you would prefer to be doing with your life.

### What may happen if you "Spy on the Habits and Effects of the Problem"?

You may begin to notice the difference between what you want, and what the Problem wants. This can help you decide how you agree or disagree with the Problem's messages and values (which usually reflect social or cultural messages and values).

You may find yourself taking the Problem much less seriously, in the process.



**Exercise #3: Effects of the Problem**

I call the diagram below a 'web diagram'. Lots of folks like using the web diagram because of the visual way that it maps out the effects of the Problem. This web diagram is just a 'starter'. You might want to extend the web, make links between parts of the web, or do more than one, for different situations. When you are finished with this way of tracking the effects of the problem, you might decide to combine your findings into a list, or some other piece of writing.

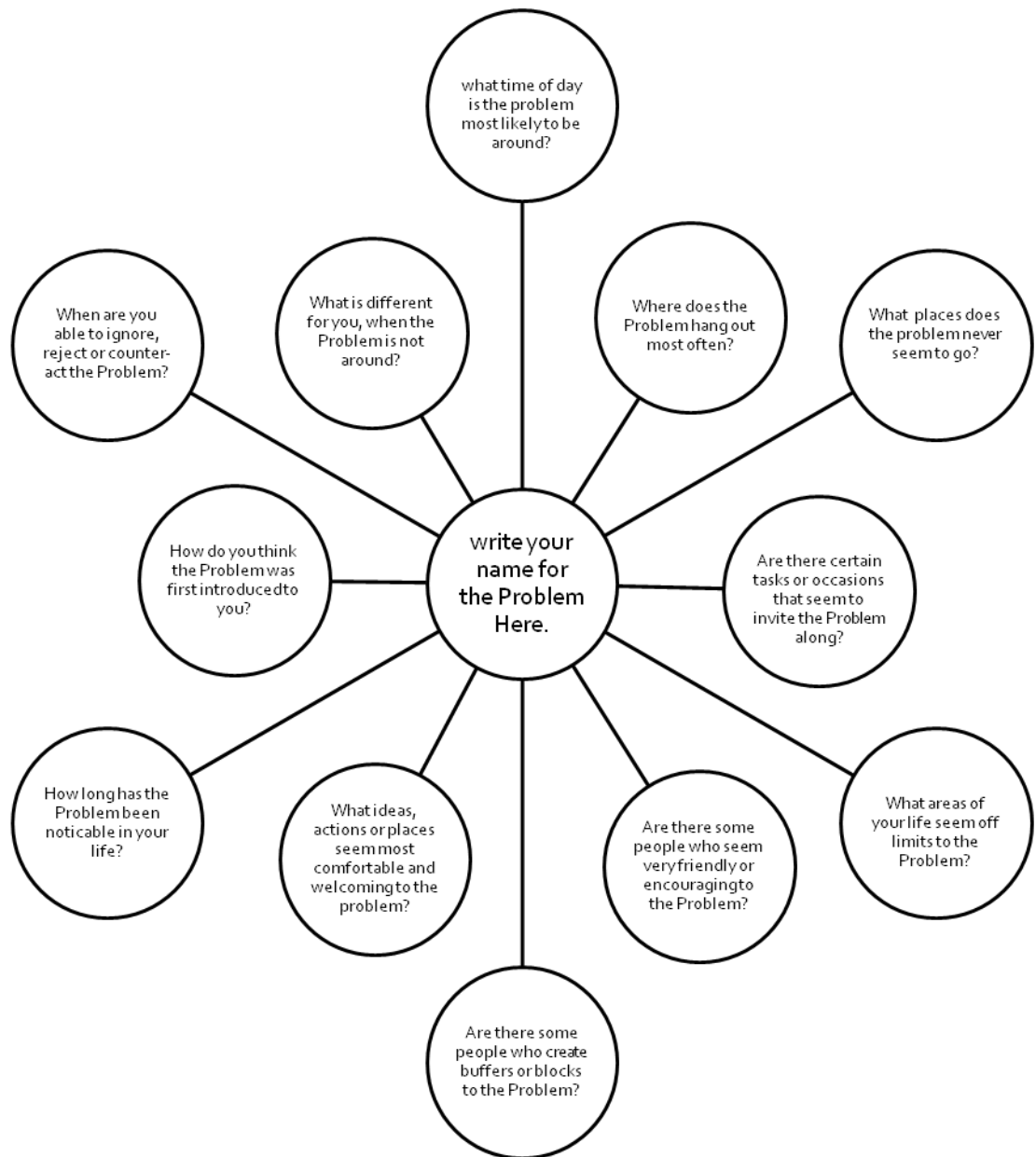




#### Exercise #4: Habits of the Problem

Remember that you can choose which questions you'd like to answer. And when you do answer a question, you might find that you'd like to write down some details, perhaps a story that relates to that question. The more information you gather here, the more material you'll have for "Taking a Position"- the step that follows this one.





### STEP 3: "TAKE A POSITION"

*A Story: Laurie struggles with Anger- or so she thinks. But after looking at Anger and its habits, she realizes that a better name what gets her into trouble with others is 'Injustice'. As we talk about how 'Injustice' gets her thinking and acting she notices that 'Injustice' doesn't really give her any rest. There seems to be an expectation that she stand up and*



*she speaks every time 'Injustice' gets her attention. This has led Laurie to believe that friends and family sometimes dread her involvement in events- and she has started to stay home more often. After considering how she feels about her relationship to 'Injustice' Laurie concludes that her principles and values remain constant, even when she chooses not to give them voice. She decides that she is in charge of how and when she gives her energy to the causes of 'Injustice'.*

### **What do I mean by "Take a Position"?**

"Taking a Position" is something that you do every day- it's another way of saying that we have an opinion or feeling about something, usually something that matters to us. "Taking a Position" on a Problem simply means deciding how we feel about the Habits and Effects of the Problem.

### **Why would you want to "Take a Position"?**

When you "Take a Position" you are really putting into words what you intend to do with the relationship that you have with the Problem. It's important to notice that you may have mixed feelings about your relationship with the Problem. After all, some Problems may be pointing out useful information or alerting you to things that could use improvement. "Taking a Position" means that you are deciding to act, rather than re-act.

### **How will you actually "Take a Position"?**

You have collected quite a bit of information about the Problem in the last few exercises. You'll use what you've learned about the Problem's Habits and Effects to decide how you feel about what is happening in your life, as a result of your current relationship with the Problem. You will compare that information to your ideas about what is important to you in living your life.

### **What will happen if you "Take a Position"?**

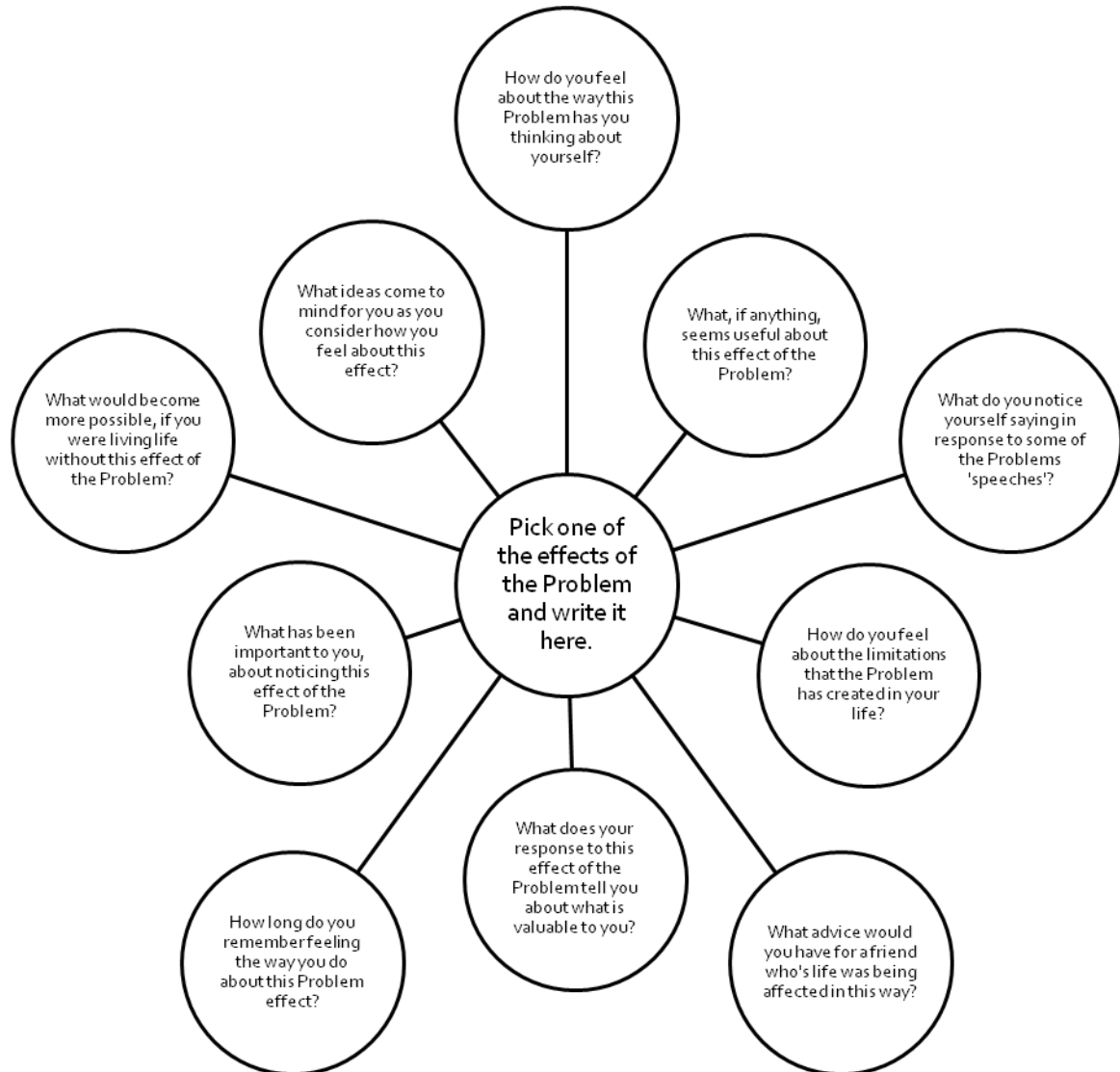
You may notice certain trends. You may be able to put words to certain values and aspirations. You may come to a clearer understanding of how your relationship to the Problem is not working for you, and begin thinking about actions that you'd like to take.

### **Exercise #5: "Take a Position"**

I invite you to do as many of these 'maps' as you like- one for each 'effect of the Problem' that interests you. You may want to share what you discover with an



interested and supportive friend, or not. Either way, I recommend that you give yourself a good chunk of time to reflect on what you find.



**WRAPPING IT UP**



Now what do you do?

So far, you've picked out which feeling responses have become a Problem, you've looked into the effects and habits of that particular Problem, and you have decided where you stand in relationship to these things.

So, where to go from here?

Well, if we were having a conversation together I might ask you about your ideas, plans for action, or next steps. And I would be your witness, as we worked together, noticing and documenting what changes you were making in thought, action and relationships in your life.

This is something that you can do for yourself, through journaling or through forming a network of support. I think the important thing is to keep the conversation alive.

If you found the exercises useful, use them again. And as you come to new understandings about the Problem influences, your relationships with them will continue to change.

If you've enjoyed the exercises and learning about "Externalizing Conversations" then you might like to check out the links in the Resources Section, for more information on Narrative ideas.

And if you'd like to go further, you can get in touch with me by email or by phone.

Visit [www.ProblemRelationshipTherapy.com](http://www.ProblemRelationshipTherapy.com) to learn more about my independent practice as a therapist, and to read other articles on Narrative Therapy.

Or, just drop me a line, at [bmillerconsulting@gmail.com](mailto:bmillerconsulting@gmail.com)



## Resources

For more information on Michael White, David Epston and Narrative Therapy check out the following links:

<http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/>

<http://www.narrativepractices.com.au/>

<http://www.narrativeapproaches.com/>

<http://www.narrativetherapychicago.com/>

<http://www.narrativetherapycentre.com>

[www.kenwoodcenter.org](http://www.kenwoodcenter.org)

