

# Why Talking About Our Problems is so Helpful

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Talking about our problems contributes to our wellbeing explains Jason Liem

Talking about our problems with a trusted person can help us to work out what is bothering us and to figure out what we can do about it. It also helps us to understand how and why we think and feel the way we do. Such insight increases our ability to handle future thoughts and emotions.

Talking is an important part of our relationships. It can strengthen our ties with other people and help us stay in good mental health. At the same time, when we feel listened to, we feel others care about us and what we have to say.

It is great if we discover specific actions that help us to resolve or improve our situation. The ability to verbalise our thoughts and emotions can, itself, be a part of the solution.

Talking about our problems is like getting enough sleep, eating well and exercising. All these efforts contribute to the improvement of our well-being.

In this article, I explore why talking about our problems and issues can be so cathartic.

## Labelling

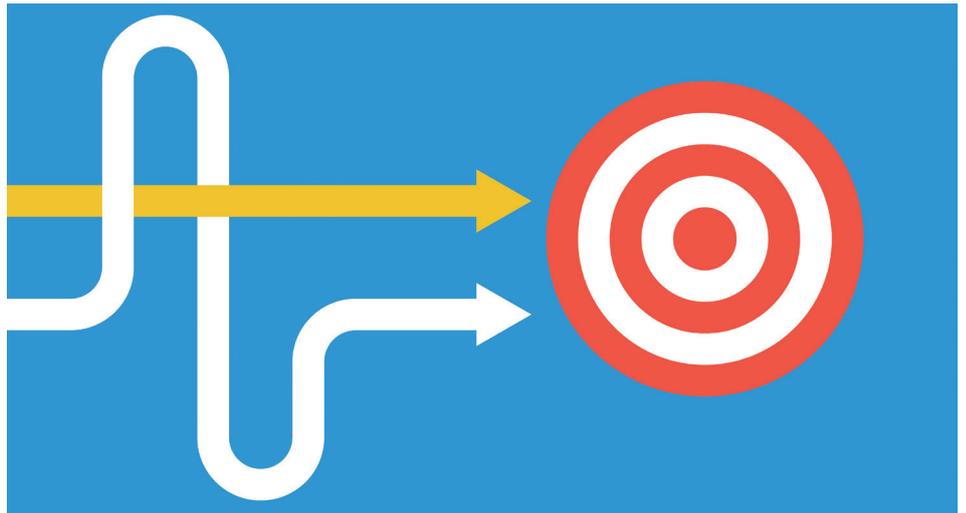
Affective Labelling is when we name the emotions we are experiencing. These could be feelings such as fear, anger, agitation, overwhelm, anxiety and so on. By talking through our experience, we translate amorphous feelings into tangible words.

This translation is not always a straightforward process. I know I have struggled to put words to my emotions and experiences but doing so pays off. Labelling helps us to process what is happening or has happened to us.

## Asking Questions

Well constructed questions are excellent tools to help us explore our thinking and emotions. (You can find a list of questions at the end of this article.)

We can think on an issue for days on end twisting and turning it every which way. Our thinking



goes round and round leading to overthinking. We end up feeling blocked. Asking questions is akin to pulling a cork from a bottle. It allows the contents to flow, freeing up space.

When we uncork our minds and let the words start to flow, for many of us it can be the first time we have heard our thoughts out loud.

Working with clients, I can see their eyes light up as they make sense of their own words. They are editing as they are speaking. Talking through a difficult issue or troubling experience is rarely a linear process. It is more akin to untying a ball of string.

When we give people the space to talk (and we hold back our urge to respond), it gives them the chance to hear their own words. Slowly and surely a coherence emerges as they self-edit.

A person will say something but then stop, sometimes in mid-sentence. You can almost hear the tape in their head spool backwards as they replay their words. They then say something along the lines as, "What I meant to say was ..."

This is the mental and emotional processing in action as we translate abstract thoughts and emotions into concrete words.

## Finding the Right Person

Scattered across the psychological landscape are studies examining the phenomenon of *co-rumination*. For example, work colleagues who talk exhaustively about their shared problem. They revisit and speculate about it, and do not move the discussion onto how they can resolve it. Instead of the discussion helping it has the opposite effect. It leaves people feeling helpless and more stressed.

Finding the right person to talk to about our challenges and dilemmas is crucial so we do not fall into co-rumination. It is best to find someone we trust and respect. It should be someone we know who will give us a balanced perspective.

What we do not want is someone who's going to tell us everything is going to be all right. As well-intentioned as they may be, these empty words do very little to help us deal with a hard situation.

If you need specific advice, find someone who has faced a similar situation. Explore with them what they did to deal with it.

Another idea is to find a professional and reputable coach. If you go this route, my advice is to invest time doing background research.

There are a lot of coaches out there. Please make sure you get five or six references and thoroughly check them out.

### It's all about the Angles

When change and uncertainty show up on our doorstep uninvited, our initial response usually triggers defensive emotions like anger, concern or anxiety. This is a normal response to a negative and unexpected event.

Our first thoughts and emotions focus on all the things that could go wrong. Our minds play out the worst-case scenarios. Our thinking about the future gets wrapped up in speculation – all the “what-ifs” of things that could go sideways on us.

When we talk to someone about an event we are facing, our first sentences may sound negative. But this is okay. It allows us to vent and sort through our entangled thoughts and emotions. When we feel listened to and can articulate our fears and worries in a safe, non-judging environment, this puts us into a more reflective state.

There are going to be times when we have neither the control nor influence to change a situation. But when we talk through our concerns, we often shift to a more optimistic and constructive perspective of the situation. In this mindset, we are better able to identify actions we can take to help ourselves.

### Audience or Actor?

When we speak about ourselves, we generally speak from a first-person perspective. When using pronouns like me, myself and I, we identify ourselves as the central character. From a brain point of view, we take on a subjective perspective to what is happening. This makes it difficult to create distance from a problem.

Distance, whether it is time or space, can help us see a situation with fresh eyes. We can achieve this distancing by the pronouns we choose to use. Instead of using the pronouns me, myself and I, we can use third-person pronouns. For example, I can start using my name: His name is Jason. He likes running. Jason also loves ice-cream.

Psychologists call this *dissociation*. It is the ability to distance our perspective from our thoughts, feelings, memories and sense of identity. Speaking in the third person creates a distance between the thinker and their thoughts. It also creates a space between the feeler and their feelings.

What does this mean? It means we do not identify with our thoughts and emotions. Instead, we *notice* them. This *noticing* gives us the space to observe and reflect and then to choose our response.

### Action is Essential

Talking allows us to vent and process our thought and emotions. In doing so, it helps us to gain a clearer perspective and a level of insight.

Talk is great, but action is essential. Taking action serves a dual purpose. It plucks the self-doubt from our minds while nurturing self-confidence.

Gaining momentum starts with a single step. The key is to ask: how can I turn this insight into action? What do I need to do to move this forward?

Do not stop at insight. Follow through with turning insight into action by painting a picture with words. Translating insights into actions is best done using visually loaded words and terms.

Why visually oriented words? The brain dedicates a large part of its real estate to visual processing. This influences how we learn. Most people find learning is easiest when they see how something is done.

### Writing as an Alternative

There are going to be times when we do not have someone to talk to about our challenges. A strong second alternative is to write our thoughts down on paper or to type them into our phone or computer.

The choice of medium is not so important (although I prefer writing). What is important is to articulate our thoughts and emotions into words. If they stay trapped in our head, they keep their mutating ability where it is difficult to pin them down.

Written words mean we can see them for what they are. We can look at them with a rational eye and evaluate them. Do they help us or hinder us? Are they based on fact or assumption? We can choose to keep, modify or replace them.

### Asking Good Questions

Years ago, my mentor gave me a list of questions to help me work through my thoughts and emotions. I have found them to be indispensable. As a result, I have used them extensively to help clients work through their thoughts and emotions. I hope they serve you as well as they have served me.

#### 1. What is the evidence?

What evidence do I have to support my thoughts?

What evidence do I have against them?

#### 2. What alternative views are there?

How might an outsider view this situation?

#### 3. How much does thinking this way cost me?

Does it help me get, or stop me from getting what I want? How?

What might be the outcome of looking at things in a healthier way?

#### 4. Is my thinking realistic?

Am I concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?

Am I expecting myself to be perfect?

Am I paying attention only to the bad side of things?

Am I doing ‘should, must and ought’ instead of accepting and dealing with situations as they are?

#### 5. What action can I take?

What can I do to change my situation?

Am I overlooking solutions to problems on the assumption they won't work?

### about the author



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs to individuals and to teams. Learn more at [www.MINDtalk.no](http://www.MINDtalk.no).

