



Fairness Toolkit: How to Say Goodbye to Your Problem

Everyone has problems. Some we carry with us for short periods of time; others are with us months, maybe years.

What is true of all our problems is that we have choice and control over at least some aspect(s) of the problem and how we think and act can determine how long we choose to interact with and be affected by the problem. Look at this situation:

Mary is a second year Science student. She has enjoyed all her classes to date except this semester she has ended up with Professor Lungs for a course she needs to take for her major. He has a reputation for being gruff and short with all students. While Mary was prepared to share the pain with her classmates, she was not prepared for being singled out and being the brunt of his sarcasm and derisive comments. Mary has complained to the Associate Dean and Faculty Relations. She feels intimidated, harassed and is suffering from insomnia and is losing weight.

Mary has a problem – she has done nothing to provoke or deserve the professor’s bad behaviour and she is suffering. She has taken appropriate steps like going to complain to the Associate Dean and Faculty Relations, but to date, there has been no change.

She doesn’t know how and if her complaint will be addressed to her satisfaction. So she keeps going to class because she needs the course. She feels bad about herself and isolated, breaks down in tears all the time and questions whether she really wants to continue her studies.

What does Mary think is her problem? How does Mary think and act about her problem?

Like most of us faced with a similar situation, it is likely that Mary is thinking that her problem is Professor Lung and the university’s inability or unwillingness to do anything about it.

Let’s name it differently:

Mary’s problem is having a professor whose behaviour results in her feeling demeaned, humiliated and stupid. She doubts her intelligence and wonders whether she really wants to graduate from the program.



Office of the Ombudsperson for Students

In Mary's Control

- How she thinks about herself
- Whether she attends classes
- Changing her major
- Taking her complaint further
- Appealing an unfair grade

Out of Mary's Control

- Professor Lung's behavior
- Associate Dean's response
- Faculty Relations' response
- How others view her
- The mark she will get

There will be consequences that flow from any action Mary decides to take or decides not to take. She is in the best position to decide what the pros and cons are of each action and assess the potential risks and whether she is prepared to take them.

It is tempting to *think* about Mary's problem as being huge and unsolvable and totally out of her control, but once you list them out, you can see there is a range of options open to her, even if Mary might not like any of them. The fact is, there are choices and you can spend your time keeping the problem the same and sustaining (or aggravating) its impact on you and your well-being, or you can decide to think and act differently to mitigate the costs on you to the extent that is within your control.

So, the next time you're feeling the effects of a problem you've been carrying for a while, think about this:

- All problems have aspects that are within your control and outside of your control.
- We spend more time fussing and focusing on aspects of our problems that are not within our control (what other people did or didn't do, the state of the economy, the weather, being too old or being too young ...) rather than what is in our control.
- Naming the problem differently than we have been, will often open the doors to choices which we did not see (or wish to see) before.
- We may not be able to change what others do or think, but we do have control and the power to act and think differently ourselves.
- We always have more than one choice – even if we don't particularly like any of them, they are ways in which we can do things differently to change our relationship to the problem.
- Even if there are people and processes that *might or should* be able to address or help you with your problem, it is still up to you to reframe the problem, challenge yourself to making a change and move forward and away from your problem.