

# PUTTING OUR PROBLEMS ON THE TABLE

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*When we're feeling overwhelmed, or our lives feel like they are out of control, we struggle to understand what's happening. And we're often at a complete loss as to how to deal with our problems. It's important to become aware of how to identify problems that show up in our lives, how our problems show up as physical symptoms and negative thoughts and behaviors, and how these areas are interconnected. We can learn a way to examine our problems — on a table with three legs — where we can identify our physical symptoms, and maladaptive thoughts and behaviors, and begin to make positive changes.*

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When life is going along well, we feel good, we think positively and we make healthy choices in our daily lives. But when we are overwhelmed, in pain, and struggling with bad behaviors, or stuck in negative patterns, our lives can seem unmanageable, and out of control. There is a simple way to find clarity, by putting our problems on a three-legged table, to build awareness of our challenges and find a way forward.

## **Problems show up in three ways**

Why three legs? We use a three-legged table because our problems show up in three distinct ways: problematic physical symptoms, negative thoughts, and maladaptive behaviors and habits.

Firstly, our problems show up as physical and physiological symptoms, like headaches, muscle aches, weakness, tingling, abdominal distress, nausea, fatigue, eating too much or too little, sleeping too much or too little, heart palpitations, anxiety, concentration, or memory problems, racing mind, sexual dysfunction, fatigue, moodiness, panic attacks and more, simply anything we feel in our body.

Secondly, our problems also manifest as negative, unhealthy thoughts or cognitions. We internalize past hurts and ingrained negative beliefs about how the world works, and of our sense of worth in the world. In low self-esteem, we often develop negative thoughts which lead to self-depreciation, feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness,

and negative thoughts about our abilities, relationships, the world, and opportunities.

Finally, our problems play out in any number of unhealthy, maladaptive behaviors and habits, from eating too much, eating too little, sleeping too much or too little, relying on alcohol and drugs to numb physical symptoms or escape negative thoughts to angry outbursts, self-sabotage, procrastination, self-harm, inflicting or tolerating abuse, mismanaging money, gambling or shopping addictions, staying in a job we dislike and many more unhealthy behaviours. The list goes on and on...



Physical Symptoms

Negative Thoughts

Unhealthy Behaviours

### **Putting the three-legged table to use**

Remember, problems manifest in our lives in three distinct ways: as physical symptoms (leg #1), as negative thoughts (leg #2); and unhealthy, behaviors, actions, and habits (leg #3). Whatever is troubling you, you can put your problems on the top of this three-legged table... from work struggles, low self-esteem, becoming a caregiver to children or elderly parents, relationship troubles, inter-personal conflicts, anger, medical conditions, addictions, like food, alcohol, shopping, gambling, chronic pain, money concerns, depression, anxiety ... anything.

### **Identifying and addressing our problems**

We can use the three-legged table to gain insight and awareness of the connections between our problems and symptoms, negative thoughts, and maladaptive behaviors. By identifying our symptoms in these three categories (legs) we can begin to address them together. Within us, we can feel overwhelmed with these symptoms, looking at them outside of ourselves, we can address them. The first step to managing things is awareness of symptoms to address.

In therapy, we can tackle our negative thoughts with *Cognitive Therapy* (CT). We can alter maladaptive behaviors with *Behavioural Therapy* (BT). And physicians can treat troublesome physical symptoms. However, when we treat just one of these 'legs' in isolation while ignoring the other two, we continue to prop up the negative forces at play. But when we confront all three categories of the three-legged table, we empower ourselves to make significant positive changes. Treat just one 'leg' of the three-legged table, the table remains standing. And we remain stuck.

### **A more effective option**

The far more effective option — Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy that breaks maladaptive thoughts and behaviors and creates meaningful positive changes. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) works by challenging and reframing the cognitive distortions and thoughts we hold

onto, and in addition, facilitates positive changes by slowly changing unhealthy acts, shifting maladaptive behaviors and habits to healthier, more adaptive ones.

### **The first step**

When we feel overwhelmed by our negative thoughts, behaviors, and physical symptoms, there are plenty of actions we can take to help ourselves. There are things we're all aware of, like starting or increasing an exercise regime, confiding in a supportive friend, colleague, or family member, sleeping and eating well, meditating, socializing and seeking mutual support through a buddy system, making healthier choices, seeking medical or psychological counseling when required.

We owe it to ourselves to pay attention to our physical and mental health and to create positive change where change is needed. The first step to positive change — and to addressing our physical symptoms, and troublesome thoughts and behaviors — is awareness. We can use the three-legged table to look at our problems in a powerful new way that creates a deeper understanding of how our thoughts, behaviors, and symptoms show up and play out in our lives. With this awareness, we can begin to create positive changes that tackle our problems head-on.

### **Creating positive change**

**Focus** your awareness on how you're feeling when you are struggling or feeling overwhelmed

**List** your problematic negative thoughts, behaviors, and troublesome physical/physiological symptoms

**Think** about the areas of your life where you would like to create positive changes in

**Make** a commitment to yourself to reach out and find the supports you need to address your physical symptoms, negative thoughts and behaviors

**Bring in** resources you need to address problematic thoughts and behaviors, as well as address your physical symptoms to alleviate and manage them better.

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*About the author*

*Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021.*

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*Dr. Vermani has recently launched an exciting online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, delivering powerful mental-health guidance, life skills, and knowledge that employees can access anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/>*

