Changing how people perceive problems

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Psychologist Gregory Walton is co-creator of a database of “wise interventions” to help individuals and the wider society with problems of education, health, parenting, relationships and intergroup conflict. Credit: L.A. Cicero

Every day, people try to make sense of challenges in their lives. But sometimes their explanations get in the way of solving them, said Stanford psychologist Gregory Walton in a new paper in *Psychological*

Review.

Whether it is a college student feeling like he doesn't belong at school, a partner concerned about a spat with a loved one or a parent worried about a crying baby – people often draw negative conclusions about situations they face.

These interpretations, Walton said, are critically important because they can lead to problematic behaviors, such as in the case of the student, poor performance at school.

That's why for those who help shape environments for others – a college administrator, a psychologist or a social worker, for example – anticipating the questions people ask themselves is a crucial step when looking at why some of life's most challenging issues arise, said Walton, who co-authored the paper with University of Virginia professor Timothy Wilson.

"These can be deeply personal questions that people might not even be aware of, such as: 'Do I belong in school?' or 'Does my partner love me?' or 'Am I good parent?" said Walton, who is an associate professor of psychology at Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences. "Too often we lack definitive information about these issues, so we try to construct answers as best we can. Sometimes these answers are pejorative, and lead to more problems."

Instead, Walton and Wilson suggest a new method that prioritizes both the individual and social contexts. They hope that this approach – what they call "wise interventions" – will be a useful starting point for people working in fields such as policy, health, psychology and education who want to facilitate behaviors and attitudes among people they work with that help them accomplish their goals.

Creating new narratives

Take the question "Do I belong in school?" which is just one of the hundreds of scenarios reviewed by Walton and Wilson in the paper.

For students from racial and ethnic groups that have been marginalized in society, this can be a reasonable question, said Walton, pointing out that the history of American schooling for African Americans and other minority groups has too often been a fight for inclusion. Aware of negative stereotypes and underrepresentation, students from these groups can be more likely to question whether "people like me" can belong in college, Walton said.

In turn, common challenges such as a conflict with a roommate, a poor grade or critical feedback can seem like proof of that fear, said Walton, who is also the Michael Forman University Fellow in Undergraduate Education. In an earlier study, Walton found that those feelings of exclusion can lead to poor performance, which can then lead to students dropping out of school.

"Could students be given a new narrative to understand common challenges to belonging?" asks Walton.

In fact, Walton found that what helped were stories from diverse, older students showing that worries about belonging are normal for all students when they come to college, pass with time and are not a sign that "people like me" do not belong. A one-hour experience in the first year of college that emphasized these points raised African American students' grades over the next three years and halved the racial achievement gap, Walton said.

"Worries about belonging are a reasonable response to our history," Walton said. "By anticipating questions students of marginalized

backgrounds ask about their belonging, colleges and universities can create experiences and send messages that help all students recognize that many challenges are normal and inherent in the transition to college, and how they can address them to succeed. That helps students, and institutions, do better."

When people draw new interpretations about their lives, the researchers found, it can stimulate self-enhancing cycles of improvement.

For example, if a college student feels more confident in their feelings of belonging, it's easier to reach out and connect with a professor and build a relationship that can support them, Walton said. "Ultimately, that makes society better as a whole by promoting greater college success."

In addition to social belonging, Walton and Wilson addressed other problems including personal and intergroup conflict, poor health and unhappiness. To accompany their paper, the authors created a searchable database, wiseinterventions.org, that summarizes more than 325 different interventions in far-ranging problem spaces from education to health, parenting, relationships and intergroup conflict.

Rethinking social problems

There is a long tradition of approaching problems that focuses only on the individual instead of the social context in which issues are situated, Walton said.

"It's easy for people to see a failing student and think, 'He just doesn't get it,' 'He's not smart' or 'He's not self-controlled,'" he said. "Our basic intuition can tell us that problems are due to inadequacies in the individual: 'If only he were smarter or less lazy he'd do fine.' That can lead to victim-blaming. And it ignores how the world looks to that person – the interpretations he draws, often reasonably, based on his

experience and context – that can prevent him from succeeding."

Focusing on the individual without the context can have broader societal impacts. "A university might think that to solve a dropout problem it needs higher selection criteria, admitting students with higher SAT scores or better high school grades – as though it is students' inherent, fixed abilities, either you have it or you don't, that is causing them to not thrive in college," Walton said. "Preparation is important. But many thousands of students are capable of succeeding in college but don't because they don't feel like they belong, or don't believe they can succeed. Those are problems that institutions, educators and researchers need to work on."

By influencing the ways that people make sense of themselves and their social situations, Walton hopes interventions can facilitate behavioral change that help individuals and society succeed.

"By anticipating the questions people are asking, decision-makers can construct experiences that help people draw answers that are more adaptive and that help them, and those around them and society at large, flourish," he said.

More information: Gregory M. Walton et al. Wise interventions: Psychological remedies for social and personal problems., *Psychological Review* (2018). DOI: 10.1037/rev0000115

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