

Taking a Look at a Problem

In objective science it is normal to define a problem by means of its causes - its roots, or core. Solving the problem therefore means removing these causes, in other words getting to the core, which is of course hidden under the surface. This works well for trivial machines and simple systems, such as a motor, television or part of the human body (joints, muscles, etc.).

The Toilet Roll Metaphor

For more complicated systems, a 'toilet roll' metaphor is more appropriate. If we unroll all the paper from a toilet roll, we are left with the cardboard cylinder; its core. When we finally have it, it is worth precisely what all the paper we unrolled was meant for...

With highly complex systems – like high pressure, stress, information overload - the question of the relationship between the problem and its solution poses itself acutely. However, to describe the problem (= reveal/diagnose) is to capture what was wrong, which in itself does not lead to a solution. Therefore, **if we describe a problem we are doing something completely different from solving it**. Solving a problem means finding what is necessary for things to improve. More often than not, there is **no direct relationship between the description of a problem, and its solution**. Still, many people choose to stay in their "problem trance" instead of focusing on the desired solution, or result worth working toward.

Application: The Sweater Metaphor

A systemic coaching approach looks at the problem as a 'thread of narratives' from which a sweater is knitted, in which the client is then 'clothed'.

The sweater is a negatively-coloured story, which says that something is not how it should be. At the same time it is nourished by the hope of change, which may be imaginable, but is momentarily unattainable. We thus have to concern ourselves with the sweater, not with what it hides. Just as a sweater can be unravelled and the wool wound up into a ball (in which there is no core!) and **from the same wool** a completely different sweater can be knitted, so it is possible to take another thread of narratives from the same life experiences and to 'knit' a different story from them.

(inspired by study materials from the Institute of Systemic Experience, ISZ, 1999)

In our conversation we can work with the attitude:
Problem = Potential for Change

We have all heard this before. But if we decide to take this stance, problems will not be as terrible as they appear: everything that is one way can be another way.

Practical Tip: Try thinking (or even better, talking with a friend) about something that you call a problem. Help each other to express yourselves, with the focus towards finding a solution, and to better see the potential for change that is contained in the problem situation. In other words: find the beginning of the thread from which you can knit a sweater that simply fits you better than the previous one.