

Externalization of Resistance

What is the Externalization of Resistance?

Externalization of Resistance is a TEAM-CBT technique developed by Dr. David Burns. It is often used after tools such as the Positive Reframe, Cost–Benefit Analysis, Double or Triple Paradox, or Blame CBA.

The purpose of this method is to help you clearly see the good reasons you might want to stay the same, even if part of you wants to change. Paradoxically, discovering these positive values can increase your motivation for change or help you find peace in staying where you are for now.

Once you understand the benefits of your current thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, you then “argue back” and examine whether those benefits truly make sense or whether you’re ready for a different path.

Case Example: “I’m Not Good Enough”

Harold, a husband and father of two boys, came to therapy because he constantly felt inadequate. He repeatedly told himself, “*I’m not good enough.*” He believed he should be a better husband and father, but the weight of his self-criticism left him feeling discouraged and disconnected from his family.

After exploring the **Positive Reframe**, Harold discovered that his feelings of inadequacy had some meaningful intentions:

- They motivate him to try harder.
- They show he cares about being a good husband and father.

Therapist: I’d like to show you a tool called *Externalization of Resistance*. It can help you decide whether these feelings of inadequacy truly make sense to hold onto, or whether you feel ready to let them go.

Harold: Sure.

Therapist: Great. This is a role-play. I'll argue that you *should* continue feeling inadequate, using your own positive reasons. Your job is to argue back with solid, believable responses. Ready?

Harold: Yes. Ready.

Roleplay

- **Therapist:** Harold, you should keep feeling inadequate because it motivates you to do better.
- **Harold:** It can motivate me sometimes, but most of the time it just makes me feel so awful that I give up. In reality, it actually *reduces* my motivation.
- **Therapist:** That may be true, but feeling inadequate is still the best way to show you care about being a good husband and father.
- **Harold:** Actually, it's a terrible way to show I care. When I feel inadequate, I shut down and withdraw. If I want to show my wife and kids I care, the best thing I can do is work on feeling better so I can be more present and engaged.

After this role-play, Harold felt significantly more motivated to tackle his negative thoughts. The resistance that had been holding him back began to fade, and the other therapeutic tools became more effective. Over time, he overcame these feelings and became more present with his wife and children.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Prepare

Before trying Externalization of Resistance, complete at least one of the following:

- Positive Reframe
- Cost–Benefit Analysis
- Double Paradox or Triple Paradox
- Blame Cost–Benefit Analysis

These tools help you identify the real benefits of staying the same.

Step 2. Imagine the Argument

Imagine someone saying: “You should continue the way things are because ____ (your advantages or values).”

Your job: Argue back in a convincing and believable way.

Step 3. Who Won?

After arguing both sides, ask yourself:

Who won the argument? Me or the other person?

- If *you* won, move to Step 5.
- If the *other side* won, ask yourself: “If those reasons are so convincing, why do I want to change at all?”

Step 4. Check Your True Intention

Ask yourself: “Do I still genuinely want to change, or does it make more sense to keep things the same right now?”

Either choice is okay.

- If you still want change → go to Step 5.
- If you prefer staying the same → stop here.

Step 5. Repeat

On a separate sheet of paper, repeat Steps 2–4 for every advantage or core value you identified. Continue until you go over all the advantages and core values.

Step 6. A Moment of Honesty

After completing the earlier steps, take a quiet moment to reflect:

“Do I want to keep things the way they are for now, or am I feeling ready to learn skills and tools that can help me create real change?”

Either answer is completely okay. This step helps you stay honest with yourself about what you want—without pressure, judgment, or expectations.

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- **It is completely okay not to want change right now.** Many people feel relief when they discover the good reasons behind their stuck points.
 - The goal is **insight**, not immediate change. Sometimes change follows naturally and sometimes not.
 - This technique often boosts motivation and dissolves resistance, making other tools more effective.
 - This is a challenging exercise. You don't have to do it alone. A therapist can guide you.
 - The purpose of this process is **not** to force yourself to “feel better,” but to clarify your true desires and values.
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Final Note

As you work through Externalization of Resistance, remember that both parts of you. The part that wants change and the part that wants things to stay the same are trying to help you. There is no “wrong” side. Each voice reflects your values, your needs, and your humanity.

Whether you choose to move toward change or stay where you are for now, the most important outcome of this exercise is **clarity**. When you understand *why* you feel stuck, you can finally make choices that feel intentional, compassionate, and aligned with who you want to be.