

The Let's Define Terms

What is Let's Define Terms?

The Let's Define Terms Technique is a semantic technique, developed by Dr. David Burns. It is a powerful cognitive behavioral tool that helps people combat the distortion of "labeling."

Often, people apply harsh, global negative labels to themselves, such as "I'm a loser," "I'm a failure," or "I'm an idiot." This technique helps you defeat these destructive thoughts by asking you to define the exact meaning of the label. When you try to define it, you typically discover that such a global label is an abstract concept that doesn't actually exist in reality.

Case Example: *"I'm a Failure"*

Sarah, a small business owner, shared that she had been struggling with feelings of inadequacy and depression. She had recently launched a new product that didn't sell as well as she had hoped, leading to the thought, "I'm a complete failure."

- **Therapist:** I'd like to show you a helpful tool called the Let's Define Terms Technique. It might help with your thought, "I'm a complete failure." Want to give it a try?
- **Sarah:** Sure
- **Therapist:** Great. This technique looks at the harsh labels we give ourselves. Your thought has the label "failure." If we were to look up the term "failure" in a dictionary that only defines different kinds of people, what would the exact definition be?
- **Sarah:** It would be a person who never succeeds at anything and ruins everything they touch.
- **Therapist:** Looking at that definition: "Someone who never succeeds at anything and ruins everything they touch" is that an accurate description of you?
- **Sarah:** Well, no. I've succeeded at a lot of things. My business has been running for three years, and I have great relationships. I just messed up this one product launch.
- **Therapist:** You may have failed at a specific task, but does that make you a "failure" as a human being?
- **Sarah:** No, it doesn't. I guess it's just a mistake, not who I am.

After the exercise, Sarah realized she was being harsh on herself and that just because she failed at one thing didn't mean she was a complete failure. She went on to acknowledge that mistakes and failures are important for growth and improving herself.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Identify a negative label running through your mind (e.g., "I'm a loser," "I'm an idiot," "I'm a bad mother"). Write it down:

Step 2. Try to come up with a precise definition for that label. Imagine you are writing a dictionary entry for this type of person. Write your definition here:

Step 3. Look at your definition objectively. Does this definition accurately and completely apply to you? Does it apply to anyone in the world? Why or why not?

Step 4. Ask yourself: Is it possible that I am a complex human being with a mix of strengths and weaknesses, who simply made a mistake or has a specific flaw?

Step 5. Finally, rewrite your original thought using specific, realistic language instead of a global label (e.g., "I failed at this specific project, but that doesn't define my entire worth"):

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- Focus on the Behavior, Not the Person: When you try to define the term, you will quickly realize that while foolish or failing behaviors exist, "fools" and "failures" as a global identity do not.
- Watch for Other Distortions: Labeling is almost always paired with All-or-Nothing Thinking. Remember that human beings are not black or white; we all have areas of success and areas for growth.
- If You Get Stuck: If you find that your definition does seem to apply to you, try to find counter-evidence. Have there been times in your life when you didn't fit that label?
- Practice Makes Perfect: If the technique works, try practicing it again with a different negative label. The more you repeat it, the easier it becomes to untwist your thinking.

Final Note

Ultimately, the Let's Define Terms Technique teaches us a profound truth about human nature: you are a process, not a product. When we use global labels like "failure," "fool," or "loser," we are unfairly reducing a complex, ever-changing human being into a single, static object. By challenging and discarding these harsh labels, you free yourself from the impossible burden of perfection. You give yourself the grace to be wonderfully, messily human. One that is capable of learning, adapting, and continuously growing through every experience.