



I have a problem with “issues”

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What I’m about to write is a eulogy for nouns like “problem,” “concern,” and “question.” These were once serviceable words, carrying specific meanings and capable of being “solved,” “addressed,” and “answered.” They were unpretentious terms, too, never claiming to be more profound than they are. Let us now bow our heads in silence as they enter the land of the No. 2 pencil, the typewriter, and the hand-written thank-you note.

In our brave new world of instant communication, these once-popular words have been replaced by an upstart locution that used to have specific meanings. When someone referred to an “issue,” we understood that the speaker was talking about a copy of a newspaper, magazine, or periodical. Political “issues” were things that politicians argued about—taxation, voting rights, and military preparedness. Offspring were said to be the “issue” of a particular family; proceeds from an estate were also identified as “issue.”

Somewhere along the usage highway, however, we took the wrong exit and started labeling any problem or question an “issue.” I suspect that this usage might have been born during the age of psychobabble, when a Dr. Phil’s clinical approach required the employment of neutral language to avoid placing

blame on anyone. Thus, when some lost soul announced to a TV audience that he hated his mother, he was told that he must find a way to deal with his “anger issues.” Suddenly, athletes were described as having “injury issues,” and people struggling to pay bills were facing “financial issues.”

It somehow now seemed mundane to be angry or injured or broke; adding “issues” to these conditions made them more dramatic and in need of therapy or counseling.

With the birth of the 24-hour news cycle, proliferating talk and reality shows, and ubiquitous ESPN commentators, the “issues” virus has gone viral and shows no signs of abating. School children struggle with “homework issues”; super-sized citizens are fighting “food issues” (which issue in “weight issues”); slumping basketball players face “scoring issues”; and troubled couples are dealing with “relationship issues.”

It seems that we so strongly desire to characterize our daily challenges as symptoms that we’ve senselessly latched on to a word that sounds cool (or clinical) but requires an adjective to give it any kind of meaning. “Issues” is now so deeply imbedded in our discourse that we don’t even question its euphemistic quality or how quickly it has become a cliché.

As we scatter dirt on the coffins of “problem,” “question,” and “concern,” let’s remember for a moment why they were once valued. We didn’t have to add an adjective to modify them: “anger” was clearly a “problem” and didn’t become an even greater one by linking it to “issue.” It could often be solved by counting to ten or leaving the room until one cooled down. It was not something in need of extended professional therapy. Let’s face it, we all have problems that are serious but not unique; when we use the word “problems,” we tend to send a signal that we acknowledge that others face them, too.

Perhaps if we revived “problems” instead of embracing “issues,” we’d begin to talk (not text or tweet) to one another about them and come to realize that ours aren’t such an “issue” after all.