

# My Favorite Problem-Solving Tool



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# My Favorite Problem-Solving Tool

Welcome to the *Perfectionist Professional Woman* podcast. This is episode 13, "My Favorite Problem-Solving Tool."

I'm Keri Martinez. I'm a wife and mother of three children and three bonus children. I'm also a certified life coach and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For a good portion of my life, I equated perfection with happiness and success. I thought that striving to *be* perfect and *do* things perfectly was the key to feeling happy and to being successful. I've since come to realize that perfection *isn't* necessary to achieve either one of those--quite the opposite, in fact--and that has made such a difference in how I think, feel, and experience life. So if you're a professional woman and you'd like to know how to release perfectionism so you can trade self-doubt for self-confidence, stop beating yourself up, and start enjoying your life more, then come with me. Let's do this together.

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Hello, friends. How is everything going in your neck of the woods? The past week has been pretty challenging for me, and I've been on a bit of an emotional roller coaster. I had something happen when I was giving a presentation about a week ago that kind of threw me for a loop and started a cascade of internal drama. And then, some health issues happened for a family member, and because I was already in a somewhat negative mental state, I freaked out about that more than was helpful, let's say. And I had a couple of days where I was really struggling to do anything. I told a friend I had a two-day pity gala – it wasn't just a pity party, it was a full-on gala with lots of drama and intensity because why do something half-way when you can go all-in, right?

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Anyway, I am so grateful for coaching, because I received some coaching last week that really helped get my mind in a better place about what happened during the presentation, and I've been doing some self-coaching to help me manage my brain around the family member's health issues. Honestly, I'm still working through a lot of stuff, but I've gotten some insights from what's been happening. I plan to go into more detail in a future episode about what I learned from the presentation experience in particular, but for now I'll say last week helped remind me that life is 50/50. It's supposed to be a mix of positive and negative, and when negative parts hit, it sucks and it's hard, but it doesn't mean anything has gone wrong. And when I say it doesn't mean anything has gone wrong, I mean that it's not wrong for negative things to happen. We need the negative parts to, first and foremost, help us appreciate the positive. There are other ways negative parts help us, too, like a lot of our growth and learning come from negative, challenging experiences — as much as I wish that weren't the case! It helps me to think that negative things happen “for” me instead of “to” me – although I have to say I definitely wasn't thinking that last week. When I was in the throes of my pity gala I was NOT thinking everything was happening “for” me. I was very much thinking all this stuff was happening “to” me and it was horrible and I had no idea how it would get better. But now that I'm somewhat on the other side of that, it's easier for me to take that “things happen ‘for’ me” perspective. Everything has not been neatly resolved and probably won't be for a while, but I'm at least in a more helpful, hopeful headspace than I was last week. I can see progress and growth, albeit small, and I'm choosing to focus on that for now.

So, I shared all of that for a couple of reasons. If you're listening in real time – it's May 2023 – May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and the first reason I wanted to share that is to normalize hard, challenging, sucky experiences and

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our brains' responses to them. If you're going through a difficult period, I want to remind you that hard times are normal for everyone, you're not alone, and hard times won't last forever – although I know it can feel very much like they will last forever sometimes. If the challenge does last for a long time or if you've already been going through it for a long time, one thing that has helped me is to notice when the suck level dips a little. I've found that the intensity of the suck varies from day to day, sometimes even moment to moment. You will have ebbs and flows, and if you can be aware of that and use the ebbs to recharge and regroup even a little bit, it can help.

Second, I want to share the main coaching tool I'm using to help me navigate through these challenges, and it's also the main tool I use with my clients. I am not exaggerating when I say this tool has changed my life. It may sound grandiose, I realize, but this tool can help with any problem or any goal. I have yet to encounter a challenge or a goal where this tool wasn't useful, where it didn't provide relief, where it didn't help me find a way through.

So the tool is called The Model, and I learned it from my coaching instructor, Brooke Castillo, when I was going through life coach certification with The Life Coach School. In this episode I'm going to talk about using The Model with problems at work, but you can use it in literally any area of your life – family, other relationships, finances, health, intellectual pursuits, even spirituality.

With The Model, everything in life can be categorized as one of five things. Those five things are circumstances, thoughts, feelings, actions, and results;

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and throughout this episode, you'll sometimes hear me refer to these categories by their first letters – C, T, F, A, and R.

So let's start with the first one. Circumstances or C's, are things that happen in the world that everyone would agree on. Circumstances are sometimes called facts, and they're things that can be proven in a court of law. They're typically, though not always, things outside our control. Circumstances are also neutral, meaning they're not good or bad – they just are. Circumstances include things like the temperature or the weather, a person's height, the capital city of a state, and the words someone says or the things they do.

The next category of The Model is thoughts or T's. Thoughts are sentences in your brain that are triggered by circumstances. Thoughts are not factual, meaning not everyone would agree on them and they can't be proven in a court of law. Thoughts can be both true and not true depending on your perspective. Some examples of thoughts or T's would be: it's a beautiful day, I'm short, and San Diego, CA is a great place to raise a family.

The next category is feelings or emotions. Feelings or F's are one-word descriptions of vibrations in your body, and they happen in response to your thoughts. In other words, your thoughts create your feelings. Examples of feelings include happy, frustrated, motivated, overwhelmed and confused.

Your feelings drive your actions or A's, which is the next category in The Model. Actions are things you do or don't do, based on how you're feeling. They can be external, meaning they're visible to others, or internal, meaning they're not visible to others – they're things you're doing or not doing inside your head. Examples of actions could be eating cookies, ruminating about

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something someone said, scrolling Instagram on your phone, not getting out of bed when your alarm goes off, and not giving someone the benefit of the doubt.

The last category is results or R's, and results are the effect *for you* of your actions or inactions. We don't include other people in our results because we can't control someone else and their experiences. Examples of results could be *I* gain or lose weight, *I* publish a podcast episode, *I* don't show up as my best self, or *I* prove my thought true that I can't be on time.

So there are those five categories – circumstances, thoughts, feelings, actions, and results – and The Model shows us how those five categories interrelate. Here's how it works. A circumstance will happen, our brain will have a thought about it, that thought will create a feeling in our body, the feeling will drive us to take some kind of action, and those actions will create a result for us. It's important to note that everything in The Model from the thought line or the T line down, is in our control. We control our thoughts, our thoughts create our feelings, our feelings drive our actions, and our actions create our results. Our thoughts are the trigger for everything else that follows, which means our thoughts indirectly create our results. This is why it's so important to be aware of what you're thinking, to be aware of how you're talking to and about yourself and your life. You will intentionally or unintentionally create what you're thinking.

The Model is helpful in solving problems and accomplishing goals not because it tells you specifically *how* to solve problems or accomplish goals but because it gives you awareness of what your brain is creating for you. Brooke Castillo teaches that all problems are thought problems. The Model is such a

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powerful tool because it helps us see the relationship between our thoughts, feelings, actions, and results, and helps us identify what we have the power to change, if we want. It directs our focus away from trying to control things we can't, and keeps it on what we can so that we retain our agency and personal power.

OK. Let's go a little deeper on the differences between circumstances and thoughts, and then I'll go through a couple of Models so you can see more of how to use the tool.

Remember, circumstances or C's are factual and neutral. They can be proven in a court of law and everyone would agree on them. They're not open to interpretation. Thoughts or T's, on the other hand, can't be proven in a court of law, and some people in the world would disagree with them.

Some circumstances I could list are that I have five appointments on my calendar today, my coworker said, "I don't like that font choice," and our department budget has \$10,000 allocated for printing for the year. Those are all factual and could be proven in a court of law. They're neutral, there are no adjectives, drama, or judgments associated with them. They're not good or bad – they just are.

So we have circumstances like that and then our brains have thoughts about them. Our brains make up stories about the circumstances. So, I can have five appointments on my calendar and think, "I'm overloaded" while someone else might have five appointments on their calendar and think, "This is going to be a cakewalk!" If a coworker says, "I don't like that font choice," I might think, "He's rude!" And someone else might think, "I agree" or "He's entitled to

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his opinion.” I could see the printing allocation on the department budget and think, “That’s way more than we need” and someone else might think, “It’s not enough.” So our thoughts are subjective – they’re true for some people and not true for others.

Where we tend to run into trouble is when we have thoughts we think are circumstances. We have thoughts and assume they’re factual because we’ve been thinking them so many times. We assume they’re the truth of the world. Thoughts like, “What happened on 9/11 was a tragedy,” “stealing and murder are wrong,” “I’m poor,” “I’m overweight,” and “That person is a jerk.” Those are thoughts that feel true to us, they feel factual, and we might have lots of evidence to back them up, but when we slow down and pick them apart a bit, we can see they’re not actually facts. Not everyone would agree with them, and we can’t prove them in a court of law. Not everyone, for example, would agree that what happened on 9/11 was a tragedy. A lot of people would, but some people wouldn’t. Not everyone would agree that stealing and murder are wrong. Some people think the ends justify the means and sometimes it’s okay to do those things. You might think you’re poor and someone else may see what you have and think you’re rich. Same thing about thinking you’re overweight or that a person is a jerk. You weigh a certain amount – that’s a factual, neutral circumstance. The label “overweight” is subjective and therefore not factual. The other person said certain words. That is a factual, neutral circumstance. A lot of people may agree that makes him or her a jerk, but not everyone would, so that’s not factual. There’s also no way to prove in a court of law that someone is a jerk.

So why does that matter? Why am I spending so much time differentiating between circumstances and thoughts? Two primary reasons. One, as I said



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before, we often can't control circumstances, but we can control our thoughts, feelings, actions, and results. We can't control the weather, how our coworkers behave in meetings, or what someone posts on social media, but we can control what we think, how we feel, and what we do in response to those things. Which brings me to the second reason: circumstances don't cause our feelings, actions or results. Someone leaving a mess in the breakroom doesn't cause me to feel frustrated or angry. Someone saying words to me doesn't cause me to lash out at them. Someone bringing donuts to work every Friday doesn't cause me to gain weight. Our normal human tendency is to attribute these to things outside our control, but when we do that, we give all our power away. If someone or something else outside of us is responsible for what we are thinking, feeling, and doing, we have to wait for those things to change before we can think, feel, or act differently. We have to wait for something outside of our control to change before we can have a different result, and that is so disempowering!

It feels easier to do that – to blame situations or other people for what we have in life. Believe me, I get it! I am well-practiced at blaming others for making me feel frustrated or angry or sad or dissatisfied. I have lots of experience blaming other people for work projects failing or my ideas not being heard. And I could give you lots of evidence to justify my blaming. The problem with doing that, what I eventually realized that really changed my life, is there is no upside to doing that. Blaming someone or something else makes you feel better temporarily, but it doesn't make anything better. It doesn't fix anything. It keeps you completely disempowered and it creates unnecessary suffering...for you.

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I want to go a little deeper on this idea that circumstances don't cause our feelings. There's a great quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* where Hamlet says, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Circumstances are neutral – they're not good or bad. What makes them seem good or bad are our thoughts about them, and I'm going to use a bit of an extreme example to really drive this point home.

Death is a neutral circumstance – it's not good or bad. It may not seem neutral, but hang with me here. Let's say you think death is bad, or that someone dying is a bad or a sad thing. Would everyone in the world agree that death is bad or sad? No. Could you prove it in a court of law? Also no. So it's not a fact that death is bad or sad.

Someone may die and you may feel sad about it, but your sadness isn't caused by the person's death. If the circumstance of someone dying caused feelings, you would feel sad the moment anyone dies. But people are dying literally every second of every day, and you're not feeling sad about the 99.999999 percent of those deaths. You may think, "Well, yes, that's because I don't know 99.9999 percent of those people." But even if we're talking about someone you do know, someone close to you, their death won't cause you to feel sad. My husband could die while he's at work or somewhere else away from me, and I wouldn't feel sad the moment he dies. I wouldn't feel sad until I knew he had died and I had a thought about it. My thoughts about his death would cause incredible sadness for me, but not his death itself. This is a very important distinction to understand, because it helps you recognize what you can control and not give that control or power away to someone or something else.

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I've focused a lot on circumstances and thoughts, and I want to zoom out a bit now and look at the whole Model. Let me run through a couple of scenarios to show you how all five categories – circumstances, thoughts, feelings, actions, and results – work together. This first scenario comes from my life when I still worked as a coach and trainer in public education. One time my boss had asked some colleagues and me to develop a training for teachers at one of the high schools. I don't remember exactly what the training was on, but I do remember I took it upon myself to build the presentation around a food theme. I worked on this presentation for hours and I took a lot of pride picking out the right graphics and pairing those with the right font faces and coming up with clever food analogies to help teach the content. I was really proud of this presentation and was excited to share it with my boss. Well, the day came to share it, and I ran through the slide deck in front of my boss and the rest of the team, and after I finished, my boss said, "We're not going to use your presentation. I think it might be confusing and convey the wrong message."

Now, remember, I had put hours into this presentation at this point, and I thought it was really good. I thought the food metaphors and analogies were so genius. When my boss said she thought it might be confusing and we weren't going to use my design, I immediately felt dejected and resentful – mostly resentful. I thought, "She doesn't appreciate me and all this work I've done," and for the rest of the meeting, I basically checked out. I stopped participating in the conversation. My brain was spinning with thoughts of how I wasn't appreciated, of how many other times my work wasn't appreciated. I started thinking, "If I'm not appreciated, why should I do any

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work at all? Why am I even here in this meeting?” And yes, I know, it sounds so childish, but this is what our brains do.

Let's put this scenario into a Model and see what this created for me.

Remember we're using The Model to build awareness of what we're creating so we can decide if we like our result and if we want to create something different. Let's start with the circumstance, the C line. What are the neutral, boring, non-judgmental facts here? We want to first separate those out from our thoughts. My boss tasked me and the rest of the team with developing a training – that's a fact, that's a neutral circumstance. I worked a certain number of hours developing the presentation for the training – also neutral circumstance. We met as a team on a certain date. I showed the presentation to my boss, and she said the words, “We're not going to use your presentation. I think it might be confusing and convey the wrong message.” Those things could all be proven in a court of law, they're all neutral, and they're all not subjective.

When my boss said the words, “We're not going to use your presentation. I think it might be confusing and convey the wrong message,” (which remember was a neutral circumstance) I had all kinds of thoughts. My brain made up all kinds of stories about what she said. One of my thoughts was, “She doesn't appreciate me and the work I do.” That thought caused me to feel resentful. Because I was feeling resentful, I did a variety of actions. I checked out from the meeting, stopped participating, and spun out in a bunch of thoughts about not being appreciated. The result of those actions was that I didn't appreciate myself for the work I did, and I didn't give my boss anything to appreciate about me moving forward.

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The thing I want to emphasize here is that I didn't feel resentful and do what I did and create the result I did because of what my boss said. Her words didn't cause or create any of that. My thoughts about her words caused everything that followed. And I know that because if, instead of thinking, "She doesn't appreciate me and my work," I had thought something like, "Well, that's a bummer, but maybe she's right. I wonder what I can learn from this," I would have felt something completely different. I probably would have felt curious instead of resentful, and if I had felt curious, I would have acted differently. I would have stayed engaged in the meeting, I would have asked why she thought it was confusing and how it was conveying the wrong message so I could learn and apply that to future presentations. I would have listened to her suggestions. I wouldn't have spun out digging up evidence of other offenses. I could have acknowledged and supported myself for the work and time I put in and thought about how this was an opportunity for growth. All of that would have created a completely different result. I would have shown up in a way much more aligned with my best self instead of in a way that's pretty much the opposite of my best self.

Now, if you listened to what I just said and you're thinking, "Wait, I don't want all this to be *my* fault! That seems terrible if I can't blame someone else for what I'm feeling and doing" – consider that it's actually good news that you're the one to blame, that it's your fault you feel the way you do, because if you caused the problem, you can fix it. If someone else caused the problem, you have to wait for them to fix it before you can feel better, and that's a terrible position to be in. It is so disempowering, and you may never feel better if that's the case!

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It's great news that your thoughts and not your circumstances create your feelings! Not that it's always easy to accept that, because we're generally pretty good at blaming other things and other people for our feelings, actions, and results. But whenever I catch myself going into that victim-y kind of mindset now, I find it helpful to ask, "What's the upside of me blaming someone else? How does that help me get out of this or through this?" And those questions are pretty effective at shifting me back into a more self-reliant headspace where I accept responsibility for my feelings, my thoughts, my actions, my results.

OK, next scenario. This one comes from a client. This individual had decided to launch a podcast for her business. She had published the first episode of her podcast a few days before we talked and had recorded the next three episodes. She had a plan in place to get those episodes reviewed, edited and published, and she'd also set a goal for the number of downloads she wanted by a certain date. After setting that goal, she talked to a mentor about it, and her mentor challenged her to quadruple the goal. She immediately started stressing out and thinking, "I have to change my goal, and I don't have enough time to get that many downloads by my goal date." She kept spinning in thoughts of how it just wasn't possible to do this because she was a newbie, unknown podcaster, she didn't have a large audience, and while she had some downloads for her first episode, it wasn't nearly enough to be on track for the 4x goal. So instead of following the plan she had laid out to get her next three episodes up and running, she kept checking her download numbers and doing mental calculations of how many more she'd need to hit the 4x goal. She'd tell herself she needed a break and then she'd go watch something on Netflix or get something to eat or go for a walk.

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So let's put this scenario into a Model. What were the neutral facts, the circumstance or the C line of the Model? Well, my client published her first podcast episode on a certain date. She had set a download goal. She had three episodes recorded and a plan to get them reviewed, edited, and published. Her mentor said, "You should quadruple your download goal." Those are her circumstances.

Her thoughts about her circumstances were, "I have to change my goal, and I don't have enough time to get that many downloads by my goal date." (Side note, you want to focus on one thought at a time in a Model because you'll get clearer, cleaner results that way. There are actually two different thoughts here – "I have to change my goal" and "I don't have enough time to get that many downloads by my goal date," and for this example, I'm going to focus on the "I don't have enough time" thought.) When she thought that, she felt stressed, which then caused her to spin out in thoughts about how it wasn't possible and brought up all the evidence to support that. She didn't stick to her plan to get the next three episodes up and running and instead did things like watch Netflix, eat, and go for walks. The result of all of that was that she didn't take advantage of the time she had and she didn't make progress on her goal. By not sticking to the schedule she had set, she made it less likely she would hit even her original download goal, let alone the quadruple download goal.

Now she thought she was spinning out and not following through on her plan because her mentor had challenged her to 4x her goal. But someone challenging you to quadruple a goal doesn't have the power to make you spin out. It can't make you feel stressed and watch Netflix and snack instead of following your plan. She was stressed and then spinning out and not working

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on her plan purely because she was thinking, “I don’t have enough time to get that many downloads by my goal date.” Her brain went to work to make that thought true...which, side note number two, is what ALL our brains do. And again, that’s why it’s so important to be aware of, to pay attention to, what you’re thinking. Your thoughts will create your results.

If, instead of thinking, “I don’t have enough time to get that many downloads by my goal date,” she had thought something like, “I wonder what I can do to hit that 4x goal,” she probably would have felt curious or open, and that would have caused her to take actions like following her plan, getting the next episodes out, and brainstorming ideas on how to get more downloads. She wouldn’t have been Netflixing, snacking, and walking instead of working. And all of that would have created a result of setting herself up to achieve the 4x download goal.

So same circumstance, but changing the thought could have created a completely different result.

I hope these examples have been helpful for you, and that you can see the power of The Model. If you’d like to try out the tool for yourself, I’d suggest you start by separating out C’s and T’s in a problem. Take a few minutes to write about a problem, why it’s a problem, and any other thoughts you have about the problem, and then practice identifying what the facts of the problem are. What are the things that could be proven in a court of law or that everyone would agree on? Remember, circumstances are neutral and pretty boring. There should be no adjectives or judgments when you’re



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listing your C's. If it sounds even remotely dramatic, it's probably a thought and not a circumstance.

And just differentiating C's from T's can be very illuminating, because you'll start to notice that a lot of things your brain thinks are facts and truths of the world are actually thoughts instead. Which, as I said before, is great news, because you have control over your thoughts, whereas you don't often have control over circumstances.

And all of this is not to say that you *should* change any of your thoughts – even if they're “negative.” The Model is meant purely to help you increase your awareness. What you do with that awareness is up to you, but awareness will help you make more empowered decisions in your life.

Feel free to hit me up on Instagram or Facebook if you have any questions about what I've shared. I'm @kerimartinezcoaching on both platforms.

See you next week.

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meetings or delivering presentations and trainings at work, this cheat sheet will help you do that.

Have a beautiful week – ciao for now!