

Facing a tricky problem
in your life?



Need help finding a solution?

We all deal with problems almost every day of our lives. Fortunately, we can solve most of our daily problems by thinking up a solution on the spot or using a strategy that worked for us in the past.

What about those problems that are not so easily fixed?

These kinds of problems can create stress and make us feel rotten. Often we cope by doing what we have done in the past. Until we come up with a solution that actually works, the problem never really goes away and continues to create stress in our lives.

Why is problem-solving an important skill for mental health?

Problems that don't go away can take a toll on our well-being. Over time, a small problem can become a big problem if left unsolved. We end up feeling frustrated, stressed or maybe even a little depressed and hopeless.

Studies show that problem-solving has a number of benefits including:

- better functioning at work or school
- more satisfying relationships with our friends, family and co-workers
- higher self-esteem
- higher life satisfaction

The steps for solving difficult problems are pretty straightforward, but most of us are never taught these steps.

step 1

'Do I have a problem and how do I face it?'

Pay attention to your feelings

By using your negative feelings to let you know that there's a problem, you can recognize problems sooner and start fixing them! For example, if you are angry whenever you talk to your boss, this is a sign that there is some kind of problem at work.

Make a list

Write out a list of the problems you need to fix before they turn into bigger problems (e.g., problems that have been around for a long time or seem to 'go away' only to pop up again later on).

Look for opportunities

Look for any opportunities or challenges in the situation rather than only looking at the negatives. If a problem seems less scary, we are more likely to try to solve it. For example, one way to look at the work problem with your boss is to see it as a chance to improve your working environment.

step 2

'What's the problem?'

You can't solve a problem until you have defined what the problem is. In order to do that, ask yourself these questions:

What is the situation right now?

- What is happening that's upsetting to me?

1)

What would I like the situation to be?

- How would things be if I weren't upset?

2)

What are the obstacles?

- What is standing between me and what I would like the situation to be?

3)

Tips

• Be as specific as possible

If you are vague in defining the problem, it's hard to know where to begin solving it. For example, it would be hard to solve a credit card problem if you say: "*I have money problems.*" A better definition might be: "*I don't have enough money to pay the minimum credit card payment.*"

• Stick to the facts

Don't put opinions in your definition, only facts. A bad definition for a money problem would be: "*The guys at the credit card company are jerks!*" Even if that's true, it doesn't help solve the problem as you can't turn them into nice people!

• Don't be too narrow

When we define our problems in a narrow way, it's harder to come up with solutions. For example, you would like to travel this summer but you don't have a car. A narrow definition might be "*How can I get enough money to buy a car in a month?*" A better definition might be: "*How can I travel this summer within my budget?*" By defining your problem this way, buying a car is only one of many solutions that could also include getting a deal on a plane ticket, taking the bus, or catching a ride with some friends.

step 3

'How will I know when I get there?'

Have some goals for your problem.

A good idea is to use the **SMART** principle:

Goals should be

Specific,

Measurable,

Attainable,

Realistic and

Time-limited.

For example, if I am in debt, my goal could be "paying off my credit card debt in 12 months" rather than "not having any money problems."

step 5

Picking a solution

Always pick the best solution to your problem, not the perfect solution. The key is to pick the solution that has the most benefits and the least costs (there will probably be some negatives to whatever solution you choose). Use the following questions as a guide to picking the best solution.

Will this solution help me reach my goals and solve my problem?

If a solution doesn't solve the problem, it's probably not the best one to pick.

If I choose this solution, how good or bad am I going to feel?

Sometimes we come up with solutions that might solve the problem very well. However, if we expect to feel terrible while doing it, the solution may not be the best choice at this time.

How much time and effort does this solution involve?

Solutions that take up too much time and energy may not be the best choice, especially if we cannot realistically carry them out.

Does this solution have more benefits than costs if I choose it?

When looking at costs and benefits, it's a good idea to think about how a solution will affect you and others (both now and in the future).

step 4

Coming up with possible solutions

It's easy to get stuck in the old habit of coming up with the same ideas over and over again. When it comes to difficult problems, the first ideas are not always the best!

Quantity: it's easier to find a good solution when you have lots of solutions to choose from. Write out at least three or four solutions: the more the better!

Don't judge! Do not judge yet whether your solutions are good, bad or silly. You are more likely to think of new solutions if you also include some wild ones.

Variety: come up with lots of different kinds of solutions. For example, if your solutions to money problems include borrowing from your friends, your parents or your sibling, you have come up with three solutions that all involve the same idea: borrowing money. Instead, you want many different *types* of solutions such as selling some of your possessions, looking for loose change in the couch or getting a second job.

More tips for finding possible solutions:

• Ask others for help!

Get new ideas from friends, family, or professionals. This is an important aspect of social support that can help reduce our stress. For more on social support, see *Wellness Module 3: Social Support*.

• Combine solutions

Some solutions that seem silly can work when combined with other ideas. For example, parents often need to problem-solve what to do with their kids all summer. By combining "send them to the moon" with "get someone else to take care of them" one solution might be "enroll our kids in summer camp for 2 weeks."

step 6

Putting your solution into action

After you have chosen a solution, you need to *make a plan of action!* Write down all the steps you need to do in order to carry out your solution. If you know what you need to do, you are more likely to do it.

step 7

Checking up on your progress

It's a good idea to track how well your solution is actually working. If your problem is resolving itself, be sure to reward yourself for a job well done. If your solution is not working, keep in mind that sometimes things don't always turn out as expected even with the best-laid plans.

What can you do when the solution doesn't seem to be working? Ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I define my problem correctly?
- Were my goals unrealistic?
- Was there a better solution?
- Did I carry out the solution properly?

Many problems require us to go through these steps more than once until we have a satisfactory solution. This is normal—especially for more difficult problems.



To help you work through all of these steps, see our problem-solving worksheet at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/helpmewith/wellness4.shtml

Select Sources

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You might also be interested in...

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