

Solving Problems: A Guide for Reducing Stress

Key Points

Problems are a normal part of life

Problems don't cause stress, our thoughts do

Reducing stress makes problem solving easier

How to solve problems

Tips for solving problems



Problems are a normal part of life

Having problems and feeling stress is nothing new for adults, we have been having them ever since we were children. Although our childhood problems may have just been how to tie our shoes or write our names, they were still pretty stressful at the time! Of course these problems don't cause us stress now, but think back a few years about what caused you stress then but is now a normal part of your week. Maybe these stressful events were adapting to a new work policy or taking on more responsibilities at home, but either way you met the challenge and adapted. This is because with each problem we solve, we learn and grow as problem solvers. To reduce stress when confronting new problems, it is important to know that having a problem is nothing new and just like your old problems, you will be able to solve this one.



Problems don't cause stress, our thoughts do

Not every problem we find ourselves in causes us stress and what causes stress in one person may not cause stress in another. This is because a problem is not what causes stress, but rather our thoughts about the problem. When we are experiencing a problem we weigh what is needed to solve it with what resources we have available. We only feel stress when we think we do not have enough resources to solve a problem. Sometimes after we resolve a problem we realize we had all the resources available and we shouldn't have felt stressed in the first place. One of the greatest resources we have available is our own knowledge and ability to solve problems. Having a healthy respect for our own abilities is a great way to help prevent stress from ever occurring.

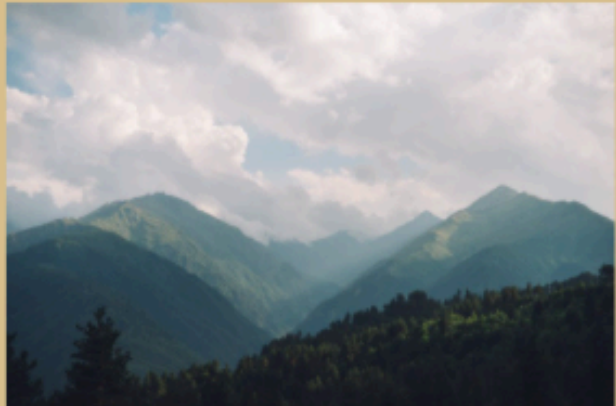
Reducing stress makes problem solving easier

Stress is our body's way of telling us that there is a problem occurring that needs our attention. It is important to notice when we start to feel stressed so we can prevent it from getting out of control. When our stress is out of control we may panic and not be able to think clearly to solve our problems. Everyone's first feelings of stress are a little different. Identify what yours are (headache, a fast heart beat, or a pit in your stomach) and take action to help reduce these feelings. What helps someone reduce their stress is unique to them: try counting to ten, deep breathing, going for a walk, or anything that has helped you in the past. Once you have slowed down your thoughts of worry and limited your stress you can start using your problem-solving skills.



How to solve problems

The booklet attached with this guide discusses the six problem solving steps: identifying the problem, listing solutions, listing their pros and cons, selecting one solution, making an action plan, and using the solution. Each step is explained in the booklet in more detail and there is a worksheet to guide you through solving a problem you are currently facing.



Tips for solving problems



- When identifying the problem determine if it is solvable and important to you. If your problem is unsolvable don't set your goal to solving the problem, but changing the way you feel about the problem. If the problem is not important try and focus on a problem that is.
- When your problem is large or difficult and you find it is hard to think of the whole picture, try writing things down to help you work through everything.
- If writing things down does not help enough, try focusing on only the important parts of a problem. This can be done by breaking a larger problem into smaller parts that each need to be solved.
- To manage feelings of being discouraged when solving a problem, try and visualize what will be of benefit to you if you solve it and how that will feel.
- If you are concerned that you will be unsuccessful in solving your problem and do not want to try, think of what would happen if you did nothing and compare that to what would happen if you are only partially successful in solving your problem. This mental exercise is helpful as oftentimes a partial success is still better than doing nothing.



Problem Solving

 TalkPlus

Problem Solving

Problem Solving is an evidence based intervention for the treatment of low mood or anxiety.

This workbook can be used either alone or with the support of your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner.

How to use this workbook.

Problem Solving has six steps. It is important to work through one step at a time, only move on to the next step of Problem Solving once you are comfortable with using the previous step.

It is key to follow all six steps of Problem Solving in sequence.

It can take some time for an intervention to become effective and to show improvement. It is important to allow enough time for the intervention to be effective.

Evidence of Effectiveness;

[http://www.europsy-journal.com/article/S0924-9338\(06\)00188-X/abstract](http://www.europsy-journal.com/article/S0924-9338(06)00188-X/abstract)

Helpful Resources;

How to Solve Daily Life Problems, Complete Home Toolkit www.anxietybc.com

Problem Solving cedar.exeter.ac.uk

An Introduction to Coping with Anxiety, by Brosnan and Hogan www.overcoming.co.uk

Solving Life's Problems, by Arthur Nezu, Christine Nezu, and Thomas D'Zurilla
www.springerpub.com

www.talkplus.org.uk

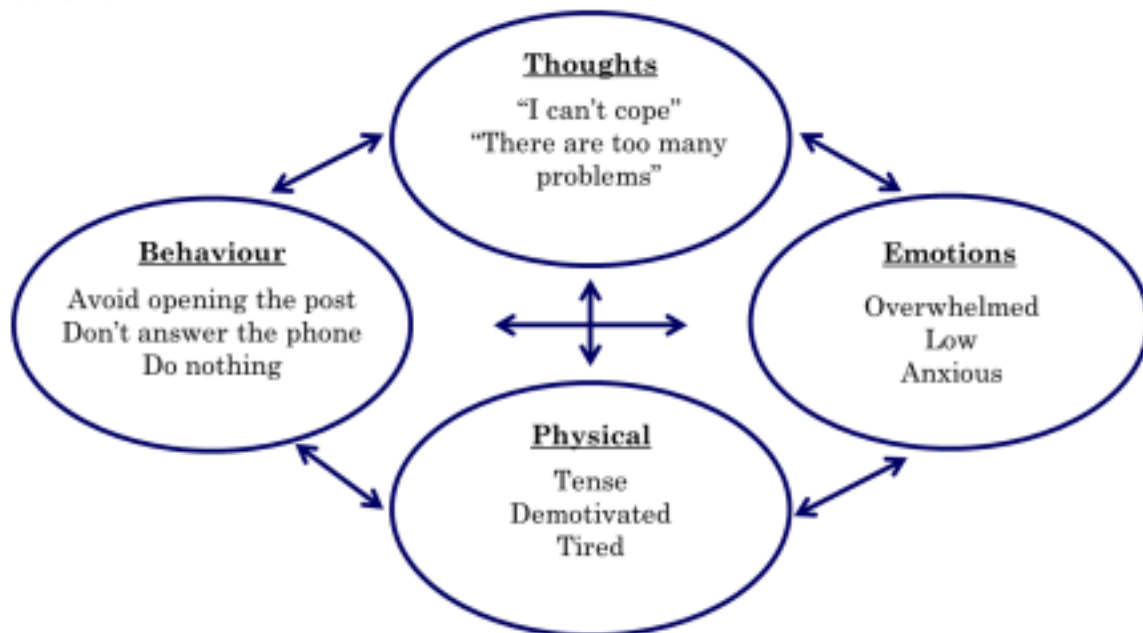
Problem Solving



Tackling Practical Problems

Problem Solving is an evidence based treatment used to tackle practical problems in low mood or anxiety. It works by tackling one problem at a time and developing a specific action. We do this by developing as many solutions as possible and evaluating each solution before choosing one to implement.

When we feel low or anxious it can become very difficult to tackle practical problems, or to even decide which problem needs to be addressed. For example, if we have not paid our bills we may avoid opening the post, stop answering the phone and distract ourselves by engaging in other activities. Initially avoiding tackling the problem can seem beneficial as it reduces our anxiety or low mood to begin with, however the longer we leave our problems unresolved the more difficult it can become to solve them.



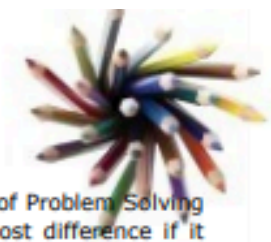
The Vicious Cycle

Being too busy, avoiding, ignoring or distracting ourselves from solving practical problems can lead to a vicious cycle in which we continue to feel overwhelmed, low or anxious. Anxiety and low mood decrease our natural problem solving abilities, therefore making it even more difficult to tackle our problems. Problem Solving breaks this vicious cycle by gradually tackling one problem at a time in a structured way to make our problems more manageable.

STEP ONE

Identifying one problem

It may be that you have more than one problem at a time, therefore the first step of Problem Solving is to choose one problem, perhaps start with the problem that will make the most difference if it wasn't there. It is important that we define the problem as clearly as possible, try to be clear about what aspects of the situation make it a problem.



Identify one problem

"I have too much work to do so I am completing work at home and missing time with my family"

"I haven't paid my rent arrears and now they say I will be evicted"

"I can't do anything to help my elderly relative"

STEP TWO

List all possible solutions

List as many solutions as possible; don't worry about how practical, good or reasonable the solutions are at this stage, try for a list of at least five possible solutions. It can be difficult to come up with solutions when we are feeling overwhelmed therefore it is important that we try to be as creative as possible so you can come up with solutions you may not have thought about previously. It can also be helpful to ask a trusted friend or family member to help you come up with solutions, or even to look online.

List all possible solutions

1. Only do what I can complete in work hours
2. Talk to my boss about my problem
3. Quit my job
4. Manage time better at work
5. Make my colleagues do some of the work

STEP THREE

List the pros and cons of each solution

Read through the list of possible solutions you have made in Step 2 and choose the top solutions you feel are most likely to succeed. Evaluate each of the remaining solutions in terms of their advantages and disadvantages, or pros and cons. It may be difficult to see which solution might be best, it is good to consider what resources you might need and whether you would require anyone else to be present. A good solution may be one that doesn't require too many resources or the solution that appears most achievable.

Solution	Advantages	Disadvantages
Only do what I can complete in work hours.	Have family time. Will highlight the problem. Increasing pleasurable activities will improve my mood.	Won't get all my work done. My workload will increase day by day. I will get more stressed.
Talk to my boss about my problem.	My boss is in a position to help me. Have family time.	I don't want my boss to know that I can't cope. Might not help.
Manage time better at work.	Have family time.	Not enough time to complete all tasks.

STEP FOUR

Select one solution



After reviewing the pros and cons of each solution, select one solution that you feel at the time will have the best chance of a positive outcome. It may be difficult to choose a solution as you are concerned that it will not work, however keep in mind that you have gone through the pros and cons of each. If several solutions seem equally as good then pick the one that requires the least effort.

Select one solution
Talk to my boss about my problem

STEP FIVE

Make an action plan

Develop an action plan of how you will carry out the solution step by step using the worksheet. Some useful questions to consider while developing the action plan are; What is the first step I need to take? Where will I be? Who will be involved? When will I carry out the plan? As carrying out the plan may be difficult it is important that we are very specific about each step of the plan and to break it down into manageable steps.

Make an action plan	
Steps	Include what, where, when, and with who
1	Email my boss Monday at 9:30am to request a meeting.
2	List what I am currently finding difficult and any solutions.
3	Arrange and attend the meeting with my boss.
4	Explain to my boss my current difficulties- being specific and clear.
5	Agree a plan with my boss to manage my workload.

STEP SIX

Implement the plan & review

Carry out the solution as outlined in the action plan you developed in *Step Five*. Once you have carried out the plan evaluate how effective the solution was. Think about what went well, or what you might do differently in the future. If the solution did not fully fix the problem then consider whether the action plan needs to be revised or return to *Step Four* and choose another solution to use. Learning from an attempt can be invaluable in identifying the best solution.

To complete Problem Solving use the *Worksheet*.

WORKSHEET ONE



Identify one problem

Each of these boxes is a text box in Microsoft Word where you can type your own answers.
Please try writing a brief answer in each box.

List all possible solutions

Solution	Advantages	Disadvantages

WORKSHEET TWO



Select one solution

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Make an action plan

Steps	<i>Include what, where, when, and with who</i>
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

Review your solution

<i>What went well?</i>	
<i>What could you do differently</i>	