

Problem Solving

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Problem solving is a very important skill to have. All sorts of life's troubles can be boiled down to 'a problem' which, if you can solve it, leaves you in an immensely better situation. This session looks at a powerful, systematic and effective way of solving problems in a simple 6 step sequence.

Step 1.

Find a pad of paper and a pen or pencil. It is essential that you write everything down – it makes problem solving much easier and better.

Step 2.

Write down what your problem is. Keep it simple, don't make it over-involved, use plain English. E.g. "I'm broke – I'm spending more than I'm earning."

Step 3.

Write down ALL possible solutions. Even ones that you know you will not use. This is a really important step: if you can make yourself write ALL possible solutions then you know all your options are 'on the table' for you to see.

TIP: At this stage simply write them down, don't start choosing.

Step 4.

Examine all the options you've written down and choose your preferred option. It may be that there are some good options to choose between or it may be you are choosing from the 'least-bad' options. Either way, make your choice. Sometimes you might want to combine more than one option together.

TIP: So long as you have all the relevant information in front of you, you are often best to be guided by your 'gut feeling'.

Step 5.

Explain your choice to yourself. Explain why you've chosen what you've chosen. This is useful because it allows you to examine your thinking and, probably, to consolidate your choice.

Step 6.

Act on your decision. Problem-solving is not simply a theoretical exercise; it is important for you to act on what you believe to be right.



Case 1

David had been upset and put out for five years about his wife's infidelity. Every time they had an argument he brought it up. He brooded about it; it was "wrecking the marriage and my life". Using the problem solving technique in therapy, David and his therapist produced 23 different options for him to choose from. Examining them all carefully he eventually chose item number 13: "forget all about it". And this is what he did – he acted on that – and when he and his wife saw the therapist 6 months later they were able to report that things were entirely back to normal again.

Case 2

Steve was broke. He had an expensive house mortgaged to the hilt. His children were at expensive private schools, he and his wife drove nice cars and had luxurious holidays. He was working as hard as he could, earning as much as he could, and yet was spending more than he was earning. The bank manager would tolerate it no longer. Steve and Tessa sat down and produced several options for them to choose from. They eventually chose option number 1: Sell the house and buy a much cheaper one. They regarded this as the 'least bad' option but, three years later, reported that they had chosen right.

Case 3

Ed met up with his friend Graham for their 3-monthly drink and get together in London. After an hour or so drinking and chatting, they decided they had a problem - they were bored. They got a piece of paper out and wrote down all of the options they had for how they could spend that evening. They eventually chose option number 7: "phone up all the most famous restaurants they had ever heard of until they found one that had a table free that evening, go there and have a great meal". They reported that worked very well.

In-session discussion.

Why was David (Case 1) able to 'forget all about it' after problem-solving, when he hadn't been able to before?

What problems have you resolved successfully? Share your successes with others in the group.

Project between now and next meeting.

Use the problem solving technique exactly as described on this sheet to address one or more problems of your choice. Remember they can be 'serious' problems or 'recreational' ones.

This project is important, so the group leader will ask you how you got on next week. Keep notes if you like.

TIP: Problem solving is a powerful technique that can be applied to problems big and small, serious or recreational.

Mythbuster:

There are some problems you simply can't do anything about. Not true.

This mis-perception normally comes from an over-simplification of the problem. For instance, take the most extreme problem all of us will have some day: "I'm dying". This is an over-simplification - the real problem is "I'm very sad that I'm dying" or "I'm very worried about dying" or something similar. Once you rewrite the problem in that form, the problem-solving strategy can work well even on this most extreme of concerns.