

Module 6: Problem-Solving

- 6 Step model for problem solving
- Problem map (to help facilitate thinking through the problem to foresee possible positive benefits and negative consequences and aid insight into the nature of the problem) (exercise/handout)
- Understanding a Problem Behavior map (exercise/handout)
- Problem-Solving and Goal Setting Sheet (handout)

PROBLEM-SOLVING

Problems. We all have them. But, why do some people appear to be better than others in resolving them? Planning and practice. They have a plan when they approach problems and they practice it. One of the most beneficial coping skills an individual can possess is good problem-solving skills. Mastering the principles of problem-solving prepares us to cope more effectively with the diverse problems of life. A great deal of our negative life experiences are likely related to ineffective behavior that fails to solve those challenges and problems life presents us and this usually leads to undesired effects like psychosomatic illness (chronic headaches, stomach aches, etc), depression, anxiety, excessive alcohol or drug use, and various other difficulties.

In general we find that individuals lacking adequate/good problem-solving skills...

- generate fewer possible solutions
- suggest solutions that often don't include social supports
- have inaccurate expectations about probable consequences or alternate/different solutions.

By mastering a systematic approach to making decisions and solving problems, we gain benefits like...

- learning a process that promotes collaboration, cohesiveness, and mutual respect among family and group members.
- preventing interpersonal conflicts produced by dysfunctional modes of reaching decisions or solving problems (such as all or nothing thinking, authoritarian patterns or competitive power struggles).
- reducing tension, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse by solving stress producing problem effectively.
- generating a wider range of options for coping with problematic situations, thereby enhancing chances of selecting maximally effective decisions or solutions.
- enhancing the likelihood that family and group members will commit themselves to implementing options that are selected.
- increasing confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (we feel good about ourselves) by acquiring a mode of problem solving that can be employed in future problematic situations.

Preparing ourselves to learn problem solving skills requires motivation and commitment on our part along with practicing the components of problem solving. This challenge is not simple because many times others view themselves as victims of unreasonable and offensive behavior on our part and fail to see how they contributed to the difficulties. So they perceive the solution as consisting of favorable changes by us, "the offending" person. Therefore they see no need for collaborative problem solving and often assume an adversarial quality and our interactions tend to be characterized by arguments, mutual recriminations, put-downs, and power struggles and nothing gets solved.

So, we're going to look at improving our problem solving skills today. We're going to look at a systematic approach that will help us learn to collaborate in solving problems or in reaching decisions effectively. It involves a number of steps that will help you to define problems accurately and to generate more than one possible solution so that you can select the best possible option. The best possible option is the one that best meets your needs. The process also involves guidelines that will help you to work together as a team (if others are involved) and avoid needless and unproductive hassles. So, when approaching a problem we need to observe some guidelines...

1. Be specific in relating problems.
2. Focus on the present problem rather than on past difficulties.
3. Focus on only one problem at a time.
4. Listen attentively to the concerns and feelings of others who are sharing problems.
5. Share problems in a positive and constructive manner.

When we develop good problem solving skills it equips up to...

1. Identify the causes of emotional difficulties.
2. Recognize the resources we have to deal with difficulties.
3. Gives us a systematic way to overcome our current problems.
4. Enhances our sense of control.
5. Prepares us to deal more effectively with future problems.

We need to remember though that implementing the process does not guarantee that resultant decisions and solutions will always produce desired results. However, using the process does avoid discord and substantially increases the chances of achieving favorable outcomes.

So, let's look at a simple but effective 5 step process for problem solving. The first thing we want to do is..

1. Acknowledge/Identify the problem.

At times, this is more difficult than it appears. An example here: Say you just got written up at work and placed on probation. So, you might see that as the problem that needs addressed. But, why did you get placed on probation? Then you realize, I've been missing a lot of work and coming in late. So, is this really the problem? Let's go one step further, why have you been missing work and coming in late? Because I've gone out the night before and drank a little too much so I was hung over the next morning. So, in this instance the real problem would be "I'm drinking too much" instead of "I'm on probation at work". If we address the real issue behind what has caused the behavior (drinking too much), we pretty much resolve the probation issue. This is why it's really important to look at a situation and be able to identify the real problem.

Next...

2. Brainstorm and generate possible solutions.

We want to come up with as many possible solutions as we can think of at this point. This isn't the time to consider their feasibility, we're just looking for options. Try to think in ways you haven't before. Consider the problem we just mentioned – you're drinking too much, having a hang over, and not making it to work. What are some of the options we could come up with for this? Options: Not drink on nights before I have to go to work; Not drink as much when I do; Drink only on the weekends; Drink the way I am doing now; but invest in an oxygen tank to alleviate my hangovers in the morning (*as you'll note this one probably isn't real feasible, but in this stage I don't care about that because it is an option*); etc.

Then...

3. Evaluate each option, considering the needs of those affected.

Now is when we look at the feasibility of our options. We want to look at both the advantages and disadvantages – the short term positive consequences and the long term negative consequences – of each option. Once we've done this then we...

4. Implement the option selected.

Once we've looked at the feasibility of our options and picked the best one. So, we put it into action. But, that's not the end. Because after we put it into action, we need to...

5. Evaluate the outcome.

Just because we went through the process and picked one option doesn't mean we have to stay with that option if it turns out that once we put it into action it didn't give us the result we wanted. If it didn't, then we start the process over to find another one. But, if it did, we stick to it.

Sometimes when we look at solving problems we may have to consider taking some risks – trying something new, or approaching the same problem in a different way than we're use to, thinking about it differently. This is a risk – it's different, it's new, we don't know exactly what the outcome will be. There are many times when we have to take certain risks to bring about a desired change, growth, and learning. By avoiding risk we *may* avoid suffering and sorrow. However, we will also avoid learning, feeling, change, growth, love, and living. To avoid risk in making decisions or solving problems is to remain a prisoner of fear and doubt.

So, why don't we practice this a little bit and see if we can get comfortable working through problems. To do this we're going to use a visual aid to help us see how our thinking works.

Hand out Problem and Understanding a Problem Behavior map and work during group with clients to help them get comfortable with working through a problem solving process. Work both maps during the group in an effort to give to visual strategies in identifying and considering a problem.

Encourage group members to share a problem in order to personalize the experience more. If they are unwilling to share a problem in the group, then as a group pick/manufacture a problem to work through with the maps.

Once both maps have been worked hand out the Problem Solving and Goal Setting handout in order to give a third approach to this process. Work through as appropriate.

PROBLEM SOLVING or GOAL-SETTING SHEET

1. Identify the problem or goal. If others are involved in this problem or goal, discuss their opinion. Try to reach an agreement on exactly what the problem or goal is. Write down *specifically* what the problem or goal is.

2. Brainstorm at least 3 possible solutions. Do not evaluate these at this time – wait till step 3.

- (a) _____
 - (b) _____
 - (c) _____
-

3. Briefly evaluate each solution. List major advantages and disadvantages.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
(a)	_____ _____	_____ _____
(b)	_____ _____	_____ _____
(c)	_____ _____	_____ _____

4. Choose the best solution(s). Consider how easy it would be to implement the solution, and how likely it is to be effective. _____

5. Plan the implementation.

When will it be implemented? _____

What resources are needed and how will they be obtained? _____

Who will do what to implement the solution/goal? _____

List what might go wrong in the implementation and how to overcome it.

Practice any difficult parts of the plan.

Who will check that all the steps of the plan have been implemented? _____

6. Review implementation and make changes/adjustments as needed.