



BC Cancer Agency

CARE + RESEARCH

An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

Problem solving



Coping is active problem-solving. When we are stressed by events, we are unable to be good problem-solvers as we either see no solution or one we don't like. There are steps to good problem-solving that we can follow no matter how stressed we are. Following the steps gives us a plan and results in better solutions being found. It is similar to following the steps in a recipe.

Steps in Problem Solving

1. Define the problem.
2. Recognize how you feel about the problem.
3. Relax and try not to think about solutions for a while.
4. Consider all possible solutions.
5. Try to imagine how other people might solve the problem or how to obtain the information needed to solve the problem.
6. Evaluate the pros and cons of each solution.
7. Arrange the solutions into a list starting with the least practical or least desirable one, all the way to the best.
8. Make a choice.
9. Briefly consider some favourable or positive aspects of the original problem. Can you think about it differently?

Problem solving explained...

Step 1: Define clearly the one problem you want to try and solve now.

Here are some examples:

- I want to get more information from my doctor on my treatment plans.
- I want to get back to work soon.
- I want to get the household tasks arranged.

The problem may also be a preoccupation with something or a feeling that you have. For example:

- I need to feel useful.
- I want to look more attractive.
- I want to be closer with my spouse.

The problem may be a task you have to do. For example:

- I have to go to the hospital for a few days.
- I have to decide on what treatment to take.
- I have to get more exercise.

Step 2: Identify and recognize how you feel about the problem: Thinking, feeling and behaving are all very much related and it is important not to ignore any of these. In the same way that thinking can affect your decisions, many of your feelings about a problem may lead to some very creative solutions.

Step 3: Take time out. Take time not to think about solutions or coping strategies. This phase of problem-solving is used to get away from what is on your mind, to relax for a while, using the relaxation exercises. By getting away from your problem for a brief period of time, you may uncover new and creative solutions.

Step 4: Think of as many different solutions as possible. Often when we are experiencing a great deal of distress we tend to focus only on one solution. Step 4 encourages you to list as many alternatives as possible, whether they be good, bad, or indifferent. This is a time for brainstorming, not evaluating. All solutions are valuable as often times a poor solution may trigger a better one and/or afford a contrast to those already known.

Step 5: Consider or imagine how other people would respond to the problem. In other words, sit back and say to yourself, "How might my friend solve this problem?" In this way, you may be able to shift your attention from your own approach or style and suddenly become aware of a totally different solution(s).

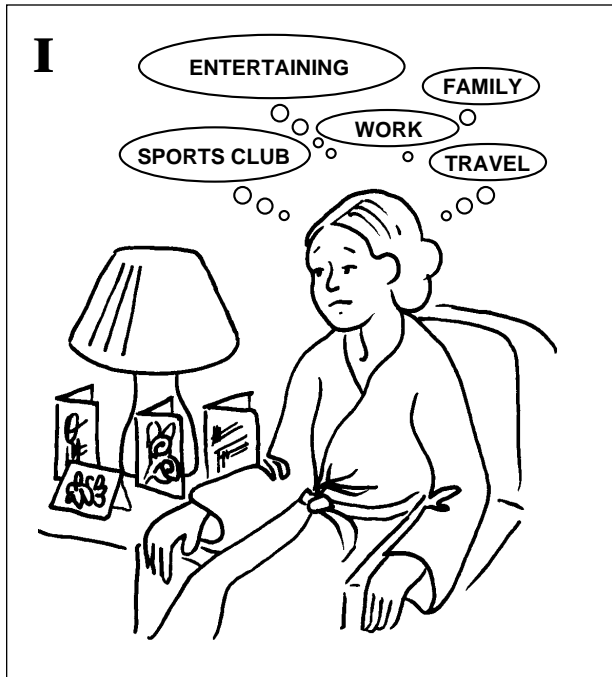
- Step 6:** List the advantages and disadvantages of each of the solutions which you generated previously. Now is the time to evaluate, to consider the possible consequences of all the different solutions. Be conscious of the fact that you are still not choosing a solution, merely assessing the validity of each one.
- Step 7:** Arrange the proposed solutions into a list, starting from the least practical or least desirable solution all the way up to the best solution or those solutions which seem to have the most likely chance of resolving the problem.
- Step 8:** Make a choice. The actual choice is quite simple and often readily apparent if all of the preceding steps have been followed carefully.
- Step 9:** Re-examine and re-define the problem. Go back to the original concern or problem and ask yourself, “Can it be thought about differently?” or “Is there anything positive that I can understand about this situation?” Many can go back to their original concern and see it in a different light or from a different perspective. For example, you may go back to a particular problem and discover that one of the positive things which comes out of the situation is that you are closer to people or you are better able to understand a particular person in your life. Thus, not everything that confronts someone with cancer is necessarily terrible and catastrophic. You can, through effective problem-solving, always discover at least one positive aspect to a difficult situation. This is a vital dimension of flexible coping.

My notes:

An example to practice...

An example to practice involves moving from the problem depicted in scenario I (below) to the solution seen in scenario II. Try it with a friend or by yourself. When you have practiced with this one, work on one of your own problems this way. You may want to put the steps in a spot where you see them frequently.

The Situation:



Pauline is married and has two children. She has recently had surgery for cancer of the uterus. Happily, she has good support from her husband and children and she will soon be able to return to work. The thought of dealing with her friends' and co-workers' questions is making her anxious. She worries what they will ask her about the operation, how things are at home, and the changes in her lifestyle as she has curtailed many of her household and social activities.

Once you have made a list of your problems or concerns, choose which problem to start with first.

Pauline's Practice with Problem Solving

Step 1: What is the one problem to be solved now?

Pauline has listed several problems — the curtailing of her activities at home, her husband's reactions to her surgery, the changes in her activities, etc., feeling different now from others, etc. Specifically she fears the questions about all that's happened and feels incapable of responding to them.

Step 2: How does she feel about it?

She is afraid. She fears being judged by her peers and co-workers. She is avoiding contact with others. She is anxious.

Step 3: Pause. Take some time out.

Pauline focussed on good memories of vacations with her husband and children. She practiced some calm, regular breathing while imagining herself on a holiday again with her family at their favourite spot on the beach with the warm sun and gentle breezes.

Step 4: Think of solutions.

Here are some of Pauline's ideas.

- Talk with someone who had the same surgery and ask how she handled the situation.
- Ask her doctor for suggestions.
- Avoid social situations for awhile.
- Anticipate questions and think up answers in advance.
- Just do her best to answer the questions and help the questioner out if they ask awkward ones.
- Refuse to comment and say that she isn't ready yet to talk about any such private matters.
- Ask her husband to warn her friends to avoid any embarrassing questions, or even ask him to answer for her.
- Relax before she goes out to remain calm when speaking to others.
- Rehearse certain responses with her husband.

Step 5: Imagine what others would do.

- Her husband would joke about it.
- Her friend Ghislane would say, "it's none of your business!"
- Her mother would become depressed and pity herself.
- Her friend Christiane would talk about her experiences and focus on the positive parts of it.
- Her priest would shift the conversation to the other person.

Step 6: Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of the solutions in Steps 4 and 5.

Here are some:

SOLUTIONS	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Talk with someone who had the same surgery and ask how she handled the situation.	She surely would understand me.	It would take a lot of energy to find such a person.
Ask her doctor for suggestions.	She has confidence in him.	He has never experienced this. He'll just tell her that she has to find the answer herself.
Avoid social situations for awhile.	She can gather her strength.	She feels isolated already. The longer she waits the harder it will be.
Anticipate questions and think up some answers in advance.	She'll feel more in control if she takes the initiative.	This takes a lot of energy. They may not even have thought of asking!
Just do her best to answer the questions and help the questioner out if they ask.	Once she's answered she won't have to do it again.	She can't choose the time or the place or the person.
Refuse to comment and say that she isn't ready yet to talk about any such private matters.	She's protecting herself.	She risks alienating her closest friends.
Ask her husband to warn her friends to avoid any embarrassing questions, or even ask him to answer for her.	She'll feel protected and secure.	She is being dependent on others, and he doesn't know all her friends well.
Relax before she goes out to remain calm when speaking to others.	She'll be in a good mood to answer.	She doesn't know in advance when she's likely to meet them.
Rehearse certain responses with her husband.	She'll feel at ease with him.	It will take time for both of them. Role playing isn't like reality.
Joke about it.	Joking relaxes the atmosphere.	Some people don't have a sense of humour.

SOLUTIONS	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Say, "it's none of your business."	It's clear and direct.	It may offend some people.
Become depressed and pity herself.	It may make her feel better temporarily.	It will increase her isolation and loneliness.
Talk about her experiences and focus on the positive parts of it.	It projects a good image of her.	They may still ask difficult questions.
Shift the conversation to the other person.	It prevents her from thinking about herself.	It increases her isolation.

Step 7: Rank the solutions from least workable to best.

Pauline ranked them as follows:

14. Become depressed and isolated.
13. Avoid being with others for awhile.
12. Shift the conversation to the other person
11. Ask her doctor for suggestions.
10. Ask her husband to warn her friends not to ask questions, and ask him to answer if they do.
9. Meet someone with the same experience.
8. Say, "it's none of your business!"
7. Answer questions before they are asked.
6. Answer questions and even add more information.
5. Talk about the positive aspects.
4. Refuse to elaborate about it.
3. Joke.
2. Relax before meeting anyone.
1. Rehearse certain responses with her husband.

Step 8: Make a decision. Write it here.

Pauline decided to practice with her husband some likely situations. She thought it might help her to become more confident in her abilities to respond successfully.

Step 9: Look for a positive aspect of the original problem.

Pauline learned how much support her family has for her, and she became more aware of her own strengths and abilities.

S U M M A R Y

Skill # 5 *Problem Solving*

1. Coping is active _____.
2. Why is it important to define the problem? _____.
3. Relax before thinking of solutions so that _____.
4. Why is it important to “brainstorm” (no evaluation)? _____
_____.
5. The evaluation step helps to _____.

My notes: