



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

Problem Solving

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Problem solving in action

When faced with a difficult situation, people often find it hard to cope. It can feel as if there is no way out of the situation, or that you have no control over it.

This can lead to emotional problems such as stress, depression or anxiety.

Remember, problems are a normal part of life. By learning how to “problem-solve” effectively, you can take control and learn to cope. You can also use these skills to help you face the challenges of daily life.

1. Identify the problem

First, it can help to define the problem by thinking about what is wrong with the situation you are in now, how you would like it to be and how realistic this is.

Brian felt as if the world was caving in on him. He felt that his mood and anger were problems, in addition to the difficulties it has created within his marriage. However, on consideration, Brian felt that these problems were *secondary* to his financial situation. From this, Brian identified two problems:

- How to get out of his debts
- How to get more business

2. Brainstorm

The next step is to think of as many solutions as possible to the problem you Face.

Brian decided to work on his debts first. The brainstorming went like this:

1. Take on another job
2. Ask his wife to increase her hours of work (as she worked 15 hrs per week)
3. Take out a huge loan to pay off all debts
4. Sell some of his gadgets
5. Ask his parents for a loan of money
6. Go to the citizens advice and ask for help
7. Declare bankruptcy
8. Rob a bank

3. Taking STEPS

Select a solution

Now you can decide what to do and how to do it.

Brian quickly rejected robbing a bank, as this was not feasible and would end in dire consequences. He rejected asking his parents for money, as they were getting older and may need the money they have. Also, he didn't want to take out another loan: That was the problem in the first place. Brian did not want to go bankrupt and he didn't want to tell his wife about the debts, therefore he couldn't ask her to work more. Also, Brian felt that taking on another job would tire him out and make him perform poorly at his current job. That left him with two options; to sell some of his gadgets or to go to the citizen's advice. Brian didn't think his gadgets would sell for enough. He didn't want to go citizen's advice, as he hated asking for help. But it was the only feasible option.

Try it out

The next step for you is to try it out. Have a go at solving the problem in the way you decided.

Brian went to the citizen's advice bureau. They were kind and helpful, and Brian was surprised. They helped him to identify what debt he had, what debts were priority, and so on. They helped him to work out a plan for paying his debts off, and they actually managed to help him write off a few smaller debts.

Evaluate what happens

Then think, "Is this working? Am I solving the problem?"

If the course of action you have chosen is working - great! You did it!

If not go back to stage 1 and try again. It may be that the problem needs a better definition or that a different solution would work better.

Two months after Brian visited the citizen's advice bureau, things had improved a bit. He was no longer spending more than he earned and his debts were beginning to get paid off, albeit slowly. However, Brian still felt quite down: His mood and anger were still a problem. As he was trying to pay off his debts, he had little money left at the end of each month. He was just making ends meet. Brian felt that his family were becoming suspicious. Although his problem of "how to get out of his debts" had been successful, he still felt low. Therefore he started problem solving again.

Persist until you feel better

Brian identified the secondary problems of his lack of money and low mood. He felt that the lack of money was only difficult because he was trying to hide it from his wife. Through brainstorming, his best option was to tell his wife about his difficulties. She was angry at first for getting into debt and for not telling her. However, after a little time she became supportive and started working more hours in order to have some extra income. Brian was well on his way to overcoming his problems. However, the problem that got him into debt in the first place was still present: His business. Therefore, after a few more months of paying off his debt, Brian started generating solutions to this new problem.

Problem Solving Worksheet

1. Identify the problem: State it clearly. Be specific

2. Brainstorm

3. Take Steps

What are the pros and cons of each solution?

Option	Pros	Cons	Will it Work?
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

Select the most reasonable solution

Evaluate, did it work? Yes, No, To some extent?

Persist until you feel better

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This guide was adapted by Dr Liza Morton from a Step Forward guide amended by Dr Angela Morrison-Brown, Clinical Psychologist, NHS Fife Department of Psychology, Stratheden Hospital, Cupar, KY15 5RR. The original guide was compiled and written by Dr Marie Grant, Clinical Psychologist and Mandy McAlpine, Clinical Associate in Applied Psychology, NHS Fife Department of Psychology, Lynebank Hospital, Halbeath Road, Dunfermline, KY11 4UW. With contributions from Dr Jim White, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, NHS Greater Glasgow, and Joanne Savage, Clinical Associate in Applied Psychology, NHS Lanarkshire, and other health care staff from NHS Fife.

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