

10. Problem Solving

Disclaimer: This written information is not intended as a substitute for medical or mental health care advice. Please be sure to discuss any questions or concerns you may have with a professional person.

SOLVING PROBLEMS EFFECTIVELY

Depression often causes life problems that people experience to become overwhelming. Previous strategies used for problem solving may have been ineffective, or may even have made them worse. Why is it that as people get depressed, their ability to solve problems declines? There are several reasons:

- Solving problems takes energy. As depression worsens, energy level often declines.
- Everyday problems take a backseat to a bigger problem: The depression itself. Because the person becomes so concerned about their depression, other problems are often ignored and can get worse.
- Depression causes difficulties in concentration, memory, decision-making ability, and creativity. Most problem-solving requires all of these skills.
- Depression and anxiety often go hand in hand. The stress response (also called the "fight or flight response") often causes a physical response that can make depression worsen and tends to cause patients to avoid situations which produce stress. This avoidance can make current problems continue or even worsen.

Given all of these factors, it is no great surprise that problems don't get solved and instead pile up. What can be done? **First**, recognize that your problem-solving ability may not be as good as it usually is. Don't beat yourself up over this. It is a normal symptom of depression, and it does get better.

Then sit down and follow the process below.

Step 1: Identify your problems

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____

Use additional paper if you wish.

Step 2: Pick a problem

Now select one problem from the list you have made you want to work on first. It should be a problem that you really want to solve, and one that seems reasonably solvable.

Now answer the following questions about this problem.

Have you solved similar problems in the past? If so, how did you do it? What Strengths or talents did you use?

Are there any people who may be able to support you in your efforts to solve this problem? Ideally, these should not be people who will solve the problem for you, but people who can help you solve it yourself. Who are they?

Step 3: Choose an Action

Now choose the best (or perhaps the least bad) action. Consider the possibilities about the advantages and disadvantages of each, then just pick one. It should be an action that takes you at least partway towards a solution. Remember, if you start to move in one direction and discover that it really doesn't work, you can try another action.

Which action did you choose?

Step 4: Make an action plan

Your plan of action should be **manageable, action oriented, specific & time limited**, follow these as a format. In other words:

☐ **Manageable.** Even if you don't feel any better in the coming week than you did last week (even if you feel a little worse), you could do it anyway. It's better to accomplish a goal that is too small than to fail at an ambitious one. Here's a bad example: For my first time out, run a marathon. **Better example:** Walk one block.

☐ **Action-oriented.** Make a plan for what you will do, not how you will think or feel while you are doing it. You have a certain amount of control over what you do, but you have less control over your emotions and thoughts. Bad example: Spend a pleasant hour with my children.

Better example: Spend one hour with my children.

☐ **Specific.** It should be very clear what you need to do. Bad example: Get in shape. **Better example:** Phone the community centre to find out whether they teach yoga.

☐ **Time-limited.** Your plan should take only a short time to carry out. Don't plan to change your style forever. Bad example: Keep finances in order for the rest of my life. **Better example:** Spend 20 minutes looking for income tax receipts.

What's your plan, exactly?

Carry out your plan in the coming week.

Step 5: Evaluate and Move On

Come back to this section after a week or when you have achieved your goal.

What was the outcome? What went right? What went wrong?

☐ **Keep going.** Example: Spend another 20 minutes finding the papers.

☐ **Revise your goal and try again.** Example: Cleaning the garage for three hours was too difficult, so plan to work on it for just one hour instead.

☐ **Take a new approach.** Perhaps you learned something useful from your first effort that suggests another way of handling the issue. Example: Talking face to face with Aunt Sarah didn't work, so write her a letter instead.

Based on your experience, what is your next step?

- Keep working on this issue in a step-by-step manner. Record your efforts on paper.
- Keep reminding yourself about the progress you make.

Resources

Getting Things Done by David Allen

Antidepressant Skills Workbook by Bilsker & Paterson (Simon Fraser University)

The Feeling Good Handbook by David Burns M.D.

<http://www.engin.umich.edu/~problemsolving/>

http://www.managementhelp.org/prsn_prd/prob_slv.htm

http://www.solveyourproblem.com/artman/publish/article_890.shtml