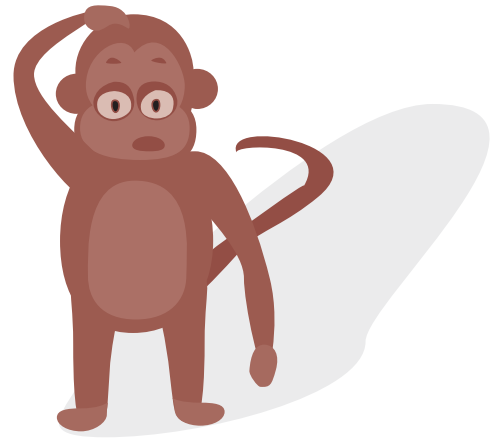# facing a tricky problem in your life?

need help finding a solution?

we deal with problems almost everyday

Fortunately, we can solve most of our daily problems by thinking up a solution on the spot or using a strategy that worked in the past.

Why is problem-solving an important skill for mental health?

Problems that don't go away can take a toll on our well-being. Left unsolved, a small problem can become a big problem. We end up feeling frustrated, stressed or maybe even depressed and hopeless.

Problem-solving may have a number of benefits, including:
- Better functioning at work or school
- More satisfying relationships with friends, family and co-workers
- Higher self-esteem
- Higher life satisfaction

What about problems that are not so easily fixed?

These kinds of problems can create stress and impact our health. We often cope by doing what we've done in the past. Until we come up with a solution that actually works, the problem never really goes away and continues to create stress in our lives.

The steps for solving difficult problems are straightforward, but most of us are never taught these skills. ►►►►

Canadian Mental Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

AnxietyBC®

solving difficult problems

step 1

'I think I have a problem. How do I fix it?'

Pay attention to your feelings
Negative feelings often point to problems. When you pay attention to these feelings, you often recognize the problems sooner. For example, feeling angry whenever you talk to your boss may be a sign that there is a problem at work.

Make a list
Write out a list of the problems you need to fix before they turn into bigger problems. Some problems seem to stick around. Other problems seem to go away, but they pop up later on.

Look for opportunities
Don't focus on the negative parts of the situation. Look for any opportunities or challenges instead. If a problem seems less scary, you're more likely to try to solve it. For example, you might look at the problem with your boss as a chance to improve your working environment.

step 2

'What's the problem?'

You can't solve a problem until you know what the problem is. In order to do that, ask yourself these questions:

1. What is the situation right now?
What's making me feel upset?

2. What would I like the situation to be?
How would things be if I weren't upset?

3. What are the obstacles?
What's standing between me and my ideal situation?

More tips for finding possible solutions:

Be as specific as possible
If your definition of the problem is vague, it's hard to know where your solution should start. For example, it would be hard to solve a credit card problem if you say, "I have money problems." A more precise definition might be, "I don't have enough money to pay the minimum credit card payment."

Stick to the facts
Don't put opinions in your definition, only facts. A less helpful definition for a money problem would be, "The guys at the credit card company are jerks!" Even if that's true, it doesn't help solve the problem—you can't turn them into nice people!

Don't be too narrow
When you define the problem too narrowly, it's harder to come up with solutions. For example, you would like to travel this summer, but you don't have a car. A narrow definition might be, "How can I get enough money to buy a car in a month?" A better definition might be, "How can I travel this summer within my budget?" When you define your problem like this, buying a car is only one of many solutions. Your solutions could also include getting a deal on a plane ticket, taking the bus or catching a ride with friends.

step 3

'How will I know when I get there?'

Choose a goal for your problem.

The **SMART** principle may help you set goals:

Goals should be
- **S** pecific
- **M** easurable
- **A** ttainable
- **R** ealistic and
- **T** ime-limited

For example, "Not having money problems" isn't a good goal statement because it doesn't tell you what to do and when to do it. A helpful goals statement may be, "I am going to pay off my credit card debt in 12 months."

step 5

'What's the best solution?'

Always pick the best solution for you—the perfect solution rarely exists. The key is to pick the solution that has the most benefits and the least costs. There will probably be some negatives to any solution. Use the following questions as a guide to picking the best solution.

Will this solution help me reach my goals and solve my problem?
If a solution doesn't solve the problem, it's probably not the best choice.

How good or bad will I feel if I choose this solution?
You may come up with solutions that could solve the problem very well. However, if you think that the solution will make you feel terrible, it may not be the best choice at this time.

How much time and effort does this solution involve?
Solutions that take up too much time and energy may not be the best choice, especially if you can't realistically carry them out.

Does this solution have more benefits than costs?
When you look at costs and benefits, it's a good idea to think about how a solution will affect you and others—both now and in the future.

step 4

'What are some possible solutions?

It's easy to come up with the same ideas over and over again. When it comes to difficult problems, the first ideas aren't always the best!

Quantity
It's easier to find a good solution when you have a lot of solutions to choose from. Write out at least three or four solutions—the more the better!

Don't judge!
This is not the time to decide whether your solutions are good or not. You are more likely to think of new solutions if you also include some wild ones.

Variety
Come up with lots of different kinds of solutions. For example, if your solutions to money problems include borrowing from your friends, your parents or your sibling, you have come up with three solutions that all involve the same idea: borrowing money. Instead, you want many different types of solutions, such as selling some of your possessions or getting a second job.

More tips for finding possible solutions:

Ask others for help!
Get new ideas from friends, family or professionals. This is an important aspect of social support that can help reduce stress. For more on social support, see *Wellness Module 3: Social Support* at **www.heretohelp.bc.ca.**

Combine solutions
Some solutions that seem silly can work when combined with other ideas. For example, parents often need to problem-solve what to do with their kids all summer. By combining "send them to the moon" with "get someone else to take care of them," one solution might be, "enroll the kids in summer camp for two weeks."

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solving difficult problems _continued from previous page_

step 6

put your solution into action

After you've picked a solution, you need to make a plan of action! Write down the steps it will take to carry out your solution. You're more likely to take action if you know exactly what you need to do.

step 7

check up on your progress

It's a good idea to track how well your solution is actually working. If your problem is resolving itself, be sure to reward yourself for a job well done.

If your solution isn't working, you can check to see what might be wrong. Remember, even the best plans don't always work as expected.

If your solution doesn't seem to be working, ask yourself the following questions:
- Did I define my problem correctly?
- Were my goals unrealistic?
- Was there a better solution?
- Did I carry out the solution properly?

You may need go through these steps more than once until you have a satisfactory solution. This is normal—especially for more difficult problems.

T!P To help you work through all of these steps, see our problem-solving worksheet at **www.heretohelp.bc.ca**

Select sources and additional resources
- Visit **www.comh.ca** for _The Antidepressant Skills Workbook_ by Dan Bilsker and Randy Paterson.
- Visit **www.heretohelp.bc.ca** for the Communication and Problem-Solving Skills module from _How You Can Help: A Toolkit for Families._
- Visit **www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk** for problem-solving worksheets and guides.
- McKay, M. & Fanning, P. (2002). _Successful Problem-Solving. A Workbook to Overcome the Four Core Beliefs That Keep You Stuck._ Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

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4 wellness module 4: problem-solving