



## Structured Problem-Solving

### Coping

 Exercise

 30 min

 Client

 No

Life can be challenging, and problems, whether they are related to family, finances, work, or relationships, are an unavoidable part of the human experience. While we all encounter problems - from the inconsequential to the substantial - many people lack the requisite skills to generate and implement effective solutions. An inability to rationally approach and tackle problems can have myriad negative consequences. Indeed, inadequate problem-solving skills have a strong positive correlation with hopelessness, helplessness, anxiety, and depression [1], and they may increase the negative effect of stress on well-being [2].

Conversely, generating solutions to one's problems is a key factor for success in organizations and personal careers [3] while promoting autonomy, innovative behavior, and perceptions of opportunity [4]. Furthermore, problem-solving skills may reduce the negative effect of stress on well-being, enhance positive functioning, and improve self-efficacy [1].

Fortunately, problem-solving skills can be cultivated and strengthened. Problem-solving therapy is a relatively simple cognitive-behavioral intervention that helps individuals develop the skills to approach problems in a rational, structured, and sequential manner [5]. Structured problem-solving involves defining a problem, generating solutions, engaging in deliberative decision-making, implementing solutions, and monitoring one's progress [6].

It is important to note that, while this technique allows individuals to approach problem-solving logically and methodically, people's orientation towards a problem may impede or facilitate the process. Specifically, structured problem-solving is more effective with a positive problem orientation that allows individuals to view problems as opportunities for change or challenges to overcome and accept that the process may take time and effort [2]. This exercise will guide clients through the process of structured problem-solving. Through this technique, clients are better able to break down a problem, generate and implement potential solutions, and monitor the success of those solutions.



### Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



### Goal

The goal of this exercise is to guide clients through structured problem-solving. By defining the problem, generating solutions, and creating an action plan, clients can better break down a problem into its various components and monitor the success of their chosen solution.



## Advice

- This exercise will be most effective for clients who can approach the process with a positive problem orientation. A positive problem orientation will also help clients feel more confident when confronted with problems. As such, clients should be encouraged to view their problems as challenges that can be overcome and opportunities to improve their current circumstances.
- Clients should understand that problem-solving can take time, patience, and effort. Clients may have to repeat the exercise to solve a problem effectively. This is normal and not a sign of failure; it should be viewed as an opportunity to regroup, reflect, and try other possible solutions. The more clients practice this approach, the more habitual it will become.
- Ensure that clients attempt to solve problems they can control. As clients identify the problems they are currently facing, remind them that they should be within their power to solve, or this process is likely to be unsuccessful and lead to frustration.



## References

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3. Kim, J.Y., Choi, D.S., Sung, C.S., & Park, J.Y. (2018). The role of problem-solving ability on innovative behavior and opportunity recognition in university students. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity, 4*, 4.
4. Punhagui, G.C. (2019). Using problem-solving as a method for the development of self-regulation of learning with adolescents: An experience report. In N. Feza (Ed.), *Metacognition in learning*. IntechOpen.
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6. Nezu, A.M., Maguth Nezu, C., & D’Zurilla, T.J. (2013). *Problem-solving therapy: A treatment manual*. Springer Publishing Co.



## Structured Problem-Solving

Problems are an inescapable part of life. They are simply part of being human, and we can all benefit from developing effective problem-solving skills. Sometimes, we instinctively know how to solve a problem right away, and other times we might need a little extra guidance before finding the right solution.

Facing a problem with no immediate, obvious solution can be stressful, overwhelming, and leave you feeling helpless. However, these problems are challenges that you can overcome, and while finding the right solution may take time and effort, they also provide opportunities to improve your circumstances.

How can you approach these problems? While the source and nature of your troubles might vary, structured problem-solving is a technique that will help you uncover suitable solutions, decide on a course of action, and implement a plan in a logical and structured way. This exercise will guide you through the process of structured problem-solving so that you can take a step back, evaluate your problems rationally, and generate solutions clearly and methodically.

### Step 1: Identifying problems

The first step in structured problem-solving is identifying the problems you are presently facing. Perhaps you have been experiencing issues in the workplace, relationships, or finances. In the space below, list some of your current problems. You may list as many - or as few - as you like. At this stage, do not be too concerned about the finer details of these problems. Write a brief description of each one.

From this list, pick one problem that you would like to work on first.

My problem is...



## Step 2: Defining your problem clearly

Now, look at this problem in more detail. Consider the following questions and write your responses in the spaces provided.

When and where does this problem occur? Is anyone else involved?

What do you think is the main cause of this problem?

What effect does this problem have on your life?



### Step 3: Identifying potential solutions

In this step, take some time to think about possible solutions to the problem.

As you complete this step, allow yourself to be creative and open-minded so that you can think of as many potential approaches as possible.

At this point, do not worry about how good, bad, outlandish, impracticable, or unworkable your potential solutions may seem. You are more likely to develop a suitable solution if you have a variety to choose from, so try to generate as many as possible.

Write down your potential solutions in the spaces below.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	



9.	
10.	

### Step 4: Evaluating and selecting a solution

Now that you have a list of possible solutions to your problem let's work through the list and evaluate which ideas are most likely to help you solve your problem.

First, go through your solutions and eliminate any that are impractical or involve things out of your control. Some solutions may not be possible because your present resources, like time, money, and skills, may be insufficient.

Continue to eliminate potential solutions and reduce your list until you are left with the solution you think is most likely to be effective.

Which solution is the most promising in your current circumstance?

### Step 5: Implementing your chosen solution

Developing a detailed plan and putting it into action is an important step in the structured problem-solving process. In this step, you will create a plan with realistic and achievable goals that will allow you to execute your chosen solution.

To begin crafting your plan, take some time to consider the questions below and write your answers in the spaces provided.



What exactly do you need to do? When do you need to do it? Write these steps down in the order they should be completed.

Step 1:	
Step 2:	
Step 3:	
Step 4:	
Step 5:	

What potential barriers might you face?



How will you overcome these barriers?

Will you need any additional resources? If so, what are they?

How will you know if this solution has worked?



### Step 6: Monitoring success

Now that you have put your plan into action, the final step of structured problem-solving is to review and monitor the success of your chosen solution. Take some time to think about the following questions and write your responses in the spaces provided.

Was the solution effective? How do you know it was/was not effective?

What specific actions worked well for you?

What actions did not work as well as expected?



Do you need to revise this plan to address the problem better? What changes can you make?

### Step 7: Reflection

- How was it to complete this exercise?
- What did you find most challenging about this exercise?
- How did you overcome this challenge?
- How do you feel about your problem now?
- How has this exercise changed how you will approach problems in the future?
- After completing this exercise, what do you consider the main benefits of structured problem-solving?