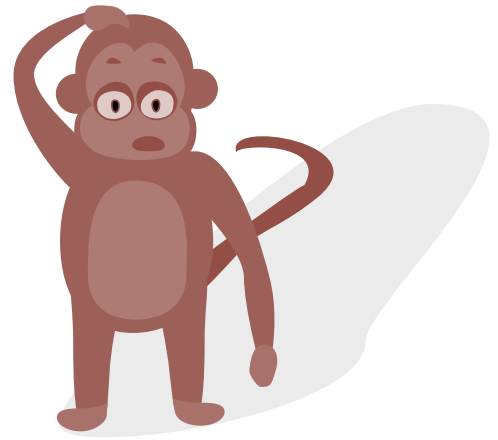


facing a tricky problem
in your life?

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 helps you deal more effectively with stressors in your life.

Problem-solving may have a number of additional 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. ▶▶▶▶

solving difficult problems

step 1

How do I know if I have a problem?

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.

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?
What is within my control to change?

Tips:

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 might be hard to even start problem-solving if you say, "I hate my home!" A more precise definition might be, "My commute is too long and I always come home stressed out and exhausted."

Stick to the facts

Don't put opinions in your definition, only facts. If you're frustrated because your neighbours have loud parties every weekend, it isn't helpful to say, "My neighbours are jerks!" Even if that's true, it doesn't help solve the problem—you can't just turn them into nicer people!

Don't be too narrow

When you define the problems 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, “I will go to the gym every day” may not be realistic goal if you don’t current exercise regularly. A more helpful statement might be, “I will go to the gym on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 4:30pm to 5:30pm.”

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!

Brainstorm

It’s easier to find a good solution when you have a lot of solutions to choose from. Try to come up with as many different solutions as possible. If you’re frustrated by a long commute between your home and your workplace, you might come up with a list of neighbourhoods that you could move to. However, all of those solutions involve the same thing: moving. You may also want to consider different solutions, like working from home a few days a week, changing your work hours so you don’t have to commute during rush hour, or exploring transportation options like public transit or car-pooling with coworkers.

Don’t judge!

Try not to get caught up with coming up with the ‘right’ solution as you brainstorm. 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.

step 5

What’s the best solution?

Once you have a list of possible solutions, go through your ideas and 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. If it will create other problems or stress for you or others, it likely isn’t the best solution.

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.”



step 6

put your solution into action

After you've picked a solution, you need to make a plan of action! Write down the specific 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, reflect on what you learned from the situation. You never know if you'll face a similar problem in the future. Be sure to reward yourself for a job well done.

If your solution isn't working, be kind to yourself. Remember, even the best plans don't always work as expected. You can re-evaluate to see where you can make changes to your plan.

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?
- Did the situation change?

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/mildmoderate/ProblemSolving.asp for problem-solving worksheets and guides.