

A Simple DIY
Technique

How to Solve Problems



Problem Solving

We all have problems in our day-to-day lives. At times these can cause anxiety, stress and distress. So what can be done? There is away to help you solve your problems successfully. This is quite simply called 'problem solving'.

There are five steps to problem solving.

Step 1: Identify your problems

Before you can solve a problem, you have to know what it is. What are the problems facing you at the moment? Some of them are probably quite large *'I have an eviction notice that comes up next week'* while others are smaller *'I'm going to need lettuce if I want to make that salad tonight'*. Others are somewhere in between *'There's a pile of mail and paperwork on my desk that I haven't looked at in over a month'*.

Make a list of your problems on the next page. Here are some tips:

- don't spend too much time thinking about each problem. Just list each one and **move on**
- you don't need to describe the problem completely
- don't worry whether or not you think the problems can be solved
- remember that you don't have to come up with the solution, just the problem
- you don't have to finish your list in one sitting
- you don't have to fill all the spaces

Sometimes writing down all our problems can be quite scary. Try not to let the list you make worry you. Remind yourself that this is the **first** step towards solving your problems. Sometimes people find that when they start writing out their problem list it is not as long as they thought it would be.

List of problems

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Step 2: Pick a problem

Now select **one** problem from the list you have made. It should be a problem that you really want to solve, and one that you can see may be possible to solve. Later on you can get to the ones that may seem more difficult. Which problem would you like to work on first?

For example, a chosen problem could be: *"I have friends coming for dinner and I have no food"*. This is a bit vague; it is helpful to state your problem as clearly as possible. This problem could be described more accurately as *"I have friends coming for dinner and only have pasta and tinned fruit in the cupboard"*. Try writing the problem you have chosen as clearly as possible in the box below.

My problem is:

Now answer the following questions:

Have you solved similar problems in the past? If so, how did you do it? What strengths or skills 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?

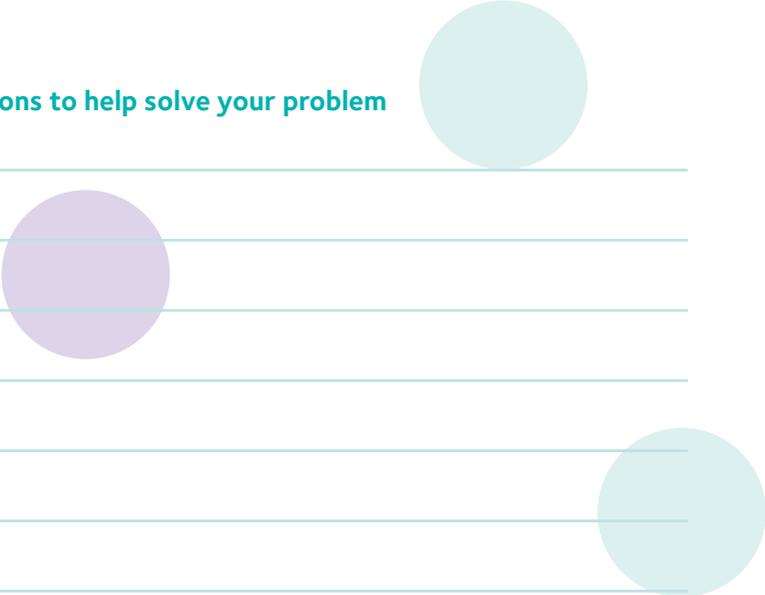
Next, think of the things you could do that might help.

- try using brainstorming: write down as many actions as you can think of.
- don't worry whether the actions will solve the problem completely.
- don't worry if some of them seem silly. You are trying to get as many possible actions as you can. Then you will look at each one.

List of possible actions:

- get a takeaway
- take my friends out to dinner
- go to the shops now and serve them dinner a bit later
- ask them to bring something for dinner
- phone them and rearrange
- say the dog ate the dinner
- don't answer the door when they come and pretend I have forgotten altogether

Possible actions to help solve your problem



Step 3: Choose one of your solutions

Now choose what seems to be the best action. There are no fixed rules for how to make this choice. The only rule is that you must choose one of the actions so that you can begin. Think about the good points and bad points for each, and then pick one. It should be an action that takes you at least part way towards solving your problem. Remember, if you try one action and find that it doesn't work, you can try another.

Which action do you choose?

Step 4: Make an action plan

There aren't very many problems that you will solve completely with just one action. There might be many actions that will take you part of the way towards a solution. If you have a financial problem, for example, then your first action could be to gather the papers together so that you can look at them. Just gathering the paper won't solve the problem, but it will take you closer to a solution than you were before. The important thing is to get started on a solution.

Your plan of action should follow four rules that can be abbreviated as **M.A.S.T.** In other words:

- **Manageable.** Even if you don't feel any better next week than you did last week (even if you feel a little worse), you could carry out your plan anyway. It's better to accomplish a goal that is small than to fail a big one. Here's a **bad example**: *for my first time out, run a marathon.* A **better example**: *walk for ten minutes.*
- **Action-oriented.** Make a plan for what you **will do**, not how you will think or feel while you are doing it. You have some control over what you do, but you have less control over your emotions and thoughts. A **bad example**: *spend a pleasant hour with my children.* A **better example**: *spend one hour with my children.*
- **Specific.** What you need to do should be very clear. A **bad example**: *spend time with a friend.* A **better example**: *spend one hour with my friend Liz.*
- **Time-limited.** Your plan should take only a short time to carry out. Don't plan to change your lifestyle forever. A **bad example**: *keep finances in order for the rest of my life.* A **better example**: *spend 20 minutes looking for income tax receipts.*

What's the plan, exactly?

| Action | BY WHEN |
|--------|---------|
| | |
| | |
| | |

Carry out your plan by the time you set above. When you have carried out your plan, or when the deadline has passed go to Step 5.

Step 5: Think about how it went, then move on

Now, think about how the plan worked out (even if the problem still hasn't been solved). What happened? What went well? What went badly?

Use this experience to plan your next step. You have three main options:

- **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 your first effort has allowed you to find another way of handling the problem. Example: *talking face to face with Aunt Sarah didn't work, so write her a letter instead.*

Based on your experience, what is the next step?



Keep working through the five steps. Keep a record of your efforts. Remind yourself of the progress you make.



Further Help

Books

Some useful books you may like to buy or borrow from the library. In some areas your GP can prescribe one or more of these books for you to get from your local library.

Butler, G and Hope, T (2002) 2nd Edition *Manage Your Mind* Oxford University Press (Chapter 8: Problem-solving: a strategy for change) ISBN: 9780198527725.

Williams, Chris (2002) *Overcoming Depression: a five areas approach*. Arnold. (Workbook 2: Practical Problem Solving) ISBN: 0340763833.

Websites

www.livinglifetothefull.com (Self help for depression and anxiety and related mental health issues).

www.edspace.org.uk (Provides useful information about resources in Edinburgh).

www.fiveareas.com (Provides mental health information and resources).

www.eastlothian.gov.uk/documents/contentmanage/directory (A very useful directory of national and local East Lothian services).

Help lines and other services

Breathing Space – A mental health helpline (daily 6pm–2am)
Tel: 0800 83 85 87.

NHS 24 – Tel: 08454 24 24 24 – Advice and information about how to look after yourself and treat common health problems (24 hours).

National Debt Line

– Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.
Tel: 0808 808 4000 (freephone).

Consumer Credit Counselling Service

– Offers free one-to-one phone counselling and debt regarding debt management. Tel: 0800 138 1111.

Midlothian: Orchard Centre Services – Health in Mind.

– Tel: 0131 663 1616 (Mon – Fri 9.30am–5 pm, except Tues 12.30pm – 5pm). Offers a wide range of information, support and activities for people with mental health problems.

East Lothian: CHANGES Community Health Project

– Promotes positive wellbeing, providing a resource base and information about support for peoples experiencing stress, depression, panic attacks, phobias and anxiety. Different types of service available, e.g. various free short courses such as ‘understanding anger’ and self help groups.
Tel: 0131 653 3977 or 3813. Web: www.changeschp.org.uk.

*Adapted with permission from Northumberland,
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Lothian – Psychological Interventions Network

