

Structured Problem Solving

Everyone experiences problems. Some of us have more to contend with than others, yet often it's not the size of the problem that gets us down, but the way we deal with it.

Structured Problem Solving (SPS) is a learned skill that helps you to step back and evaluate your problems, big or small, in a clearer, more structured way. It's a "thinking skill" commonly used in personal coaching and has proven to be helpful in managing mild to moderate depression.

It's a great skill for anyone to learn and because it's basically a simple, 4-step process, we've put together this easy-to-follow workbook to get you started:

Workbook Step 1	Identifying your Problems Page 1
Workbook Step 2	Generating Solutions Page 3
Workbook Step 3	Making an Action Plan Page 5
Workbook Step 4	Reviewing your Progress Page 7

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1. list the problems you face

Use this page to write a list of the problems you're currently facing. List as many or as few as you like. You don't have to go into too much detail and we've included a checklist of common problems to help you sort out where to start.

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Use this checklist of common problems to help you:

- Relationships with family and spouse
- Loss or death of someone close
- Isolation or loneliness
- Study stress
- Unemployment
- Harassment, bullying or abuse
- Accommodation
- Financial
- Legal
- Alcohol or drugs
- Physical or mental illness
- Low self-esteem or confidence

2. choose the problem from your list you want to work on

Choose one problem from your list on the previous page, write it below and work your way down the page to help define the problem.

3. define the problem clearly

Why is the problem a problem - what effect does it have on your life?

What is the problem?

When does the problem occur?

Where does the problem occur?

Who is involved in the problem?

4. write your Problem Statement:

Using the answers above, write a single sentence that summarises the problem. This makes it easier to focus on the real issue. Start your statement with "I" and try to include an action word (like work, learn or try)
eg: I don't know how to ask for help with the kids so I can get some time to myself.

I...

+ ask yourself: do you have control over this problem?

If you don't then resolving it will be very difficult. It would be better for you to choose another problem from your list.

1. list your ideas

Use this page to list a range of potential solutions for the problem you have selected. Don't worry if the solutions are good, bad or impractical, just write everything down.

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(Don't feel that you have to stop at 9 solutions, just keep going!)

Here are some tips to get the ideas flowing:

- Don't think about the ideas now, just write them down.
- Write down every one, no matter how silly it sounds.
- Don't think about how you will solve them yet.
- "Warm up" by picking a household object nearby and think of 10 different things you could do with it.

2. evaluate your list

Give yourself a few extra minutes on this page as you try to sort out which of all your great solution ideas might actually work. Eliminate those that are too hard or involve things you can't control and look for duplicates that could be grouped under a single solution.

To give you the best chance of success, use this page to evaluate your most promising idea. Then write a solution statement to summarise it.

3. choose the best looking idea

4. evaluate the idea

Test the possible solution by weighing the advantages against the disadvantages. If it helps, ask yourself:

- How will this solution affect my own wellbeing? (physical, emotional, psychological)
- How much time and effort will it require?
- Are there any financial costs or benefits?
- How does it fit in with my other goals and commitments?
- How will it affect the wellbeing of the people who are close to me?
- Is the solution feasible?

Advantages	Disadvantages	Neutral

5. write a solution statement

If your idea shows promise write a summary of it below. If it doesn't score well, try evaluating one of your other ideas and compare them to see which has the most potential.

This page is all about clearly defining the steps involved with making your solution work, then getting started. The clearer you make this action plan, the more likely you are to succeed and the SMART test is a great way to maintain structure and help keep you on track.

1. write a description of your plan

2. check it's a SMART plan!

SPECIFIC – *identify what key things you will need to do*

MEASURABLE – *decide how you will tell if you have succeeded*

ACHIEVABLE – *identify any particularly difficult tasks and decide now how you will tackle them (eg: practice, get help or training)*

RELEVANT – *check how the solution will address the original problem*

TIMEBOUND – *set a start date, finish date and any important dates along the way*

Take a moment to write a summary of the problem you are tackling, along with your selected solution. Then write a step-by-step plan for putting things into action. This will make it a lot easier to tackle the problem – you just need to take it one step at a time.

My problem is:

I...

My solution is:**My plan is to do:****1****2****3****4****5****6****7****8****9**

1. review your progress

Reviewing your progress is an important part of mastering Structured Problem Solving. With a Problem/Solution/Action plan clearly spelled out, it's much easier to stand back and assess how you're doing. You'll learn as much from your mistakes as you will from your successes and before long, tackling problems in this structured way will become second nature.

What worked well?

What didn't work as planned?

What would I change about my plan?

2. reward yourself!

If you've worked your way through each step in the workbook, give yourself a pat on the back – whatever the result, you've taken the first step towards tackling the things that get you down.

Now...

If you feel you've sorted out the first problem, move on to the next one on your list and use the same approach. Just keep it simple while you're still learning how the process works.

If you haven't managed to address the problem, don't worry. It often takes a few attempts. They're called "problems" for a reason. Try reviewing your first plan, decide if you should change it slightly, then have another go. Or, if the problem is too hard, simply choose another simpler one – remember you have to choose problems you have control over.

Remember, if you want to talk to someone about how you are feeling, call the Depression Helpline on freephone 0800 111 757.