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**Problem Solving**

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## Problem Solving

The psychological importance of effective problem solving is very underestimated and is often taken for granted. As human beings, we assume that we effectively problem solve ALL of the time. However, this simply isn't true.

How many times do we buy things we don't need or say things we don't mean too? How many times do we avoid things we shouldn't or don't avoid things we should? How often do we drive too fast when we are late for a meeting? Although many of these strategies are not problematic as we "get away with them" they could become problematic if they continued for a long duration. For example, if we continued to buy things we don't need we develop financial problems or if we drive fast all of the time we risk losing our licence.

So, although we generally problem solve well MOST of the time, why not ALL of the time? The word that springs to mind is EMOTION. When our emotions become powerful we can lose our ability to think rationally. Then our problem solving strategies can fail us and we can engage in strategies that maintain or even increase our emotions and we can become even more irrational. This can become a vicious cycle that can be maintained for days, weeks or even years.

## **The Problem Solving Process**

**The problem solving process can be broken down into the ten steps below. An example case (*Peter*) will be used to highlight the approach and help you to utilise the steps for yourself.**

**1: Problem Identification**

**2: Formulating a hypothesis**

**3: Brainstorm and list problem areas**

**4: Prioritise Problems by taking into account**

- a) Achievability
- b) Subjective distress caused by the problem
- c) Cognitive Behavioural science of problems
- d) Motivation to resolve the problems
- e) Urgency of the problems

**5: Brainstorm and list of your strengths and resources**

**6: Choose small number of problems of highest priority (as judged in step 3 and carry out a further assessment if necessary)**

**7: Describe these problems in more detail taking into account**

- a) Severity
- b) Distress
- c) Frequency
- d) Disruption
- e) Threat to safety
- f) Possible causal factors

**8: Devise a problem statement including the above**

**9: Specify ideal long-term goal for resolution of problem**

**10: Devise a series of goal statements**

### **Let's look at an example:**

*Peter is an engineer working for a large manufacturing company. He is very successful and his role involves him solving various problems with machine engines. He found himself experiencing anxiety over a number of months when his workload grew tremendously. He was working very hard and longer and longer hours, often going into work at weekends and taking work home in the evenings. There was a threat of redundancy and he constantly worried about losing his job and his house. He was struggling to get off to sleep lying awake for 2-3 hours before he finally got off to sleep and waking early in the morning.*

*He became increasingly irritable and started drinking more to help him sleep. He started having arguments with his wife and accusing her of not caring about him. He was irritable with his 2 children and regularly shouting at them. He was always tired and stopped meeting his friends and stopped going to the gym.*

The above example is very common and we often see clients with this history. Peter was an excellent problem solver (he was an engineer and employed to solve various problems) but when his emotions became very strong with his “threat” of losing his job he slowly lost his ability to problem solve effectively. He began drinking more (which actually increases anxiety/stress symptoms), avoided social contact (which reduces relaxation and pleasure), increased confrontation with family (would only cause further frustration and biological anxiety), reduced exercise (a very effective strategy for reducing anxiety) and finally worked even harder to solve his work problems (thus increasing anxiety/exhaustion even further).

The example supports the fact that even when individuals who normally problem solve very well, become emotional over a period of time, they often lose the ability to problem solve well and engage in thoughts and behaviours that further increases the emotion and so the vicious cycle begins as the biological symptoms increase and behaviours increase due to

habit forming patterns. It is extremely important that we understand this so as not to presume we problem solve well ALL of the time.

The model that is discussed here is a structured form of problem solving. This is by no means an attempt to patronise individuals but when we are very emotional we lose the structure of problem solving and often try to rush through the 'process' of problem solving and jump straight to the wanted 'outcome'.

*Think about Peter for a moment..... he wanted to sleep but rather than work through a problem solving 'process' he jumped straight through to the wanted 'outcome' of getting some sleep and began drinking as in the short term "it worked"!*

## **The Problem Solving Process**

### **1: Problem Identification**

This is probably where most mistakes are made in the initial phase of problem solving. Failure to identify the true problem is a common mistake we all can make especially under times of increased emotional distress. We often focus on external factors (our environment) when we are distressed rather than our internal factors (how we cope with external factors). Peter (case example) may well have viewed his workload as the problem, and to a degree that is understandable, however, his problem solving and coping strategies were actually MAINTAINING his distress/condition.

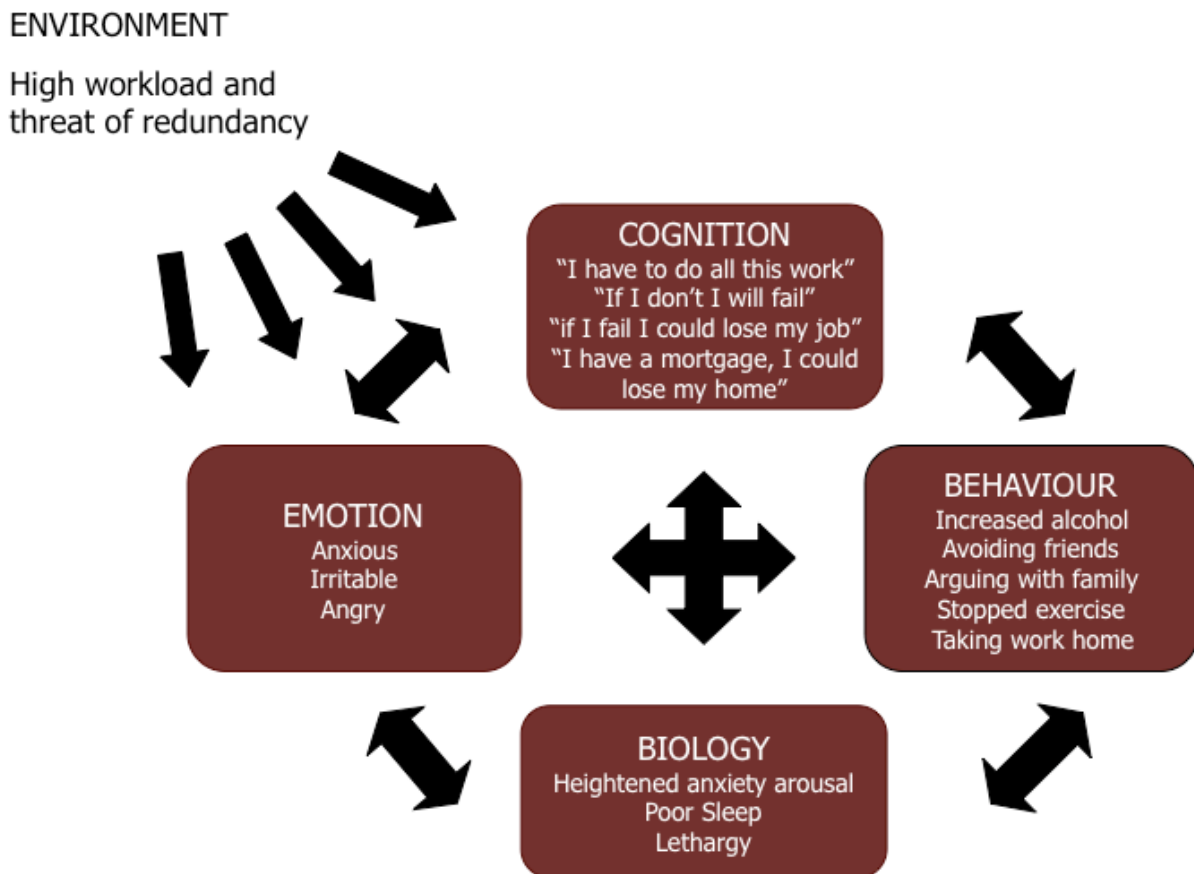
## What is a Problem?

- A problem can be anything i.e. thought, behaviour, feeling
- A problem can be experienced by anyone i.e. client, relative, professional
- A problem description needs to be specific:
  - a) Who is affected by the problem
  - b) Describe specific thoughts, feelings, behaviours that constitute the problem
  - c) It should be described in terms of subjective and objective severity (measured if possible)
- Frequency and duration should be specified exactly as possible e.g. over previous month.
- A problem should be measurable.
- A problem should reflect an area where there is reasonable potential for change.

## **2: Formulating a hypothesis.**

This is where the cognitive behavioural model has strengths over many other psychological models. Without formulating the problem it is impossible to identify factors that are maintaining the problem. At the very best, we might be lucky and 'guess' the right factors but this is not the best way to solve our problems! The five area cognitive behavioural formulation for anxiety and depression framework can be very effective in teasing out the factors that need addressing.

*Lets' look at formulating Peters' current problems using the five-area approach.*



The above formulation provides a structure for Peter to understand some of the factors that could be maintaining his anxiety. Again it is important to remember that by mapping out the areas like this it would help Peter to look objectively at the situation (this is very difficult to do when feeling emotional) and begin problem solving appropriately. We can also help Peter look at the health science between the various areas and how they interrelate.

We are now ready for the next stage:

### **3: Brainstorm and list problem areas**

The cognitive behaviour therapist will help you identify problems based on scientific principles as well as your feelings about what the problems are. Once again lets' look at Peters case.

- a) High workload.
- b) Threat of redundancy
- c) Increased alcohol consumption
- d) Disturbed sleep
- e) Anxiety and Anger
- f) Arguments at home
- g) Reduced activity/exercise
- h) Taking work home
- i) Working at weekends
- j) Reduced social contact.

### **4: Prioritise Problems by taking into account:**

- a) Achievability
- b) Clients subjective distress caused by the problems
- c) Cognitive Behavioural science of problems
- d) Clients motivation to resolve problems
- e) Urgency of problems

It is important that both the client and therapist work in collaboration to prioritise areas for intervention. The client may view one problem as a priority and the therapist another. By open communication and discussion priorities can be agreed. For example, Peter wanted some medication to help him sleep and viewed this as his priority, however, after a CBT session where the biological effects of alcohol misuse were explained, it was jointly agreed that alcohol reduction was viewed as a priority as it was achievable (a) leading to increased distress (high arousal) (b), very destructive from a biological perspective (c) and Peter was motivated to deal with this problem (d) and urgent (e).



## **5: Brainstorm and list of your strengths and resources.**

It is so important to remember that you have many strengths and resources that you use on a day-to-day basis. Often when we are very distressed for a long period we lose our confidence and develop beliefs that we cannot cope.

If we look at Peter.....

He is a successful engineer with good problem solving skills. He works hard and has high work and family ethics. He has a good social and family network and enjoys seeing things in a structured way. He has a history of taking responsibility for his health (used to attend gym regularly) and only drinking in moderation. He is motivated to resolve current issues and wants to make a full recovery. He understands the cognitive behavioural framework and the five area formulation.

He has helped bring up 2 children and been happily married for some years. He reports no marital disharmony prior to his current emotional problems.

## **6: Choose small number of problems of highest priority (as judged in step 3). Carry out a further assessment if necessary.**

For Peter's situation the following problems were collaboratively agreed as high priority.

- 1) High workload
- 2) High alcohol consumption
- 3) Reduced activity
- 4) Taking work home and working weekends

## **7: Describe these problems in more detail taking into account**

- a) Severity
- b) Distress
- c) Frequency
- d) Disruption
- e) Threat to safety
- f) Possible causal factors

## **8: Devise a problem statement including the above**

E.g. Peter is experiencing high workload from his employment and this led to him taking more work home on at least 2 nights and working every weekend. He is drinking 6-8 pints of lager per night and no longer engages in exercise (he used to go 3-4 times per week). He is arguing with his family on most days and feels more irritable on a majority of days. He also feels lethargic on most days

## **9: Specify ideal long-term goal for resolution of problem**

In the case of Peter.....

- 1) To reduce workload and not take work home or work weekends.
- 2) To drink to previous levels of alcohol consumption (4-6 pints on a Friday and Saturday)
- 3) To enjoy his relationship with his family.
- 4) To have a stable sleep pattern and be able to get off to sleep within 30-45 minutes.
- 5) To have more energy and enjoy his social life.
- 6) To go to the gym 3-4 times per week.

## 10: Devise a series of goal statements

### What is a Goal?

- A Goal can be undertaken by anyone, client, relative or professional.
- It needs to be specific:
  - a) Who is to achieve the goal
  - b) How exactly is the goal to be carried out
  - c) Specify the frequency and duration
- Progress towards goal achievement should be measurable reliably
- It should be realistic and achievable within a specific time period.
- Goals can be independent or specified as a series of goals where progress on one depends upon achievement of a previous goal.

*E.g. Peter's initial goals were agreed:*

- 1) To speak to his manager and discuss how he is feeling and how he is taking work home and working weekends.
- 2) To go out at least once over the weekend with family and friends.
- 3) To reduce alcohol intake (gradually reduce until at previous levels)
- 4) Start back at the gym. Initially 1-2 times per week increasing to 3-4 times as energy returns.
- 5) To follow good sleep hygiene strategies.

## **Summary**

Although this process may appear slow and not always necessary, it is a necessary process when emotions are strong. Problem solving can be difficult and we all need help and guidance at times. We normally work through the above process on an unconscious level and don't consciously think about how we problem solve. However, when we are struggling with emotions we sometimes need to re-visit this structure to allow our brains time to work through the correct process under times of duress.