



One of the core Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) strategies is structured problem solving. It is applicable across a wide variety of diagnostic categories – and is a useful skill in all areas of life. (It is also used widely in business). Clinically it is useful in helping people who feel overwhelmed by their problems and unable to find effective ways of coping or dealing with them, especially because of depression and anxiety.

'There are rarely perfect or ideal solutions to problems, however, the structured problem solving approach aims to identify the most effective plan of action available at the time. The problem solving process includes:

- Defining problems or goals in an everyday manner
- Encouraging people to seek a wide range of ideas
- Defining solutions in terms of current strengths
- Careful consideration of the practical constraints that are involved in successfully applying a solution.

One of the main aims of teaching structured problem solving to individuals or families is to assist people to incorporate the principals of efficient problem solving and goal achievement into their everyday lives. The aim is NOT for the clinician to solve everyone's problems *for them* but to give people skills so that they can effectively overcome problems and achieve goals *for themselves*. Self-management is a key goal, with the clinician adopting the role of a teacher or guide.' (Taken from 'Management of Mental Disorders' Volume 1)



It is helpful to work through the two Psychological Toolkit sheets '**Structured Problem Solving**' and '**Problem Analysis**' with your patients – taking them step by step through the process with an example they have provided from their current situation.

When the structured problem solving method is first taught, try to avoid problems that are either very difficult, significantly emotional or long-standing. Instead, deal with easier issues until the individual is

used to the method. Regular practice is important until the steps are well-learned.

Gaining a clear definition of the problem is a vital step which helps focus thinking on the issue at hand and minimises the possibility of getting side tracked onto other issues. Thus it may be helpful to start with the '**Problem Analysis**' exercise in order to clearly define the problem and the effect it is having on the person's life. Then move on to the '**Structured Problem Solving**' exercise.



Useful References

Treatment Protocol Project (1997). **Management of Mental Disorders (Second Edition)**. Sydney: World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Mental Health and Substance Abuse.