

Working Towards Wellbeing Video Series

Structured Problem Solving

This video is part of a series designed to help health practitioners learn evidence-based skills which enhance mental wellbeing and resilience. If you are a health practitioner, why not try these techniques for yourself? Once you've practiced these skills and experienced the benefit, we hope you will be willing and able to teach them to others.

If you are not a health practitioner, please watch these videos anyway! We encourage everyone to look after their mental health and emotional wellbeing in ways that we know work.

As health professionals we solve problems all the time. It is so second nature to us that it is sometimes difficult to remember that a lot of people in the community just do not know where to start when it comes to solving their problems. Many people don't have any sort of structure to guide their thinking. Under those circumstances emotional responses can take over and create chaos.

Structured Problem Solving is something that can be taught and learned. It may take a few practice sessions for someone to get the hang of it but once they do, the technique can generalise from simple everyday problems to more complex ones – without any further guidance from you! It's more than likely that this is the sort of process you go through yourself when solving problems in your own life, though perhaps not consciously. While you are here it might be worth having a look at your own processes to see if there is any point at which you can make some improvements in your own problem solving.

How to talk to your patients about structured problem solving:

Firstly, don't forget to acknowledge the difficulties they are having and introduce this as a technique that might help. Explain that you need to start by solving a small problem. Ask them to bear with you because the purpose of this conversation is specifically to learn a technique rather than to solve all their problems. A pen and paper to write things down or a template like the ones we've linked to below can be very helpful.

These are the steps:

1. **Identify the problem.** This is sometimes the most difficult part but for the sake of the learning exercise it needs to be a simple easily definable problem.
2. **Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of** – this is a brainstorming exercise. All suggestions can be included. The least practical and most outrageous ones will be culled in the next step.
3. **Work out the pros and cons of each solution** and look at what remains.



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4. **Choose the least-worst solution.** Remember that no solution is going to be ideal (if it were there probably wouldn't be a problem in the first place)
5. **Make a detailed plan** for how to try that solution.
6. Decide **how long to experiment** with this potential solution and **set a date for review**.
7. **Review progress** - decide whether to continue with this solution or to try a different solution from the list in Step 2. It may be that other potential solutions have come up in the meantime and they can be added to the list now as well. Repeat the process until a satisfactory solution is found.

Other resources:

- [Black Dog Institute Structured Problem Solving Template](#)
- [Centre for Clinical interventions: Problem Solving module](#)
- [Centre for Clinical interventions: Problem solving worksheet](#)
- [Stay Strong App:](#) AIMhi Stay Strong is a motivational care planning tool that assists health professionals to promote the wellbeing of Aboriginal clients by considering their social supports, strengths, worries and the goals or changes they would like to make.
- myCompass online CBT – structured problem solving activity
www.myCompass.org.au



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Structured Problem Solving – Example

Chloe is a 23. She does not want to go to work at her new job. She says she is unhappy because the work is boring and people are unfriendly and make her feel unwelcome. She is so unhappy she doesn't want to get up in the morning. She doesn't know what to do because she really, really needs the job as 12 months of unemployment have left her in a lot of debt. Chloe agrees to try to solve one of those problems with a structured problem-solving exercise.

Identify the problem:	Feeling unwelcome at work: Should we look at Chloe's financial situation, the boring work, the unfriendly staff or her mood in general? For the purposes of the exercise, Chloe agreed that it would be easiest to look at the unfriendly staff.
Brainstorm the Solutions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Quit her job2. Find another job3. Complain to the boss4. Start to try to get to know someone5. Be more friendly to everyone (that's what Mum says)6. Invite them all to her housewarming party (her flatmate's idea)
Examine the pros and cons of each solution	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Quitting would take that problem away but create others – debt would remain, she would have to move back to her parents' place.2. Finding another job would not be easy – it took 12 months to get this one after graduation.3. Complaining to the boss is possibly not an option because he is not very friendly either and not often in the office.4. It might work to start to try to get to know someone, but Chloe says she is very shy and it's hard to make the first move5. Mum says be more friendly, but Chloe is not sure what she means by that or how to go about it.6. Chloe says that the staff spreads over a wide range of ages and types of people so inviting them all to the party would be "weird".
Choose the least-worst solution	Chloe says only solutions 4 and 5 have any potential and she doesn't like either of those that much as she doesn't know how to make them happen. 5 seems like the better of the two.
Decide how to "operationalise" the solution (including considering the barriers that might come up)	After a long discussion Chloe decides she will try making a point of saying good morning to everyone and smiling every morning when she first comes into the office. She understands that she might still not get a friendly response but she agrees not to take it to heart until the experiment is over. She will also consider offering to do something for someone once each day. This could include making a coffee for her nearest workmate, offering to share her morning tea with someone, asking someone how their weekend went or complimenting someone on their appearance.
Set a date for review	Chloe decides she can try this for two weeks and makes an appointment for two weeks' time
Review	Things have improved a little as some people in the office are returning her "good mornings" and her nearest workmate got her a cup of coffee the other day. The job is still pretty boring though and she thinks she might like to look at trying to solve that problem too.