CRUfADclinic
Resources

Module 3:

Structured Problem Solving

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"I have been a worrier all my life. When I started having panic attacks, I noticed that worrying about things could really trigger my anxiety symptoms. Problem solving has helped me to break problems down and face them, rather than just getting anxious about them."

Morgan

"It never occurred to me that there were some underlying stresses and problems in my life that were probably contributing to my sensitivity to having panic attacks. The problem solving technique is really practical. You might not be able to solve every problem, but often there are at least some things you can do to help."

Steve

About Structured Problem Solving

People with anxiety often feel overwhelmed by problems. They may feel like they are too anxious to cope effectively, or feel like the problem is too big and has no solution. Getting anxious about the problem can indicate that you care about it and it is important to you, but it doesn't solve it! When you notice you are feeling anxious or sad about a situation, it is a cue for you to ask, 'Why am I anxious/sad?' and 'What can I do about this situation?' – this is where structured problem solving can help.

Structured problem solving is a practical skill designed to help you find **practical solutions to everyday problems**.

Structured Problem Solving (SPS) is a step by step process, which helps by:

1. **Breaking down problems** that can seem too big to tackle

2. **Identifying and evaluating potential solutions** to problems

3. Identifying the **best course of action** (to overcome procrastination)

SPS is not 'rocket science' and is probably already familiar to you. However, many people with anxiety find it one of the most helpful ways to solve problems and regain confidence.

How to do Structured Problem Solving

Structured Problem Solving involves 5 important steps. These are:

Step 1: Identify the problem
Identify one problem that is causing you difficulty, which you are finding hard to resolve and is affecting you.

Tips for this step:

- Get a clear definition of the problem and make the problem as specific as possible. This may involve breaking it down into a smaller part. For example, the problem "I'm broke" could be broken down to the specific problem "My credit card repayment is due next Wednesday and I am unable to pay it." This helps you to identify when you have reached or achieved the goal, or when the problem has been solved.

- Only consider one problem at a time. If other problems arise in the course of the problem solving session, they should be set aside for a problem solving session in the future. This minimises the possibility of getting side-tracked onto other issues.

- Avoid getting side-tracked into attempting to solve the problem at this stage.

Step 2: Generate solutions through brainstorming

Brainstorm as many possible solutions as you can.
Tips:

- Get help from friends or family for this step, or think of what options they might come up with.

- List all solutions that come to mind without evaluating them yet (even if they don't seem perfect or ideal, or even if they seem absurd).

- Use your imagination! Even though a solution may at first seem ridiculous, the idea may help to generate better solutions than those that are more obvious.

Step 3: Evaluate the solutions

Identify and consider the pros (advantages) and cons (disadvantages) of each solution.
Tips:

- You can either write these points down or just quickly run through the list of solutions in your mind, noting the strengths and weaknesses of each.

- Accept that no solution will be perfect since every good idea will have some faults.

Step 4: Choose the optimal solution and create a plan of action

Pick a solution or a combination of solutions which will solve the problem. Create a detailed plan to implement it.

Tips:

- Choose a solution that can be readily applied and which is not too difficult to implement, even though this solution may not be the ideal solution (that way you can get started straight away). This approach is preferable to choosing a solution which is doomed to failure because you have been overly ambitious.

- Plan out step-by step how you will carry out your solution, and when you will do it. A detailed plan of action will increase the likelihood that the problem will be solved. Even if your solution is excellent, the solution will not be of any use if it is not put into practice.

To help make a plan, consider the following questions:

- ⭐ Do you have all the necessary resources (e.g. time, skills, equipment) or do you need to arrange them?

- ⭐ Do you have the agreement or co-operation of other people who might be involved in the plan?

- ⭐ Do you know exactly what needs to be done, and when you will do it?

- ⭐ Can you use any of your other CBT skills, for example thought challenging or activity planning to help you implement difficult parts of the plan?

- Remember: although the problem may not be solved immediately, the solution might have made a difference, and what is learned from this attempt might be useful the second time around.

Step 5: Review what happened

Review how that option went that you just tried. If there is more you need to do or achieve, start the Structured Problem Solving Process again.

This stage needs to be planned in advance. It is an opportunity to assess progress. What has been achieved? What still needs to be done? Often, problems are not completely solved after the first round of structured problem solving. Use this step to reflect on what you have learned, and make plans for your next solution.

Remember to use the **'Structured Problem Solving Worksheet'** to help you apply the technique. Set aside some time to work on one problem at a time. It may also be useful to enlist the help of a friend or family member with this one – sometimes another person can think of a solution you may never have considered.

Problem-Focused vs. Emotion-Focused Solutions

What happens if the problem doesn't have a solution that we can act upon? Not all problems have solutions within our control. So solutions can be broken down into two main types:

1. Problem-Focused Solutions: These solutions attempt to alleviate or eliminate stressful situations through taking control and weighing up pros & cons (like SPS). Problem-focused solutions involve **taking action** to resolve problems.
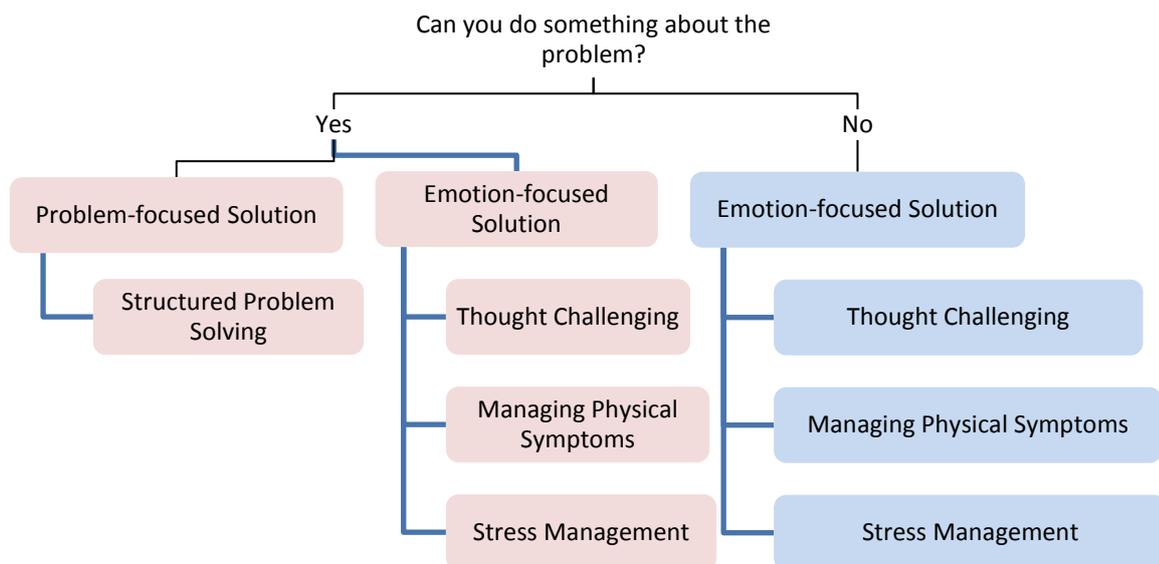
   e.g. Asking colleagues to assist with a difficult task at work.

2. Emotion-Focused Solutions: These solutions attempt to manage emotional distress with stressful or potentially stressful events. In other words, because you can't do anything about the problem, these sorts of solutions help you **manage the feelings** associated with the problem.

   e.g. If colleagues cannot help, using thought challenging to challenge anxious thoughts about getting fired.

It is possible to use both Problem-focused and Emotion-focused solutions.

The following flowchart can be employed to assist with your problem solving:

Can you do something about the problem?

Yes — No

Problem-focused Solution	Emotion-focused Solution	Emotion-focused Solution
Structured Problem Solving	Thought Challenging	Thought Challenging
	Managing Physical Symptoms	Managing Physical Symptoms
	Stress Management	Stress Management

Let's look at an example of a Problem-focused vs. Emotion-focused solution for a difficult situation Penny is facing:

Since Penny's break-up with Ralph they have had limited contact. Penny has a number of personal possessions at Ralph's apartment that she would like to get back, but she feels anxious about asking for them. She has been putting this off for a few months.

Problem-focused Solution: Penny decides to email Ralph as a first point of contact because this would be less confronting for her than calling him. She uses some assertiveness skills to explain that the items are hers and she would like them back. She lets Ralph know her availability to come and pick them up.

She decides that it would be helpful to take Lucy with her when she goes to pick them up to have some extra support.

Emotion-focused Solution: Penny used some thought challenging to counteract fearful thoughts such as 'What if he's ruined my stuff?', 'I couldn't cope with seeing him', 'What if I don't get it all back?' She also decided to give herself a small reward to sending the email and bought a magazine at lunchtime. She spoke to Lucy about how she felt about it, and Lucy said it was normal to feel anxious about contacting Ralph. When Penny and Lucy went to pick up the items, Penny used some of the controlled breathing technique to manage her anxiety too.

Let's look at another example from Penny…

	STRUCTURED PROBLEM SOLVING
Step 1 Identify the problem	Penny was interested in starting a yoga course. She wanted to ask her boss if she could leave early one afternoon to make it to the class on time. But she would need to arrange some cover for the phones.
Step 2 Brainstorm solutions and list their pros and cons	a) Demand to leave early and tell my boss he'll have to find someone to cover the phones. b) Leave early and hope it's alright, maybe no-one will notice or mind that I've left. c) Email or talk to my boss about it, say I'd be willing to come in earlier that day to make up the time, ask someone if I can divert the phone to them after 4pm, or activate the voicemail earlier. d) Tell my boss about my plans and see if he might be interested in having a yoga teacher come into the office to give a lunchtime class. e) Try and find a class closer to work so I can go at lunchtime.

Solution A	
Pros I'd be standing up for myself, and he'd have to sort out the problem.	***Cons*** It's probably a bit unrealistic and forceful, I don't think my boss would appreciate this approach!

Solution B	
Pros I get to avoid confronting and asking my boss about it.	***Cons*** It could create problems if the phones are left unattended.

Solution C	
Pros I'd be offering my boss some reasonable solutions.	***Cons*** It could inconvenience someone else a little, or make me have a bit of 'catch up' calls to return the next day.

Solution D	
Pros It could promote health in the workplace.	***Cons*** It would be more organizing.

Solution E	
Pros It would fit into my day better.	***Cons*** It might be hard to get away on time.

Step 3 Pick a solution and make an action plan	**What:** I will tell my boss that I would like to leave early one day and present him with a few ideas of how we could work around it to make sure the phones are covered. I will also look around for a yoga class close to work in case I need to look at the lunchtime option. **When:** I will do some research about the classes today, and speak to him about it tomorrow.
Step 4 Review what happened	**Outcome:** It didn't seem like a big deal to my boss. He was happy for me to divert my phone to someone else, and I said I would be happy to cover that person if they needed to leave earlier at other times.

Now it's your turn. Have a go at Structured Problem Solving, using the form on   the last page.

Summary

Structured Problem Solving is a simple but very effective skill for helping to address problems that make you feel anxious or sad. While most of us are able to solve problems, when we are particularly anxious or depressed our problems can often seem overwhelming.

Part of the difficulty is often that anxiety and depression can lead you to miss steps and to get 'stuck' in thinking about the problem without doing anything. The process of writing down and systematically working through a problem at these times can therefore be very helpful.

Kind regards and best wishes

The CRUfADClinic Team
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STRUCTURED PROBLEM SOLVING

Step 1 Identify the problem	
Step 2 Brainstorm solutions and list their pros and cons	a) b) c) d) e)

Solution A	
Pros	*Cons*

Solution B	
Pros	*Cons*

Solution C	
Pros	*Cons*

Solution D	
Pros	*Cons*

Step 3 Pick a solution and make an action plan	**What:** **When:**
Step 4 Review what happened	**Outcome:**