

# Brief Counseling Techniques for Your Most Challenging Patients Problem-Solving Treatment: Learning and Planning How to Act, Not React

Avi Kriechman, M.D.

UNM Department of Psychiatry

Center for Rural and Community Behavioral Health

Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

# Objectives

- Recognize the 7 steps of problem-solving
- Learn ways to help patients set goals that are specific, measurable, and achievable
- Learn how to help patients brainstorm solutions, then evaluate and compare them
- Learn ways to help patients select a preferred solution, implement an action plan, and evaluate the outcome

# Overview of Problem Solving

- Take a problem identified by the patient and assist them in a structured process to come up with an action plan to address the problem then evaluate the plan's effectiveness
- Once learned, problem solving skills can help prevent relapse

# Overview of Problem Solving

- Here-and-now focus
- Emphasis on teaching skills
- Structure that supports patient follow-through
- Homework that incentivizes patient to act

# 7 Steps

# 7 Steps of Problem Solving

- Define the Problem
- Set Realistic, Achievable Goal
- Generate Multiple Solutions: Brainstorming
- Evaluate and Compare Solutions: Pros and Cons
- Select the Preferred Solution
- Implement the Solution: Action Plan
- Evaluate the Outcome

# Define the Problem

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# Define the Problem

**Patient defines the problem** which is

- Current, specific, and do-able
- Described in objective behavioral terms
- Explored and clarified
- Broken down into simpler parts



# Questions to Define the Problem

- What makes this a problem?
- When does the problem occur?
- Where does the problem occur?
- Who is involved in the problem?
- How often does the problem occur?
- *What have you already tried to solve the problem?*
- Do you realistically have control over this problem?

# Break Down Large Problems into Smaller, More Manageable Parts

Example: a woman's "problem with family relations" broke down into:

- Resentment of husband for staying out four nights a week
- Mother's criticism about her patient's child-rearing
- Burden taking care of an ungrateful sister with a chronic medical illness

# State Problem Clearly

State problem in a clear and objective way that specifies the exact behaviors needing change

*“My daughter disrespects me”* is vague and doesn’t provide information what needs to be changed

vs.

*“My daughter tells me to ‘Shut Up!’ when I ask her to do something”* is much more objective and describes more precisely what behaviors need to change

# Set Realistic, Achievable Goal

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- Generate Multiple Solutions: Brainstorming
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# Set Realistic, Achievable Goal

- Goal is objective
- Goal is described in observable and measurable behavioral terms
- Goal is achievable with a reasonable amount of time and effort
- Goal is realistic: within the patient's control
- Goal directly follows problem statement

# Set Realistic, Achievable Goal

*“I will lose five pounds during the next week*

is stated in a way that is not within the patient’s control

vs.

*“I will find ways to decrease my sugar consumption” or*

*‘I will increase my activity level’*

are measurable and observable activities over which patient has direct personal control and provide signposts whether or not the goal has been met

# Generate Multiple Solutions: Brainstorming

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# Brainstorming



# Generate Multiple Solutions: Brainstorming

- The first idea is not always the best idea
- The greater the number of potential solutions, the greater the chances for successful problem resolution
- Solutions come from patient
- Encourage patient to generate as many solutions as possible via brainstorming techniques
- Help patient withhold judging ideas until brainstorming is completed to avoid prematurely abandoning potential successful problem resolution

# Brainstorming More Ideas

## More Ideas on Brainstorming

- If patient asks provider “what do you think”, remind them they’re the best judge of what is right for them and their situation
- If patient’s stumped generating ideas, encourage them to think of how other people might respond to the problem
- Encourage with statements like “have fun with your ideas”, “think as free as you like”, “let’s play around with lots of possibilities”

# Evaluate and Compare Solutions: Pros and Cons

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- Set Realistic, Achievable Goal
- Generate Multiple Solutions: Brainstorming
- ***Evaluate and Compare Solutions: Pros and Cons***
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# Evaluate and Compare Solutions: Pros and Cons

Effective solutions not only solve problems but minimize negative outcomes for self and others

- Consider pros and cons (advantages and disadvantages, feasibility and obstacles, benefits and challenges) for each solution
- Consider pros and cons for self and others for each solution

# Don't Rush the Evaluation Process

Evaluating and selecting the solution represents the most important step in problem-solving toward developing critical thinking skills – the ability to carefully weigh the evidence and appropriately draw conclusions.

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# Select the Preferred Solution

- Find middle way between tasks patient feels unprepared to handle vs. discounting patient's competency by supporting a solution that is barely relevant or clearly unsatisfactory for making progress
- Solutions satisfy goals: Don't emphasize do-ability over likelihood of satisfying the goal → the easiest solution to implement is not always the preferred one
- Solutions limit negative impact to self and others

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# Implement the Solution: Action Plan

- Identify specific tasks
- Tasks are relevant to solution
- Set realistic behavior requirements
- Break big tasks down into more simple ones
- It may be helpful to rehearse task in the office
- It may be helpful to use visualization, imagery
- List clear set of tasks assigned for completion between treatment sessions (“homework”)

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- ***Evaluate the Outcome***

# Evaluate the Outcome:

## Review Homework

- Review all homework tasks
- Follow review by asking patient about their sense of ***satisfaction with their effort*** and the ***impact of their success*** on their mood, behavior, relationships, etc.

# Evaluate the Outcome: Difficulties as Opportunities

Difficulties (not “failures”) result in useful information about the problem and how best to solve it

- What did patient learn about situation that they did not know for sure before?
- Exactly what happened when they tried to implement the solution?

# Evaluate the Outcome: Difficulties as Opportunities

Difficulties (not “failures”) result in useful information about the problem and how best to solve it

- Should the goal be defined more clearly?
- Are the goals unrealistic?

## Evaluate the Outcome: Difficulties as (continued)

Difficulties (not “failures”) result in useful information about the problem and how best to solve it

- Have new obstacles come up?
- Are the action steps difficult? If so, why?
- Does the patient feel truly committed to work on the problem?

# Too Difficult to Tackle

***A problem “too difficult to tackle” is usually due to the patient not having sufficient control over the source of the problem***

If a problem proves too difficult....

- Go on to another problem *or*
- Modify the goal to focus on aspects of the problem over which the patient has more control

# 7 Steps of Problem Solving

- ***Define the Problem***
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- ***Generate Multiple Solutions: Brainstorming***
- ***Evaluate and Compare Solutions: Pros and Cons***
- ***Select the Preferred Solution***
- ***Implement the Solution: Action Plan***
- ***Evaluate the Outcome***



# Selected References

- *Training Residents in Problem-solving Treatment of Depression: A Pilot Feasibility and Impact Study* by Hegel, Dietrich, Seville & Jordan
- *Problem-Solving Treatment for Primary Care (PST-PC): A Treatment Manual for Depression* by Hegel & Arian
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