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

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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

- 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
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

- 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
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

• 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
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.
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
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**
• Evaluate the Outcome
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”)
7 Steps of Problem Solving

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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
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Selected References

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