Problem-Solving Therapy

CBT: Working Through a Problem Step by Step

Problem-solving therapy teaches you a clear, step-by-step way to handle the problems that stress you out. Psychologists Thomas D'Zurilla and Marvin Goldfried first described the approach in 1971, and Arthur and Christine Nezu later developed it with D'Zurilla into a full treatment. It is often used for depression and stress. This worksheet takes you through the main steps with one problem at a time.

1 How you see problems

Problem-solving therapy starts with your attitude toward problems, because it shapes whether you tackle them or avoid them. Read each pair, and circle any thought on the left that sounds like you.

When a problem comes up, I tend to think…	A more helpful way to see it
This shouldn't be happening to me.	*Problems are a normal part of life, and everyone has them.*
I'll never be able to fix this.	*I can probably make at least part of this better.*
I need to deal with this right now.	*Taking time to think it through usually leads to a better plan.*
Ignoring it will make it go away.	*Most problems get bigger when I avoid them.*

Why does this work? *When a problem feels like a threat, stress can lead you to avoid it or act on impulse. Breaking it into small steps makes it feel more manageable and helps you think of options you might miss. Studies have found that problem-solving therapy can help reduce symptoms of depression.*

2 Define the problem

Pick one problem. Describe it as clearly as you can, sticking to the facts instead of guesses or judgments.

What is happening? (who, what, when, where)

Example: I have fallen two months behind on my phone bill, and the company has started calling.

Why is this a problem for me?

What would a realistic goal look like?

Example: Have a payment plan set up by the end of the month.

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Brainstorm solutions

List as many ideas as you can, even ones that seem silly or unlikely. Do not judge them yet. More ideas give you more to choose from.

Ideas	More ideas

4 Choose the best idea

Pick your three most promising ideas. For each one, think about how well it would work, whether you can really do it, and what it might cost you in time, money, or stress.

Idea	Will it help?	Can I do it?	Downsides

5 Try it and check

My first step, and when I will take it:

Afterward: How did it go? What would I keep or change?

If your plan does not work, that is useful information. Go back to your list and try the next idea. If problems feel too heavy to face on your own, a therapist trained in problem-solving therapy can help.

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