

Worksheet 5.2a

Problem solving (worked example)

When we are stressed we can feel overwhelmed, that there are so many things we are trying to juggle and something is going to go wrong. Learning to problem solve effectively can help us to feel less overwhelmed and less stressed.

To do this we need to first take a step back and work out very clearly what the problem is. We can then think about what we want to do about it. Once we have our problem written down, there are some steps that we can follow to figure it out:

- 1) Brainstorm all the different things you could try.
- 2) Go through each option and think about the positives (pros) and negatives (cons) of each option.
- 3) Choose the option that makes the most sense for you.
- 4) Break your chosen option down into step-by-step actions.
- 5) Write down the things that might help you achieve each action in spite of any barriers.
- 6) Carry out the actions.
- 7) Review the problem – have your actions solved the problem?

Problem: **A neighbour is having building work done which wakes you up early every morning and you aren't able to get enough sleep**

Once we have our problem on paper, the next step is brainstorming all the different options that we have. It's helpful at this point to include absolutely anything, even impossible or silly options, as these can sometimes spark off a very useful option. It's also best to try to stick to thinking of as many options as possible without starting to think through the detail of any of them at this point. Let's have a go with our example... You might find as you're doing this that your mind starts to tell you that some of your ideas are rubbish, impossible, or silly. When this happens, just try to hold that thought lightly, and put the idea down on the paper anyway.

What kind of options can you think of? Options might include:

Problem: **A neighbour is having building work done which wakes you up early every morning and you aren't able to get enough sleep**

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- Possible solutions:
- Go to bed earlier
 - Wear earplugs
 - Politely ask neighbour if they can arrange for the builders to start a couple of hours later
 - Do nothing
 - Attack the builders, hitting them and shouting at them to stop

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Once we have a list of ideas, the next step is to think about the pros and cons of each option. So, in our example:

Option:	Pros:	Cons:
Do nothing	Don't have to confront anyone	Won't fix the issue Will continue to sleep poorly
Go to bed earlier	Don't have to confront anyone The noise may not be an issue anymore	Would lose part of evening Takes time to change sleep routine – may not be able to sleep earlier
Wear earplugs	Don't have to confront anyone Will block out the noise	Uncomfortable, may make it difficult to sleep
Politely ask neighbour if they can arrange for the builders to start a couple of hours later	Making needs known May solve the issue Neighbour may be respecting and accommodating as asked politely	Neighbour may be unable or unwilling to do this Neighbour may be judgemental or aggressive
Attack the builders, hitting them and shouting at them to stop	Will feel like have done something Builders may stop making as much noise	May get arrested and/or a criminal record Likely to ruin relationship with neighbour

Note that all of the options have pros and cons – there isn't one perfect solution. So based on this, perhaps the option of going to bed earlier is chosen. The next step then is to think carefully about how we're going to go about this option. Often it is helpful to break the option down into smaller 'chunks'. We can then plan when it will take place, where, what is needed. The more information we think through here, the more chance it will happen.

So, in our example, we could break this option down into:

- 1) Work out what time would need to go to bed to get enough sleep
- 2) Figure out which evening activities could be moved to the morning instead
- 3) Plan a wind down routine for getting to bed earlier
- 4) Start by going to bed half an hour earlier
- 5) If this works for a few nights keep shifting the bedtime back every few nights until the time identified in step 1 is reached

Then once we've carried out the actions, we can evaluate whether it has solved our problem or not. If it has, great! If not, or if we think more could be done, then maybe we want to go back to the list of options again and choose another one, or perhaps start the process again.

So in our example, we get through all the steps and start going to bed earlier, but after shifting our bedtime back an hour we are unable to sleep any earlier than that. So – we can follow the process again, clarifying what the problem is and brainstorming options like seeing if the building work can start later or finding other ways to help get to sleep.

Problem solving strategies can help us to achieve our goals and in managing stress. But it's important that we are aware of when it's helping us to do this, and when it's not, so that we can make a choice about whether it is the right tool for us in that moment.