



### DECISION-MAKING WORKSHEET

1. List your alternatives below.
2. For each idea, rate the likelihood that (a) it will help solve the problem; (b) you can carry this idea out optimally; (c) it will have positive immediate consequences; and (d) it will have positive long-term consequences. Use a scale of “minus” (–) to indicate a *low* likelihood, a “plus” (+) to indicate a *high* likelihood, and a “zero” (0) to indicate neither a low nor high likelihood. Use additional worksheets if necessary.

Alternative Solution Ideas	Will it Work?	Can I Carry it Out?	Personal Effects	Social Effects



**“MOTIVATIONAL” WORKSHEET**

If you are having difficulty deciding whether you should carry out your action plan, complete this worksheet.

Consequences If You Did Nothing at the Present Time	Predicted Consequences of Carrying Out Your Action Plan



### ACTION PLAN OUTCOME EVALUATION WORKSHEET

- 1 = not at all  
 2 = a little  
 3 = somewhat  
 4 = much  
 5 = very much

Using the above rating scale, circle the number that represents your feelings.

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. How well does your solution plan meet your goals?  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. How satisfied are you with the effects on you?   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. How well do these results match your original prediction about personal consequences?              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. How satisfied are you with the impact on others involved in the problem?                           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. How well do these results match your original prediction about the consequences concerning others? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Overall, how satisfied are you with the results of your action plan?                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

## **APPENDIX THREE**

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### Patient Handouts: Brief Instructional Booklets

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## STRESS, HEART FAILURE, AND DEPRESSION

**H**eat failure (HF) is the medical condition where the heart has significant difficulty in keeping blood flowing throughout the body to supply various organs. Common symptoms include fatigue, breathing problems, swelling, sleep difficulties, persistent coughing, lack of appetite, nausea, confusion, and increased heart rate.

Unfortunately, HF can be very stressful. HF-related problems can include physical and social limitations, limited capacity to perform activities of daily living, reduced ability to take care of other family members, reduced sexual activity, decreased mobility, and limited social relationships. As such, the quality of life for patients with HF is often greatly impaired. In fact, a recent review of the research literature suggests that patients with HF experience poorer overall quality of life than most other medical patient groups.

Research also suggests that **depression** is very common among individuals with HF. Estimates suggest that between 24% and 42% of all patients with HF experience significant depression that should be treated. But depression in patients with HF often goes unrecognized and undertreated. This is unfortunate, because depression can negatively impact the heart condition itself. For example, research has shown that depression can lead to a worsening of HF symptoms, an increased chance of being rehospitalized, and an increased risk of death. This can occur for physical reasons (e.g., depression can lead to elevated levels of stress hormones), as well as psychological reasons (e.g., being depressed can lead to poor adherence to the health care team's medical advice).

The **COPING WITH HEART FAILURE** program aims to help individuals with HF to better handle the common stresses and problems

associated with this diagnosis and its treatment. The basic idea is to help them better cope with stressful problems as a means of decreasing their depression. Reducing depression is an important goal in and of itself, but alleviating depressive symptoms might also lead to an improvement in one's physical health. This is an important research question we hope to answer in the future by conducting these types of studies.

Interviews with patients with HF have revealed common stressful problems they experience, including

- Feeling tired all the time
- Being bothered by medication side effects
- Feeling that “no one understands me”
- Getting angry at small things
- Feeling helpless
- Not being able to do things that used to be enjoyable
- Feeling like a burden to their family
- Having difficulties sticking to a diet
- Problems with exercising even a little bit
- Worrying about death
- Relationship problems (with spouse, partner, family, friends)

What type of problems are *you* experiencing that are related to feelings of stress and depression? Which ones would you like to tackle first? List 2 or 3 problems below, for now—these might be ones to focus on with your counselor.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

### So What Do I Do?

**Learn to be an effective problem solver!** The ***COPING WITH HEART FAILURE*** program provides ***PROBLEM-SOLVING TRAINING (PST)***. **PST** is a counseling program that teaches individuals how to adapt better to stressful circumstances. It is an interactive, skill-based approach to help people to cope better with stress by dealing with difficult problems. PST has been found to be highly effective as treatment for depression, as well as an

approach to enhance the ability to cope with other types of medical problems, such as cancer, hypertension, diabetes, pain, and traumatic brain injury.

Our program is designed to help teach individuals with HF to better adapt to problems such as those listed above, as well as any stressful concerns unique to a given person. These skills should not only be applicable to HF-related issues but also to other problems in living (e.g., financial difficulties, sexual problems, work problems).

Dealing with depression is an important goal for your overall health. As one patient with HF, HK, once told us—“if you do not deal with the depression, it can become paralyzing; your mental state of health in dealing with heart failure is as important as your heart-related medical treatment.”





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### WHAT IS EFFECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING?

*“We cannot direct the wind  
but we can adjust the sails”*

Life is full of problems, but as Helen Keller once said, “it is also full of overcoming them.” These types of quotes underscore the idea that even though you might be experiencing many stressful difficulties, you *can* adjust to the multiple challenges they represent. As one client told us—“these are the cards I was dealt, now I have to play the hand, win, lose, or draw; I have to ‘fight’ the problems—I can’t fight the reality that these problems exist!”

Research has demonstrated that individuals who are better at adapting to stressful circumstances by solving difficult problems they encounter experience less depression, a better quality of life, and enhanced physical well-being. Such individuals can be considered effective problem solvers, that is, people who tend to

- Look to see where opportunities for growth exist rather than react to problems as *major* threats
- Have self-confidence in their ability to tackle stressful situations
- React to difficult problems in a thoughtful and planful manner, rather than trying to go for the “quick fix,” avoiding dealing with them, or responding with overwhelming negative emotions

The good news is that these are *skills*, not personality traits that we are born with! Just like driving, various sports, or hobbies, **these skills can be learned.**



What are **effective problem-solving skills**? People who are successful at coping with stressful difficulties are said to have a positive orientation toward problems in living, and engage in a planful problem-solving style when dealing with problems.

A **positive problem orientation** involves a set of attitudes to

- View a problem *and* negative emotional reactions more as a challenge than a threat
- Be *realistically* optimistic and believe problems *are* solvable
- Have the self-confidence in oneself to tackle such difficulties
- Believe that difficult problems take persistence and effort (Einstein once said—“It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer”)
- Commit oneself to tackling problems

A **planful problem-solving style** involves a thoughtful and systematic way of dealing with problems. People using such an approach tend to

- Set realistic goals and try to determine what obstacles exist that prevent one from reaching that goal
- Creatively think of multiple ways of overcoming these obstacles and challenges
- Compare the pros and cons of these various options in order to identify effective solution ideas
- Carry out the solution as best as one can and monitor the outcome

On the other hand, **ineffective problem solvers** tend to have a negative orientation toward problems in living and engage in either an impulsive-careless or avoidant problem-solving style.

A **negative problem orientation** involves the general tendency to

- View problems as major threats to one’s well-being
- Doubt one’s ability to cope with problems
- Become overwhelmed with emotional distress when confronted with problems

An **impulsive-careless problem-solving style** involves the strong tendency to

- Go for the “quick fix”
- See the problem through narrow, “tunnel vision”
- Be incomplete and careless

An **avoidance style** is characterized by the strong tendency to

- Procrastinate
- Be passive
- Deny the existence of problems
- Rely on others to fix things rather than trying oneself

### What kind of problem solver are *you*?

Do you *generally* see problems with a positive or a negative orientation? Do you *generally* react to problems with a planful style, an impulsive style, or an avoidant style?

People often react to problems with differing orientations or styles depending on the problem. For example, sometimes people use a more constructive way of dealing with problems at work but experience difficulty handling relationship or family problems (or vice versa). In addition, sometimes problems are so new, so complex, so overwhelming, or at times, even life-threatening that it becomes difficult to know what to do—our previously effective strategies don't seem to work. That's when we may need to learn new skills!

In thinking about the two types of orientations, which one describes you best?

- Positive orientation
- Negative orientation

Think about a problem you recently experienced—are you correct in describing your orientation?

Now think—which one of the 3 problem-solving styles best describes you?

- Planful problem solving
- Impulsive problem solving
- Avoidant problem solving

Go back to that same problem—are you correct in describing your style?

Francis Bacon once said—“knowledge is power!” We believe that self-knowledge is even more powerful; that is, if we are able to correctly

understand our strengths and areas in need of improvement, we are better able to improve our strong points and overcome our limitations.

A first step toward becoming an effective problem solver is to better determine *your* particular problem-solving strengths and limitations. In that way, you can help your counselor to develop a learning program best suited for you!



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### PROBLEM-SOLVING MULTITASKING

*“The brain is a lot like a computer. You may have several screens open at once on your desktop, but you’re able to think about only one at a time.”*

*—William Stixrud*

Sherlock Holmes, the famous fictional detective who possessed great intelligence, would often characterize very difficult problems as a “three pipe problem,” meaning that it would take smoking at least three pipes worth of tobacco before he would be able to solve it. This suggests that solving stressful real-life problems, in-and-of themselves, can often be difficult to handle. But what makes it even more of a challenge is our ability to multitask. This expression has become popular in the current computer age to describe the act of performing several tasks at the same time. Although a powerful computer can be a successful multitasker, due to the limited capacity of the human brain, this becomes difficult for us when attempting to solve real-life problems. In fact, science has shown that we actually cannot multitask efficiently!

Research has shown that our brains are limited in that they cannot perform all the activities required to solve problems efficiently at the same time, especially when the problem is particularly complex or stressful. Often, one activity interferes with another. For example, when we try to remember important information about a problem, this very act can actually interfere with our ability to think of ways to solve it.

Given this limited capacity (unfortunately we cannot go out to a computer store and buy a better brain), what can we do when faced with a stressful or complex problem in life?

### Ways to Facilitate Problem-Solving Multitasking

Because our brains really can't do two things at the same time without affecting the accuracy of our attempts (even though we think we can), we need additional ways to help our minds perform better, especially when tackling complex or emotionally arousing problems.

We recommend three strategies:

- Externalization
- Visualization
- Simplification

These strategies are basic activities that can help us to become better problem solvers in general. Think of them as skills that are important building blocks required for other skills to develop. For example, proper breathing and stretching is important as basic skills required when we wish to exercise correctly or play a sport successfully.

#### Externalization

This strategy involves displaying information *externally* as often as possible. Simply put—write ideas down, draw diagrams or figures to show relationships, make lists. This procedure relieves our brains from having to actively display information being remembered, which allows one to concentrate more on other activities, such as attempting to better understand what obstacles stand in our way of solving the problem, creatively thinking of various solutions, or making effective decisions. That's why we need calendars, BlackBerry's "to do lists," iPods, grocery lists, maps, and even audiotape recorders.

The construction worker needs the blueprints to properly build the house—without them, it would be impossible to remember all the details required regarding measurements, materials, and decorations. Having written materials can help us solve problems more effectively!

To practice this strategy, we strongly recommend that you purchase a small notebook, journal, or notepad.

#### Visualization

Visualization involves using your "mind's eye" in the following ways that can help you solve a problem:

- **Clarifying the problem**—visualize a problem in order to look at it from differing perspectives, break it down into different components, and

“map out” ways of getting from “A” to “B.” It can also help us to remember details better.

- **Imaginal rehearsal**—rehearse carrying out a solution in your mind to improve upon it and get more practice. Sports figures do this all the time to improve performance; for example, skiers “imagine” going down the slopes; basketball players “imagine” how to jump in order to get the ball into the hoop from certain angles.
- **Stress management**—visualizing a “safe place” to go to, such as a relaxing vacation spot, in one’s mind, can be a powerful stress management tool. It can also help you to “slow down,” an important concept that is part of this program.

### Simplification

This strategy involves breaking down or simplifying problems in order to make them more manageable. Rather than trying to solve the big problem, one should try to break it down into smaller parts representing smaller steps. For example, rather than trying to deal with the problem of “how am I going to pay for four years of college?” one can break the problem into smaller steps, beginning with “how can I pay for my first year of college?”

In addition, simplification involves focusing only on the most relevant information, and translating complex, vague, and abstract concepts into more simple, specific, and concrete terms. One way to practice this rule is to write down a brief description of a problem that you are experiencing (which means that you would also be practicing the “externalization” rule)—now read it over and ask yourself the question—“if a friend read this description, would he or she understand it, or did I use vague, ambiguous language and ideas?” If the answer is “no,” go back and try to rewrite the information using the simplification strategy. If that proves difficult, try to visualize talking to your friend to better determine what kinds of words or ideas you should use in order to really get your points across. Write this down, look it over, and try to simplify once again!

**Use these multitasking strategies  
when trying to solve stressful problems!**






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### GO ON A VACATION IN YOUR MIND: VISUALIZE TO REDUCE STRESS

This visualization exercise, often called “guided imagery,” is a stress management tool that you can use to decrease negative emotions or arousal. Basically, you will be asked to use your “mind’s eye” to vividly imagine a scene, one that represents a “safe place,” similar to a favorite vacation spot. Think of it as “taking a vacation in your mind” in order to relax and calm your body and mind. Your safe place is there for you to relax, feel safe and secure, “let go,” and completely be yourself. Under times of stress, it can be extremely helpful in reducing distress. It’s like “turning down the ‘stress’ volume.” This tool can also put you in a relaxed state of mind in anticipation of undergoing an upcoming difficult situation. In addition, the more you practice, the more you will be able to reap the positive benefits of relaxation more quickly and profoundly. It can also be used to help you to **“SLOW DOWN.”**

#### Preparation

We suggest that either you or a friend make a tape recording of the script contained in this handout in order to practice the exercise at home by yourself. In doing so, be sure to read slowly, pausing at places where you are being asked to concentrate, and think of a certain image. Try to visualize the scene as best as possible using your *mind’s eye* and all of your other senses, such as touch, sound, taste, and even smell. Try to *experience* the situation as best as you can. By recording it, you can listen to the instructions at your

leisure and not have to be distracted by trying to remember all of the directions. You can even add some of your own favorite relaxing instrumental music playing softly in the background. This way, you will be able to have your own visualization tape that you can use over and over again.

Find a comfortable location to practice this visualization exercise, such as a recliner, couch, bed, or soft floor covering. Remember to loosen your clothing, remove glasses or contact lenses, and lower the lights to create a more calming effect in your environment. Practice once every day for at least one week. Practicing this tool is important—like learning any other skill (e.g., driving a car, using a computer, playing a piano), the more you practice, the better you get! Trying this strategy only once or twice will **not** produce the kind of results that leads to significant reductions in anxiety or negative arousal. Therefore, practicing is important. A single session will take about 10–15 minutes to complete. The more you practice, the less you will need the tape to help guide you. In that way, you can be able to use this exercise in places outside your home where you have some privacy when you especially need to relax. This exercise can also be helpful when you are having difficulty falling asleep. Try it the next time you can't fall asleep.

### Visualization Script

Let your eyes shut gently. Shut out the world and begin a voyage inward. Relax. It is important to get the most out of visualization.

Now you are going to go to your safe place. Take a nice slow, deep breath. Now put your palms gently over your closed eyes and gently brush your hands over your eyes and face. Place your hands at your sides and allow your body to become relaxed all over. You are about to allow yourself to privately enter your own special place that is peaceful, comfortable, and safe. You will fill your imagination of this place with rich detail. You will experience this place close up, looking off into the distance and through all of your senses. You can also allow room for another person, such as your spouse, friend, or family member, to be with you in this place—but only if you choose to do so.

Your safe place may be at the end of a boardwalk leading to a beach. Sand is under your feet, the water is about 20 yards away, and seagulls, boats, and clouds are in the distance. You feel the coolness of the air as a cloud passes in front of the sun and seagulls are calling to each other. The sun is shimmering on the waves continually rolling to the shore, and there are smells of food coming from the boardwalk. If this is a safe place for you, try to imagine it as best you can. What do you feel? What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear? Try to visualize this scene in great detail. Enjoy this safe place—enjoy this vacation.



A different safe place might be a warm, wood-paneled den, with the smell of cinnamon buns baking in the oven in the kitchen. Through a window you can see fields of tall dried corn stalks or a forest of beautiful, lush trees. There is a crackling fire in the fireplace. A set of candles emit the aroma of lavender and there is cup of warm tea on the table for you.

You may have a different safe place than these two scenes. Take a few seconds to identify your safe place. It can be the beach or a warm house, on a boat, or in your own backyard. It can be anywhere. Maybe a safe place is a vacation spot you have already been to that was relaxing. Where was it? Go to this place now using your mind's eye.

Continue to close your eyes, allowing your breathing to be slow and deep. Walk slowly to your safe and quiet place. Let your mind take you there. Your place can be inside or outside. But wherever it is, it is peaceful and safe. Picture letting your anxieties and worries pass. Look to the distance . . . what do you see? Create a visual image of what you see in the distance. What do you smell? What do you hear? Notice what is right in front of you—reach out and touch it. How does it feel? Smell it . . . listen for any pleasant sounds. Make the temperature comfortable. Be safe here—look around for a special, private spot. Feel the ground or earth under your feet—what does it feel like? Look above you. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell?

Now walk a bit further and stop. Reach out and touch something lightly with your fingertips. What is the texture of what you are touching? This is your special place and nothing can harm or upset you here. Notice how relaxed you are. Notice how good this feels. Be mindful of how you feel—relaxed and calm. Say that to yourself—“I feel relaxed and calm.” Say it slowly. Think of these words—“I feel relaxed and calm.” You can come here and relax whenever you want. Stay in this safe and peaceful place for as long as you wish, allowing yourself to breath slowly and deeply and become relaxed all over.

Is there anyone else you wish to be with you? If so, imagine that he or she is now with you, also enjoying the peace and calm of your safe place. If not, that's fine—remember, this is your vacation.

Remain in your safe place for as long as you wish. Continue to be mindful of what you see, feel, hear, smell, and touch. Take slow, deep breaths. Relax and enjoy.

When you wish to, slowly rise and leave your safe place by the same path or steps that you used to enter. Do this slowly. Notice your surroundings . . . say to yourself the following words—“I can relax in my safe place. This is my special place and I can come here whenever I wish.” Now slowly open your eyes and get used to your surroundings, but bring back “home” the nice feelings of relaxation.

**Remember to practice!  
Enjoy your vacation!**



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**STOP, SLOW DOWN,  
THINK, & ACT  
THE S.S.T.A. METHOD**

*If you are having difficulty coming up with new ideas.  
Then slow down.*

*—Natalie Goldberg*

### **Here's a Question**

When's the best time to make an important decision? When you are upset, right? Of course not! The worst time to try to solve a difficult problem is when you are under stress, feel upset, feel unmotivated, or not thinking your best!

Even if you have great problem-solving skills, putting them to work when trying to cope with lots of stress can be very challenging to even the best of problem solvers. In particular, three common barriers exist when trying to deal with stressful problems. These include

- **Negative feelings**
- **Negative thinking**
- **Feelings of hopelessness**

**Negative feelings**, such as sadness, guilt, tearfulness, or anxiety, when intense and overwhelming, often interfere with our ability to identify effective ways of coping with problems. They can take over our ability to think

logically and serve to mask what such feelings are truly trying to tell us (“there’s a problem to be solved”). **Negative thinking** that focuses on the bad things that have happened or may happen in the future can run over and over in our heads, leaving little room for *constructive* thinking. When negative emotions and negative thinking occur, it isn’t long before a sense of **hopelessness** takes over and significantly reduces our motivation to believe that anything can improve our situation—when that happens, we often stop trying! When we’re thinking logically, it makes sense that quitting *guarantees* failure. BUT, when we’re feeling down and hopeless, it just feels like nothing can be done!

The good news is that there are ways to learn how to be an effective problem solver in *spite* of these obstacles!

When confronted with negative feelings, negative thinking, and feelings of hopelessness, there are things you can do to keep solving problems effectively. The following acronym best captures our overall approach:

### “S. S. T. A.”

This acronym stands for

<b>STOP:</b>	notice your feelings when facing a problem,
<b>SLOW DOWN:</b>	give your brain and body a chance to lower the intensity of your negative arousal,
<b>THINK:</b>	use your planful problem-solving skills to try to cope with the problem, and
<b>ACT:</b>	put your problem-solving ideas into action.

Stopping the negative feelings from taking over is an important first step! Negative feelings, such as sadness, in response to stress, is fairly common—it’s when the sadness turns into depression that significant difficulties can occur! Or when feeling tense turns into anxiety or panic, or the sensation of being “ticked off” turns into anger and hostility! The best way to prevent such initial feelings from turning into strong and overwhelming emotions is to “**STOP, SLOW DOWN, THINK, & ACT.**”

It’s very difficult to stop a train if it has already left the station and increasingly gaining speed. However, putting the brakes on *early* can allow you to stop it before it goes too far. **Note that this is a skill that you can learn!**

## How Can I STOP and SLOW DOWN if I'm Upset and Stressed Out?

Your PST counselor will teach you a set of skills that will help you to *STOP and Slow Down*. These include

- 1. Becoming more aware of your reactions to stress.** These include feelings (sadness), thoughts (“I can’t handle this situation”), physical responses (headaches, sweaty hands, fatigue), and changes in behavior (“wanting to run away”). Becoming more aware can help you to better know when to *STOP* and try to determine what is actually bothering you and to deal with that situation rather than becoming more upset. When you experience these reactions, that’s when to say to yourself—**STOP!**
- 2. Becoming aware of your “unique triggers.”** These would be your “hot” buttons or switches—those people, events, situations, thoughts, sights, sounds, etc., that most often “get to you. Examples might include someone cutting in front of you on a long line, crowds, hearing a song that has special meaning for you in a sad way, or getting yelled at by someone. Knowing your triggers can also help you to **STOP & Slow Down**.
- 3. Slowing Down.** Once you are able to STOP, the next step is to try to “slow down” the arousal, that is, to try to “slow the train down enough that it doesn’t leave the station.”

### Strategies to Slow Down

Below is a list of tools your counselor can help you with. Some may seem strange or unusual (“fake yawning”). But before you dismiss them, talk to your counselor. Others you may have learned to do already, for example, deep breathing. All have been found to reduce stress and help people to “slow down.” Because we believe in the idea—“different strokes for different folks”—we wanted to provide you with a group of tools, rather than just one or two.

- Counting
- Deep breathing
- Visualization
- “Fake” smiling
- “Fake” yawning
- Meditation
- Muscle relaxation
- Exercise/mindful walking



- Talking to someone
- Gum chewing
- Prayer
- Can you think of any others

### **Think & Act**

The last two steps involve planful problem solving—that is, thinking creatively of a plan that will help you to solve the stressful problem, as well as carrying it out.

However, before you can do this, your mind *and* body needs to be calm and cool!

Talk to your counselor about practicing the **S-S** process. Learn which “slow down” tools seem to work for you!



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## DEEP BREATHING

**D**eep or *diaphragmatic* (meaning breathing from your diaphragm instead of from your chest) breathing is one of the simplest, cheapest, and safest ways to help our bodies calm down. According to doctors who specialize in mind and body interactions, breathing is an incredibly powerful health tool that we have available to us at all times.

Follow the steps below to learn how to make more effective use of your breathing in order to better manage stress.

**Step 1.** Lie down or sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes.

**Step 2.** Place your hands gently on your body. Put your right hand on your stomach, just under your rib cage and about even with your waistline. Put your left hand on the center of your chest, just under your neck.

**Step 3.** Become aware of your breathing. Notice how you are breathing. Which hand rises the most? If the hand on your stomach or belly is moving up and down, then you are breathing more from your diaphragm or abdomen. This is the best way to breathe. Practice doing this now, keeping your hands on your belly. As you take in your breath, imagine that your entire abdomen, just below your rib cage, is a balloon that is filling up with air. When you exhale, let all the air out of the belly slowly, and feel it collapse, just like a balloon that is letting out air.

**Step 4.** Follow the breathing directions for about 5 minutes.

- Inhale *slowly* and *deeply* through your nose into your abdomen, filling all the spaces in your belly with air (if you have difficulty breathing through your nose, go ahead and breathe through your mouth).
- Now exhale through your mouth, making a quiet, exhaling “whooshing sound” like the wind, as you gently and slowly blow out. Purse your lips, forming an “O” and release your breath, as if you were trying to make a paper sailboat glide *slowly* across the water. Take long, slow, deep, breaths.
- Feel your belly rise and fall.
- Repeat a phrase (silently or out loud) with each breath, such as “I take in life” with each breath in and “I am giving life” with each breath out (another phrase can include “I am taking in a good breath and now I am releasing the tension”).
- Continue to breathe this way for approximately 5 minutes.

Try to practice this breathing exercise at least once a day—it only takes 3–5 minutes! As you get better at this skill, you can try to use it to calm your body down during times of stress without having to close your eyes and place your hands on your stomach. It may come in handy, for example, while waiting in a long line at the supermarket, getting caught in traffic, right before a major presentation at work, or in the middle of a difficult exam. Apply this skill especially when you are feeling increased stress when attempting to solve a problem.



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## MINDFUL MEDITATION

An important goal of mindful meditation is to be able to adopt a point of view where one attempts to distance oneself from one's experiences. This independent observer pays close attention to his or her thoughts and feelings as they occur but attempts to separate such thoughts and feelings in a way that helps the person come to believe that "*I am not my thoughts; I am not my feelings.*" In this way, you can observe your thoughts and feelings as you experience them but begin to realize that you don't have to allow these thoughts and feelings influence you to behave in a certain way. For example, the following thought, "I feel so stupid today for forgetting my planning book at home," should be considered *just a thought* and not reality! You can note that you had this thought but realize that you don't have to *react* to such a thought as if it is the "universal truth" and then feel bad about yourself. You can simply acknowledge, with *detached acceptance*, that you had the thought. You had the thought but the thought neither "owns" you nor "defines" you—it's *just a thought*.

We have found that the metaphor of looking at movies of yourself or hearing tape recordings of your voice can be a useful way to help you to become a detached observer. Seeing a movie of yourself allows you to see yourself "outside of your own body." You are actually seeing yourself say and do things—*but it really isn't you*. If you can refrain from evaluating these actions, but rather simply note that you are engaged in them, then you can begin to see your thoughts and feelings from a distance. If you have ever taken any home movies, try to look at them and observe yourself. Try to observe yourself without any judgments, being more accepting and forgiving of any actions you previously would have felt embarrassed (or even proud) by. Simply observe—don't judge.



Being able to detach yourself from negative thoughts and feelings can help you to “slow down” negative arousal by accepting that these experiences are just experiences and do not represent the “truth.”

### Instructions for Mindful Meditation

The following are instructions that can help you to engage in mindful meditation.

You can practice this meditation with your eyes open or closed. Initially, plan on about 10 minutes to engage in this mindful meditation exercise. You can extend the time after you have practiced a bit. Similar to other stress management strategies in this book, you may wish to tape record the following instructions in order to free you from having to remember them.

Begin by feeling your breath—do not *think* about it—just feel it come in.

1. Focus your attention on your breathing; notice how it stops, it reverses, then it flows out.
2. There is no special way to breathe. Anyway you breathe is natural—it is your life force.
3. Think of your breath like a rising wave—it happens on its own—just stay with that—be mindful of the breath in your own body.
4. Your mind is not going to want to stay on the breath for very long. When that happens and you drop your focus on your breathing, just let the mind go off—but let it also come back.
5. Leave your body still.
6. Feel the breath.
7. Breathe in . . . breathe out.
8. As you breathe in, focus on the “in” breath.
9. As you exhale, focus on the “out” breath.
10. “Ride” the breath.
11. Flow with the breath.
12. Feel it in your nostrils.
13. Feel your abdomen rise and fall (place your hands on your stomach area if you prefer to feel the flow of your breath).
14. Rest your mind on the simple, regular, calming wave of breathing that your body is experiencing.
15. Notice the sensation in you nostrils, abdomen, and shoulders.
16. Notice any thoughts that bubble up to the surface of your mind. Notice them and simply let them go. Visualize these thoughts floating away, like leaves floating down a gentle stream of water. Remember that these thoughts are “not you”—you are not defined by your thoughts.

17. Settle in the present moment. Stay aware of actual moment-to-moment happenings—a slight pain in your shoulder or various sounds, such as a train passing by, the wind rustling through the trees, or people’s voices.
18. Let your concentration deepen.
19. Don’t try to suppress your perceptions, feelings, awareness—simply notice what is happening and then let it dissolve as the new moment begins.
20. Stay awake (even if your eyes are closed), remain alert . . . pay attention.
21. Breathe in . . . breathe out. Stay focused.
22. Let go of each breath. Let go of each thought—don’t hang on. Let them float away down the stream.
23. Note your thoughts—notice them and let them go. With each breath, let go of any thoughts a little bit more. Let them simply pass by in the stream.
24. Notice where your mind is when it’s not on your breathing.
25. Make no judgment, just notice where it is and come back to the breath
26. Allow each moment to be fresh and new.

After engaging in several practice sessions, it is likely that you will have experienced several moments in which you were able to let the “noise of your mind” fade in the background and experience “the present moment.” Try to practice this tool several times during the next week. We suggest that you consider practicing this tool once a week for the rest of your life.



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### DEEP MUSCLE RELAXATION

Deep muscle relaxation, also known as *progressive muscle relaxation*, is a stress management technique that reduces physiological tension in the muscles. When we experience anxious thoughts or feelings, our bodies often respond with muscle tension. This muscle tension then gets interpreted by our brains as a sign of more anxiety. Thus, begins a vicious cycle between the mind and body. This strategy can release muscle tension and give a feeling of warmth and well-being to the body. This is interpreted by our brain as “everything is okay.” Deep muscle relaxation can be a very strong antistress medicine and break the above cycle.

#### Preparation

Essentially, progressive muscle relaxation teaches you to first tense a particular muscle group (e.g., your left hand) and then to “release that tension” in order to feel relaxed and calm. You then progress in a similar manner throughout several muscle groups in your entire body. You will then be taught to foster a sense of overall relaxation without tensing any muscles.

Note that when you are asked to tense a given muscle, you should not do so as to cause a cramp or create pain. Rather, tense the muscle only in order to feel the tension. Try to concentrate on the particular muscle group that is being addressed and not any others. For example, when asked to “make a fist,” do so simply by clenching your hand into a fist but not raising your entire arm.

Ask someone with a *calming* voice to make a tape recording of the script provided in the following pages or you may want to make the tape yourself. You can even add some of your own favorite relaxing instrumental music playing softly in the background. This way, you will be able to have your own progressive muscle relaxation tape that you can use over and over again.

Now, practice this relaxation tool in a comfortable place. Loosen your clothing, remove glasses or contact lenses, and lower the lights to create a more calming effect in the room environment. Make sure that your legs are not crossed and your head is supported, as your body may experience a sense of heaviness that would be uncomfortable if your legs or arms were in a crossed position. Practice once every day for at least one week. Practicing this tool is important—like learning any other skill (e.g., driving a car, using a computer, playing a piano), the more you practice, the better you get! A single session will take about 25–30 minutes to complete.

### **Script Instructions (*read softly and slowly*)**

Let yourself go now, getting deeply relaxed all over. Start by taking a deep breath, feeling the air flow in, way down to your lower stomach, and filling your whole abdomen region. Now exhale slowly, and as you do, feel the air slowly releasing from your lower abdomen region and allow yourself to float down into your chair. Close your eyes and focus on the sensations of breathing. Imagine your breath rolling in and out—like waves coming onto the shore.

Think quietly to yourself—I am going to let go of tension . . . I will relax and smooth out my muscles . . . I will feel all of the tightness and the tension dissolve away.

Now we will begin the progressive muscle relaxation procedure. Your first muscle group will be your hands, forearms, and biceps. First, clench your right fist . . . tighter . . . study the tension and discomfort as you do so. Keep it clenched and notice the tension in your fist, hand, and forearm. Hold this tension in your right fist for a few seconds (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . feel the looseness in your right hand.

Notice the contrast with the tension. Repeat the procedure with your right fist again, always noticing as you relax that this is the opposite of tension . . . relax and feel the difference.

Now, clench your left fist, tighter and tighter, studying the tension and discomfort as you do so. Keep it clenched and notice the tension in your fist, hand, and forearm. Hold this tension in your left fist for a few seconds (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . feel the looseness in your left hand . . . notice the contrast with the tension (reader—pause for 5 seconds).

Now repeat the entire procedure with your left fist, then both fists at once. Clench both fists, tighter and tighter, studying the tension and discomfort as you

do so. Keep them clenched and notice the tension. Hold this tension in both fists now for a few seconds (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . feel the looseness in your hands . . . allow warmth and relaxation to spread all over. Now bend your elbows in order to tense your biceps. Tense them now and observe the feeling of tension and tightness (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . let your arms straighten out. Let relaxation flow in and feel the difference between the tension and strain in your arms when it was tensed and how it felt when it was relaxed, loose and limp. Now repeat this procedure. Bend your elbows and tense your biceps. Tense them now and observe the feeling of discomfort (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . let your arms straighten out. Let relaxation flow in and feel the difference between the tension and strain in your arms when it was tensed and how it felt when it was relaxed.

Your next muscle group will be your head, face, and scalp. Turning attention to your head, wrinkle your forehead (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax and smooth it out. Imagine that your entire scalp is becoming smooth and relaxed . . . at peace . . . at rest. Now frown and notice the tightness and strain spreading throughout your forehead (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now let go . . . allow your brow to become smooth and soft again. Close your eyes now and squint them tighter. Notice the tension, the discomfort (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax your eyes and allow them to remain gently closed (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now clench your jaw, bite down like you trying to hold something in your teeth (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax your jaw. When your jaw is relaxed, your lips may be slightly parted and you might feel your tongue loosely in your mouth. Now press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. Feel the slight ache it creates in the back of your mouth (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . feel your tongue soft and loose in your mouth. Press your lips now, purse them into an “O” as if you were blowing bubbles (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax your lips. Notice that your forehead, scalp, eyes, jaw, tongue, and lips are all relaxed (reader—pause for 5 seconds).

Your next muscle group will be your head, neck, and shoulders. Press your head back as far as you can and observe the tension in your neck. Roll it from right to left and notice the changing location of the stress. Straighten your head forward, pressing your chin to your chest. Feel the tension in your throat and the back of your neck (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . allow your head to return to a comfortable position. Let the relaxation spread over your shoulders (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now shrug your shoulders. Keep the tightness and tension as you hunch your head down between your shoulders. Feel how uncomfortable this position is (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax your shoulders. Drop them back and feel relaxation spreading throughout your neck, throat, and shoulders; pure relaxation, deeper and deeper (reader—pause for 5 seconds). Your next muscle group will be your chest and abdomen. First, give your entire body a chance to relax. Feel the comfort and the heaviness. Now breathe in and fill your lungs completely. Hold your breath and

notice the tension (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now exhale . . . let your chest and abdomen become loose while the air is coming out. Continue relaxing and let your breathing become calm and natural (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Repeat the deep breath once more and notice the tension leave your body as you exhale (reader—pause for 5 seconds).

Now tighten your stomach as if you are trying to “suck it in” and make it hard and flat. Hold it (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Notice the tension. Now relax. Arch your back (without straining). Notice the tension in your lower back and hold this position for a few seconds (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Focus on the tension in your lower back. Now relax, gently lowering your back down and relaxing all over (reader—pause for 5 seconds).

Your next muscle group will be your legs and buttocks. Tighten your buttocks and thighs. Flex your thighs by pressing down on your heels (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax and feel the difference (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now point your toes like a ballet dancer and make your calves tense. Study the tension and hold it (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax . . . notice the difference between the relaxed feeling in your legs and the discomfort that you experienced a moment ago. Bend your toes toward your face, creating tension in your shins. Pause and hold it (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Now relax again (reader—pause for 5 seconds). Feel the heaviness and warmth throughout your lower body as the relaxation spreads all over you. Relax your feet, ankle, calves, shins, knees, thighs, and buttocks. Now let the relaxation spread to your stomach, lower back and chest (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Let go of the tension more and more (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Experience the relaxation deepening in your shoulders, arms, and hands. Deeper . . . and deeper. Notice the feeling of looseness and relaxation in your neck, jaw, and all your facial muscles (reader—pause for 3 seconds). Say to yourself—my muscles are relaxed, warm, and smooth . . . I am letting go of all my tension . . . I am deeply relaxed . . . my muscles are relaxed, warm, and smooth . . . I am letting go of all my tension . . . I am deeply relaxed. Enjoy these feelings of relaxation for the next few moments (reader—pause for 2 minutes, during which you can occasionally say—“more and more relaxed, deeper and deeper into a state of relaxation”).

Now bring your focus back to the present time and place while I count from 1 to 5. With each increasing number, try to become more alert to your surroundings, open your eyes, but keep the feelings of relaxation in your body (Reader—slowly count from 1 to 5).

### **REMEMBER TO PRACTICE!**



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### MINDFUL WALKING: TAKING A “WABI-SABI” WALK

*Wabi-sabi* is a Japanese concept that is somewhat difficult to translate into English but essentially represents a particular type of “world view” or way of thinking about the world. A wabi-sabi perspective acknowledges the beauty in objects, things, or people things that are *imperfect, impermanent, or incomplete*.

As an example, when we look at a tree, the lines in the bark, the tree’s color, as well as the foliage, all tell us unique characteristics about that tree. Thus, each tree is uniquely beautiful. Similarly, it is the lines in a person’s face that lets us know how much they have laughed, thought deeply, experienced pain, or was kind to others. Wabi-sabi offers a philosophy that fosters an appreciation of our surroundings each moment. It can also help us to slow down by becoming more aware of the beauty all around us.

#### Instructions for Taking a Wabi-Sabi Walk

Allow yourself at least 20 minutes to take this type of walk. This is not a walk for physical exercise—and you can feel free to sit down at any time during this activity. The importance of this exercise is that you will have an opportunity to practice a walking meditation. Try taking such a walk at least once a week—perhaps for the rest of your life. As you go on this walk, engage in the following:

1. Begin by engaging in mindful breathing.
2. As you breathe in, be aware that you are “receiving life.”
3. As you exhale, be aware that you are “giving something back to the world.”

4. Stay in the present.
5. Clear all thoughts of the past or future.
6. Stay in touch with your breathing.
7. As thoughts come into your mind, simply observe them and let them pass.
8. Let any of these thoughts go and refocus on the present.
9. The purpose is to be present and aware of your breathing and walking.
10. Be aware of your feet as you walk, one foot in front of the other.
11. Walk gently on the earth—be aware that with every step you are placing your footprint on the earth.
12. You can coordinate your breathing with your steps by taking an “in” breath every 3 or 4 steps, followed by an “out” breath every few steps. You may quietly whisper “in” and “out” to yourself as you go along your path.
13. Be aware of all other sights, smells, and life in your surroundings—the car horns, the birds, the traffic noises, the leaves on a tree, the blades of grass, the concrete walkway, the park bench, or the mall parking lot.
14. Notice that everything you see is *imperfect*, *impermanent*, and *incomplete*. The tree’s bark has cracks in it indicating its age or the conditions under which it grew.
15. As you walk along the concrete path you may notice that it is cracked, covered with leaves, debris, or animal droppings.
16. Be aware of people. Notice how *imperfect*, *incomplete*, or *impermanent* they are.
17. Visualize how you are connected to each person in some way or they to each other.
18. Now what is present in your surrounding that you cannot see? Perhaps a squirrel that is climbing on the other side of the tree, the pain experienced by the elderly gentleman who crosses the street with his cane, or the bulbs of spring flowers that are still under a frozen ground. Be aware that even though you may be aware of all that you observe, it is possible that there are objects present that you cannot see with your eyes.
19. As you return from your walk, be aware of all those things that you may have missed on previous walks—make a commitment to become more mindful as you go through your day.
20. Enjoy the walk!





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## POSITIVE VISUALIZATION FOR GOAL ATTAINMENT

This handout contains a series of “visualization lessons” that can help you to lay out various goals for the future and feel more motivated to try to reach them. Follow the described below in a step-by-step manner beginning with Lesson 1.

Move on to the next visualization lesson when you are ready. You can take anywhere from 1 day to several weeks to get through the 8 lessons. If you decide to take some time with any one of the lessons, just make sure to practice the visualization exercise that is described in that lesson at least once each day.

### Lesson 1: Develop a Specific Visual Picture of the Future

Many times our personal goals are too vague and cloudy. For example, if your goal is to improve your health, what is your *visual* picture of this goal? Do you see yourself eating 3 well-balanced meals a day? Do you picture yourself completing 10 push-ups and running 2 miles? Do you picture yourself with a blood pressure of 120 over 75, smoke free, or meditating in the park? Do you picture playing catch with your grandchildren in the park? Likewise, a goal for more financial security may include increasing your savings to a certain amount, starting a retirement plan, or picturing yourself in your own home or apartment.

It is very important that you develop your visualization of the future in very *specific and concrete mental pictures*. Try it out right now. Describe the mental picture of what you wish to accomplish and write down a description of that picture. For example, individuals who want to learn how to scuba dive

might picture themselves in warm, clear water, wearing a wet suit and scuba gear, slowly following the path of a beautiful fish. They approach the surface with a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction. Later, they picture themselves sitting in the warm sun on the deck of the boat, sharing the experience with friends.

### **Lesson 2: Break Down Your Visual Picture of the Future Into Small Steps**

It is important to have both *short-* and *long-*term goals to visualize (Remember to “simplify!”). For example, if your long-range visualization is seeing yourself smoke-free and walking 1 mile each day, make a series of visual images that are steps to this goal. For example, in this situation, a person may have a short-range goal of initially cutting-out smoking while on the telephone and walking at least two blocks each day. The next step might include no smoking after meals and walking 5 blocks a day. And so on . . . practice visualizing your goals by creating both short- and long-term goals in your visual images.

### **Lesson 3: Develop Different Types of Goals**

Remember to visualize your goals in terms of things that you can accomplish. You can only make changes in yourself. For example, if your overall goal is to improve your marriage, goals such as “my husband will not complain so much,” “my wife will not drink too much,” or “my husband will find me attractive” may not be reachable because they are not in your control. However, “I will be more patient,” “I will communicate my concerns and disagreement with her behavior more effectively,” or “I will feel more confident about the way I look” are goals that can be achieved because they involve things that you have control over. In the same way, goals involving physical or athletic accomplishments should be focused on improving your performance, not simply winning a game or an event. Winning involves other players’ performances—something over which you have no control. In this way, your goals are actually reachable.

### **Lesson 4: Remove the Barriers to Your Goals Through Visualization**

In this lesson, you will travel, in your imagination, to the future, and visit yourself 5 years from now. In this image, remember that anything goes—so picture it just the way that you want it to be. You will look around at your possessions, notice your accomplishments, see who you are with, be aware of how you

spend your leisure time, and so on. Remember, it is a good idea to have a friend or family member with a calming voice tape record the script below.

Before you begin, find a comfortable location to practice visualization, such as a recliner, couch, bed, or soft floor covering. Remember to loosen your clothing, remove glasses or contact lenses, and lower the lights to create a more calming effect in the room environment. Practice once every day for at least one week. Practicing this tool is important—trying this strategy only once or twice will not produce the kind of results that leads to significant reductions in anxiety, depression, or feelings of hopelessness. Therefore, practicing is important. A single session will take about 10–15 minutes to complete. Use positive statements or affirmations when you begin the visualization. These should be short, positive statements that state your intention to yourself. Examples include the following:

- “I will experience success in my mind”
- “I can peace within myself”
- “A goal is a possible future”
- “If I can dream it, I can do it”
- “I can put distractions aside for now”
- Think of some new ones yourself

### Visualization Instructions

(Reader: read softly and slowly—pause between sentences throughout).

“Close your eyes and relax—let go of any tension in your body. Now go to a safe and tranquil place in your mind—a special, outdoor place. Look around, take note of what you see nearby, as well as in the distance. Describe the scene silently to yourself. Now look for a path—this is your path toward the future. Notice a tree stump or log branch across the path. Imagine that this piece of wood in front of the path is getting in the way of your ability to walk down the path. This piece of wood is your own hesitation or fear of changing and walking toward your goals. Step over it, step over this log and visualize overcoming your hesitation, overcoming your fears.

Now, as you walk along the path, you come across a steep hill. This hill is your own doubts about yourself. Slowly, keep walking up the hill, even though you are not absolutely sure of what you will find at the top of the hill. With each step, begin to let yourself become more self-confident that you will reach your goals. When you reach the top, you walk through a dark forest of trees that block out the sunlight. This forest has all the obstacles that block you from seeing your final goals—interference from others, day-to-day problems that keep you from working on your goals, or your own fears that you don’t deserve what

you want. However, you push past the trees to a clearing and you are now in a sunny field. You can see your home in the distance. This is your home 5 or 10 years in the future. Go into your home and look around. What do you see? How many rooms are there? How are they decorated? What things do you own? What pictures or photographs do you see? Look at yourself in the mirror. What do you look like? What are you wearing? Look at your family come in. How do they act toward each other? Listen to yourself as you picture yourself to be five years older. Listen to yourself as you talk to people or make phone calls—what do you say?

Follow yourself to work or school. What are your achievements? What are your activities? Watch yourself at leisure. What are you doing? For example, maybe you're watching TV, race car driving, sailing, fishing, listening to classical music?

Now ask yourself how you feel. In other words, look back over your life of the last 5 years—what are you especially glad that you had the chance to experience? What are you most proud of? Maybe you gave a successful speech, ran a marathon, had several good friends, raised self-confident children, or people knew that they could count on you. Anything is possible.

Remember—visualize what you hope and wish to be in the future—not what is going on now!

When you have finished exploring, let your images fade away and come back to the present—here and now. Open your eyes and make a brief list with your images still fresh in your mind. Pick one or two major goals for your future and write down the details and the specific visual images that come to mind.”

### **Lesson 5: Write Down Your 5-Year Goal**

Choose just one image that you had from the previous visualization exercise and write down your 5-year goal. It could be a personal, physical, career, family, or social goal. Remember to be very specific and concrete, as explained in the first lesson.

### **Lesson 6: Break Your Goal Into 1-Year Goals**

Look at the goal again, and break it down into smaller 1-year goals—one goal for each year. These would be smaller steps leading to your larger goal. Write these down—externalize!

### **Lesson 7: Break Your First Year Goal Into Smaller Steps**

Now look at your first 1-year goal and break it down one more time into several steps to reach over the course of a year. Write these down. Once again, remember to be very concrete and specific.

### Lesson 8: Create a Daily Visualization

Create a visualization for each day to accomplish the steps toward these goals. In your imagination, picture yourself clearly carrying out the steps for your immediate goals. For example, you might be picturing yourself exercising 2 days per week for the next four months. If so, visualize yourself in workout clothes, imagine that you will experience a sense of pride in arranging for enough time to spend at the gym. Imagine your favorite music playing on a personal tape player; visualize your body feeling strong and the perspiration dripping off your skin as you are working hard.

As you reach each goal that you have visualized, begin daily visualizations of the next step in your series of goals, leading finally up to your 1-year goal. After that, develop a series of visualization steps toward the next year's goal. In general, use the basic strategy of visualizing future goals in order to develop a road map of steps that you need to take in order to achieve such goals, whether it involves solving a particular stressful problem at present, reaching toward a goal that involves only a week, or going for something that involves a much longer time. In developing such road maps, write down both overall goals, as well as smaller steps or objectives leading to these goals.

#### Visualize reaching each step and then “go for it!”

Remember though—sometimes we set unrealistic initial goals or set goals that depend on other people. If either of these situations occur, maybe you need to redesign your smaller goals to those that are reachable in a smaller period of time and involve situations that you have control over and do not necessarily require others to change.





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## PLANFUL PROBLEM SOLVING

**P**lanful problem solving involves several steps or activities that serve as guides to help people approach problems in a reasoned, deliberate, and systematic way. It is a powerful means of helping individuals to reach their goals. When attempting to deal with problems that are particularly stressful, remember that this toolkit should be used in combination with the directive to ***STOP and SLOW DOWN***. You simply can't think logically when you are feeling stressed out!

The tasks involved in ***Planful Problem Solving*** includes the following 4 steps:

- Step 1. Define the problem and set realistic goals.
- Step 2. Generate alternative solutions to solve the problem.
- Step 3. Decide which ideas are the best.
- Step 4. Carry out the solution and determine whether it worked or not.

### Step 1: Define the Problem

There is an old saying—"measure twice, cut once." John Dewey, the American philosopher and psychologist, suggested that "a problem well-defined, is half solved!" Both quotes suggest that if we take the time to fully understand the nature of the problem we are experiencing, solving it will take less time and effort. Defining a problem is similar to laying out a course or route to travel. We need to know our destination, what resources we have to get there, and what barriers exist that might make the trip difficult. Accurately defining the problem, then, involves the following activities:

- **Seek important facts** about the problem (that is, answer questions such as "who," "what," "when," "where," & "how").

- **Describe the facts in clear language.**
- **Separate “facts” from “assumptions.”**
- **Set realistic goals**—break down a complex problem into smaller ones if necessary.
- **Identify barriers** or obstacles to your goal.

### **Problems That Are Changeable Versus Problems That Cannot Be Changed**

One thought about goals—it’s important to remember that we cannot always solve a problem by “fixing it.” Sometimes, the best solution for dealing with a problem is to accept that the problem exists. On a small scale, this means that we cannot change the weather to better suit our plans; we may just have to accept that it’s going to rain during a ballgame we waited a long time to see. On a larger scale, as one former client told us—“accepting reality often helps me to get past feeling sorry for myself or to keep from trying over and over to change something that can’t be changed; especially people who don’t want to change!”

### **Step 2: Generate Alternative Solutions**

The next step is to creatively think of a *variety* of solution alternatives or ways to solve the problem. Doing so can increase your chances of coming up with a great idea, make you feel more hopeful (imagine if there was only one alternative to choose among for each decision we had to make), decrease “black and white” thinking, and minimize the tendency to act impulsively. This step directs you to creatively think of multiple ideas—at least 3 to 5, more if possible.

To carry out this step effectively, we suggest that you use various brainstorming principles. *Brainstorming* increases your flexibility and creativity, which actually improves the quality *and* quantity of the solutions that you generate. Brainstorming also helps you to better deal with strong negative emotional reactions. Strong emotions can frequently dominate or influence your thinking by giving you “tunnel vision,” leaving you with only one or two ideas, and ones that are likely not even to be ultimately effective. When emotions do seem to become overwhelming, brainstorming can help you to get “back on track.” There are 3 brainstorming rules we recommend:

- **“Quantity leads to quality”** (the more ideas you think of, the better your chances of thinking of really good ones).

- **“Do Not Judge”** (trying to evaluate each idea, one at a time, only limits your ability to be real creative).
- **Think of “variety”**—try to think of different kinds of ideas.

### Step 3: Decision Making

In thinking of differing solution alternatives, we suggested that you “defer judgment.” In this step, judgment is the key activity used to make sound decisions. Making decisions about how to handle difficult problems can be hard. However, we offer several guidelines that can help you. There are 4 important tasks involved in making good decisions:

- **Screen out** obviously ineffective solutions.
- **Predict** the positive and negative consequences of each solution idea.
- **Evaluate** the impact of these consequences (weigh the pros and cons of these solutions).
- **Develop an action plan to carry out as your solution** (the plan includes those ideas that are the most effective ones based on the above cost-benefit analysis).

When thinking about consequences—be sure to consider *personal* (the effects on oneself), as well as *social* consequences (the impact on others), and *short-term*, as well as *long-term* consequences.

### Step 4: Carry Out the Action Plan & Evaluate its Success

Now that you developed an action plan, the next step is to carry it out. However, that’s not necessarily where you stop. It becomes important to determine whether your plan was successful; if not, to determine where you need to revise your plan. The specific tasks in this last Planful Problem-Solving step include the following:

- **Motivate** yourself to carry out your solution (think about the pros and cons of “doing nothing” vs. the possible success of solving the problem; **visualize** how you would feel if you persist and solved the problem).
- **Carry out** your action plan.
- **Observe and monitor** the actual outcome.
- **Reward yourself** for making an effort (you *do* deserve it), especially if the problem is solved.
- **Circle back** to the previous activities if the problem is *not* solved to your satisfaction.



To help develop an action plan geared to solve your problem, ask your problem-solving counselor for a “Problem-Solving Worksheet,” a form that can help guide you to carry out these important problem-solving tasks.

Our program also has numerous additional helpful hints, suggestions, and guidelines to help improve one’s problem-solving skills. If you find that you are having difficulty engaging in 1 or more of the tasks described above, be sure to ask your counselor for more help.

