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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.

