



**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

STOP:	notice your feelings when facing a problem,
SLOW DOWN:	give your brain and body a chance to lower the intensity of your negative arousal,
THINK:	use your planful problem-solving skills to try to cope with the problem, and
ACT:	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!