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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!