

Problem Solving

Introduction

Welcome to the Problem Solving session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session will help you deal with daily life problems that accumulated while you were using as well as new problems that might come up in sobriety. Importantly, this session will provide you with a simple six-step plan for problem solving.

What is in this session?

This session has three major parts: (1) Life Problems, (2) Problem Solving, and (3) Tips and Techniques.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - Understand why you were unable to deal well with problems when you were using
 - Recognize the difficulties you may have in dealing with problems in early sobriety
 - Understand the importance of “willingness” in finding solutions to your problems
- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - Understand a basic set of steps for problem solving
 - Practice the basic steps for problem solving that you learned



SESSION 19 HAS THREE MAJOR PARTS:

1. Life Problems
2. Problem Solving
3. Tips and Techniques



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:

You will

- Understand why you were unable to deal well with problems when you were using
- Recognize the difficulties you may have in dealing with problems in early sobriety
- Understand the importance of “willingness” in finding solutions to your problems

- ✓ After participating in part 3, you will be able to
 - Prioritize problems
 - Break big problems into manageable pieces
 - Ask for help
 - Brainstorm when stuck
 - Weigh the benefits and risks of potential solutions

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to consider how you dealt with the problems of daily life when you were using, and the difficulties you may face in doing so when newly sober. You will also be asked to use a simple technique to solve a current problem.



Part 1: Life Problems

Problems are a part of living. During active addiction, though, you added problems to the normal ones that everyone faces. You may have so many problems that your life is out of balance.

Problems in Active Addiction

When you were using alcohol and other drugs, you probably tried to ignore your problems as much as possible. A typical pattern in addiction is this:

1. The distorted thinking caused by addiction, such as denial and the mental distortions caused by the drugs themselves, keeps people from seeing the true nature of their problems.
2. This distorted thinking makes people believe that they are not responsible for their own problems.
3. Active drug users also ignore problems because getting and using drugs is their main priority.
4. People become overwhelmed by their problems, ignore them, and let them accumulate.

Needless to say, such a pattern not only does little to solve life's problems, but also it can make them worse.



EXERCISE 1

Please answer the following questions:

1. Have you ever blamed someone else for a problem that you caused?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain why.)*

2. Have you ever simply ignored problems because you were too involved with alcohol or other drugs?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

3. Have you ever been so overwhelmed by problems that you just tried to forget about them?

Yes No *(If yes, please describe.)*

4. How well do you think you currently handle problems?
Explain.

Sponsors, people at self-help meetings, family members, counselors, and sober friends can help you solve problems and improve your problem-solving skills in early recovery.

Problems during Recovery

Especially for those in early recovery, trying to deal with problems may be a frustrating and difficult thing to do. Because individuals are concentrating on the most important task at hand—staying sober—they tend to let other things go. Also, as they recover from the effects of alcohol and other drugs, they have trouble concentrating, feel disoriented, and have a short attention span. They may also find that they have little experience in actually dealing with many of life’s day-to-day problems. They may even find that some problems develop because they are in recovery.

Because of these lingering effects of your substance abuse, you may need help from others in dealing with your problems. Sponsors, people at self-help meetings, family members, counselors, and sober friends can help you solve problems and improve your problem-solving skills in early recovery.



EXERCISE 2

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are some of the problems that you could use some help with?

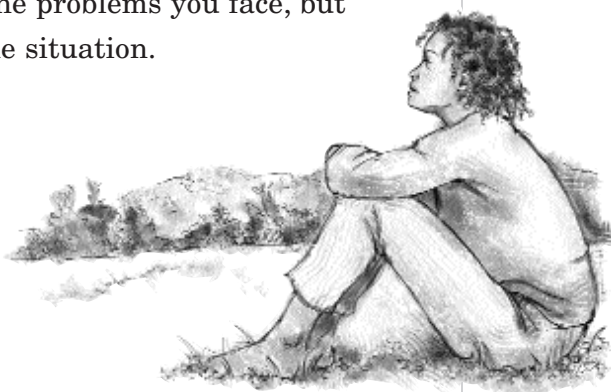
2. Name one or two people whom you could ask for help.
Why did you pick these people?

Getting sober does not automatically solve life problems. However, in recovery you can begin to deal with them in a positive way. This is not an easy task, and you may find yourself responding by

- Feeling like you have problems that you’ve never had before
- Being overwhelmed by the number and magnitude of your problems
- Exaggerating the severity of your problems
- Resenting your problems and using them as an excuse for relapse
- Feeling guilt and shame because of the problems you have and the problems you’ve caused

These are possible responses to the problems you face, but there are better ways to deal with the situation.

In recovery you can begin to deal with life problems in a positive way.





EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are the unhealthy ways in which you respond to life problems?

2. How do you feel when you experience these unhealthy ways of responding to life problems?

3. What are some of the ways in which you would like to change the way you respond to life problems?

What Is Necessary to Begin Solving Your Problems?

Good problem solving begins with a willingness to address the problem. More specifically, you need

- A willingness to *accept* the fact that there are problems that need to be solved
- A willingness to *believe* that there is a solution for whatever problems exist
- A willingness to *examine* specific problems
- A willingness to *find solutions* to these problems
- A willingness to *make changes* in yourself in order to solve the problem

Good problem solving begins with a willingness to address the problem.



EXERCISE 4

Please answer the following questions:

1. Are you willing to examine specific problems?

- Yes No

Are you willing to find solutions to these problems?

- Yes No *(If yes, please describe.)*

2. Are you willing to make changes in yourself in order to solve these problems?

- Yes No

Are you willing to accept the fact that you have problems that need to be solved?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

3. Do you believe that there is a solution for whatever problems exist?

Yes No

Are you willing to find a solution to these problems?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

In recovery, you need a balanced approach to your problems. On one hand, don't let problems become overwhelming by focusing on the worst possible outcome. On the other hand, it is important not to avoid the problems.

Problem solving involves looking carefully at the problem, reacting to the problem, and seeking other ways to solve the problem. For example, don't just ignore a bill, even if you lack the money to pay it. Instead you can call the business, try to arrange help, or make a small token payment.

One thing that may keep you from dealing with a problem is believing that it is so serious that it can't be solved. Problems often get solved in unanticipated ways, but they do get solved if you make an effort to solve them. Solve the problem rather than dwell on it.



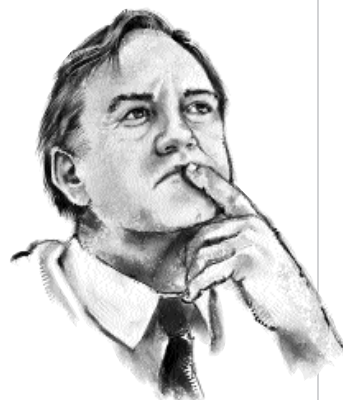
EXERCISE 5

Please answer the following questions:

1. Do you have a tendency to let things wait and pile up?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

2. Name a few problem-solving difficulties that you would like to improve. Explain.



Problem solving involves looking carefully at the problem, reacting to the problem, and seeking other ways to solve the problem.



Part 2: Problem Solving



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- Understand a basic set of steps for problem solving
- Practice the basic steps for problem solving that you learned

The first step in solving any problem is to identify exactly what the problem is.

Owning the problem is not the same thing as blaming yourself.

Problems don't just go away. They have to be solved. Problem solving can be made much more simple by using the following steps:

1. **Identify your problems—one at a time.** The first step in solving any problem is to identify exactly what the problem is. Often, this means narrowing the problem down to its basics. As much as possible, put aside your feelings about the situation and describe what the problem behaviors may be. It is also best to try to solve one major problem at a time.



EXERCISE 6

Please answer the following question:

What does the above step mean to you?

2. **Own the problem.** Owning the problem is not the same thing as blaming yourself. Owning the problem means trying to understand how the problem got started, which of your behaviors may have contributed to it, and how it can be avoided in the future. It also means being willing to change.



EXERCISE 7

Please answer the following question:

What does the step on the previous page mean to you?

- List possible solutions.** Make a list of all possible solutions, even if some of them don't seem like good solutions. In particular, list solutions that have not been tried before. Consider whether it's time for a new approach. Talk to others and see how they have solved similar problems.



EXERCISE 8

Please answer the following question:

What does the above step mean to you?

Make a list of all possible solutions.

You need to consider what your short- and long-term objectives are.

4. **Describe what might happen.** Think about what the outcomes could be for each of the solutions you identified. Maybe one solution is not as bad as it seems. One solution may be temporary, while another more permanent. Perhaps one solution is quicker, but another is more complete. You need to consider what your short- and long-term objectives are, and then decide which of the possible solutions will meet those objectives.



EXERCISE 9

Please answer the following question:

What does the above step mean to you?

5. **Make a plan and stick to it.** Once the solutions have been selected, make a plan of action that says how, when, and where you will put the solution into effect. Note who will be responsible for particular tasks. It may be important to have a backup plan, in case the original situation changes.



EXERCISE 10

Please answer the following question:

What does the above step mean to you?

6. **Learn from the outcome.** Don't reinvent the wheel. If something doesn't work once, you may want to try it one more time. But if it keeps failing, stop and try another approach. If something does work, try it again.



EXERCISE 11

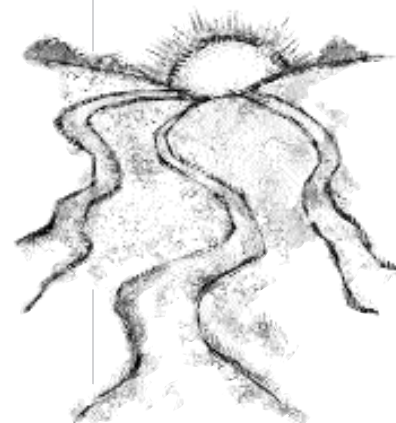
Please answer the following questions:

1. Have you ever used any of these problem-solving steps?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

2. Can you identify any other problem-solving steps that have been useful to you?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*



If something does work, try it again.

Personal Problem Solving

Try practicing good problem-solving techniques with the following exercise. You can follow these steps for other problems that arise.



EXERCISE 12

Select a problem you are currently having and answer the following questions about it:

1. **Identify the problem.** What is the problem? Be as specific as possible.

2. **Own the problem.** How did the problem get started? What contributed to it? How many people were involved in the problem? How long has it been going on?



Make a plan of action.

5. **Make a plan and stick to it.** Pick the best possible solution. Make a plan of action. List the steps involved in the plan. List who should be involved, what should be done, and when, where, and how the plan should be implemented. List at least one backup plan if appropriate.

6. **Learn from the outcome.** After you tried the solution, what happened? What part of the plan worked the best? What worked the worst? What could be done differently?

Part 3: Tips and Techniques

This section provides a few very practical tips and techniques to help you solve problems. These include easy and practical tips about how to prioritize, break big problems into manageable pieces, ask for help, brainstorm when stuck, and weigh the benefits and risks of potential solutions.

Prioritize!

While drinking and using drugs, many people feel overwhelmed with problems. They become so overwhelmed, they just give up. Those problems don't just go away when you begin your recovery. Many of those problems are still waiting to be solved. With so many problems, what do you do?

Prioritize! When you have a lot of problems to deal with, a simple but very important technique is to prioritize them. Think of it this way: If you only have an hour to run an errand, and you have to pay a police ticket that costs fifty dollars and a library fine that costs fifty cents, what do you do? Most people would say pay the police ticket.

Well, problems are sometimes like having a big pile of tickets. Some are expensive and some are cheap. Some need to be paid now. Some can wait until later. All need to be paid. In the past, you may have looked away because you were overwhelmed. Now, your job is to take a look at the problems and start figuring out which ones need to be addressed first and which ones can wait.



EXERCISE 13

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are three problems you have that need to be addressed very soon?

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LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 3:

You will

- Prioritize problems
- Break big problems into manageable pieces
- Ask for help
- Brainstorm when stuck
- Weigh the benefits and risks of potential solutions

2. Name three problems that can wait a little while, although they still need to be addressed.

Break It Down!

Even after you prioritize your problems, and know which ones you need to address soon, you might still feel overwhelmed. When faced with a fairly complex problem, many people feel overwhelmed. Where to start? What to do?

Break it down! If a problem is complex, break it down into several parts. You know the old proverb “A thousand-mile journey begins with a single step”? There’s a lot of wisdom there. Breaking a problem down into manageable steps is smart, and it works!

Think of it this way: A big problem is really a bunch of small problems. If you try to solve the big problem, you might feel overwhelmed. If you try to solve small problems, one at a time, you’ll have solved the big problem before you know it!

**If a problem is complex,
break it down into
several parts.**

For example, your drinking or drug use may have led to a legal problem. It may feel overwhelming. You may feel that you don't have the time, money, knowledge, or skills to handle the problem. But if you break it down into small steps, you can solve the problem. In this case, it might include (1) getting a referral for a lawyer, (2) making an appointment with the lawyer, (3) asking questions, (4) learning what you need to do, and so on.



EXERCISE 14

Please answer the following questions:

1. Identify and describe a current problem that feels overwhelming. Why does it feel overwhelming?

2. Even if the problem seems overwhelming and you don't know where to start, break down the big problem into smaller problems. List those below.

3. When you look at your list of small problems, are there any that you need to break down into smaller problems? If so, describe them below.



Asking for help is a sign of strength and maturity.

Ask for Help

Three simple words: “I need help.” Sometimes they can be the hardest three words to say. Some people feel that asking for help is a sign of weakness. Actually, the reverse is true. Asking for help is a sign of strength and maturity. When you ask for help, you are taking advantage of the intelligence, creativity, and knowledge of those around you.

All too often, people feel that they “don’t want to bother” someone else with their problems. But the fact is that most people really enjoy helping others. In fact, the Twelve Step programs are based on the idea that people get better by helping others. So don’t be shy. Turn to others for help when you need it.

Remember, everyone has had problems at one point or another. The trick is to identify people who have had problems and then successfully solved them. You can learn from their successes. At the same time, someone may have had a problem similar to yours and did not solve it so well. The truth is, you may learn a lot from that person’s mistakes.



EXERCISE 15

Please answer the following questions:

1. Describe a problem that you have in which you could use some help. This might be a problem where you could benefit from someone’s experience or “expert” advice.

2. Identify someone who “has been there before.” This person might have solved a similar problem or might be knowledgeable about the topic. Why did you choose this person?

3. You can ask people for different kinds of help: for brainstorming, identifying solutions, or just listening. What kind of help could this person provide?

Brainstorming is a tool that can help you explore ideas that you might not otherwise think about.

When You Are Stuck: Brainstorm!

When trying to find solutions to a problem, you can get stuck. You may be following the strategies described earlier in this session, but you just can't find a good solution. You are stuck. You may feel like giving up. What to do? Brainstorm!

Brainstorming can be a useful way to get unstuck. Brainstorming is a tool that can help you explore ideas that you might not otherwise think about. It's also a good way to get some help from others.

Brainstorming is based on two ideas. First, the more potential solutions developed, the better. A greater variety of potential solutions increases the likelihood of finding a good solution. Second, temporarily putting aside any judgment about the quality of the solutions encourages more ideas to flow.

A good way to brainstorm is to identify an individual whom you trust and who is willing to help you solve your problem. Set a fifteen-minute period of time to brainstorm. Start the brainstorming session by stating the problem aloud. Begin stating potential solutions, even if they are a little offbeat. The idea is that one idea can spark another idea, and so on. Write down these ideas on paper. After fifteen minutes, look at what you wrote. Some solutions may be good, and some may be poor. See if there are any ideas that might be good solutions.



EXERCISE 16

Please answer the following questions:

- 1. Describe a problem or issue about which you have gotten stuck.

2. In our day-to-day life, we sometimes engage in events that involve brainstorming or are somewhat like brainstorming. What are a few examples from your life?

3. Brainstorming is a good way to ask someone for help with a problem. What kind of problem might best be addressed with brainstorming? Who might be a good candidate to help you brainstorm?



Sometimes you may have more than one solution to a problem.

Weigh the Benefits and Risks

Sometimes you may have more than one solution to a problem, and you can't choose which one to try. That's not a bad problem to have. But it's still a problem. Luckily, there's an easy solution. Using the example below, make a list of your potential solutions. Then, describe the primary benefits that each solution may have. In addition, describe the main risks that each solution may have.

If you want to, you can assign numbers to the benefits and risks. You can assign a number from

0 to +10 for benefits
 (with 0 = no benefit and +10 = great benefit),
 and
 from 0 to -10 for risks
 (with 0 = no risk and -10 = great risk).

This can help you weigh some of the benefits and risks of certain solutions to your problem.



EXERCISE 17

Please answer the following questions:

1. Do you have a problem for which you can't decide among the potential solutions?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain why.)*

- 2. We all do informal benefit-risk analyses in our daily lives. Describe a few situations in which you have done this informally.

- 3. In what ways can a benefit-risk analysis help you solve problems?



Session 19 Summary

This session has dealt with finding solutions for the problems of daily life. You have looked at the difficulties you had in solving problems when you were using, and the difficulties you may continue to have in early sobriety. You have been given a six-step plan for problem solving and asked to use it to solve a current problem. You have also reviewed practical tips about how to prioritize, break big problems into manageable pieces, ask for help, brainstorm when stuck, and weigh the benefits and risks of potential solutions. In order to maintain your sobriety, you will need to deal with daily problems, not ignore them as you may have done in the past. By using some simple techniques, you will find that every problem has a solution.