

Rely on Your Problem-Solving Ability Even When You Feel Hopeless

Objective

To identify one or more strategies to solve specific problems in your life and to develop a “problem-solving attitude” as a way to cope with life’s difficulties.

You Should Know

You might feel so hopeless about your current problems that you feel there is nothing you can do about them. But is that really true? In fact, there are very few problems that cannot be made better. You simply have to be creative about finding solutions. Solutions may not always be simple, nor do they always address the whole problem that is causing you distress. However, even small changes can make a big difference in your life. Having a problem-solving *attitude* is the most important part of getting over your depression and hopelessness. This assignment is intended to help you develop a problem-solving attitude toward your life, rather than just dwelling on your problems and feeling hopeless.

Finding solutions to the problems that are weighing you down requires a different way of thinking. Albert Einstein once said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them.” In other words, to solve your problems, you need to change the way you think.

There are many different approaches to solving problems. Cognitive psychologists tell us that there are at least 60 different problem-solving strategies. This worksheet reviews five popular ones.

To understand how you can take different approaches to the same problem, consider an example, John, who described himself as being “hopelessly stuck” in his life. John was depressed because his wife had just left him, taking their two small children. He had a low-paying job and was deep in debt. He could barely afford to pay his rent and buy food. He could not see any way to make his life better, until he decided to try some new problem-solving strategies. Here are the different strategies that John used to get “unstuck.” These may help you, too.

Break your problem into small solvable steps.

John knew that there are two ways to get out of debt - make more money and spend less money. He decided to look for small ways to do both. He was able to save over \$100/month by getting rid of his cable TV and just watching shows on Netflix. He also found that he could make money by selling things on eBay. This seemed too easy, so he began to look at other simple ways to change his finances. Can you think of two or three small things you can do that might impact your problem? Write them below.

Ask for help.

When people are depressed, they tend to isolate themselves, forgetting that there are many people who can help with their problems. John was a veteran and found free counseling advice as well as free financial advice at veteranscrisisline.net, a service of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Other free advice and support can be found through places of worship or community service organizations - and remember your network of friends and relatives. Write down several people or organizations that could give you help.

Try a brainstorming session.

Sometimes you have to be really creative to solve a problem. Brainstorming is best done in a group of four people or more, but it can be done with just one other person. The idea of brainstorming is to come up with as many possible solutions to a problem as possible without worrying about whether they are realistic solutions or not. Make a list of all the possible solutions, no matter how far-fetched they may be. Then, review the list and find a solution that is most practical and most likely to succeed.

John had a brainstorming session with his brother Matt. They came up with a list of more than 100 ways to make extra money. Eventually, John decided to borrow Matt's lawn mower and he began cutting his neighbors lawns for \$25 a lawn.

Write down a problem that you can brainstorm solutions.

Write down the name of people who help you brainstorm. _____

Try brainstorming solutions to this problem for at least 30 minutes *without censoring any solutions*. The purpose of brainstorming is to come up with as many possible solutions as possible, and then choose the ones that seem the most likely to succeed.

Write down all your brainstorming ideas on a separate piece of paper and then write down the two or three best solutions here.

Challenge the assumptions about the nature of your problems.

Often it is hard to see new solutions when you are viewing your problems through false assumptions. Try making a list of all the reasons your problems are unsolvable, and then sit down with a trusted friend or a professional and determine which of your reasons are not based in fact.

John assumed that he could not get a better job because he barely finished high school and had no real skills. Over time, he realized that neither of these assumptions were true. Through a friend, he found a job salvaging automobile parts, where he was making twice what he made at his previous job. John enrolled in a school to learn to be an auto mechanic, which he felt would be a permanent solution to his money problems.

Write down any assumptions you have about your problem and then ask someone you trust to help decide if they are true or false.

Root Cause Analysis.

You might only view a problem as it exists in the present. However, serious problems usually go far back in your life. Identifying the root causes means going back to where the problem might have originated. Understanding the root cause can give you deeper insight into what is the underlying cause of a problem.

During therapy, John talked about when he started to feel hopeless and powerless. It was not when his wife left him. It was not when he left the military. He remembered having these feelings when he was just nine-years-old, and his parents were getting a divorce. He remembered that his mother was very depressed, and his father was distant and always drinking. John felt that perhaps his own divorce triggered memories about this time and made him identify with his parents. He eventually realized that he did not have to relive his parents' mistakes, but instead could make his own choices and certainly be a more active parent with his own children.

Write down your thoughts on what could be some of the root causes of your current problems.

Secret of Success: When you practice problem solving, you are working your survival muscle and getting mentally stronger, much like working out in the gym makes you stronger. Try focusing on solutions throughout the day. Even when faced with small problems, be aware that you are always finding solutions.

What to Do

What are the problem-solving strategies you think could be most helpful to you?

On the chart below, see how often you can use problem-solving strategies, noting the situation and the outcome.

Situation	Problem to Solve	Strategy	Outcome

Reflections on This Exercise

What obstacles did you encounter in trying to solve problems?

Are there any problems in your life that you think are unsolvable? What are other ways to cope with these issues? Describe.

Do you know anyone who could be a mentor in helping you develop better coping skills? Is there anything preventing you from talking to this person on a regular basis?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful to 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
