

## BOOKLET SIX

### Problem solving



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## **Why problem solving?**

Being depressed tends to create problems. Also, depression is often started by problems. Tackling these problems effectively is therefore often an important part of recovery from depression.

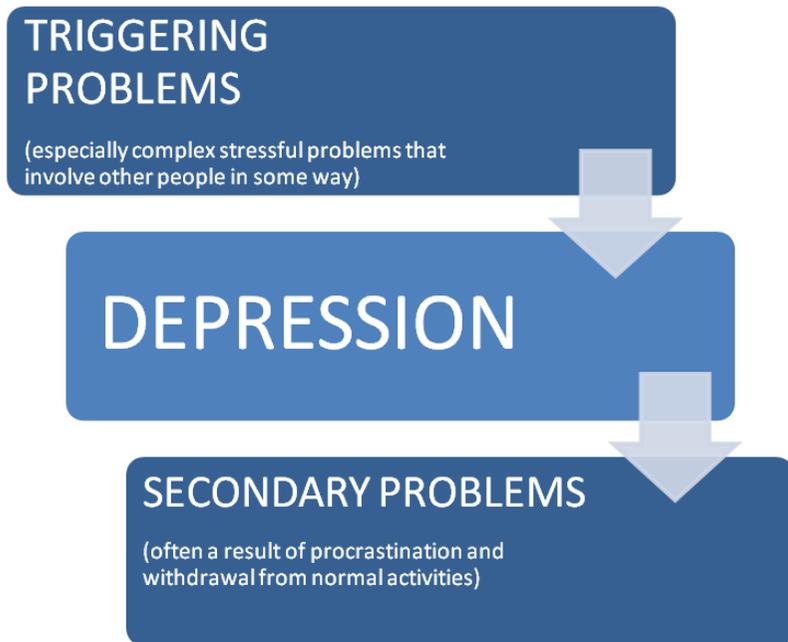
### **There are the problems that may have started the depression off in the first place.**

These are usually particularly difficult, stressful problems which often involve other people, e.g. difficulty in a relationship, or a stressful situation in which you feel you came off worse or were taken advantage of in some way, or a situation which turned out badly for which you feel responsible, or an event which might have somehow affected others' views of you, and so on.

### **Then there are the problems that can build up as a result of the depression.**

These are the problems that can so easily build up when you feel less able to cope, and perhaps start putting off doing important chores, or withdraw from family and friends, etc.

# **PROBLEMS LEAD TO DEPRESSION & DEPRESSION LEADS TO PROBLEMS**



**So for some episodes of depression, for some people at least, tackling problems is part of tackling both the root causes of the depression and the things that are keeping it going.**

## **When do we need to problem solve?**

It's not always easy to know, but it may help to remember that:

### **Some problems go away by themselves**

Some problems do resolve themselves with time, and then the depression may lift. Perhaps a family argument gets made up, a new job comes along, a difficult boss leaves, etc.

### **Some problems we come to accept**

Some problems we recognise we cannot do anything about. We learn to accept what we cannot change, move on in some way, sometimes partly by developing other aspects of our lives that we can do something about.

### **Some problems, however, we need to tackle**

Some problems we *can* do something about, and what is more, it is quite likely that as long as the problem remains an issue for us, the depression is likely to persist.

**This means that waiting to feel better before dealing with the problem isn't going to work, however much this is our natural inclination!**

Facing problems we have been avoiding is likely to cause us some anxiety in the short run, but is very important for longer term well-being. Also, it is worth remembering that problems often seem much worse when we are avoiding them than when we get down to doing something about them.

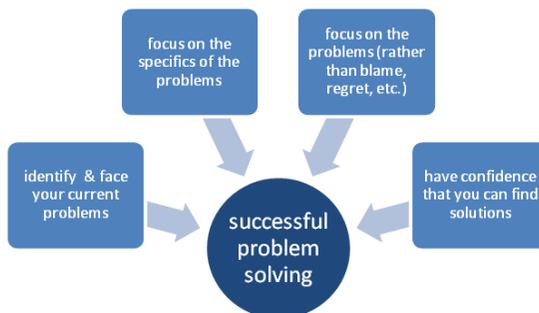
## How depression can make problem solving harder

In general, problem solving seems to be most successful when we approach problems with some confidence that they can be solved, when we define the problems clearly and focus on the detail of what needs to be done. Seeing problems as challenges and as opportunities to learn also helps.

Depression can make this difficult because it tends to lead to:

1. **loss of confidence that things will work out**, which undermines the motivation to try. This is associated with thoughts such as ‘No point’
2. **self-analysis and self-criticism** (as if the real problem were within the individual that is depressed rather than in their circumstances). This means that attempts to problem solve are easily hijacked by asking ‘Why did this happen?’ etc. rather than ‘What can I do about it?’
3. a **feeling of being overwhelmed** by difficulties which makes it hard to concentrate on the specifics of one problem at a time
4. understandable **reluctance to face problems** in case they lead to feeling worse.

**This booklet aims to support you to:**



## Problems you have solved

Looking at how we have solved problems in the past (and we all have) is helpful in getting into a problem-solving mindset. Here is a list of just a few of the common sorts of problems we encounter in everyday life, some small, some

- Needing to manage on less money
- Childcare arrangement breaking down
- Finding somewhere to live in a new town, city or country
- Organising a holiday
- Making a complaint
- Your boss undermines you in meetings
- Water from floor above coming into your flat
- Family disapprove of your partner
- Visitors about to arrive and no milk
- Double booking in your diary
- Your child is getting into trouble at school
- Resolving an argument or disagreement with someone

### EXAMPLE

#### WHAT THE PROBLEM WAS

*A big argument with my partner, mainly about money*

#### WHEN IT OCCURRED

*When I decided not to go back to work after having second child, so was in Spring 2008*

#### HOW I SOLVED IT

*Made a list of the ways I could save money including: cooking more often instead of buying ready meals and takeaways.*

*Generated some temporary cash by selling the baby things.*

*Found a time to budget with my partner when we were both feeling calm and I knew I had some constructive suggestions to make; and was careful not to start blaming him. Listened to his concerns without shouting him down.*

#### OUTCOME

*We did get the debts under control (they stopped getting bigger at least) and we didn't argue so much. I backed down over the holiday but felt good that we both made some compromises.*

- Pick some of these, or any other sorts of problems you have solved in the past, and make a note of what the problem was, when it occurred, what you did, and what the outcome was.
- Include as much detail as possible.
- Try doing one example a day over the next few days.
- Choose examples similar to problems you are facing now if you think that might be helpful.
- **Do at least two examples before moving onto page 10.**  
This is important! There is an example below to help you.

**What the problem was:**

**When it occurred:**

**How I solved it:**

**Outcome:**

**What the problem was:**

**When it occurred:**

**How I solved it:**

**Outcome:**

**What the problem was:**

**When it occurred:**

**How I solved it:**

**Outcome:**

**What the problem was:**

**When it occurred:**

**How I solved it:**

**Outcome:**

**What the problem was:**

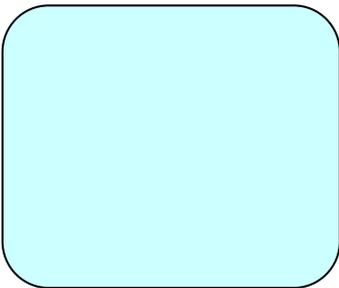
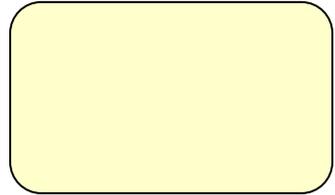
**When it occurred:**

**How I solved it:**

**Outcome:**

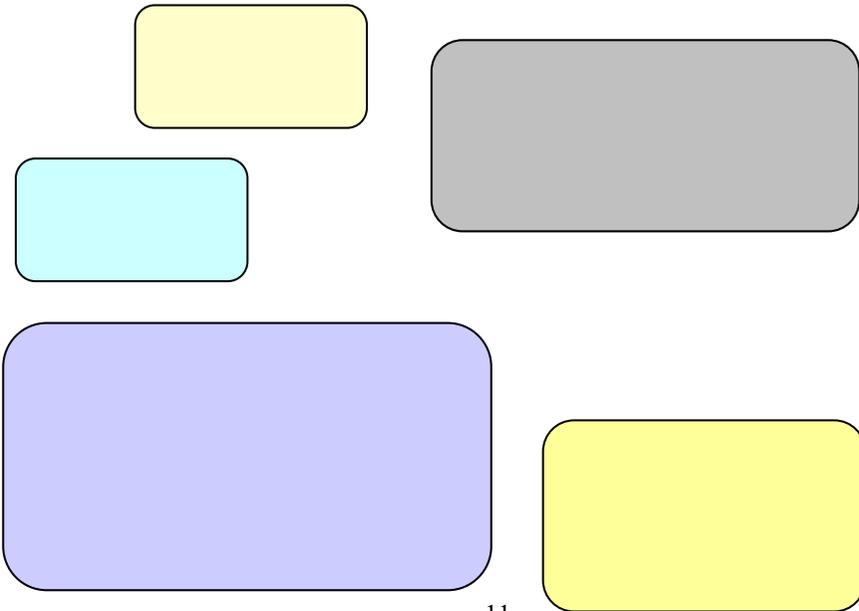
## Facing the current problems: laying them out

Think about the problems facing you at the moment. **Identify each problem with a short phrase or label (or image or picture) and write the label (or draw the image or picture) in one of the shapes below.** You could chose to put bigger problems in bigger shapes, or you might prefer to put the big ones in small shapes. Add more shapes if you need to.



**This task can be quite challenging so here are 3 tips:**

1. Whenever possible, **identify smaller, specific sub-problems**, e.g. instead of “I have fallen out with all my friends,” it would be better to put, “Jenny hasn’t replied to my text last week,” “Pete has moved away,” & “I am upset with Maisie”, “I think John might be upset with me,” etc.
2. **Imagine you are getting some distance** from the problems, putting them where you can see them but far enough away that you do not feel too overwhelmed. At least temporarily can you get a sense that you are putting down these burdens rather than carrying them around with you?
3. Do your best to **avoid getting caught up in self-criticism, regret, etc.** Your task here is simply to identify problems, not to analyse the causes or start blaming anyone.



## Sorting the problems

Here are three boxes. See if you can sort the problems you have identified into those that need tackling, those that you either can't or don't need to do anything about, and those you are not sure about.

Try making the problems as specific as you can.  
There are some examples opposite.

**Problems I think it would be helpful to tackle (even if right now I don't feel confident about being able to):**

**Problems I cannot or do not need to do anything about:**

**Problems I am unsure whether they need tackling or not:**

### **Making problems specific**

Making a problem specific often makes it easier to think of solutions. Does that seem to apply to the examples below?

General	Specific problem / sub-problem
No money	Not enough money this month for train fare to cousin's wedding
Going nowhere in career	Haven't got the qualification for the job I'd really like and haven't come up with any other ideas
My kids play up all the time	My 3-year old has been coming out of the bedroom after I have put him to bed several times a week

## **Working with one problem**

Look at the problems you have listed in the ‘would be helpful to tackle’ box and select one to work on.

### **STEP ONE: Describing the problem**

Many problems are not easy to define; something is wrong, perhaps something needs to happen, but it is not yet clear exactly what. It is fine to spend some time thinking about the nature of the problem. Research has shown that people who give more time to this first stage of problem solving often arrive at more creative solutions.

One helpful technique is to restate the problem in different ways. Use the box on p. 16 to describe the problem in as many different ways as you can.

See if you can describe the problem as:

- a challenge or opportunity
- consistent with your goals and values
- something you want (an approach goal, rather than just something you want to get rid of)
- how it would be if it were solved

Sometimes it is also helpful to describe how the problem feels - is it a knotty problem, a thorny problem, a tangled problem, a delicate problem, a heavy problem, a sticky problem?

### EXAMPLE ONE

Esther says that one of her problems is having lost touch with all her friends. She lost touch with some friends when she was made redundant from work and didn't have as much money to go out. She later lost touch with more friends when her health got worse.

Not seeing friends is making me feel lonely and sad.

It makes me feel sorry for myself, like nobody cares (although it was me that stopped seeing them).

It's a problem that's been easy to ignore when I've been worrying about money and my health.

But having friends is important - definitely something I value.

If it were solved I would have people to talk to and share problems with.

Tackling this problem will take some effort.

It feels a bit scary to think about contacting people but would probably be worth it.

### EXAMPLE TWO

Craig says his problem is that he has got unfit and overweight. He describes it like this:

*It's a very sticky problem because it has been around a long time and I haven't been able to do anything about it.*

*It makes me feel useless and unattractive.*

*If I lost weight I would feel much better about myself and more confident about starting a new relationship.*

*Part of the problem is drinking quite a lot, especially at the weekends and then I don't feel like exercising.*

*Another part of the problem is being embarrassed about my weight which puts me off going swimming, which used to be my favourite sport.*

*Another part of the problem is that I work long hours sitting at a desk.*

*There is always food around at work and I snack when I am working.*

*It's a very heavy problem and gets me very down.*

**A SPACE FOR YOU TO DESCRIBE & RESTATE YOUR PROBLEM:**

A large, empty yellow rectangular area intended for the user to describe and restate their problem. The area is bounded by a thin black line and occupies most of the page below the header.

## **STEP TWO: Brainstorming solutions**

When brainstorming it is important to set aside judgements and include as many ideas as you can, including those that seem ridiculous, extravagant, silly, impractical, etc.

When you are running out of ideas:

- Think what you would say to someone else
- Think what you could imagine someone else doing (even if you can't imagine yourself doing it)
- Ask someone else what they would do
- Take a break and come back to it

Here is Esther's brainstorm:

### **WAYS TO SEE FRIENDS BRAINSTORM**

Phone Mary and invite her round for tea

Go to the coffee morning at the local church

Arrange to meet Mary at the shops

Phone Jill to ask after her family and if she seems friendly, invite her round

Ask my sister if she still sees Lizzy

Find out if there are any groups I could go to

**YOUR BRAINSTORM**

### **STEP THREE: Selecting possible solutions to try**

Now it is time to select one idea to try out. It is important to be clear that this is not about finding *the perfect* solution; we do not know what will work in advance, so this is just about finding something worth giving a try. It sometimes helps to list good and bad points of different options, but take care not to bogged down in this. Sometimes it is better to just to with your overall feel of what you could try.

Here is Esther's list of good and bad points for 3 of her ideas:

SOLUTION	GOOD POINTS	BAD POINTS
Invite Mary round for tea	I won't need to travel anywhere It won't cost anything	She will see that I am not keeping on top of the housework She may stay a long time and I will get tired We may not have anything to talk about
Arrange to meet Mary at the coffee shop in the shopping centre	She won't see the state of my flat I can leave whenever I want	I may feel embarrassed (I have COPD and may start coughing) I will have to get the bus there It might be noisy (and her hearing is poor) If it is crowded there won't be space to sit down
Go to coffee morning at the church	I can leave whenever I want Is quite nearby so I can walk Will be cheap	I may get embarrassed about my COPD if I am very breathless or start coughing I may not see anyone I know

Here is a space for you to write down the good and bad points for a few of your ideas, if you'd like to use it.

SOLUTION	GOOD POINTS	BAD POINTS

So which are you going to try first?

.....

Recognise that this is likely to be just a first step.

Unless you are working on a small problem, it is very unlikely to be solved in one go.

It is often important to focus on what you can learn & what might

## **STEP FOUR: Making a plan**

What is needed to put your chosen solution into action?

You may need to do some or all of the following:

- Break the task down into smaller steps
- Collect information
- Get any clothing, materials, equipment needed
- Decide when
- Decide where
- Decide who with

Esther decided to invite Mary round for tea.

Her plan included:

- Finding Mary's phone number
- Checking days that are free
- Calling Mary
- Adding biscuits to shopping list
- Tidying the living room the day before

Craig decided to take up swimming again

His plan included:

- *Buying new swimming trunks*
- *Checking opening times of swimming baths near work or en route from work to home*
- *Asking friends at work if any of them would like to join him for an after-work swim*
- *Tell work colleagues that he is going for a swim after work instead of a drink and please can they remind him if they see him heading for the pub*
- *Adding swimming to his activation schedule twice a week*
- *Setting reminder to pack swimming and shower things the night before*
- *Buy notebook to record number of lengths swum each time and set targets for improving fitness over the coming months*

**YOUR PLAN**

A large yellow rectangular area intended for writing a plan. The area is mostly blank, with the text 'YOUR PLAN' at the top left corner.

**STEP FIVE: How did it go?**

Did it go as you expected?

If not, what were the surprises?

What did you learn?

Did you encounter a new challenge or obstacle?

IF YES, what was it? And can you problem solve it?

Have you overcome an obstacle like this in the past? If so, how? Do you know anyone else who has overcome an obstacle like this?

What is your next step?

**WORKING THROUGH A SECOND PROBLEM**  
**STEP ONE: Describing the problem**

**A SPACE FOR YOU TO DESCRIBE & RESTATE YOUR PROBLEM:**

*If possible, as a challenge, as in line with your values, as something you want to achieve (not just something to get rid of), as an opportunity to learn*

## **STEP TWO: Brainstorming solutions**

### **YOUR BRAINSTORM**

*Remember to include all ideas, including the ones that seem ridiculous*

**STEP THREE: Selecting possible solutions to try**

SOLUTION	GOOD POINTS	BAD POINTS

So which are you going to try first?

.....

## **STEP FOUR: Making a plan**

**YOUR PLAN**

## **STEP FIVE: How did it go?**

Did it go as you expected?

If not, what were the surprises?

What did you learn?

Did you encounter a new challenge or obstacle?

IF YES, what was it? And can you problem solve it?

Have you overcome an obstacle like this in the past? If so, how? Do you know anyone else who has overcome an obstacle like this?

What is your next step?

## **Creativity & problem solving**

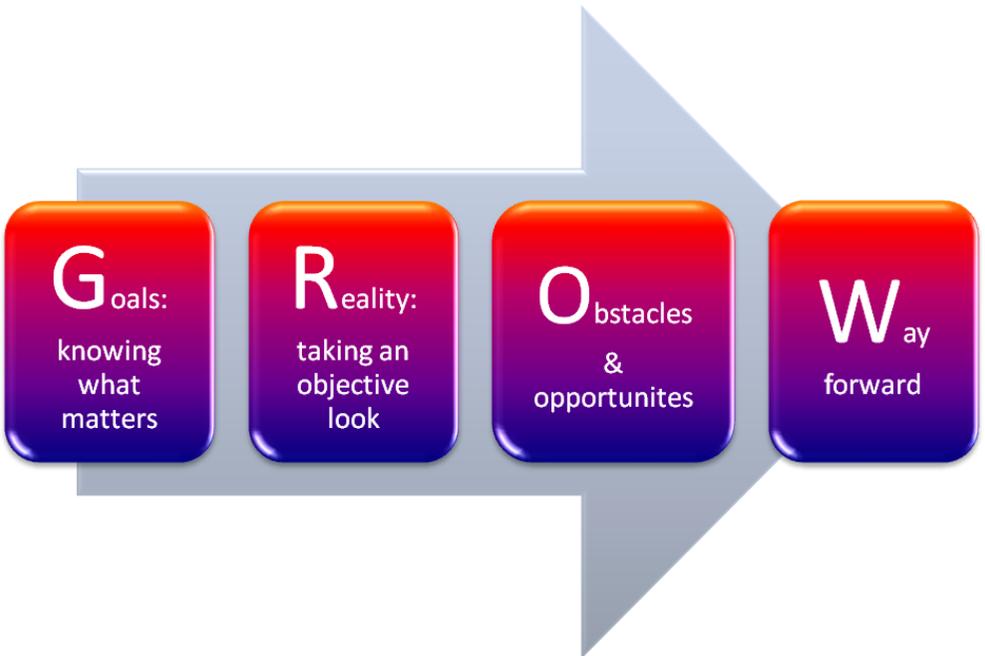
Problem solving can be seen as a type of creativity. Everyone has the ability to be creative given the right circumstances. The evidence suggests that we are more creative when:

- We relax and take our time
- We don't try too hard
- We treat ourselves kindly
- We chat things over with others who are accepting and non-judgemental
- We hold back on the kind of critical thinking that finds fault with every option, stamping on ideas before they have a chance to develop
- We hold problems at 'the right distance', not avoiding them, but not so caught up in them that we can't see anything else.

## Problem solving is a way to continue to learn & grow

Some people use the acronym GROW to summarise the key aspects of problem solving.

This is helpful in reminding us that in some senses we do grow through solving problems - it is an important way in which adults as well as children learn.



## BEHAVIOURAL ACTIVATION FOR DEPRESSION

### *LIST OF BOOKLETS*

1. Introduction to BA for Depression
2. Monitoring activity and mood
3. Roadmap: The Activation Plan
4. Finding direction: values, flow and strengths
5. Avoidance and the depression TRAPs
- 6. Problem solving**
7. Thinking habits
8. Next steps

**We hope you have found this booklet helpful. We welcome your feedback.**

You can give comments to your therapist or by emailing us at [slm-tr.SPTS@nhs.net](mailto:slm-tr.SPTS@nhs.net) or writing to us at Talking Therapies Southwark, Middle House, Maudsley Hospital, London SE5 8AZ.

[www.slam-iapt.nhs.uk](http://www.slam-iapt.nhs.uk)