

## Problem solving

### Objectives

This module aims to help you explore and gain an understanding of the following:

- The benefits of problem solving and how it can be applied to a range of different types of problems
- Ways to avoid acting on impulse

### Problem solving

Problem solving – the process of working through the details of a problem to reach a solution, is a skill which promotes good decision making and encourages confidence and emotional wellbeing.

Problem solving skills are necessary to resolve conflicts that arise in our everyday lives whether big or small. Having the ability to deal with problems promotes self-esteem and self-confidence.

### Starting Point

Identify your current level of confidence

( 1 = no confidence; 2 = some confidence; 3 = very confident )

The advantages of the problem solving approach and how to apply it	1	2	3
Ways to avoid acting on impulse	1	2	3

If you have scored yourself as 1 or 2, this module will be particularly useful for you. If you have scored yourself as very confident, there still may be some resources below that you will find useful. Complete Exercise 1 before moving on to the next module.

Here are three ways in which individuals tend to deal with problems:

### The Avoidant Approach

This is similar to the 'Head in the Sand' way of experiencing anger and involves a failure to acknowledge the problem. It is characterised by procrastination (putting things off), passivity, inactivity (doing nothing, hoping the problem will go away) and making excuses for not acting (I can't do anything about it). Individuals who adopt this approach may blame other people or situations for the problem and the problem tends to remain unresolved.

### The Emotional Approach

Individuals who adopt this approach tend to act impulsively or carelessly and may become angry or upset. They are unlikely to consider different solutions and the consequences and make hasty decisions which may compound the problem.

### The Problem Solving Approach

This involves a more systematic approach to problems, which includes defining the problem, selecting a possible solution, implementing it and evaluating whether the solution is the right one.

## Exercise 1: What approach do I use?

### Problem Diary

Complete the problem diary over the next 7 days. Reflect on your initial responses to the problem and how you dealt with it.

Describe the problem- what happened?	My thoughts about the problem?	My feelings about the problem?	What did I do?	Which approach is this? Avoidant, Emotional, or Problem Solving?	What was the outcome? How did I feel afterwards?

*[Return to the website to download a printable template.](#)*

Now ask yourself:

- Which approach did you use most – avoidant, emotional or problem solving?
- Which was most effective?

## Steps to solve a problem

Below are some steps to help you solve a problem. It is helpful to take the approach of problem-solving when going through these steps. If you are struggling to get yourself into a problem-solving frame of mind, consider looking at our [self talk section](#) to help you explore your positive and negative thinking.

Take time to go through all the steps before you make a decision.

### Step 1 – Recognising a problem

Sometimes we are not always aware of when we have a problem. Our thoughts and emotions can be a helpful way of letting us know when we have a problem. Have a think about some different areas of your life (e.g., your career, relationships, finances, health etc.) and for each area reflect on what thoughts you have, how you're feeling and your behaviour (i.e., have you noticed a difference in your sleeping or eating patterns). Answering these questions helps to find clues that we might have a problem and can identify areas in our life that we might want to be different.

### Step 2 – Define the problem (what exactly is it)

Be specific, for example if you are not happy at work, think about what exactly is causing the problem, is it the hours, the commute, the type of work. It can help to think about where you want to be in relation to your problem, i.e., how things will be different when you have changed something or solved your problem.

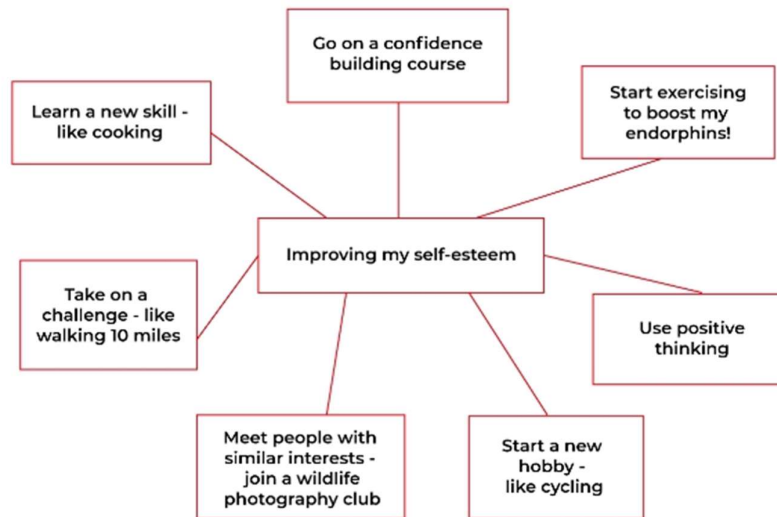
### Step 3 – Seek information from reliable sources

It's important to seek information to help solve a problem, but we need this information to come from facts and not assumptions. Don't guess at the outcome or rely on the opinion of others. Focus on what you know is factual and what you need to find out to solve your problem.

## Step 4 – Generate a number of solutions

Think of this like brainstorming. The more solutions you come up with the more options you have! Even if they seem unrealistic it's worth considering all the options. When we write down anything and everything, we find that our ideas bounce off one another, so it helps us to think of more ideas.

Here is an example of brainstorming.



## Step 5 – Think of the pros and cons of each solution (costs and gains)

The [Problem of Immediate Gratification](#) module can be used when evaluating any decision. If the costs outweigh the gains then it can be an obvious sign that it is not a good decision. This is not just about the number of costs as some consequences will be more significant and impactful if they happen than others. You also need to ask yourself if you are choosing a short term 'fix' (for example alcohol, drugs, sex), again re-visit the [Problem of Immediate Gratification](#) module if you need to understand why you might do this.

## Step 6 – Choose the best solution

Hopefully this is clear having completed the costs and gains above, if not then speak to a trusted friend/family member to get a different view. If you can make a good case to them about the course of action you want to take, then you are probably making a well-considered decision. It is unlikely they will support you using a short term 'fix' to feel better when it doesn't address the problem!

## Step 7 – Plan how you will apply the solution

Benjamin Franklin said that "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

A carefully thought-out plan is going to maximise your chances of success. It is helpful to have a clear picture of what you want to come out of solving this problem and how you want your life to be. When creating your plan, consider why you have chosen the solution you have, what you need to do, how you will do it, who might help or hinder you, when each thing on the plan needs to be done.

## Step 8 – Carry out the solution

Put your plan into action!

## Step 9 – Evaluate how well it worked

If we don't evaluate what we did and how well it worked we can end up repeating the same mistakes or thinking we have solved a problem when we haven't. It might be that you haven't identified the right problem in the first place; for example, if you didn't like your work colleagues you might change where you work but the type of work is still the same. So, while you have different colleagues you actually realise it is the type of work you do that needs to change.

**Now, try this approach with one of your current problems and see how you get on – see if the approach helps you come up with new and different ways of dealing with your problem.**

## Ways to avoid acting on impulse

Good problem solving involves the ability to stop and think and consider consequences. Here is a list of approaches that can assist in this and reduce the chance of you acting impulsively.

- Don't allow other people to pressure you into making a decision
- Don't panic when faced with a difficult decision- few good decisions are made in haste
- Sleep on it **BUT** don't put off important issues for so long that you leave it to the last minute and then don't have time to consider them
- Check the facts- seek other people's views but don't rely on opinions
- Write things down, make lists, notes
- Never sign anything without reading it and read everything at least twice
- Don't be afraid to say if you are unsure, to clarify your understanding
- Don't make decisions after taking drink or drugs
- Count to ten before responding
- Ask yourself how you will feel about the situation/decision next week or next year

*Please return to the website and complete the **Reflection** questions at the end of this module.*