Explaining stress and problem solving

1. How do we stop the process of stress continuing? That is, the more stress, the more distress; the more distress, the more stress. What do we do? One strategy is to increase resources, such as family and interpersonal relationships. However, sometimes your relationships are the problem and can be stressful themselves. So, a second strategy is to strengthen your ability to cope with stress. Your problem solving ability.
2. Problem solving can be thought of as a set of skills or tools that people use to handle, cope with, or resolve difficult situations encountered in daily living. The type of problem solving I am talking about here is often referred to as social problem solving. Real-life problems, problems that are different from intellectual or academic problems on tests at school, are stressful because they are usually connected to strong emotions.
3. Problem solving is comprised of two major components. The first is called problem orientation. This involves people’s belies and attitudes about stressful problems and their ability to deal with them. The second is referred to as one’s problem solving style. This involves the general way people attempt to deal with stressful problems.
4. Let’s work together to help you become a better problem solver and to more effectively manage all the stress in your life. We will start by looking at how you react to problems and understand your own emotions. In general, we can help you to learn how to do the following: how to think of problems as challenges rather than aversive threats; how to approach problems in an adaptive manner; how to improve your problem-solving style; how to define problems and set goals; how to understand why the situation is a problem; how to accurately identify major obstacles; how to set realistic goals; how to invent and to create new solutions to problems; how to make effective decisions; how to carry out a solution or action plan; and how to validate the outcome of the solution.

Toolkit #1: Problem-Solving Multitasking

1. We are going to learn about the externalization skill. It involves showing information externally (e.g., writing it down, drawing diagrams to show relationships, recording information on computer/smartphone/tablet, etc.) as often as possible. This helps you free up space in your mind to concentrate more on other activities, such as better understanding the nature of a problem, creatively thinking and then writing down solutions on paper, and making decisions based on visually examining and comparing a list of pros vs. cons.
2. In the skill of visualization, we will use visual imagery to help us understand the problem. For example, you can visualize the problem in your imagination to help you separate different parts of the problem. You can also rehearse how you’ll carry out the solution to your problem in your imagination.
3. For the simplification skill, you will try to break down or simplify a large or complex problem to make it more manageable. I will ask you to focus on the most relevant information, break down complex problems into more manageable subproblems, and translate vague and abstract concepts into more simple, specific, and concrete terms. I will also ask you to identify smaller steps to reach one’s goals, as well as specify these goals concretely.

Toolkit #2: The SSTA Method

1. We will now learn about the SSTA method. It stands for: S = Stop, S = Slow down, T = Think, A = act. Stop when becoming aware of experiencing an emotional reaction that has the potential to grow into a full blown negative response. Slow down your emotional response. Think more planfully about what to do within the context when presented with less emotionally charged triggers. Act by carrying out a solution or action plan that will most effectively cope with the stressful situation.

Toolkit #3: Healthy Thinking and Positive Imagery

1. One strategy to help people overcome negative thinking habits is the ABC Model. The ABC Model of Healthy Thinking shows how you think about a situation can have a direct impact on your emotional state, which negatively impacts your ability to effectively engage in planful problem solving. A = the activating event, B = what you believe or say to yourself about A, and C = the emotional consequences.
2. Let’s talk about visually an improved future or a “problem solved” future for you. It may seem weird, but it could prompt you to be more motivated to persevere In your problem-solving efforts. Please close your eyes and take a deep breath. Now use your imagination to visualize yourself at a future point in time. It could be a few months from now or a year from now when the problem that you are facing is largely resolved, such that it is no longer a major problem for you. It doesn’t matter how you got there. Just that you are on the other side of the obstacles between you and your goals. Where are you? What are you doing? How would you describe it?

Toolkit #4: Planful Problem Solving: Fostering Effective Problem Solving

1. We will now focus on learning these four planful problem-solving skills. The first one is *problem definition,* or the clarifying the nature of a problem, delineating a realistic problem-solving goal, and identifying those obstacles that prevent one from reaching such goals. The second one is *generation of alternatives,* or predicting the likely consequences of these various alternatives, conducting a cost-benefit analysis based on these identified outcomes, and developing an action plan that is geared toward achieving the problem-solving goal. The third skills is called *decision making,* or predicting the likely consequences of these various alternatives, conducting a cost-benefit analysis based on these identified outcomes, and developing an action plan that is geared toward achieving the problem-solving goal. The last skills is *solution implementation and verification,* or carrying out the action plan, monitoring and evaluating the consequences of the plan, and determining whether one’s problem-solving efforts have been successful.