

YOUR PROBLEM-SOLVING TOOLBOX

Some problems are easy to deal with. You've encountered them before, and you know just what to do. Others can be more difficult, such as problems with relationships, finances, work, or school, or problems that come up during a significant life change. When you face new or complex problems, or problems that leave you feeling stuck, it's time to draw on your toolbox of problem-solving resources. It can also help to follow a step-by-step problem-solving approach.

YOUR PROBLEM-SOLVING RESOURCES

You may not realize it when you're confronting a difficult problem, but you have a well-stocked toolbox of resources to draw on. These may include:

- Your qualities and strengths, such as your curiosity, resilience, self-awareness, determination, courage, creativity, and flexibility
- Your skills and abilities, which might include your communication and listening skills, your ability to analyze situations and think critically, your ability to plan and prioritize, and your ability to calm yourself and regulate your emotions
- Your supportive social connections—the people in your life whom you can talk to; share your concerns with; bounce ideas off of; get honest feedback from; and turn to for help, guidance, and support

STEPS IN PROBLEM-SOLVING

Building on your existing toolbox of resources, here's one more: a step-by-step approach to problem-solving that can be applied, with variations, to almost any problem you face.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM.

The first step in solving any problem is to notice, acknowledge, and identify it. Ignoring the problem won't solve it and may lead to the problem getting even worse over time. When identifying a problem, it's important to distinguish between the symptoms of the problem and the problem itself. Write down a description of the problem you're trying to solve, being as specific and concrete as possible.

STEP 2: BREAK THE PROBLEM DOWN, OR LOOK FOR ITS CAUSES.

Ask yourself questions about the problem to break it down and get at its causes. Why is this a problem? When did it begin? Who does the problem affect? What's different about this problem that's making it harder for you to solve?

STEP 3: MAKE A LIST OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS.

Once you've identified the problem that needs to be solved or the causes of the problem that needs to be addressed, make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of, even ones that seem impractical or even silly. Don't judge or rank the ideas as you're generating them. Be as open-minded and creative as possible as you generate ideas, and make as long a list as possible.

STEP 4: WEIGH THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF EACH POSSIBLE SOLUTION.

Once you have a good list of possible solutions, consider the advantages and disadvantages of each. You might do this by making a chart with columns to note pros and cons. For each possible approach, consider whether it would really solve the problem, how hard it would be to act upon, and whether making it work is within your control or would depend on other people changing their behavior.

STEP 5: CHOOSE A SOLUTION TO TRY.

From your options, choose a solution or combination of solutions to try. You're not looking for the perfect solution. That probably doesn't exist. You're choosing the one that seems to have the best chance of working for you.

STEP 6: MAP OUT A PLAN OF HOW TO ACT ON THE SOLUTION.

Once you've settled on an approach to try, make a step-by-step plan for making it happen. What will you need to do differently than you do now for this to work? What resources or support will you need? How will you need to communicate your plan, and to whom? What step or steps will you need to take first?

STEP 7: PUT YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION.

Starting with one small step, put your plan into action. Allow yourself to experience the feeling of success as you make progress, even small progress, and keep building on those successes.

STEP 8: REVIEW & ADJUST.

As you make progress on implementing your solution, pay attention to how it's going. Is it working? Are you getting closer to solving the problem you set out to solve? If not, what might you do differently or what other solutions might you try?



Don't worry if you don't solve your problem on the first try. Look at it as a chance to learn and grow. You'll know more, and have new skills and experience, when you try again in a different way.