

◀ CHAPTER THIRTEEN ▶



Learning to solve problems

Each day brings a new set of problems and challenges. For example:

- ▶ dealing with being unfairly told off by a teacher
- ▶ trying to stay in your seat at school
- ▶ coping with teasing by an annoying brother or sister
- ▶ negotiating with your parents about staying out late.

When we encounter a problem we have to think about the different ways in which we could deal with it and then make a decision about what we will do or say. Sometimes we make the right choice, while at other times we seem to get it wrong. There will always be times when this happens, but some people seem to make more wrong choices or find it harder to solve problems than others. When this happens it is useful to think about how you are dealing with your problems and whether you could try to solve them in different ways.

Why do problems happen?

There are many reasons why we are unable to solve our problems successfully. Three of these reasons are particularly common.



▶ Acting without thinking

Decisions and choices are sometimes made too quickly. You may rush into something without really thinking through what will happen.

- ▶ Nick heard his dad say that he had left the shopping in the car. Wanting to be helpful, Nick rushed out and carried all the bags from the back seat of the car into the house. He didn't check with his parents, but if he had he would have found out that their shopping was in the car boot. The bags he brought in were for a party his dad was organizing at work.

- ▶ Sabrina heard her teacher’s instructions to copy her work into her book, and she immediately picked up her pen and started. Unfortunately, she didn’t hear the next instruction, which told her to use a pencil and to start her work on a new page.

Nick and Sabrina were both trying to be helpful, but in their rush they created more problems for themselves.



▶ Feelings take over

Strong feelings like anger or anxiety sometimes take over and prevent us from thinking problems through and making the right choices about what we do or say.

- ▶ Mike became very angry when he was tackled during a game of football, and he kicked the other player. The referee sent Mike off the pitch.
- ▶ Jenny didn’t understand her schoolwork, but was really worried about asking her teacher for help. She didn’t ask, she got her homework wrong and she had to stay behind after school and do it again.

Mike knew that if he kicked someone he would be sent off. Jenny knew that if she got her schoolwork wrong she would have to do it again. At the time, Mike and Jenny were not able to think about the consequences of their behaviour. Strong feelings took over and prevented them from thinking these situations through.



▶ Can’t see any other solution

The third main reason why we can’t solve problems is because we just can’t think of another way of doing things. We become very fixed in our ideas and can’t see any other solutions.

Learn to stop and think

It is useful to learn a way of dealing with problems which ensures that you don’t rush in with the first thing that comes into your head. A helpful approach is the **Stop, Plan and Go** traffic-light system.



- ▶ **RED.** Before you do anything, think of the red traffic light and **Stop**.
- ▶ **AMBER.** **Plan** and think about what you want to do or say.
- ▶ **GREEN.** **Go** with your plan.

The first step is often the hardest, and sometimes you may find it hard to **STOP** yourself from rushing in. Practise imagining a picture of some traffic lights and as you see the red light think to yourself **STOP**. As the light comes on, take a few deep breaths. This may help you to calm down and slow down enough to let you plan and think about what you want to do. The more you practise, the easier it will become.

You can also use this system at school. You can remind yourself by putting red, amber and green coloured strips around a pencil or ruler or on your pencil case. Seeing the strips will help you to think '**Stop, Plan and Go**', but no one else will know what the strips mean.

Identify different solutions

Sometimes we meet the same problem or challenge every day but often end up making the wrong decision over and over again. When this happens, it is useful to stop and think about all of the different ways in which you can deal with this problem.

Try using the '**OR**' method to find as many possible solutions as you can. Another way of doing this is to take a sheet of paper and write down all of the possible solutions you can think of in two minutes. The idea is to get as many ideas as you can, so don't worry if some of them seem unrealistic or silly.

▶ **Billy is ignored**

Billy felt that his friends often ignored him, so he used the '**OR**' method to find ways in which he could get his friends to listen to him.

- ▶ I could talk louder **OR**
- ▶ shout **OR**
- ▶ stand in front of their faces so that they would have to listen to me **OR**
- ▶ keep repeating myself **OR**

- ▶ talk with one person rather than all the group **OR**
- ▶ find things to talk about that really interested them **OR**
- ▶ find a new group of friends!

For Billy, the idea of shouting all the time seemed silly, and changing his group of friends was not really possible. Some of the other ideas he came up with were more useful. Billy decided that he needed to listen more carefully to the things that really interested his friends. He also decided that he would try to talk more with people on their own, rather than trying to join in with the group discussions.

If you find it hard to think of any different ways of dealing with your problems, then it may be useful to talk this over with someone else. Ask how they would deal with your problem, and see if they can suggest some different ideas.

Think through the consequences

Once you have made a list of possible solutions, the next step is to work out which is the best one. Think about the positive and negative consequences of each idea and then choose the one that you think, on balance, will work best. This involves five steps.



- 1 What is my problem?
- 2 How could I deal with this problem?
- 3 What are the positive consequences of each solution?
- 4 What are the negative consequences of each solution?
- 5 On balance, what is the best solution?

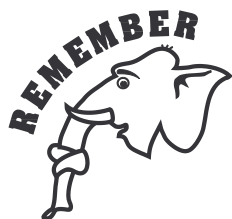
▶ Marla gets teased

Three girls at school have started to tease Marla and call her names at break-time. On the first day, Marla became very angry and chased after the girls. On the second day, she hit one of the girls and ended up in trouble in front of the head-teacher. On the third day, she called the girls names back, but this seemed to make the name-calling worse. Marla decided to sit down and work out how she would cope with this problem.

My problem: being teased by Emma, Kate and Jo		
What I could do	Positive consequences	Negative consequences
Hit them whenever they call me names <i>OR</i>	Would make me feel better!	I'd get into more trouble I might be suspended from school They might start to hit me
Find a teacher to tell <i>OR</i>	The teacher would sort it out and I wouldn't get into any more trouble	They might tease me even more for telling the teacher I might not be able to find a teacher
Ignore them <i>OR</i>	If I don't react they might get bored	BUT I CAN'T DO IT because they annoy me so much!
Stay away from them at break-times	They can't tease me I won't get into trouble They might find something else to do	This might not always be easy They might come and look for me
On balance, the best way to solve this problem is to stay out of their way at break-times. If they come and find me, I'll move away and move closer to a teacher.		

Thinking this problem through was helpful for Marla. Although hitting the girls made her feel better, she also realized that this had other consequences which were not good. Marla weighed up all of the ideas, and on balance she chose to stay away from the girls at break-times.

Remind yourself what to do



There will be times when, although you know the best way of dealing with your problems, you slip back into your old ways as your new plans are forgotten.

If this happens, you need to work out how you can remind yourself to use your new plan. The people in these examples found some very simple ways to help them to remember how to solve their problems.

▶ Michael fiddles with his pencil case

Michael was in trouble every day at school for fiddling with his pencils and pencil case. He wanted to stop this habit, and he problem-solved with his teacher about what he could do. He decided that he might be able to stop fiddling by sitting on his hands when the teacher was speaking. He agreed with his teacher that she would lightly touch his shoulder if Michael forgot. Michael also decided to put his pencil case in his bag, rather than leaving it out on his desk. He stuck a sign on the inside of his pencil case saying ‘put me in your bag’, to help him to remember.

▶ Jemma’s room is always untidy

Jemma was always in trouble at home for having an untidy bedroom. This had become more of a problem for her recently since her parents had stopped her pocket money. Even when she tried to tidy her room, she never seemed to get it right. There was always something she forgot to do. She decided that she had to stop this happening, and she drew up a ‘tidy bedroom checklist’ which she put on her bedroom wall. She listed all of the things she needed to do to tidy her room.



- ▶ Pick clothes up off the floor.
- ▶ Put dirty clothes in the washing bin.
- ▶ Put clean clothes in drawers and wardrobe.
- ▶ Make bed.
- ▶ Put magazines and books in a tidy pile.
- ▶ Put CDs in their cases.

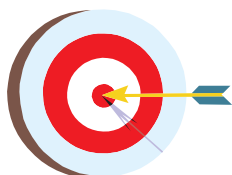
Jemma agreed a time with her parents when she would tidy her room, and she used the list to make sure that she did not forget to do anything.

▶ Henry gets wound up

Henry had a very quick temper and became very angry – shouting, swearing and sometimes hitting out. He was always fighting, and had recently been suspended from school for two days. Henry problem-solved this with his best friend and decided that he needed to ‘bail out’ of arguments. He needed to

stop and walk away rather than stay and argue. This was not easy for Henry, so his friend agreed that he would help. When Henry started to become angry, his friend would tell him to 'bail out'. This was the signal for Henry to stop, walk away and calm down. Henry's friend was very helpful and, although it was not easy, Henry started to learn that he could deal with arguments in a better way.

Practise getting it right



Learning to deal with problems in new or different ways is not always easy. It can take time, and you may need to practise before you get it right. As with most things, the more you practise the easier it will become.

▶ Imagine yourself changing the ending

Think about your problem and imagine yourself solving it differently. Instead of using your old solutions, **change the ending** and imagine yourself being successful. Choose a quiet time and get a really good picture of your problem situation in your mind.

- ▶ Describe the scene as well as you can.
- ▶ Imagine who will be there.
- ▶ Think about what is going on and what is being said.
- ▶ Imagine yourself using your new solution and being successful.
- ▶ Remember to praise yourself for solving your problem so well.

▶ Millie rushes around

Millie was always in trouble at school for rushing around. Sometimes she would knock and push people in her hurry to be first. She decided that she needed to calm down, and that she would count to five before she did anything. Millie imagined herself using this idea at the end of lessons, going into the dining hall and coming in after lunchtime. Imagining herself counting and becoming calm helped her to prepare to use this idea when she got to school.



▶ Practise acting it out

It is useful to practise using your new skills by acting out your problem situations with friends. Try to make the situation as real as possible, and think about who will be there, what will be said and how they will react. Try out different solutions and see what works well.

Acting out problem situations can be good fun, and if you take it in turns you may find that you can learn some useful tips from your friends!

Plan to be successful

Problem-solving is often used to **stop things happening**.

- ▶ Marla wanted to stop being teased.
- ▶ Michael wanted his teacher to stop telling him off.
- ▶ Henry wanted to stop fighting.

Another way to solve problems is to think about the things you want to happen and then **plan how you can be successful**.

▶ Kia wants to sleep over

Kia wanted to sleep at her friend's house but she didn't think her mum would let her. They were having a lot of arguments, and Kia knew that unless this situation changed her mum would not allow a sleepover. Kia problem-solved how this could change. She knew that this would take time, and she saw the main job as stopping the arguments with her mum. Most of these were about Kia not helping around the house, so she decided that she would start to keep her room tidy. She also decided that she would help to lay the table for meals and help with the washing up afterwards. Kia's mother was very surprised and also very pleased. They argued less, and after a week Kia asked her mother if she could sleep over at her friend's house. Her mother agreed, saying that if Kia was now prepared to help around the home, then she should be allowed some special privileges.

Talk yourself through it

Another useful way of learning to solve problems is to ask someone who is successful to talk you through what they do.

- ▶ Ask them to tell you what they do.
- ▶ Watch them doing it.
- ▶ Then talk yourself through your problem.

This can be very helpful for those problems that seem to occur fairly often.

▶ Mike doesn't know what to say to his friends

Mike felt very worried when he met his friends because he often did not know what to talk about. His friend Reuben was very popular and always seemed to know what to say, so Mike asked for his help. Reuben said that when he arrived at school each morning he would go up to his group of friends, say hello and talk about something that had been on television last night, such as a sports match or the latest episode of their favourite TV soap. Reuben went to school with Mike the next day and as they arrived Reuben talked aloud about what he was going to do as Mike watched. The next day, when Mike arrived at school he talked aloud about what he was going to do. 'I'm going to walk across the playground, go up to Max and Errol, say hello and ask if they saw what happened on our favourite TV soap last night'. Mike did this and was pleased to find that he was soon chatting with his friends. The next day he talked himself through it again, and after a few times Mike found that he was now doing this without thinking.



- ▶ Don't rush – learn to **STOP, PLAN and GO**.
- ▶ Think about the **different ways** in which you could solve your problem.
- ▶ Think through the **consequences** of each solution.
- ▶ On **balance**, choose the best solution.
- ▶ Ask someone successful to tell you what they do, then watch them and finally **talk yourself through it**.
- ▶ Find ways to **remind** yourself to use your plans.



Identifying possible solutions

What is my problem?

Write down **ALL** of the possible ways in which you can solve this problem. The idea is to try to find as many different solutions as possible.

1 I could solve this problem by:

2 OR

3 OR

4 OR

5 OR

6 OR

7 OR



Identifying possible solutions

It is useful to find out how other people might solve this problem. Think of someone who you think could help, and ask them what ideas they might suggest.

I asked:

They suggested that I could solve this problem by:



What are the consequences of my solutions?

Write down your problem and list the different solutions you have identified. Think about the negative and positive consequences of each solution and write these down. When you have finished, look at your list and on balance choose the best solution for your problem.

My problem is:

Possible solution

Positive consequences

Negative consequences

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

On balance, the best way of solving this problem is:



Looking for solutions



My problem

Write down or draw your problem and fill in all of the possible solutions you can think of.



Talk yourself through it

If you find that the same problem occurs over and over again, then find out how someone else copes, watch them do it and then talk yourself through their plan for success.

What is my problem?

Who could I talk with who is successful?

How do they deal with this problem?

When can I watch them talk me through their plan?



Talk yourself through it

When shall I try to use this plan?

What will I say to myself?

How am I going to reward myself for being successful?

How did it go?

THINK GOOD – FEEL GOOD



Stop, plan and go

Use the traffic lights to help you to plan how you will deal with your problem.



STOP. What is your problem?

PLAN. What is your solution?

GO. When will you try it out?