

# A Helping Model of Problem Solving

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# Steps to helping a helpee solve a problem

A nine step method for problem solving follows:

Step 1: Help the helpee think of the problem in words that refer to self, e.g., How is this a problem to me?

Step 2: Help the helpee focus on specific feelings and reactions to the problem.

Step 3: Help the helpee to own specific feelings about the problem.

Step 4: Help the helpee explore how thinking, feeling, or action can contribute to the problem. Help the helpee answer: What am I doing that contributes to the problem? Not doing

Step 5: Help the helpee identify and list specific changes in behavior designed to solve the problem. Brainstorm solutions to the problem. (Leave no idea out of the brainstormed list.)

Step 6: Help the helpee answer: Of the generated list of behavior changes, which am I most willing to try and/or able to accomplish?

Step 7: Help the helpee commit to adopting the most realistic changes in behavior.

Step 8: Help the helpee review the solutions identified (the brainstormed list). Weed out the impossible, consider the rest, and put solution(s) into practice.

Step 9: Set a date and time to review the behavior changes and solutions. If the problem remains unsolved, adjust the plan as necessary.

# Step 1: Problem recognition by the helpee

- You need to assist the Helpee to acknowledge the problem which faces him
- Help Helpee to accept personal responsibility for his individual part in the problem.
- Assist the helpee to establish priorities
- Make sure the helpee chooses problem areas under his control
- Encourage helpee to give priority to pressing problems (crisis situations)
- Good rule of thumb: choose a problem less difficult than the others to begin with
- Choose a problem that, when corrected, will bring about general improvement for the helpee

## Step 2: Problem definition by the helpee

- Have the helpee make a *How to ...* statement in which the problem appears solvable
- The statement should name specific goals (rather than general, vague ideas)
- The goals should be stated in positive terms (rather than negative) so that the problem will appear solvable
- The statement should deal with tangible, unmet wants, and needs

# Step 3: Have Helpee generate alternatives

- Have the helpee explore her personal “helping” and hindering factors
- Have helpee list the resources, helping factors, and advantages that will allow resolution of her problem
- Have helpee list the hindering and limiting factors and disadvantages, keeping her from reaching her goal
- Help helpee to underline the factors in each list that seem most important now

# Step 4: Help helpee through brainstorming generate alternative solutions

**In brainstorming alternatives, follow these rules:**

- All ideas should be heard
- No idea is too wild to be expressed
- Quantity is wanted; each idea coming to mind should be expressed
- Combining ideas for improvement is highly desirable
- Criticism or negative discussion regarding ideas is absolutely forbidden
- Maximize the helping and minimize the hindering factors
- Adapt solutions from similar problems solved in the past

# Step 5: Evaluation and decision making by the helpee

- With the helpee analyze alternative solutions
- Have the helpee predict the possible OUTCOMES of each alternative
- Help helpee to determine the PROBABILITY of each outcome
- Encourage the helpee to consider the DESIRABILITY of each outcome (list pros and cons)
- Have the helpee answer these questions:
  - Does the solution overcome the hindering factors?
  - Does the solution make use of the helping factors?
  - Does the solution create new problems or new advantages? If so, can the problems be corrected or the advantages used?
- Then have the helpee rank the alternatives in order of preference



# Step 6: Have the helpee make a decision based on:

- The ranking of the alternatives.
- The values held by the helpee
- The practicality of the solution and the probability of success for the helpee
- The ability to move gradually and systematically toward the identified goals



# What are the blocks to productive problem solving?

1. Using reassuring clichés
2. Giving advice
3. Requesting an explanation
4. Agreeing with the helpee even when evidence does not support the plan
5. Giving approval to the helpee
6. Expressing disapproval
7. Contradicting the helpee
8. Changing the subject

# Problem Solving Block #1: Using reassuring clichés

## Using reassuring clichés, e.g.:

- *Everything will be all right.*
- *You don't need to worry.*
- *You're doing fine.*

Reassuring clichés often are given automatically, without thinking

Sometimes they are used as filler during embarrassing moments or emotional outbreaks

Saying “*Everything will be all right,*” may reduce the helpee’s anxiety, but such a response may result from an unrecognized need to reduce your own anxiety—to make yourself feel more comfortable

Reassuring clichés block problem solving because:

- (1) they tend to convey that you feel the helpee is worrying needlessly
- (2) that you are not interested in or do not understand the helpee’s problems

You can reassure the helpee by communicating facts of a positive and pertinent nature

Assisting others to clarify their position is important to problem solving

# Problem Solving Block #2:

## Giving advice

### **Giving advice:**

- *What you should do is ...*
- *Why don't you ...*

By telling your helpee what to do, you impose your own values, opinions, and solutions on him rather than helping him explore his ideas and allowing him to arrive at his own conclusions

Even when a helpee clearly asks for advice, you should be cautious in your response

Encourage him to explore and identify his feelings about the situation

# Problem Solving Block #3:

## Requesting an explanation

### **Requesting an explanation:**

- *What happened to you?*
- *Who can you see about this?*

By requesting an explanation, you ask others to analyze their feelings or actions immediately

You keep them dealing at the cognitive level by asking questions

Although generally questions are useful in determining the nature of the problem, those that ask “why” can be intimidating

Such probing may make others feel uneasy, causing them to invent a reply

*Who, what, when, and where* questions used in clarifying identities, things and events, times and places will elicit factual information

How and why questions demand reasons, causes, and purposes

This is information often difficult or impossible to verbalize

# Problem Solving Block #4:

## Agreeing with the helpee

### Agreeing with the helpee:

- *I agree with you.*
- *You must be right. I feel the same way.*
- *Of course, he was wrong ...*

Introducing your own opinions or values into the problem can prevent the helpee from expressing herself freely

By agreeing with her, you can make it difficult for her to change or modify her opinion later.

If she has expressed ideas other than what she actually believes to be true, she (in the heat of the moment,) may be hesitant to retract emotional statements for rational ones

# Problem Solving Block #5:

## Giving the helpee approval

### Giving the helpee approval:

- *That's the right attitude.*
- *That's the thing to do*

Giving approval can sometimes create a block by shifting the focus of the discussion to your values and feelings

Most importantly, you imply what is or what is not acceptable

It is possible that you may approve behavior of which the helpee actually disapproves—such as crying, expressing strong feelings, or hurling insults

# Problem Solving Block #6: Expressing disapproval

## **Expressing disapproval:**

- *You should stop worrying like this.*
- *You shouldn't do that.*

When you indicate disapproval of the helpee's feelings or actions, again your own values are imposed on him.

Such a negative value judgment may intimidate or anger the helpee, increasing his feelings of guilt and hopelessness

This effectively halts communication.



# Problem Solving Block #7: Contradicting the helpee

## Contradicting the helpee:

- *You're wrong*
- *That's not true.*
- *No it isn't.*

By contradicting the helpee you indicate that what she has said is unacceptable

You are setting yourself up as the authority figure

This may be threatening to her and may keep her from expressing herself further on the subject

It may make her defensive or angry, as you are denying her feelings and her right to be herself

# Problem Solving Block #8:

## Changing the subject

### Changing the subject:

- *Oh, by the way ...*
- *That reminds me ...*
- *Let's talk about that next time.*

You can misdirect the course of problem solving by changing the subject

By doing this you are not giving the helpee the freedom to discuss what he wishes

Having been blocked once, he may abandon further attempts to make his feelings known

You may be changing the subject to avoid dealing with a problem that makes you uncomfortable at a conscious or subconscious level regardless of your helpee's needs

# Useful responses in problem solving:

## 1. Exploratory responses

### 1. Exploratory responses:

- Exploratory responses encourage helpees to stay deeply involved in the problem-solving communication and, at the same time, give them freedom and latitude in their responses
- Exploratory responses encourage helpees to become active participants in the problem solving rather than passive receivers of your advice and knowledge
- You help them to feel free to reject, disagree, or modify your comments and observations
- Your responses encourage them to explore further, to go deeper, to expand, to elaborate, and also to assume a great deal of the responsibility for the direction and comfort of the problem-solving process

# Useful responses in problem solving:

## 2. Listening responses

### 2. Listening responses:

- By this response to problem solving, you actively and deliberately communicate to the helpee that you are listening and trying to understand
- You ask for clarification whenever something is unclear or confusing
- Periodically you paraphrase or check with her as to what you think she has said
- These responses offer proof to her that you are really listening and trying to understand
- Also, in order for you to test your understanding, you ask her to confirm or deny what you think you have heard
- Listening responses communicate that the helpee is being taken seriously
- She is encouraged to think carefully about her own statements—to take herself seriously and to begin listening at least as closely to her own concerns as you have been

# Useful responses in problem solving:

## 3. *Affective–Cognitive* responses

### 3. *Affective–Cognitive* responses:

- The word affective refers to feelings
- Cognitive refers to the content or context of the story line
- Affective responses generally are about emotions, feelings, or bodily states, such as fear, anger, tension
- These responses attempt to maintain and intensify the helpee's focus on the “feeling” parts of this problem statements
- You use this response mode when you want to encourage the helpee to focus more clearly on underlying attitudes, values, and gut-level reactions to his problems
- Cognitive responses are those related to the “information” parts of the helpee's statements, usually seeking facts
- Cognitive responses shift the interaction to a thinking or analytic mode
- Making cognitive responses is a little like listening to the words of a song and ignoring the music.

# Useful responses in problem solving:

## 4. Honest labeling:

### 4. Honest labeling:

- An important part of communication is the feelings people have about each other as they converse
- Labeling these here– and–now feelings often requires a great deal of courage
- Frequently, the only time you offer others honest feedback in the course of your daily communication is in a fit of anger
- Often you may choose to respond in a vague, less than completely honest or specific way because you think helpees are unable to deal directly with their more troublesome concerns
- When you choose not to be honest, you do so out of your own concern and desire to save face
- Often the helpees assume that you are unwilling to engage in or to assist them in problem solving