

## HOW TO SOLVE DAILY LIFE PROBLEMS

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Everyone has problems in their life. For the most part, we are able to quickly solve them without much trouble at all. We either come up with a quick solution or use a strategy that worked in the past. For example, if you overslept in the morning and are going to be late for work, you might decide to call work and explain your situation while getting dressed and ready in half the usual time.

Problems become more difficult when there is no obvious solution and strategies that you have tried in the past don't work. These types of problems cause a great deal of stress and anxiety, and they require a new and different strategy.

### The Steps to Solving Daily Life Problems

#### Step 1: Is there a problem?

As a first step, it is important to realize that there is a problem. Because problems can cause anxiety, many people will try to avoid, ignore, or procrastinate when dealing with difficult issues in their lives.

Unfortunately, avoiding your problems usually causes the problems to come back and a small problem can become a big problem over time!

So, how can you recognize a problem early?

1. Make a list. Get in the habit of writing out a list of the problems in your life. It is easier to work on a problem if you have written it down. This approach will also help you to see how certain problems seem to come up again and again.



**Hint: Write it down.** When a problem causes you anxiety, it is best to use a pen and paper and to work it out in written form. You are more likely to deal with a problem if it is written down in front of you.

2. Use your feelings. We often make the mistake of thinking our negative emotions are the problem. This is false! For example, you might think, “the problem is that I am always stressed at work” But actually, it is more accurate to say that there is a problem at work (such as difficulties with coworkers or a huge workload), *which is making you feel* stressed. Use your negative emotions to guide you: when you

are feeling anxious, stressed, frustrated, or annoyed in a particular situation, try to find the problem that is making you feel that way.

3. Find the challenge. A huge obstacle for most people is the negative way that they look at problems: if you think that problems are completely threatening, or that having them is a sign of weakness or failure, and you see yourself as a bad problem solver, **you won't solve the problem!** That is, even if you are good at solving problems, you won't try to deal with them if you don't think you can and you don't see any benefit to it.

But if you can find some benefit or opportunity in a problem, you are more likely to work on it. For example, if your problem is not getting along with coworkers, the opportunity might be that it is a chance to improve your communication skills and possibly resolve some arguments with your coworkers.



**Key Point: There is always a benefit to solving problems.**

Remember that if you solve a problem, even a difficult one, it is one less thing to worry about, and one less problem on your problem list!

## Step 2: What is the Problem?

Before trying to solve a problem, you first need to define it. Here are some tips on how to properly define what your problem is:

- Focus on the problem itself. Ask yourself the following questions:
  - What is the situation? (*e.g., my boss gives me too much work*).
  - What would I like the situation to be? (*e.g., I would like my boss to give me less work*).
  - What is the obstacle that is keeping me from my desired situation? (*e.g., I'm unsure how to talk to my boss about my work obligations*).

You can then put your problem into a sentence. For example, *the problem is that my boss gives me too much work; I would like to have less work, but I'm not sure how to ask him to reduce my workload.*

- Just the facts! Be careful to avoid putting opinions or assumptions into your definition. For example, thinking that your work problem is that “my boss is a jerk” is an opinion. Besides, it makes the problem almost impossible to solve.

- Be specific and concrete. If you are too vague when defining your problem, it will be difficult to know how to even begin solving it. For example, thinking that, “my problem is my work” is not specific or concrete; what is it about your work that is a problem? How will you even start fixing this kind of problem?

### **Step 3: What are my Goals for this Problem?**

In order to know whether you have solved your problems, it is important to know ahead of time what a solved problem would look like. Here are some tips for setting goals:

- Be realistic. Make sure that your goals are achievable; if they are too unrealistic, you will probably not reach them, and you will feel pretty bad. For example, with the work problem, if your goal is to only do your work when you feel like it, you will probably not solve your problem.
- Be specific. If your goals are vague, you won't know when you have reached them. For example, if you think, “my goal is to be happy at work”, what does that mean? Do you want to be happy all the time? How happy? When will you know when you have reached your “happy” goal?
- Start with short-term goals. If you set goals that can be reached relatively quickly, you are more likely to work on your problem. You can set long-term goals too, but make sure to have short-term goals as well so that you know whether the problem is solved. With the work problem, a long-term goal might be to get another job, but a short-term goal might be to reduce your workload.

### **Step 4: Thinking up Solutions**

The biggest mistake that we tend to make when thinking up solutions for our problems is to think about the same old solutions. But if those old solutions worked, the problem would not still be around. In order to come up with new solutions, you can follow the rules of **brainstorming**:

1. Devise lots of solutions. You are more likely to come up with a good solution if you have a lot of solutions to choose from. Try to come up with at least 10 possible solutions to your problem.
2. Don't judge your solutions. Remember that you aren't choosing a solution yet, you are just trying to think of as many options as you can; so don't judge them. Even silly, strange or extreme solutions are good ones at this stage. For the work problem, you might think about solutions like “quit my job” or “organize a strike”. Write them down! You will never come up with new solutions if you aren't willing to even think about silly ones.

3. Have a variety of solutions. Make sure that your solutions are different from each other. For example, with the work problem, there is not much variety if your solutions are to “ask the boss to have lunch with me”, “ask the boss to have coffee with me”, or “ask the boss to come out to dinner”. Although these are three solutions, there is not much variety, because they are basically all the same solution: ask the boss to do something social with you.



**REMEMBER:** When it comes to difficult problems, the first idea that comes to your mind is not always the best. Take the time to come up with new possibilities.

Some other tips for thinking up lots of different solutions are:

- Be specific. Make sure that your solutions involve specific behaviours, and not general strategies. For example, the solution, “give the boss a list of all the work I am doing now” is very specific, compared to the solution, “be more assertive with my boss”. If you picked the latter solution, you would have a new problem: figuring out how to be more assertive!
- Ask for help. If you are having a hard time coming up with new and different solutions to your problem, ask friends, family, or coworkers for advice. Other people might have ideas that you have not even thought of.

### Step 5: Deciding on a Solution

If you struggle with anxiety, actually picking a solution to your problem can often seem quite difficult. However, it is important to remember that not solving a problem can lead to more anxiety than trying to solve it, no matter how anxious you feel. The following are some guidelines that can help you find the best solution to your problem.



**REMEMBER:** The goal is to find the **best solution** to your problem, **NOT the perfect solution**. If there was a “perfect” solution, you would have already found it!

1. Will this solution fix my problem and help me reach my goals?

This guideline might seem obvious, however, it is important to make sure that your solution will help you reach your goals. For example, “work harder” as a solution to the work problem will not help you reach your goal of having less work to do in a day.

## 2. How much time and effort does this solution involve?

You can expect that any solution will require some time and effort, but the amount involved needs to be related to your needs. “Quitting my job” as a solution to the work problem might involve a great deal of effort, since you would have to start looking for a new job.

## 3. How will I feel if I pick this solution?

If you think that a solution will make you feel bad, guilty, or too anxious, it might not be the best solution. For example, “lie to the boss about how much work I actually did” might make you feel bad.

## 4. What are the costs and benefits of this solution to myself and others right now and in the long-term?

The best solution will have the most benefits, and the fewest costs possible. But when thinking about costs and benefits you want to think about how a solution will affect:

→ You right now and in the future

→ Other people in your life right now and in the future

For example, if you picked the solution, “blame my coworkers for work that isn’t done”, this might solve your problem right now, but it will probably seriously affect your relationship with your coworkers, and in the long-run your boss will probably find out. The costs of this solution seem to outweigh the benefits.



**REMEMBER:** There is no perfect solution, so when you are judging each potential solution, it is unlikely that it will meet all four criteria. That is, it probably won’t solve the problem with no time or effort, make you feel happy while doing it, and have no costs and only benefits. You are looking for a solution that BEST meets the criteria, not perfectly.

## **STEP 5: Carrying Out the Solution**

This is often the most difficult step because you now have to actually start carrying out the solution you chose. Most people are afraid that they might have picked the wrong solution, or that perhaps there is a better solution if they just think about the problem more. This is not helpful thinking! It is better to act than to do nothing at all.

To help you carry out your solution, you can **make an action plan**. If you know how you are going to carry out your solution, you are more likely to do it.

Your plan should include all the steps that you will need to take to carry out the solution, and it should be as specific and concrete as possible. For example, if my solution is to “get a new job”, some of the steps involved in that solution might be:

- make a list of the types of jobs I would like to have
- buy a newspaper every day and check the “help wanted” ads
- contact all the employers who advertise a job that I would like to have
- rearrange my work schedule so that I can go to interviews if necessary

## **STEP 6: Checking In on Your Problem**

Now that you have carried out your solution, you need to make sure that it is working. Sometimes the best-laid plans don’t always turn out perfectly, so it is a good idea to have **markers** that let you know whether you are on the right track. For example, with the work problem, you might use your workload as a marker for tracking your solution. If you notice that your workload is going down, then your solution is probably working.

### What do I do if my solution isn’t working?

Because the unexpected happens in life, sometimes even the best solutions don’t work out well, which is unfortunate, but normal. The best thing to do is to **recycle** through the different steps and ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I define the problem properly?
- Were my goals realistic?
- Are there other possible solutions?
- Is there a better solution that I could have picked?
- Did I carry it out as planned?

If you work through these steps, you might find that you went wrong somewhere, and then you can fix it and try again!



**TIP:** Solving the difficult problems in life is hard work, so make sure to reward yourself afterward for a job well done.

Here is a helpful resource for more information on problem solving:

***Solving Life’s Problems: A 5-Step Guide to Enhanced Well-Being*** by A.M. Nezu, C.M. Nezu, and T.J. D’Zurilla. Springer Publishing.