How to Solve Problems

What is a problem?

Problems tend to be events and situations that disturb the smooth running of our daily lives. They can often be sources of stress.

Problems can also be viewed as events and situations that prevent us from reaching our personal goals.

Problems can be big or small.
Problems can be simple or complicated.
Problems can often be ignored.
Problems can appear bigger or smaller than they really are.

How do you know there is a problem?

Often we are alerted to problems by our emotional reactions. We may feel **anxious** or **frustrated** and **angry**.

Often it is about how well we understand the situation we are in. This is related to how we attend to our internal and external environments, and how our brains process the information thus perceived:

ATTENTION ⟶ *PERCEPTION* ⟶ *INFORMATION PROCESSING*

The outcome of this rapid sequence of events is what we call our **appraisal** of the situation.

Sometimes our appraisals are accurate, at other times they can be distorted or mistaken. Information processing is subject to all sorts of biases, depending on our current emotional and physiological state (e.g., if you are hungry, you will judge a sweet jar to contain more sweets than if you do it when you are not hungry).

It is not surprising that this process is also affected by psychoactive drugs. Attention is affected by arousal levels – how alert or subdued you are – and drugs often influence our perceptual and cognitive functioning.

Strategies for Problem – Solving

There is widespread agreement that formal problem-solving involves a number of steps as outlined below. For simple problems, we often do not have to go through this process. For many day to day problems we have well-rehearsed solutions – we have a kind of "template" for dealing with common situations. Sometimes these well-rehearsed solutions might actually give rise to other problems, and then we need to look at alternative solutions – *i.e.*, design another template.

Steps	*Questions/Actions*
Identify the problem – name the beast!	What is the concern?
Goal selection – desired outcome	What do I want?
Generate possible solutions	What can I do?
Consider likely outcomes – what is realistic?	What might happen?
Make a decision	What is my choice?
Put it into practice	Do it!
Evaluate outcome	Did it work?

[after Wasik, 1984]

Also consider…

- Talk to other people to get advice and information
- Make use of technology – e.g., use of internet
- Log-on to your own internal resources – recall and review how you have dealt with similar problems in the past
- How do you eat a pumpkin? Cut it into small pieces. Do the same with problems.
- Use visual imagery to rehearse coping successfully with the problem
- Here is Plan B - knowing what to do if Plan A goes pear-shaped, as it often will
- Be positive about mistakes and failures – they give you important information and feedback, making you more equipped for the next time you are in a similar situation
- Step outside yourself – how would you advise a friend or family member if they were faced with this problem?

Thinking Skills

Researchers have identified specific thinking skills that contribute to our ability to solve problems.

Means-ends thinking
This is the ability to plan a step-by-step sequence of actions to reach a personal goal. It includes the ability to identify **obstacles** and knowing that effective problem-solving takes **time**.

Weighing pros and cons
The ability to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of engaging in a particular act. It helps with effective decision-making.

Alternative solution thinking
This is the ability to think of unconnected, unrelated alternative solutions to a problem. It is related to creativity, and represents Step 3 in the formal process of problem-solving.

Consequential thinking
This is the ability to think of different outcomes that might occur as a result of engaging in a particular act.

- We often stop this process too soon – we tend to focus more on the **immediate** outcomes rather than the **longer-term** outcomes.

- Our attention tends to be drawn more to **pleasurable** and positive outcomes than to **aversive** and negative outcomes.

- Our decision-making is therefore biased towards choosing what seems to be rewarding now, rather than investing in our future well-being and happiness.