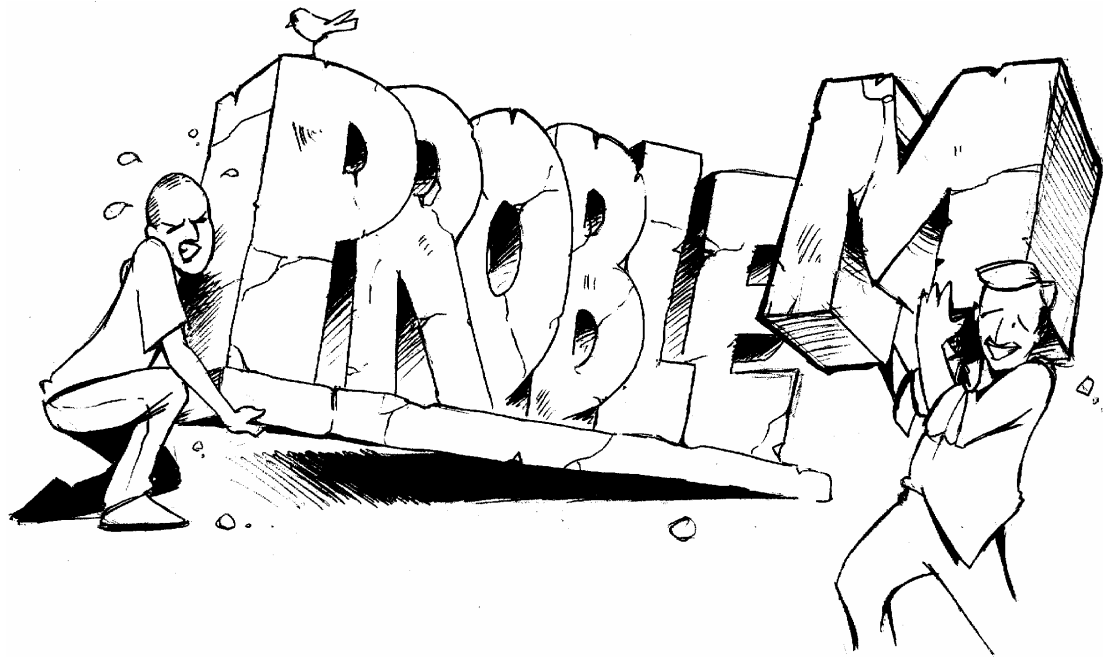


Practical Problem Solving

Dr. Chris Williams



Overcoming Depression

A Five Areas Approach

Acknowledgement

‘Practical Problem Solving’ is part of a longer self-help workbook called ‘Overcoming Depression: A Five Areas Approach’, published by Arnold Publishers (2001). The author is Dr Chris Williams is Senior Lecturer and Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist at the Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Glasgow Medical School, Glasgow, UK. The workbook has been amended for the University of Leeds student mental health with the approval and guidance of Dr Williams.

Section 1:

Introduction.

In this workbook you will have a chance to find out about ways of tackling practical problems by learning about and practising a **practical problem solving approach**.

What are my practical problems?

Firstly, think about the different situations, relationships and practical problems that you face:

Situation, relationship and practical problems.

I have relationship difficulties (such as arguments) with: Yes No

(write in the person's name or initials)

I can't really talk and receive support from my friends/family Yes No

There is no one around who I can really talk to. Yes No

Yes No

I have difficulties with money worries or debts. Yes No

I don't like where I live. Yes No

I am having problems with my housemates. Yes No

I don't enjoy my studies. Yes No

I have difficulties with other students or members of staff at University? Yes No

Other (please write in):

The key to the approach is *that it is not the events themselves that upset a person, but rather it is how they think about the events*. **However**, this does **not** mean that practical problems should be ignored. In the Overcoming Depression Course the aim is to help you to:

- Try to overcome practical problems using a Problem-solving approach.

Try to alter any **unhelpful focus** on the problem (with negative and extreme thinking) by learning how to challenge extreme and unhelpful thinking. This is the focus of other workbooks in the fuller 'Overcoming Depression' book.

By approaching your practical problems one step at a time, it is possible to begin to tackle them. You can't deal with everything at once. In order to deal with them effectively, you need to choose the most important problem to start with. This means that you must first try to put other problems to one side at the moment.

Think about and answer for yourself these questions:

Q. What might be the advantage of planning to change just one problem at first?

Write your answer here:



Q. What are the potential dangers of trying to change everything at once?

Write your answer here:

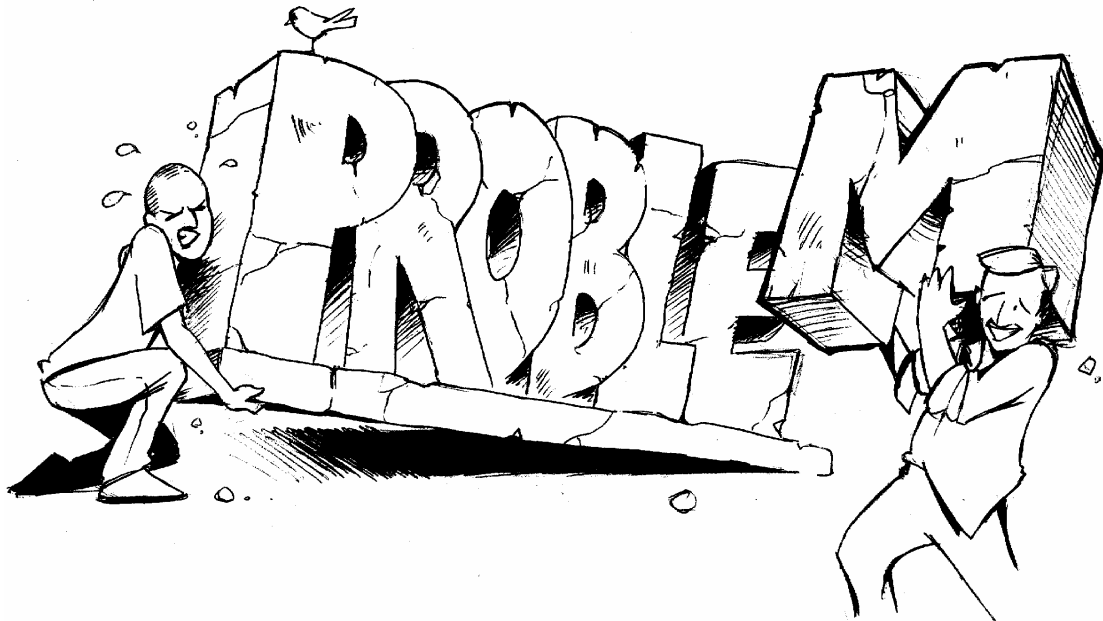


Section 2:

Practical problem solving.

The steps of problem solving include:

- Approaching each problem separately in turn.
- Defining the problem clearly.
- Breaking down seemingly enormous and unmanageable problems into smaller parts that are then easier to solve.
- The need to approach the problem one-step at a time.



Problem solving is a logical process.

By working through the seven steps outlined below you can learn an approach that enables you to solve your own problems.

Example: James is a 20 year old student who is currently feeling depressed. He has been falling behind with his studies for some time and is now unable to meet a deadline for an important piece of coursework.

The seven steps to problem solving

Step 1: Identify and clearly define the problem as precisely as possible.

Paul's problem:

- *Not being able to meet the deadline for my coursework*

Q. Is this a clear, focused problem?

Yes ✓

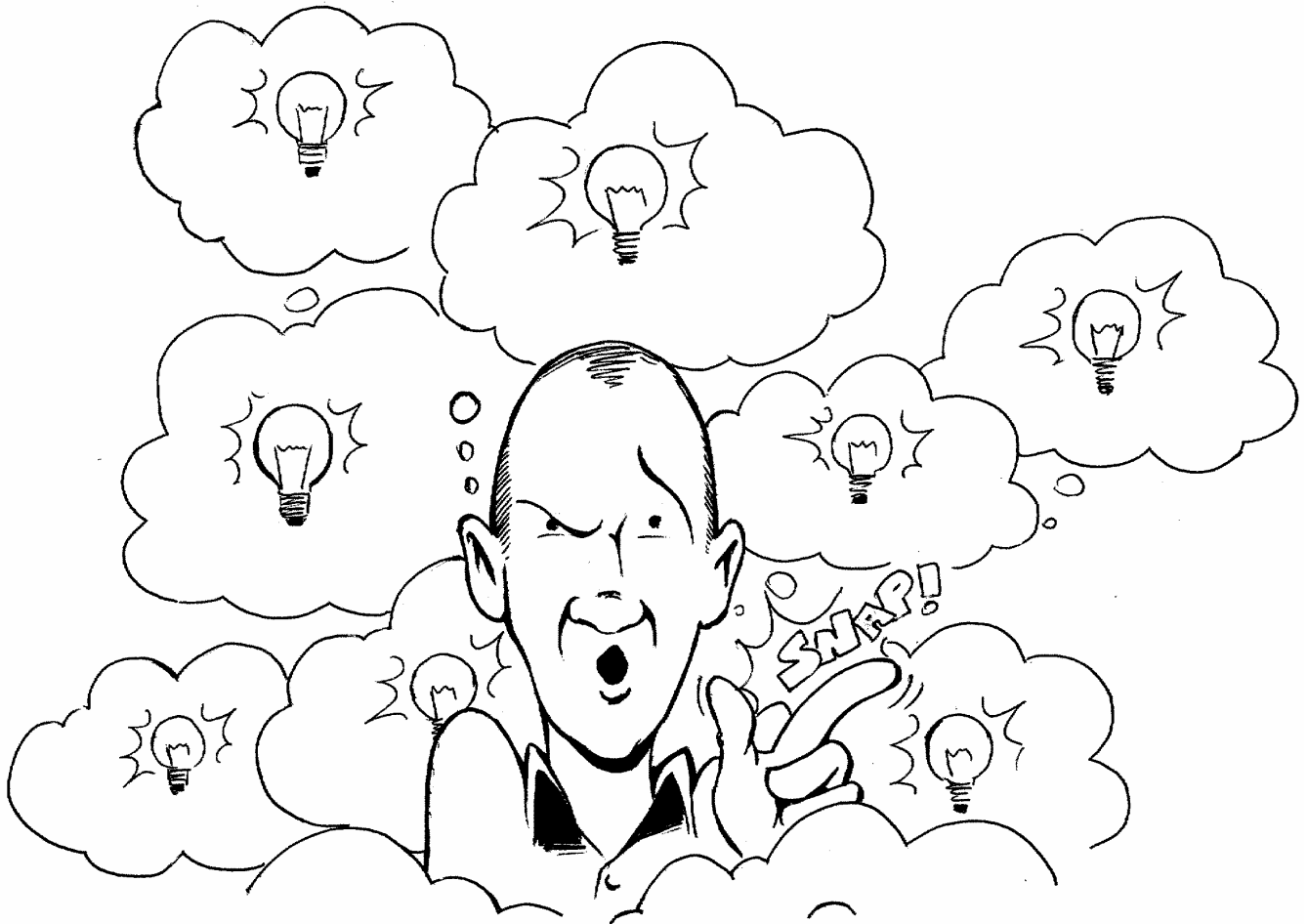
No

Step 2: Brainstorm possible solutions.

One problem that often faces people when they feel overwhelmed by practical problems is that they cannot see a way out. It can seem difficult to even start tackling the difficulty. One way around this is to try to step back from the problem and see if any other solutions are possible.

This approach is called **brainstorming**.

- The more solutions that are generated, the more likely it is that a good one will emerge.
- Ridiculous ideas should be included as well even if you would never choose them in practice. This can help you adopt a **flexible** approach to the problem. What helpful ideas would others (e.g. family, friends) suggest?



James' problem:

Possible options (including ridiculous ideas at first) are:

- *Ignore the problem completely - it may go away.*
- *Copy someone else's coursework.*
- *Hand in the bit of the coursework I have done on time but unfinished.*

- *Speak to the lecturer to see if an extension can be arranged.*
- *Discuss the problem with a personal tutor (issues could include lack of interest in the subject, problems with time management, anxiety, procrastination, lack of motivation etc).*
- *Speak to a student counsellor to explore the causes of the problem (issues could include depression, family problems, anxiety etc).*

Step 3: Assess how effective and practical each potential solution is

Suggestion	Advantages	Disadvantages
Ignore the problem completely – it may go away.	<i>Easier in the short-term.</i>	<i>This is not a sensible solution. If I am going to complete the course, the work will have to be tackled sometime.</i>
Copy someone else's work.	<i>Easier in the short term.</i>	<i>It's unethical and wrong. I couldn't do it. I would get into serious trouble. I could be thrown off the course. That's just ridiculous.</i>
Hand in the work unfinished.	<i>At least I would have done something and get some sort of mark.</i>	<i>.I wouldn't get a good mark – they would think I hadn't tried to finish it.</i>
Speak to the lecturer to see if an extension could be arranged.	<i>Good short-term answer. I could possibly agree more time to get the work done.</i>	<i>I would still have to do the work and might struggle to meet the new deadline. My friends would know I'd had to ask for an extension and I'd be embarrassed.</i>
Speak to my personal tutor.	<i>She might help me to get started and might explain my problems to the lecturer. It might motivate me to do some work.</i>	<i>I would feel a bit embarrassed about approaching my personal tutor.</i>
Speak to a student counsellor.	<i>This might help me get to the bottom of why I'm feeling depressed and why I'm struggling to keep up with things.</i>	<i>I might feel embarrassed talking to them. I don't know how to contact them.</i>

Step 4: Choose one of the solutions

This solution should be an option that fulfils the following two criteria:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------------------------|
| a). Is it helpful? | Yes ✓ | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b). Is it achievable? | Yes ✓ | No <input type="checkbox"/> |

James' choice:

James decides on balance to arrange an extension and to talk to a student counsellor. This seems a reasonable solution to deal with the short-term problem of a deadline that he can't meet and a longer-term solution to deal with the problems leading to his falling behind with his studies. Other suggestions might also have worked, but this suggestion fulfils the two criteria above.

Step 5: Plan the steps needed to carry it out

James' plan:

I could speak to the lecturer at the end of the next lecture. I could phone the student counselling service - the phone number is on the university web-site. I'm quite nervous so I'm going to plan out what I am going to say in advance. I will phone up and ask to arrange a time to see a student counsellor. I will tell them I am having problems keeping up with my studies and that I am feeling quite low.

Next, James needs to apply the *Questions for Effective Change* to his plan to check how practical and achievable it is.

The questions for effective change.

Is the planned solution one that:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1). Will be useful for understanding or changing how I am? | James' plan:
Yes ✓ No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2). Is a specific task so that I will know when I have done it? | Yes ✓ No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3). Is realistic : is it practical and achievable? | Yes ✓ No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4). Makes clear what I am going to do and when I am going to do it | Yes ✓ No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5). Is an activity that won't be easily blocked or prevented by practical problems? | Yes ✓ No <input type="checkbox"/> |

Step 6: Carry out the plan.**James' Plan:**

James decides that the first thing to do is speak to the lecturer at the end of his next lecture. When he goes to speak to him, , he feels quite scared. He predicts that the lecturer will humiliate him and turn his request down and that everyone will know what has happened.

James decides to try to challenge these fears and decides to go speak to the lecturer anyway. The lecturer says that because he has a good record of handing in previous assignments on time in the past, , there will be no problems in agreeing to an extension. James explains that he is also going to make an appointment with a student counsellor to look at why he is feeling like he is, and to try and prevent the situation happening again in future.

Step 7: Review the outcome.**Checklist:**

Q. Was the selected solution successful?

Yes ✓ No

Q. Did it help get the coursework handed in)?

Yes ✓ No

Q. Were there any disadvantages to using this approach?

Yes No ✓

James' review:**James' Review:**

In this case James' plan went smoothly. Even if there are any problems, he could have learned from them and used them to improve his next attempt to solve the problem.

The example used shows how the technique might be applied to this situation. However, it also works for **any** day-to-day difficulties.

You now have the option of practising this approach:

Section 3:

Putting what you have learned into practice.

Think about how you can begin to tackle the problems you face in your own life.

Planning to overcome my practical problem

Step 1: Identify and clearly define the problem as precisely as possible.

My problem: *(please write in)*



Q. Is this a clear, focused problem?

Yes

No

If No, re-write it so that it is clear and focused.



Step 2: Brainstorm possible solutions.

- The more solutions that are generated, the more likely a good one will emerge.
- Ridiculous ideas should be included as well even if you would never choose them in practice. This can help you adopt a flexible approach to the problem. What helpful ideas would others (e.g. family, friends) suggest?

Brainstorming my problem:

Possible options (including ridiculous ideas at first) are:

**Step 3: Assess how effective and practical each potential solution is.**

Suggestion	Advantages	Disadvantages

Try to create **as many** ideas as you can. If this proves difficult, try to think of some bizarre ideas first to help get the ideas flowing.



Try to **think broadly**. What helpful advice would a close friend or relative tell you? How could you look at the solutions facing you differently? Try to be creative in your answers. If you feel stuck, sometimes doing this task with someone you trust can be helpful.

Step 4: Choose one of the solutions.

This solution should be an option that fulfils the following two criteria:

- a). Is it helpful? Yes No
- b). Is it achievable? Yes No

My choice:

**Step 5: Plan the steps needed to carry it out.**

Write down the practical steps needed to carry out your plan. Try to be very specific in your plan so that you know what you are going to do, and when you are going to do it.

My Plan:



This is **the key part** of the problem-solving process. Be as precise as possible in your plan. Try to predict possible problems and work out how to avoid or deal with them.

Next, apply the *questions for effective change* to your plan to check how practical and achievable it is:

The questions for effective change

Is my planned task one that:

- Q). Will be useful for understanding or changing how I am? Yes No
- Q). Is a specific task so that I will know when I have done it? Yes No
- Q). Is realistic: is it practical and achievable? Yes No
- Q). Makes clear what I am going to do and when I am going to do it. Yes No
- Q). Is an activity that won't be easily blocked or prevented by practical problems? Yes No

Step 6: Do it. Carry out the plan.

What happened?

**Step 7: Review the outcome.****Checklist:**

- Q). Was the selected solution successful? Yes No
- Q). Did it help deal with the target problem? Yes No
- Q). Were there any disadvantages to using this approach? Yes No
- Q). What have I learned from doing this?

Task: Write down any helpful lessons or information you have learned from what happened. If things didn't go quite as you hoped, try to learn from this. How could you make things different during your next attempt to tackle the problem?

My review:

Conclusion: Problem-solving is a technique that needs to be practised and you will improve your skills in this approach by using it. Try to learn from any mistakes and keep practising so that using this approach becomes second nature whenever you face a problem.

Putting what you have learned into practice:

- Choose one or two problems only and start the seven step problem-solving approach now and during the next two or three weeks.
- After a week of trying this, **then** read the final part of the workbook.

Section 4:

Review of your problem-solving plan.

Q. Were you able to carry out your plan?

Yes

No

If no: Move back to the heading "**Planning to overcome my practical problem**" (Section 3 of this workbook).

If yes:

Q. How helpful was what you did in solving your problem?

Very unhelpful _____ Very helpful
0 10

If you noticed that your plan was helpful:

This shows that you have gained by choosing to plan how to overcome your problem. By using this practical problem solving approach successfully, you have learned something important – that it is possible to change problems by approaching them one step at a time. By making slow, sure steps you will be able to boost your confidence and increase your sense of having the ability to deal with the problems you face. Think about how you can apply what you have learned over the next weeks.

If you noticed that your plan was not very helpful:

Choosing realistic targets for change is important. Were you too ambitious or unrealistic in choosing the target you did? Sometimes a problem-solving approach may be blocked by something unexpected that happens. Perhaps something didn't happen as you planned, or someone reacted in an unexpected way? Try to learn from what happened. How could you change how you approach the problem and continue to apply the *Questions for Effective Change* to help you create a realistic action plan?

Q. How easy was it for you to complete the actions needed as part of the plan?

Very difficult _____ Very easy
0 10

If it was fairly easy to carry out the plan:

If you found it easy to plan out and put into practice your problem-solving plan, well done. This shows that you effectively planned out what you wanted to do. The best way to make a plan go

smoothly is to have predicted possible problems, and clearly planned out what you are going to do at every stage.

If it was quite hard for you to do the task:

When a person finds that their problem-solving plan hasn't gone as smoothly as they would wish, it is often because they have:

- Chosen a solution that is not very realistic or achievable (this is covered in steps 3 and 4 of the problem solving process).
- Not planned out in enough detail every step they need to do in solving the problem (this is step 5 of the problem solving process).

Problem solving is a technique that needs to be practised and you will improve your skills in this approach by using it.

Workbook summary.

In this workbook you have:

- Found out about ways of tackling practical problems by learning about and practising a **practical problem solving** approach.

Putting what you have learned into practice.

Please can you continue to put into practice what you have learned over the next few weeks. Do not try to solve every problem all at once, but plan out what to do at a pace that is right for you.

My notes: