

Problem Solving Training: Toolkit #1

Overcoming Brain Overload

Dealing with stressful, real-life problems can be difficult. One thing that makes it even more challenging is our limited ability to “multi-task.” With multiple demands on our time and our brains, we feel pushed to tackle multiple things at once. But, due to the limited ability of our brains, this often becomes difficult for humans when attempting to solve real-life problems, especially when under stress.

Often, one activity interferes with another. For example, when we try to remember important information about a problem, the very act of trying to remember can interfere with our ability to pay attention to other parts of the problem. As a result, we can’t solve the problem effectively.

Ways to Facilitate Problem-Solving Multi-Tasking

The following three techniques make up the first problem-solving toolkit. These tools can be useful throughout the problem-solving process to improve our ability to deal with “brain overload.” These include:

- Externalize
- Simplify
- Visualize

Externalize involves displaying information that is in your head externally. In other words— “get it out of your head.” Write ideas down, draw diagrams, make lists. This procedure relieves the human mind from “brain freeze,” allowing you to concentrate on the problem or task. That’s why we use calendars, Blackberries, “to do lists,” iPhones, grocery lists, etc.

In addition, think of journal writing, writing letters, and making audio or video recordings as further ways to “externalize.” Research has shown that writing about a stressful situation can at times actually reduce the stress. Consider getting a journal or notebook to practice externalizing. You can also use your computer, laptop, or smartphone. Engaging in art activities, such as drawing, molding clay, playing an instrument, or singing can also work.

Last, you can externalize the information in your head simply by talking aloud—talk to a friend, family member, your Problem-Solving Training clinician, chaplain, or behavioral health counselor. Some people externalize through heartfelt prayer or by talking to a “higher power.”

Simplify is the second problem-solving multi-tasking tool and involves breaking down or simplifying problems in order to make them more manageable. Focus only on the most relevant information, break down complex problems into more manageable smaller ones, and put complex, vague, and abstract concepts into more simple, specific, and concrete language.

To practice this tool:

- Write down a brief description of a problem that you are experiencing (which means that you would once again be practicing the externalizing strategy)
- Read it over and ask yourself the question—“if a friend read this description, would he or she understand it, or did I use vague, unclear language and/or ideas?”
- If the answer is “no,” it is unlikely that he or she can understand what you’re talking about
- Therefore, go back and try to re-write the information using the simplifying tool
- If that proves difficult, try to use the next multi-tasking tool of visualization, picturing in your mind talking to your friend to better understand what kinds of words or ideas you should use in order to really get your points across more clearly
- Write this down, look it over, and try to simplify once again

Visualize involves using your “mind’s eye” to create a scene in your imagination to the degree that you use all your senses and can feel as though you are there, experiencing the scene. Use all your senses to imagine seeing, smelling, touching, and hearing the experience that you have created in your mind. Visualization is used in 4 important ways in this program in order to help solve participants become better problem solvers. These include:

Problem Clarification— It can be very helpful to visualize the problem in your mind’s eye in order to begin to break it down and separate the different parts of the problem, so you can begin to see smaller goals that will help with the overall situation. For example, if one of your goals is to improve your relationship with your spouse or partner, visualizing how you currently communicate and the times that you are most likely to experience negative interactions can help you pinpoint the problem to work on. As you imagine your most recent arguments, you might discover that speaking more calmly is an important goal, or to set aside a time to talk when you are not under stress. Research has shown that visualization is a powerful tool that fosters our ability to get a better picture of a problem that we are experiencing, as well as a better understanding of our own emotional reactions.

Imaginal Rehearsal—Sports figures frequently imagine engaging in various activities in order to enhance their success in a more time efficient manner (for example, a basketball player might visualize how to throw the ball through the hoop while being pursued down the court, a rifleman might visualize lining up his target, calming his body, and squeezing the trigger). This form of visualization can be useful when an individual has decided upon a plan of action to improve a problem situation and needs rehearsal or practice to help carry it out effectively.

Stress Management – Guided imagery is a way to manage stress or negative arousal by taking a vacation in your mind. Using instructions from a therapist or life coach, an individual is guided to “take a trip to a safe place” in their mind. Essentially, when you use guided imagery, you vividly imagine a scene, using all of your senses, to take you to a safe place in your mind’s eye, such as favorite vacation spot. This activity can be practiced as a general stress management strategy and also as a tool to calm the body and mind.

Visualization for Motivation – This is another technique we can help to motivate us when we are feeling unsure whether we can actually succeed at reaching a goal. This use of visualization is specifically aimed at helping you overcome feelings of low motivation or hopelessness about the challenges you are facing or the dilemmas that you are struggling with. It has been said that “the road to success begins with a single step.” Often finding the courage to take the first few steps forward requires some focused techniques to get moving. Essentially, this approach asks individuals to visualize how they feel after a problem is solved, but not to think about how they got to that point. It is similar to having a tired runner visualize crossing the finish line, a struggling student visualize graduation day, or a service member imagining a homecoming and



embrace of loved ones. Try the exercise described below, and remember - it might not come easily the first or second time, but you can learn this powerful skill with practice.

Try This:

Use your imagination in order to “travel to the future” at a specific point in time that is after you successfully solved a difficult problem you are facing or reached an important goal. Don’t think about how you got there— just that you did reach a goal. Sometimes it’s important for us to “experience” reaching a goal in our mind so that we can see it as being possible and be willing to start with a first step. Remember what it felt like when you pictured yourself in uniform, on a date with someone you love, or saw a ribbon signaling the end of a race or obstacle course. These images kept you training hard, or making that first telephone call, or running a bit faster. “Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel” (in our mind) can help us to work harder to get to the goal.

Instructions

Close your eyes and try to imagine where you are, whom you are with, what you are thinking, and what you are feeling. Remember—it doesn’t matter how you were able to handle the problem or how you reached the goal; rather, visualize in your mind’s eye that you did reach your goal. Choose a problem with which you are currently experiencing difficulty— visualize being on the “other side of the obstacles.” Picture in your mind’s eye a specific scene or image that might be taking place if your dilemma was resolved or your goal was reached (Not your whole life situation, but a brief scene or image).

When you have an image in your mind (remember to use all your senses to picture it), try to answer the following questions to yourself:

- How is your life different with this problem solved?
- How are you feeling?
- How are you feeling now as compared to before the problem was solved?
- What are you thinking?

Try to imagine all of the positive consequences associated with having reached your goal. Try to “see the light at the end of the tunnel!” Practice using the externalizing strategy we introduced earlier in the toolkit by writing about this experience in your journal, notebook, or in your computer. Describe the various positive sensations and feelings you had when visualizing that you reached a goal.