

Problem Solving Training: Toolkit #2

Stop, Slow Down, Think & Act – Cooling down the mind and body

Learning to drive on a sunny Sunday afternoon in an uncrowded parking lot is much different than learning to drive in the snow during a blizzard at rush hour. Similarly, it is one thing to be told how to become an effective problem solver— however, it can be quite a different situation to apply such skills when faced with particularly stressful problems. Trying to handle stressful or confusing situations can test even the best of problem solvers! Over decades of clinical and research experience, we have identified common barriers that exist in trying to solve life problems under stress. These include:

- Negative feelings such as sadness, guilt, anger, or anxiety, when intense and overwhelming, often interfere with our ability to identify effective ways of dealing with problems. They can take over our ability to think logically.
- Negative thinking such as sadness, guilt, anger, or anxiety, when intense and overwhelming, often interfere with our ability to identify effective ways of dealing with problems. They can take over our ability to think logically.
- Feelings of hopelessness take over and greatly lowers our motivation to believe that anything can improve our situation. When we're thinking logically, it makes sense that giving up guarantees' failure. BUT, when we're feeling stressed out, it just feels like nothing can be done.

The 2nd toolkit we will provide you the skills become to become an effective problem solver even with these stresses. When facing negative feelings, negative thinking, or feelings of hopelessness, there are things you can do to handle problems effectively. The following acronym represents a strategy, including the final two major sets of skills to enhance effective problem solving:

S. S. T. A.

- STOP:** Be aware - Notice how you are feeling and what you are thinking
- SLOW DOWN:** Give your brain and body a chance to lower the intensity of your reaction
- THINK:** Use your planful problem-solving skills to deal with the problem
- ACT:** Carry out your solution plan

Stopping negative feelings from overwhelming you is a very important step. Negative feelings, such as sadness, tension, or irritability, in response to stress, are fairly common. These feelings let you know that something is out of balance in your life. It's only when such immediate emotional reactions persist and intensify that significant difficulties occur. The best way to prevent normal reactions to stress from turning into psychological difficulties is to Stop, Slow Down, Think, & Act. It's very difficult to stop a train if it has already left the station and is increasingly gaining speed. However, putting the brakes on early can allow you to stop it before it goes too far. This is a skill that you can learn! Note that we are not suggesting that you stop having negative feelings or thoughts. Instead, you can be aware of your feelings, minimize their impact on your ability to solve problems, and pay attention to what they are telling you.

Why is it So Hard to Stop, Slow Down, Think, & Act?

Your brain is set up so you can quickly learn how to sense danger. Think of this part of your brain (known as the amygdala) as your "emotional brain." It is very alert to signals that indicate danger, and when triggered, a stress response kicks in. During this stress response (which generally lasts about 90 seconds), your mind and body are sent into a "fight or flight" mode, and the "thinking-through" part of your brain can't work at its best. As such, it is likely that your thoughts and actions will be either impulsive or aggressive (fight) or avoidant or depressed (flight or giving up). The S.S.T.A. method is designed to help give you the opportunity to calm down without triggering the amygdala once again and sending it into warp speed.

Practicing S.S.T.A.

Think about a current problem that you are experiencing in order to help better identify where you experience the most difficulty and what barriers make planful problem solving extra challenging for you. Choose one of the problems you previously identified that you would like to tackle. In reaction to this stressful problem, you may have been feeling sad, lonely, hopeless, tense, agitated, or lost. You may have had negative thoughts that were repeated over and over again in your head—you tried in vain to stop and think of something else, but couldn't. You may have had difficulty remembering things or concentrating. You may have been experiencing problems with sleep.



As you Visualize how you were feeling in this situation, picture yourself now applying the following steps to Stop, Slow Down, Think, & Act. Identify where you experience the most difficulty. Externalize by jotting down on paper some of your reactions.

Step 1. STOP:

Notice the negative feelings you experience. Often we recognize physical sensations before we notice our feelings or mood. For example, some people notice a lump in their throat, sweaty palms, tears welling up, headaches, and increased heart rate.

Notice your thoughts . . . what are you thinking? What are your worries? These sensations, thoughts, and feelings are all “signals” that a problem exists— that you need to Stop and Slow Down before the “train gets too far out of the station.” Be aware of personal emotional triggers. You might notice specific memories, sounds, places, or difficult people in your life that often seem to distress you. Finding these triggers can help you stop and be aware of their effect on you before you react.

Note: It is normal to struggle with the Stop skill when you first try it. It takes practice to change your reactions to stress. Keep it up, check out some of other Veteran’s examples on the web course, and talk to your counselor for more help.

Step 2. SLOW DOWN:

Here are a few ways to help you to “slow down”—choose one or two that you feel comfortable doing:

- Count slowly from 1 to 10 (or from 10 down to 1)
 - Take 3 deep breaths—Breathe in slowly to a count of 3; breathe out slowly to a count of 3
 - Yawn—Brain scientists have found that yawning is a very powerful meditation technique because it relaxes and “cools down” the brain, stimulates alertness and concentration, and enhances pleasure. If you find it difficult to yawn spontaneously, try forcing yourself to take several fake yawns. This will lead to a natural, spontaneous yawn.
 - Meditation or other relaxation exercises—You may have learned how to meditate or to use various stress management exercises (such as yoga); these techniques can be very helpful to slow down when you are in a setting that allows for additional time
 - Visualize for stress management—Use your mind’s eye to imagine a very calming and relaxing scene, such as a vacation you went on in the past
 - Pray—If you are someone who holds to a particular religious faith or set of spirituality beliefs, prayer can also be a wonderful way to “slow down”
 - Others—What other “slow down” ideas do you have?: _____
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Step 3. THINK:

Think about what is going on or what you have learned that is making you feel this way. Use your feelings and physical arousal as “signals” that a problem is occurring. What is it? Why you are experiencing this emotional reaction? Is your reaction on par with the situation? Is it an “overreaction?” How big is the problem? Can it be changed? Say to yourself that “a problem exists.” Suggesting that feeling bad means that a problem exists is hardly rocket science, but acknowledging that there is a problem, or a dilemma that you are facing is an important step towards managing it successfully. The planful problem-solving steps that you will learn in the next toolkit will help you to work in a step by step way to Simplify the problem and develop an action plan.

Step 4. ACT:

Carry out your plan and determine how it worked for you.

For now, it is important to learn and practice the first two steps—that is, “STOP & SLOW DOWN.” The next toolkit will focus on THINK & ACT.

Remember to practice “STOP & SLOW DOWN” when you first get stressed! Use your negative arousal, feelings, and thoughts to signal that a problem exists and that you need to “STOP & SLOW DOWN” and prevent the “train from leaving the station.”

Practice Toolkit #2

Describe a situation that occurred between sessions where you were able to try the Stop and Slow Down skills. What difficulties did you have? What went well?
