

Problem Solving Training: Toolkit #3

Planful Problem Solving

The next step of **S.S.T.A.** involves using a planful problem-solving approach to deal with stressful problems. This equals the **Think** part of the **S.S.T.A.** process.

Planful Problem Solving includes several steps that serve as guides to help you approach problems in a reasoned, deliberate, and systematic way. It is a powerful means of overcoming barriers to your goals. When attempting to deal with problems that are stressful, this toolkit needs to be used in combination with the suggestion to Stop and Slow Down.

Planful Problem Solving includes the following 4 steps:

- Step 1. Define the problem and set realistic goals
- Step 2. Generate alternative solutions to solve the problem
- Step 3. Decide which ideas are the best
- Step 4. Carry out the solution and determine whether it worked or not

Step 1: Define the Problem

There is an old saying— “measure twice, cut once.” If we take the time to fully understand the nature of the problem we are experiencing, solving it will take less time and effort. Defining a problem is similar to laying out a course or route to travel. We need to know our destination, what resources we have to get there, and what barriers exist that might make the trip difficult. Accurately defining the problem, then, involves the following activities:

- Seek important facts about the problem (that is, answer questions such as who, what, when, where & how)

- Make sure that you describe these facts in clear language and that you separate facts from assumptions

- Set realistic goals—break down a complex problem into smaller ones if necessary

- Identify barriers or obstacles to your goal

Problems That Are Changeable Vs. Problems That Cannot Be Changed

It's important to remember that we cannot always solve a problem by fixing it. In fact, in the military it was often very difficult to fix or solve many of the problems you faced. Sometimes, the best solution for dealing with a problem is to accept that the problem exists. On a small scale, this means that we cannot change the weather to better suit our plans; we may just have to accept that it's going to rain during a ballgame we waited a long time to see.

Briefly describe the problem:

State your problem-solving goal:

Describe the major obstacles to achieving your goal at this time:

The first 3 items pertain to Defining the Problem. You can enter this directly into the blank Problem-Solving Worksheet. Try to complete these 3 items for one of the problems you want to work on. You may wish to choose an easier problem to tackle at first.



Step 2: Generate Alternative Solutions

The next step is to creatively think of a variety of solution alternatives, or other ways to solve or cope with the problem. Doing so can increase your chances of coming up with a great idea, make you feel more hopeful, decrease “black and white” thinking, and minimize the tendency to act impulsively. This step directs you to creatively think of multiple ideas.

The best way to carry out this step is to use brainstorming principles. Brainstorming increases your flexibility and creativity, which actually improves the quality and quantity of the solutions that you generate. Brainstorming also helps you to better deal with strong negative emotional reactions. Strong emotions can frequently control or influence your thinking by giving you “tunnel vision,” leaving you with one or two ideas, ones that are likely not even to be ultimately effective. When emotions do seem to become overwhelming, brainstorming can help you to get back on track.

There are 3 brainstorming rules we recommend:

- Quantity leads to quality—the more ideas you think of, the better your chances of thinking of really good ones
- Do not judge— trying to evaluate each idea, one at a time, only limits your ability to be real creative
- Think of variety— try to think of different kinds of ideas

Try this...

Think of alternative ways to achieve your goal. Be creative. List at least 3 solution ideas:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Step 3: Decision Making

In thinking of alternatives, we previously suggested that you defer judgment. In this step, judgment is the key activity used to make sound decisions. Making decisions about how to handle difficult problems can be hard. However, even though making decisions can be tough, when done correctly, it can improve your adjustment. There are 4 important tasks involved in making good decisions:

- Screen out “obviously” ineffective solutions
- Predict the positive and negative consequences of each solution idea
- Evaluate the impact of these consequences (weigh the “pros and cons”)
- Develop an action plan that includes your most effective ideas based on the cost benefit analysis)

When thinking about consequences, consider both personal (the effects on oneself) and social (the impact on others) consequences as well as short-term and long-term, consequences.

Try this...

What are the major “pros” or positive consequences of these alternatives?

What are some of the “cons” or negative consequences?

Decide which alternatives are the best by choosing the ones with the best positive consequences and few negative consequences. Write down your action plan.

Step 4: Carry Out the Action Plan & Evaluate its Success

Now that you developed an action plan, the next step is to carry it out and determine whether your plan was successful; if not, try to determine where you need to revise your plan. The specific tasks in this last Planful Problem-Solving step include the following:

- Motivate yourself to carry out your solution (think about the pros and cons of doing nothing vs. the possible success of solving the problem; visualize how you would feel if you persisted and solved the problem)
- Carry out your action plan
- Observe and monitor the actual outcome
- Reward yourself for making an effort (you do deserve it)

Below is the last item on the Worksheet that asks you to write down what actually happened after you carried out the action plan, as well as whether you were satisfied or not.

Try this...

Carry out the plan & observe the consequences: Are you satisfied with how your plan worked? Here are some questions you can ask yourself to help evaluate the outcome of your plan:

- Did I define the problem correctly?
- Did I think of a variety of alternatives?
- Did I consider both pros and cons of each solution?
- Did I carry out my action plan as best as I could?