

Chapter Six: Interpersonal Problem Solving

In Part 1 and Part 2 of the manual “Understanding and Coping with Depression” we provided you information about depression and different ways of coping with it. We have discussed changing thoughts and moods, different relaxation techniques, incorporating pleasant events into your daily schedule, problem solving, and assertiveness. We also gave you a brochure for your friends and family to help them understand depression and help you with your recovery. You may find some or all of these techniques helpful. You may find other things on your own that work for you. To wrap up Part 2, we want to show you another technique for interpersonal problem solving. In Part 3 we will give you more ideas and resources.

In Chapter Four, we talked about techniques for solving problems that cause stress and anxiety. Interpersonal problems are another type of problem that can feel troublesome and contribute to depression. Interpersonal problems are problems between people. They can be particularly difficult problems to resolve because quite often each person involved has their own ideas about how it can be solved.

Remember that every problem has many possible solutions. There is no such thing as one perfect solution. Like other problems we face in life, it sometimes seems easier to ignore and avoid problems with other people. Ignoring them can make them worse and can make it even more difficult to find solutions. Learning to work together with your friends, family, co-workers, or neighbors to solve problems is an important skill. In this section we provide some guidelines to help with interpersonal problems. On the following pages you will find a form that will guide you through the steps of interpersonal problem solving.

1. ✍ Identify and define the problem. Be as specific as you can. Write down who, what, when, where, why and how.

Who: _____
What: _____
Where: _____
When: _____
How: _____
Why: _____

2. Think about different “solutions” to the problem and list them below.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

3. Choose two of the possible solutions you identified above in Step #2. ✍ For each “solution”, try to think of the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Problem _____

Solution 1 _____

Advantages

Disadvantages

Solution 2 _____

Advantages

Disadvantages

4. Now that you have written down your perspective of the problem and some possible solutions you should schedule a meeting with the other person involved to get his/her views and input. Plan a specific time to talk about your ideas. If possible, have important talks only when both you and the other person are ready, rested, and willing. It is difficult to have an effective discussion if one of the parties is not interested or not able to contribute in a positive way. Schedule talks in a quiet location where you won't be distracted. Also, it is often helpful if both of you agree to a specific amount of time that you will devote to the conversation.

 Think of some places and times that might be good for a problem solving session.

Place	Time
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

5. For the meeting, limit the agenda to one problem. One difficult issue is plenty; more issues make it difficult to stay focused and to find solutions. Before you begin be sure you both agree on the agenda.

6. State your position clearly. Bring what you wrote in to Steps #1 - #3 (above) to the meeting. The paper copy will help you remember your ideas, and you can refer to them if the discussion strays. Listen carefully, without interrupting, to the other person's description of the problem. When he or she has finished speaking, state what you heard him or her say in your own words to make sure you heard it correctly. Ask the person if you understand. Clarify whatever they tell you and write it down.

✍ Use the Interpersonal Problem Solving Worksheet to help you with the meeting.



7. Stick to the agenda and stay focused. If too many other problems and topics get discussed, you may get distracted and not feel resolve at the end of the discussion. Of course, many problems are related to each other, so you may have to discuss them too. If this happens, address each problem as directly as possible, then politely bring the topic back to the agenda item you agreed on. If necessary, put the new problem on the agenda for later in the meeting or schedule another meeting.
8. Brainstorm solutions together. Write down as many ideas as possible. Later you will evaluate the ideas. The rules for brainstorming are: 1) write down all ideas, no matter how silly or unreasonable they seem; 2) let everyone involved give suggestions; 3) don't make fun or criticize someone's idea; and 4) spend plenty of time.

9. Think about each suggestion on the brainstorming list. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Choose a solution on which you both agree. It probably will be a compromise between the two positions. Good problem solving often means giving a little in your position, as well as taking a little from the other position.

10. Decide how long you will try the solution. Agree on a “trial period.” Many solutions take time and work to succeed. By agreeing on a trial period you can give a solution a chance to be tested, rather than stopping it right away when it becomes difficult. Some people find it helpful if each person involved signs a “contract” stating that they will hold up their end of the bargain for the agreed upon trial period. If the plan is not working after the trial period you can always go back to step #8 (think of other solutions), or step #9 (choose one of your other solutions).

11. Schedule a meeting to evaluate your plan. After the trial period, get together with the other person to chat about the plan. Talk about the parts that worked best and those that need more attention. Make adjustments if necessary.

12. Celebrate your hard work together. Working together is a great accomplishment!

Summary

1. Misunderstandings and problems with others are common sources of stress that can contribute to a depressed mood.
2. Ignoring an interpersonal problem can make it worse.
3. Thinking through a problem by defining it and considering possible solutions can help you understand it.
4. Discussing the problem with the other person involved will give you his or her perspective. A better solution can be decided upon when both people provide input.
5. When you agree on a possible solution, test it for a stated trial period.
6. Don't abandon a plan at the first complication. Time and adjustments can make it successful.

Interpersonal Problem Solving Worksheet

1. Agenda (a clear statement of the main problem or issue: who, what, where, when, how, why)

The problem is My daughter, Nancy, calls and nags me about watching TV and staying home a lot. This irritates me.

2. Positions (write down each person's position as they stated it)

Henry's position: Nancy phones and nags me about watching TV and staying
name
home so much.

Nancy's position: Dad needs to get involved and stay active so I encourage him
name
to go out more.

3. Brainstorming solutions (use another sheet if necessary)

Solution Idea: Nancy can suggest activities and present them in a nice way	
Pros I won't feel so pressured. We could do more together.	Cons I might not like her suggestions. I will feel guilty if I cant do the activity.
Solution Idea: I will try to do at least 3 activities per week away from home and will report to Nancy.	
Pros Nancy won't worry so much. I will feel better and won't dred Nancy's calls.	Cons Nancy will be upset if I don't make the goal. I might push myself when I should rest.

4. Write down the solution you both agree on (it may be a combination of the ideas from #3)

Nancy will politely suggest 3 activities per week that she will participate in.
I will try activities on my own and will report to Nancy.

5. Contract for trial period and evaluation meeting

We, Henry and Nancy, agree to try the above solution for 3 weeks.
name of person 1 name of person 2

On 6/10/98 we will meet again for 20 minutes to evaluate the solution.
Date

Henry Jones
Signature of person 1

Nancy Jones-Miller
Signature of person 2

Interpersonal Problem Solving Worksheet

1. Agenda (a clear statement of the main problem or issue: who, what, where, when, how, why)

The problem is _____

2. Positions (write down each person's position as they stated it)

_____ 's position: _____
name

_____ 's position: _____
name

3. Brainstorming solutions (use another sheet if necessary)

Solution Idea:

Pros

Cons

Solution Idea:

Pros

Cons

4. Write down the solution you both agree on (it may be a combination of the ideas from #3)

5. Contract for trial period and evaluation meeting

We, _____ and _____, agree to try the above solution for ___ weeks.
name of person 1 name of person 2

On _____ we will meet again for _____ minutes to evaluate the solution.
Date

Signature of person 1

Signature of person 2