BE YOUR OWN COUNSELLOR

A problem-solving guide

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So, I promise we (the counselling team) are not trying to offload our work onto you, but we are mindful that students who learn a few self-counselling strategies are usually more resilient to the normal difficulties and setbacks of tertiary study.

With this in mind, this handout outlines a systematic process you can use to support yourself to address difficult or upsetting situations in your life.

These strategies aren't intended to be a replacement for face-to-face counselling or therapy for chronic or severe issues, but they are intended to increase your personal toolkit of strategies to help manage during tough times.

What do we mean by self-counselling?

Although it's a bit of an oversimplification, the fundamental goal of counselling is to help someone problem-solve something in their life that is holding them back, causing them distress or getting in way of them achieving their goals.

Counsellors use a range of strategies to help individuals in this process. Some of these strategies are only possible in face-to-face counselling sessions with a professional counsellor or therapist, but many strategies can be adapted for use by people self-reflecting on their own situation.

In this document, we outline a relatively simple process for working through periods of distress and difficulty. The process emphasises defining clear decision points about how you are going to tackle an unpleasant situation.

Step 1: Decide whether to approach or avoid your situation/ problem

When confronted with a difficult or distressing situation in our lives, we have two basic options: approach or avoid.

> **Approach** means directly trying to fix, solve or modify a situation.

> **Avoid** means distracting or distancing oneself away from the situation.

You'll commonly hear that approaching a problem is *superior* to avoiding a problem. This is only partly true.

Sometimes avoiding a distressing situation makes sense if:

- you don't know yet how you are going to address it;
- your distress levels are very high; or
- it is not immediately clear to you that you can address the situation.

Avoiding a distressing situation can be a viable short-term 'solution'.

Take the example of getting an assignment back in which you got a bad mark or fail. 'Good' students use such setbacks as an opportunity to learn and develop. They digest the feedback on the assignment (and maybe talk to the lecturer) and use this to identify what they need to improve on for the next assignment.

However, they don't necessarily do this straight away. They may avoid reading that feedback for a couple of days, while the distress of having failed the assignment lessens. It is not until they are feeling a bit better, or a bit stronger that they set aside the time to read the feedback.

In this case, avoiding the situation for a little while helps you build the necessary strength and readiness to take on the situation.

So where are you at with your situation/ problem/ issue?

> If you need a bit of time before addressing your situation/ problem, go to step **2a**
>
> If you feel you are ready to start tackling the situation/ problem, go to **2b**

Step 2a: I'd like to avoid the situation for a while please!

Ok cool. I totally understand. I commonly do the same. TV and YouTube marathons are my way of avoiding problems.

If you are just thinking of a short period of avoidance/distraction, my advice for you is to focus on activities that generate pleasure. Distract yourself with activities that genuinely take your mind off the issue. The goal is to give your mind the space to rejuvenate until you get to a point where you feel willing to try and take on the issue.

If you suspect you might be avoiding the issue/problem for a while, I recommend that you at least be mindful of the potential consequences of avoidance. As an example, sometimes students avoid making tough decisions about whether to withdraw from courses. By the time they feel ready to think about it, it is too late and they've missed the census date or the final date to withdraw without having a fail register on their transcript.

> It is a perfectly legitimate option to avoid tackling a problem, as long as you are mindful that you are making this choice and willing to own the consequences of that choice.

If the problem/issue is a complex one and you are avoiding because a) you really can't see a way to solve it, b) you've tried a bunch of things and they haven't worked, or c) you don't feel you have the necessary skills to solve it, then this is probably the time to **reach out for assistance**. An obvious starting point is the counselling service here at Flinders - https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/counselling

Excellent, then let's get started.

What follows is a very systematic description of the steps you can take to solve a problem. Problems don't usually resolve themselves in such a neat and linear way but understanding there are steps/stages in solving a problem will help you be a better problem solver.

The steps below are very action oriented. Humans are prone to rolling problems around in their head for too long and not taking specific action. The steps that follow are designed to help you break out of unhelpful procrastination or rumination and instead move you towards taking small but definitive steps to solve your problem.

1. **Start by clearly describing your situation/ problem/ issue.**

   Often we are tempted to frame problems in overly simplistic terms (e.g. 'I am doing crap at my studies'), however, to generate decent solutions, we typically need to describe problems in more detail.

   To do this, grab a pen and piece of paper (or open up a file on your computer) and spend 20 minutes writing or typing down everything you can think of that relates to the issue/ problem you are facing. Imagine you were trying to describe the problem to someone you didn't know and who didn't know you.

   The goal is a detailed description of your situation that will mean you've considered all the relevant aspects.

2. **What do you think is (are) causing and/or maintaining the problem?**

   You might not totally understand what led to the problem or is maintaining it, but it is worth spending some time trying to work it out. Keep in mind that what caused a problem and what might now be maintaining it can be two different things. For example, you might have got sick because of an infection, but what is maintaining or worsening it is your lifestyle.

   The goal at this step is what a counsellor or psychologist might call a 'formulation' – a description of the problem that outlines 'why' the problem started and continues to exist. A good formulation helps you identify what kinds of things might help alleviate or solve the problem.

3. **Describe how things would be if the situation/ problem/ issue was addressed.**

   Next, you are going to do a similar process but instead of focusing on what is going 'wrong', you are going to write what the situation would be like if everything were fixed and working appropriately.

   This is your vision of what your life would be like if the problem were solved. Again, devote a reasonable amount of time and effort to describing this, as we similarly tend to frame what we want and need in overly simplistic terms.

   The goal is to be clear in your own head how you want the situation to resolve.

## 4. Have you solved a problem like this before?

When faced with a difficult problem, we sometimes forget that we've solved similar kinds of problems in the past (our brains are wired to remember our losses, not so much our victories).

Take a moment to reflect back in your life and ask yourself the question 'have I dealt with an issue like this before? If so, what did I do that worked?'.

You might at this stage also draw on the experiences of people you know. Have you witnessed friends or family members deal with a similar problem? What did they do to address it?

5. Select one or more strategies to address the situation/ problem/ issue.

Having described the problem, created a 'formulation', envisioned what life would look like if it was solved and combed your history for solutions, you now need to pick from the following strategies those that might help you get yourself closer to the ideal situation described just before. You don't have to limit yourself to one. You might use multiple methods. In the early stages of problem solving, pick strategies that you think you can most feasibly implement straight away. They might not be the best solutions, but they'll get you started and problems are often easier to resolve once you have some momentum in taking action.
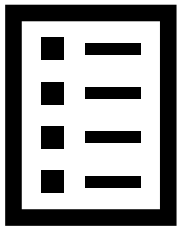
Get more information
Often problems are the result of not having enough (or the right) information. For example, students often agonise over changes to their study workload, but do so having not got all the relevant information. Had they contacted Flinders Connect - https://www.flinders.edu.au/flindersconnect the additional information could have helped them develop a better solution. Sit down and think about **who** you could talk to, or **what** resources you could get that would help you solve the problem. A central place for students to get more information is the Student Portal - https://students.flinders.edu.au/

Manage the emotions associated with the issue
Some issues and problems are not easy to 'solve' (e.g. chronic pain, loss). Instead, we need to focus on managing their emotional impact. Fundamentally this means developing your emotional intelligence and this means learning new skills. Two that I recommend are:

Mindfulness Meditation – learn the art of noticing but not as strongly identifying with your emotional experience through establishing a mindfulness meditation practice – try Smiling Mind as a starting point - https://www.smilingmind.com.au/

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) – understand the origins of difficult emotions and how to manage them more effectively through modification of your thinking – try This Way Up who have a range of CBT-based courses - https://thiswayup.org.au/

Change how you are thinking about or approaching the issue

Some issues and problems arise because of faulty or irrational beliefs that we hold. I realise that sounds a bit harsh, but I assure you that **we all have faulty and irrational beliefs that can lead to distress**. Ones that we see commonly in students involve unrealistic expectations about the experience of being at university. Students sometimes underestimate how difficult study will be and how much time and effort they will need to apply to their studies. When the experience of study doesn't match their expectations, they get distressed.

It is a little challenging to identify our own faulty beliefs, because of a tendency we all have to trust the content of our own minds. One way to identify whether faulty or irrational beliefs are at play is to observe whether you are engaging in the same behaviours, over and over again to solve the issue with no improvement. For example, a student that sticks to their study methods, even though they are repeatedly doing badly on assignments and tests. They think 'just working harder' will make things better. 'Stuckness' is a great indicator that you might have unhelpful beliefs operating.

When you discover such situations in your life, you need to entertain alternative ways of looking at the situation. The student with the dodgy study methods might have to entertain the idea that they need to actually use different study methods, not work harder.

Whilst we're often blind to our own thinking errors, other people can see them more clearly. This is one reason why engaging your social network (see point below) can be a powerful strategy for dealing with problems. Others can help you see new and different ways of looking at things and help you identify ways you might be thinking about an issue that are unhelpful. Chat through your situation with trusted others and be open to the idea that they can see where you are getting things wrong. If you don't have such trusted people in your life, consider formal counselling or therapy.
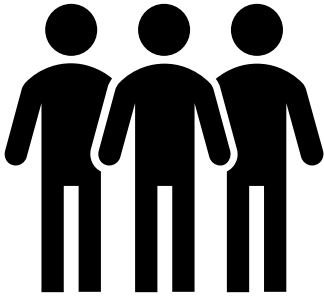
Learn and implement new skills

Although we can sometimes 'think' our way out of a problem, sometimes we just need to do things differently. For example, students who struggle with the academic side of university do better when they just focus on learning and implementing new ways to study (try this post - https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/06/19/the-study-and-exam-preparation-strategies-that-successful-students-use/). Ask yourself whether the problem you are currently facing simply needs you to modify your behaviour. If it does, seek out information or assistance to help you make those changes. You might find our Mental Fitness course of interest, as it focuses on establishing new and healthy habits through deliberate incremental changes - https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/03/22/an-introduction-to-mental-fitness-a-course-delivered-via-blog/

Engage your social network

Humans (even the most private and introverted ones) are social creatures. Relationships provide wonderful contexts for problem solving. They give us different perspectives, help us manage strong emotions, help us learn new skills and give us access to new information. One of the reasons we think a lot of students find themselves in distress is because their social networks have shrunk or been neglected. Re-invigorate your social supports. This can be as simple as organising to have a regular coffee with a trusted friend. Try to surround yourself with people who help you be a better person. Online is fine but remember to have supports in the face-to-face world as well.

It is also worth noting that the act of helping someone else out with their problem can end up helping you with your own. I've repeatedly found that redirecting my attention to provide support to someone else has ended up helping me arrive at solutions to my own issues.

Change your context

Whilst I am a big fan of individuals changing what they can about their own thoughts, behaviour and feelings to solve problems, sometimes it is the case that the cause of the problem is someone else, or something else. Consider removing yourself from the presence of a toxic person or taking action to ensure someone who is acting inappropriately towards you has to answer for their behaviour. Maybe you need to stop hanging around with a particular group or change your study or living situation. The focus here is not so much about changing yourself but modifying your exposure to something or someone that is causing you problems. In the case of getting out of violent or abusive relationships, consider getting expert assistance - https://www.1800respect.org.au/ - as getting out of such relationships can be challenging.

6. Create a plan

When we set goals for the things we want to achieve, we are more likely to achieve them. The same is the case when solving problems.

By this stage of the process you should be able to articulate a 'plan' for how you are going to try and solve your problem. This is essentially a description of what you are going to do, when, how and who might you get to help you.

Like a goal, your plan should be S.M.A.R.T.

Specific – what exactly are you going to do?

Measurable – how will you know if it is working?

Achievable – is it within your ability to implement the solution?

Relevant – are the actions you take going to address the problem directly?

Time constrained – when will you reflect to see if the solutions are working?

7. Identify any barriers/setbacks that might get in the way

As you set off to solve your problem you might notice things pop up that get in the way of you implementing your plan. This is a normal and predictable part of the process.

For example, as you try to rebuild a broken friendship, you might discover a new person on the scene who is actively trying to block it. Or when you try to change your study habits, you might discover you lack the necessary equipment to do so.

These barriers and setbacks can range from the minor to the major. You will need to treat each one like a problem in itself and do the same process with them as you did with the main problem

8. Reflect and revise your approach

It is important to note that the first things you try to address a situation/ problem might not work, so be willing to reflect on the success of your efforts, and then implement other strategies. It is normal for our problem-solving efforts to not always be successful. As such a trial-and-error approach is warranted, in which you are both realistic and self-compassionate (e.g. "*Ok, that strategy didn't work, but it was worth trying, and it is normal to have to try a few things before succeeding. I'll give it another go*").

And remember that we are always here if you need to speak to us………

Counselling Service
Confidential Support Service

Call 8201 2118
counselling@flinders.edu.au
9am to 5pm on weekdays
www.flinders.edu.au/current-students/healthandcounselling

Out-of-hours Crisis Line
Confidential Support Service

Call 1300 512 409
Text 0488 884 103
5pm to 9am weekdays
24 hours on weekends and public holidays