

[If you want to change something about yourself, your behavior, your attitude, your chances for success, and you're sincere about it, you need to take some kind of action. What will it be? This essay may help you change yourself for the better.]

CHOOSE YOUR FUTURE: SOLVING PROBLEMS AND GETTING HELP

by

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If you're having problems in school socially, academically, or behaviorally, there are ways to address those problems. To improve, you need to understand the reason behind the problem. By reading through this essay on problem-solving, you should be able to identify the reasons for your difficulties in school, list the possible remedies for the problem, and develop a plan of action you can use to improve the situation.

EVERYBODY has problems! They may come in different shapes and sizes and degrees of difficulty, but everyone has issues. Actually, that's what life is—a series of problems to address and overcome. And, if you're not thrown by them, they can make life interesting. They can be an exciting challenge if you know how to tackle them. The happiest people and most successful people aren't the people *without* problems. They're the people who know how to *solve* their problems.

Why is it important to learn better ways to tackle and solve your problems? First, it can help you to avoid a lot of miserable times. Most of the misery we go through is caused by unsolved problems. When you've got a problem on your mind, especially if it's a major one, you're likely to feel restless, disagreeable, and generally uncomfortable. You may even have trouble concentrating on your school work.

Doing something effective about your problems, on the other hand, gives you a feeling of exhilaration. Remember the wonderful feeling you had after a hard game of basketball or a stimulating tennis match or finally beating that challenging video game? The after-effects of mental exercise—of problem solving—can be just as rewarding.

Solving your problems *yourself* is a sign of growing— of becoming a mature person. By learning how to handle your problems well, you will prove to yourself—and to others—that you *can* assume responsibility for yourself.

Some problems, of course, are harder than others to solve and take more time. But whether the problems are big or small, simple or difficult, most people run into trouble when they try to do something about them. They may spend hours, days, weeks, even months, *worrying*. Like a needle stuck on a turntable's vinyl record, their minds revolve over and over on the same problem and the same solution. They can think of only one way of dealing with the situation—and it's usually not the best way.

Some people, on the other hand, are so impatient to get their problems solved that they tackle them haphazardly. If the first solution they jump at doesn't work they try another—and then another. This is known as the *trial and error method*. If your problem is simple, this may be a perfectly satisfactory way to attack it. But it can be a waste of time. Trying one solution after another without considering whether it's likely to succeed can take a lot of time and effort.

It is possible to learn a system of problem solving that will fit most situations. When you've solved your problems successfully in the past, it may have been because you hit on this method accidentally. The secret of success when it comes to solving problems is to attack them directly and to cut down on wasted motion. In other words, instead of jumping from one solution to another trying to find the answer, think through each solution to its possible outcome before you do anything about it. This is a kind of mental trial and error process. You think about the solutions before you try them. In this way you can eliminate some of the solutions that won't work without wasting time actually trying them out. You can then put all your effort into the solution you finally do select and give yourself a better chance of reaching your goal.

How do you go about using the problem-solving process? You follow the four steps listed below:

1. State your problem clearly.
2. State the reasons for your problem.
3. List all the possible solutions to your problem.
4. Choose the solutions that seem best able to help you solve your problem and then put them into action.

When Your Problems are Difficult

You may be thinking, this problem-solving method may be fine for some people, but my problems aren't so simple.

At one time or another we all face problems that seem overwhelming, almost too much for us. These more difficult and complex problems often have to be solved by indirect or compromise methods. Let's look at some of the indirect ways in which people tackle their problems so that you can recognize when you're using them and whether they're

appropriate. Usually they can be used on minor problems or as part of a large solution, but they aren't too effective when it comes to really important problems.

The Flank Attack

“If you can't go over, go around.” The flank approach means going around an obstacle and then heading back toward the goal. In football, flank plays can be very effective, particularly when a team is too small to gain consistently through the line but might have superior speed for running the ends. In the same way, when you deal with a problem, the flank approach, although it may temporarily steer you away from your goal, can sometimes turn the trick.

Merle Rowe used the flank approach with great success. Her parents were very strict, and, although she was nearly seventeen, they said “no dates.” Merle was unhappy about this because she felt herself to be a responsible person. Since no amount of arguing or reasoning would change her parents' attitude, she tried another plan. She knew her mother and father were interested in church activities. So with the help of the pastor's wife and a group of other young people, she took part in arranging a series of church socials. Since these events were held in the church, Merle's parents felt that it was quite proper for her to attend. When she showed that she could be home at a reasonable hour, she won their confidence and gradually she was allowed to take a normal part in the other activities of her group.

By an indirect approach, Merle solved her problem. It did take more time, but she achieved her purpose without family conflict, and had some good times while she was doing it. Think for a few minutes about how you might be able to use this problem-solving method to help yourself solve your particular problem.

Joining up with Others

Joining company with those who can succeed where you can't do so alone is sometimes a solution to a difficult problem. For example, one person alone cannot change a law—so he joins an organization composed of people who feel the same way he does, and jointly they may succeed. When anyone joins in working with a group, whether large or small, he identifies himself with that group; he considers himself a part of it. This is normal and healthy. We all do it when we want to solve a big problem and can't do it by ourselves. If you sincerely want to be able to attend school regularly, for instance, one of the surest ways is to develop an interest in school. You can develop an interest by joining a club, organization, activity, or sport. You'll be making a new set of friends, you'll be having fun, and you'll begin to enjoy coming to school. School will become a more happy place than it may now be.

When You Can't Solve Your Problems

Occasionally we all face problems that are too tough for us to handle alone—by any method. This may be due to several causes. For example, your problem may be caused by a situation over which you have no control. Maybe your father’s work makes it necessary for your family to move every year or so. This means you have to start all over again in a new and unfamiliar school. Then, just when you have finally adjusted to the new school and made friends, you find yourself being moved again. This particular kind of problem is one you can’t solve by yourself.

Perhaps your difficulty is caused by problems within yourself. We all have certain limitations that prevent us from achieving some of the things we want to achieve. We may not be physically able to reach our goals. We may not have the mental equipment with which to do the particular thing we want to do. Or we may have personality differences that hold us back.

When you aren’t getting anywhere with your problems, when they persist or keep coming back to trouble you, then you should recognize that it’s time to ask for help. This doesn’t mean throwing up your hands in despair and saying, “This is too much for me—I’ll let someone else solve this one.” It doesn’t mean giving up. Getting help when something is too much for you is a sign of intelligence and maturity in dealing with your problems, and it shows that you are taking the wisest course of action under the circumstances.

WHERE TO GOT HELP

Your Family—When the time comes to get help, don’t forget your parents . They can probably do more for you than you imagine. Too often, adolescents avoid taking their problems to their mothers or fathers. This may be because parents are frequently the center of the problems. It’s a curious fact that parents and children often live in different worlds. Too often they seriously misunderstand each other.

There are many times when you don’t feel comfortable with your parents or free to talk to them about things that bother you. Because they couldn’t see your point of view sometimes in the past, you are afraid that they won’t see it now. On the other hand, your parents are probably just as baffled by your resistance to their ideas. If these obstacles could be overcome, you could often get a great deal of help from Mom and Dad. Most parents actually wish their children would bring their problems to them. So, even if you do have some feeling that your parents won’t understand, give them a try. The chances are because they love you more than anybody else in the world, they will do more to help you.

Adult Friends—Another good place to get help is from your circle of adult friends: uncle or aunt, Y.M.C.A. or Y.W.C.A. counselor, scout leader, coach, or an adult friend of the family.

Obviously, if you want to relieve your mind and talk over a personal problem, you should try to find the person you think understands you best. The unfortunate part is

that too many times you don't make the effort to figure out who would help you most. Instead, you spill your troubles to the wrong person or just stay troubled.

The person from whom you seek help may possess a wealth of experience in human relations or an extra dose of common sense. The important thing is for you to share your burden or worry with someone else. To share your problems with a neutral listener will often give you new insight into possible solutions.

The very fact that you can talk out loud about your problems—pour your heart out to a sympathetic friend—will help you. Even if your friend doesn't give you any advice and only sits and listens (which may be the wisest thing for him to do), you will find that helpful. The chances are that the person you talk to has also had problems like yours. This is true whether you're concerned about school attendance, frustration, anger, studying, social life, or parents.

Peers—You can tell friends things you can't tell anyone else. A friend can offer advice that you wouldn't take from anyone else. That's the nature of friendship. Often the friend can help you see your problem more clearly. She may be able to offer a hint that will help solve the problem. Be aware, however, that friends may want to please you and may simply agree with a bad plan you've developed. Activate your crap detector to make sure the advice of a friend rings true.

Minister, Rabbi, or Priest—Your spiritual leader is well acquainted with the problems we all face. He is often an expert at helping young people like yourself, and his wide experience can be helpful to you.

Teachers—Teachers have two advantages as helpers. First, they have seen you in class and in groups. They know what you are like when you are with others. Second, teachers have had special training in understanding problems that bother most adolescents. Remember, such a teacher is a good one to ask for help.

Health Teacher—Your school's health teacher deals on a daily basis with problems and issues that face adolescents. She may be a particularly valuable source of information and ideas.

School Nurse—Your school's nurse can be of help with more than just physical problems. She's been trained to recognize and deal with emotional or family problems that adolescents encounter and can usually function as a good sounding board as well as a valuable source of information.

School Librarian—The school librarian can help you with any problem. Experts have written books and articles on every topic and every view of every topic. Simply talk with the librarian and explain to her that you'd like some information or some books and articles on quitting smoking, on controlling one's temper, or on personality or character

development, or books on self-help, etc. The library provides information and answers to any type of problem, you only have to ask in order to receive help in finding the answers to your questions.

Reading Teacher—Many students' problems relate to poor reading skills or poor study habits. Your school's reading teacher or an English teacher can help you to improve your reading and give you advice on how to help yourself improve your reading and studying skills.

Counselor or Social Worker—Ask a counselor or social worker in your school for help. He has been trained in helping young people solve problems, and he can look at your difficulty objectively and give you ideas or solutions you may never have considered. Often, just by talking to someone who can look at your problem clearly, you get insight into the difficulty. The counselor or social worker also has a unique understanding of resources in school and out of school. This person is particularly adept at referring students to others with the expertise needed to address any problem.

Professional Help—If your problem has been unresolved for a long time, or if it is very upsetting, sometimes the help of parents or friends isn't enough. You may need the service of experts. Your doctor may be able to help you because she knows your whole family and has had extensive experience in dealing with emotional as well as physical ailments.

If your family doctor feels your problem is too much for her to address, she may refer you to someone she thinks can help you. She may refer you to a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist or psychiatric social worker. These people are experts in dealing with emotional problems and can help you in understanding your own personality and why you feel as you do.

All these sources of help are available when you find yourself in a jam, unable to solve your problems. When you need them, don't hesitate to make use of them. Benjamin Franklin once said, "He that won't be counseled can't be helped." Don't let your difficulties defeat you. Don't be too proud or too shy to seek help. Sometimes we can't solve our problems alone, no matter how much we may want to. So remember—when a problem is too much for you—ask questions and get help!

