

Introduction

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate mental health issues. If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by problems, particularly if you're experiencing mental health difficulties. This guide:

- provides step-by-step advice on how to solve problems
- gives you a set of skills to help manage problems in the future

This guide is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT helps you to examine how you think about your life, and challenge negative automatic thoughts to free yourself from unhelpful thought and behaviour patterns.

How to use the problem-solving self-help guide

Working through this guide can take around 30 to 40 minutes, but you should feel free to work at your own pace.

To type in a graphic or diary, click or tap the part you'd like to fill in and use your keyboard as usual.

You can save and print this PDF guide on your device at any time.

Identifying problems

When you solve a problem, it increases your confidence and makes you feel more able to solve problems in future. When you feel overwhelmed, it's easy to forget that you already have the ability to solve problems – it's how you've coped with life so far. This guide is designed to help you tap into that ability and boost your confidence.

Finding the hidden problem

Sometimes you can't tell what the problem that's affecting you most actually is – you might feel stuck and unable to think of anything that would help.

Here are 2 examples of hidden problems:

Work was becoming stressful for Paul after a new computer system was put in place. He'd been confident at work before, but was now finding it hard to get out of bed to go into the office. All his colleagues seemed to be managing fine, but Paul was making lots of mistakes. When his boss asked how he was doing, Paul felt like he had to say he was fine, as he was worried about being sacked. At home, his girlfriend had noticed a change in his mood – he wasn't keen to go out or do anything they used to enjoy.

Mandy was a single parent. She looked after her sister's child as well as her own 12-year-old daughter, Lizzie. She also cared for her elderly mum, who was unwell. Mandy found it difficult to find time for herself, and always felt like her house was a mess and cleaning was never done. She found herself becoming irritable, especially when people asked her to do things or asked her what was wrong. Mandy was angry that no one seemed to understand how busy she was.

From these examples, you may be able to see how sometimes problems can become overwhelming and hard to identify, while at other times you can see them clearly. In this guide you'll continue to work on identifying your own problems, and work out a series of steps to solve them.

Types of problem - Activity 1

There are a large number of different types of problem. Have a look at this list and see which type – or types – your problem could be.

- relationships – for example, difficulties getting along with your partner/spouse, falling out of touch with friends, or feeling alone and isolated
- money – for example, struggling to manage bills or afford different expenses, increasing debts, or feeling pressure to spend money you can't afford
- lifestyle issues – for example, drinking too much alcohol, not eating healthily, not having time for your interests, or not having time to keep in touch with friends and loved ones
- work/education – for example, trouble doing well at work or meeting deadlines
- addiction issues – for example alcohol, drugs, or gambling
- managing health – for example, organising GP and dentist appointments, or getting enough exercise
- illness or disability – for example, dealing with a chronic illness or having a disability
- family responsibilities – for example, being there for family commitments, organising childcare, helping with lots of requests from family, or being a carer

Use the boxes on the next page to type or write any problems you can think of that fall under these categories.

If you'd like to review your answers with anyone or share the guide once you've completed it you should save this file after completing the list.

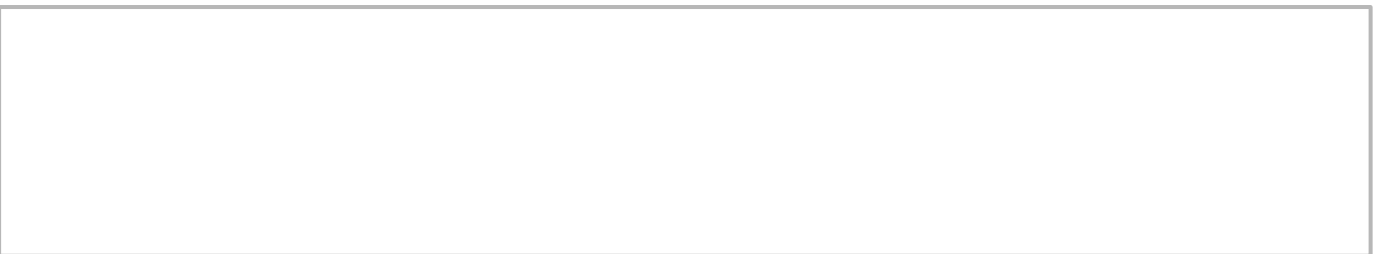
Problem 1



Problem 2



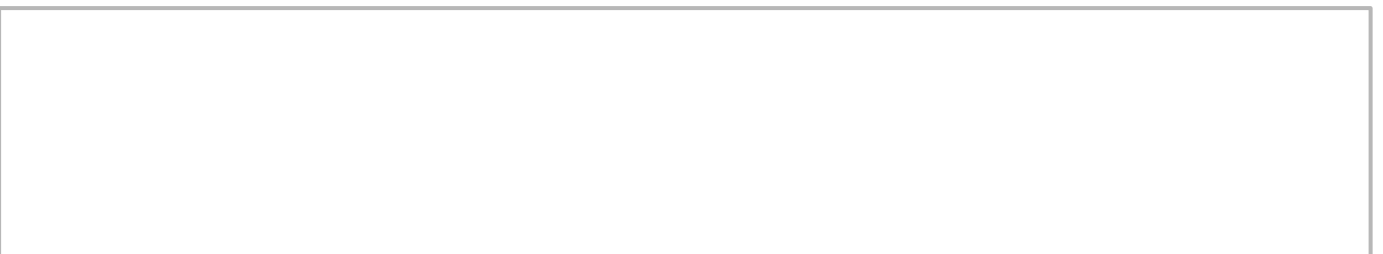
Problem 3



Problem 4



Problem 5



Recognising there's a problem

Paul's girlfriend helped him talk about his job more. He explained that he hated his job because he couldn't get used to the new computer system and was always worried about making a mistake. Paul told her he felt like he had to stay late at work to avoid falling behind, and that meant he was too tired to go out when he got home.

Paul recognised he was so unhappy at work because he was terrified he'd make a mistake with the new computer system. He also recognised that trying to cope by staying late at work was causing another problem - he was too tired to do the things he enjoyed when he got home. This was making him more unhappy.

Mandy didn't want to let anyone know how she was feeling, but one Saturday her sister asked if Mandy could drop her child off at a birthday party for her. Mandy lost her temper, and was shocked by how angry and upset she felt. Once she calmed down, she decided it was time to sit down and think about what was really going on.

Mandy recognised that all the different tasks she had to do for other people, and all the demands on her time, were making her feel frustrated and irritable. They were also making it hard to fit everything in. Mandy recognised that she found it hard to say no to other people. This left her feeling angry when she ended up with very little time to do her own tasks, or take time for herself to do things she enjoyed.

Think about your own situation. You've reached a point where you need to take action, which is why you're completing this guide. Where do you think would be a good place to start?

Barriers to problem-solving

Sometimes it feels like it's impossible to even start solving your problems, but that's not the case. Here are some common challenges.

Avoiding the problem

Paul had been avoiding bringing up the difficulties he was having with his girlfriend or his boss, because he didn't want anyone to criticise him or think he wasn't good enough at his job. This meant his boss didn't know what the problem was when he noticed Paul taking longer with his tasks, and he didn't know how to help. It also meant Paul's girlfriend didn't know why he wasn't interested in activities in the evening anymore.

Mandy had been avoiding thinking about her problems, as she didn't feel she had enough time. Instead, she was concentrating on everything she had to do every day, so she felt like she was coping. This meant she had little time for herself and other people didn't realise she was finding it hard to cope.

Take a few minutes to think about whether you've been avoiding thinking about what your problem is. The next part of this guide will give you the chance to write out a list of your problems.

Feeling like you have too many problems

Writing a list of your problems helps to break your difficulties down so you can deal with one at a time. It also helps you to feel less overwhelmed.

You know what the problems are, but not the solutions

It's okay if you don't know the solutions just now. This approach gives you a structure you can use to find possible solutions that are realistic for you. It's important to be patient with yourself – you don't have to have all the answers straight away.

"Everything's fine in my life – I don't know why I feel like this."

Sometimes you can't always identify what the problem is – to a stranger, it might seem like your life is perfect. But problems can include how you feel about yourself and your life too.

Do you ever do any of these things?

- put yourself down – think negative thoughts about yourself
- think negatively – always worry about what might go wrong rather than think about what might go right
- feel like everything has to be perfect – set yourself unrealistically high standards, so nothing you do ever feels "good enough"

These thinking problems can also be tackled by the methods in this guide.

If you can't think of any problems that could explain while you feel this way, even after working through this guide, you should consider looking at [the other mental health self-help guides on NHS inform](#) if you haven't already. You could also make an appointment with your GP to discuss things further. You can find a local GP using [Scotland's Service Directory](#).

Activity 2 - writing your problem list

The next step is writing out your list of problems. You'll find a list with examples on the next 2 pages.

Here are some tips to make writing your list easier:

- Remember there are no wrong answers – even the small things, over time, can grow into big issues. Nothing you write in this list is too small.
- Think about what's really important to you – often when we're struggling with things that seem small, it's because we're having trouble with areas of life that really matter to us.
- Talking – try to talk to someone you know well and trust. If there isn't anyone you feel comfortable discussing your issues with, you could call a service like [Breathing Space](#).
- If you need to, take a little time – get away from the situation to allow yourself time to put things into perspective. Why not make yourself a cup of tea, or go for a walk? It's often easier to see what the problem is when you're not in the middle of it.

If you'd like to review your answers with anyone or share the guide once you've completed it you should save this file after completing the list.

Problem 1

For example, "I don't have enough time to myself."

Problem 2

For example, "I always struggle with money at the end of the month."

Problem 3

For example, "I need to lose weight."

Problem 4

For example, "The house is always a mess."

Problem 5

For example, "I need to find a better job."

Activity 3 - focusing on one problem

The goal of writing a problem list is to pick one problem to work on at a time. After writing your problem list, the next step is to select the one you want to work on first.

Which one you choose is up to you but we suggest starting with the one that looks the easiest, or least distressing, to solve. You could also choose the one that you feel is the most important.

The next step is coming up with ideas for solving that problem.

Mandy chose the problem "not having enough time to relax". While getting her ideas down, she came up with the following list, to help her find the time to do this.

1. Book Lizzie into an after-school club, like drama or dancing
2. Ask a friend or neighbour to watch Lizzie one evening a week
3. Forget about housework for the next 3 years
4. Ask Lizzie to help with some of the household chores
5. Find a gym with a class Lizzie could do and go together
6. Ask my sister for help with some of the things I have to do
7. Get more confident about saying "no" to doing things when I'm busy

Getting all your ideas out

Use the solution sheet on the next page to start writing out possible solutions to the problem you've chosen. The idea is to think up as many ways as possible of solving it, not come up with the perfect answer right away.

It's important to write down every suggestion you think of, even if it seems unrealistic or ridiculous. The idea is to free up your creative thinking – thinking freely can help you consider things you normally wouldn't.

You can include things you're already doing to try and solve the problem.

You don't have to fill out every line – if you can only come up with 2 or 3 solutions, that's fine.

Ignore the part about pros and cons for now - this will be covered in the next section.

If you'd like to review your answers with anyone or share the guide once you've completed it you should save this file after completing the list.

Problem solving self-help guide — solution list

Problem - for example, “I don’t have enough time for myself.”

Solution	Pros	Cons
Example - “I could take a class at the community centre”	Example - “it’d be great to learn something new.”	Example - “it could become just another thing on my to-do list.”
	Example - “I might meet some nice new people.”	Example - “I might not be able to afford it.”
	Example - “the community centre’s really close to my house so it’s convenient.”	

Solution	Pros	Cons

Solution	Pros	Cons

Activity 4 - pros and cons

The next step is thinking about the pros (good things) and cons (bad things) of each solution you thought of. Writing these down can help.

As an example, here's the list Mandy came up with for her chosen problem.

Problem: not having enough time to relax.

Suggestion	Pros	Cons
Book Lizzie into an after-school club, like drama or dancing	It'd be good to get that extra time a couple of times a week.	I'd have to pick Lizzie up as she'd miss the school bus – and if she has shows or competitions it could end up taking more time, not less.
Ask a friend or neighbour to watch Lizzie one evening a week	Having a whole evening on my own would let me go out with friends.	I'd likely have to return the favour, so I could end up with a lot more to do on another evening.
Forget about housework for the next 3 years	It'd save a lot of time and effort!	The house would be a mess!
Ask Lizzie to help with some of the household chores	It'd be good for Lizzie to start learning these things, and it would take some responsibility from me.	Lizzie will probably be resistant at first.

Suggestion	Pros	Cons
Find a gym with a class Lizzie could do and go together	Getting more exercise would be great for both of us.	A gym class isn't what I'd consider time to relax.
Ask my sister for help with some of the things I have to do	It'd make things a lot easier for me – I'd have less running around to do.	My sister's got her own busy schedule – she probably won't have time to help me much.
Get more confident about saying "no" to doing things when I'm busy	If I can get it right, I'll be able to do it long-term and stop this happening again.	People might not like it at first so I could have to deal with family or friends being annoyed.

Write the pros and cons of each solution in the boxes on your solution sheet.

Choosing a solution

Listing the pros and cons should've made it easier for you to decide what to do next. If not, try reading over the list again and thinking of some more pros and cons for each solution.

Are you having difficulty choosing a solution?

There are a few things that can make it harder for you to decide on a solution.

No solution seems good enough

There's no such thing as a perfect solution - if there was, it's likely you'd have solved the problem already. Are you setting your standards too high?

Your solution might not be perfect, but it doesn't have to be perfect to start making things better.

You're scared to make the wrong choice

There's always a bit of guessing involved in choosing a solution, as we can't look into the future and see what's going to happen.

With a lot of problems, it's better to do something different than leave things the way they are. Even if things don't turn out the way you'd hoped, it's still a good chance to learn something and practice these problem-solving skills. In the next steps you'll also review whether your solution helped - if not, you can follow the steps to try a different solution.

Two suggestions seem equally good

If you can't choose which looks best, it might not matter very much which one you choose – they could both work equally well. Try one and see how it goes.

"The more I think about choosing a solution, the more I worry."

Getting caught up in worry can end up becoming a problem on its own. If you find yourself getting stressed out by trying to think of a solution, there are a couple of things you can do.

- do a relaxation exercise – you can find some [here](#)
- distract yourself – do something different for a little while, like watching TV or reading a book
- decide to forget about the problem for a few hours or even a day – after you've had a break, you will feel better when you start thinking about it again
- it could be a good idea to look at your problem list and start with one that feels less overwhelming, where it's easier to think of possible solutions
- maybe a problem needs to be broken down more into simple steps to make it easier to think about solutions - for example, change "the house is a mess" to "the kitchen needs to be cleaned"

If you're struggling to choose a solution and feel you're getting caught up in worry, it might be worth visiting the [Depression](#) or [Anxiety](#) self-help guides on our site. If you've come to this guide from one of these, feel free to go back and work through it again if you think it'll help.

We also have a lot of material on [coping with stress](#) that you might find helpful.

Plan your chosen solution - Activity 5

Listing the pros and cons should've made it easier for you to decide what to do next. If not, try reading over the list again and thinking of some more pros and cons for each solution.

It can be helpful to make a plan for the solution you've chosen. Once you lay out a step-by-step plan, taking action on your problem stops being a big task and becomes a number of smaller, more manageable tasks.

For example, Mandy decided to get more confident about saying no to things. You can see examples of what she did in the action plan below.

Use the boxes below to write out your action plan step by step. If you'd like to review your answers with anyone or share the guide once you've completed it you should save this file after completing the list.

Step 1

For example - in order to get more confident about saying "no" to things, Mandy decided to get a book on confidence from the library.

Step 2

For example - Mandy read the book.

Step 3

For example - Mandy started practicing saying "no" in the mirror every day.

Step 4

For example - Mandy decided to say "no" for the first time when her sister asked her to pick up some shopping for her.

Step 5

For example - Mandy rewarded herself for saying no by treating herself to a coffee in her favourite cafe.

How did it go?

This is the time to reflect on how problem-solving went. Remember, even if your solution didn't go the way you hoped, it's important to keep using this approach until you feel confident.

1. The problem is solved

Well done! Your solution worked. Here are a couple of things to remember in future:

- You might not be aware that you've solved your problem until you realise you haven't thought about it in a while – that's fine, and shows that you don't have to dwell on problems to solve them.
- It might be that things haven't changed, or haven't changed that much, but you're now more able to deal with it.

2. The problem is slightly better

If the problem is slightly better, but not solved yet, there's still a little more for you to do. There are a few things that could help:

- Keep doing what you're doing – your problem could be solved if you continue with your current plan of action.
- Choose another solution from your list – have another look at your pros and cons list and see if another option could work better. Maybe a combination of two or more is the answer. You might even have another idea for a solution when you look at the list again.
- Choose another goal – have another look at your problem list and see if there is something else you could work on for a while.
- Choose a connected problem – if there's another item on your problem list that could help solve the one you're still working on, spend some time on that. You can return to the first problem later.

3. The problem isn't better at all

If things aren't any better, there are a few things you can do:

- Think about whether your plan has had time to work – things might get better if you keep going.
- Ask if anything at all is different – some things might be bad, but consider whether or not they were worse before you applied this problem-solving approach. The situation might have improved without you realising it.
- Try another option – go back over your solutions list, and the pros and cons, and see if a different solution works better.
- Check if you followed all the problem-solving steps correctly and, if needed, go back over some or all of the steps again.

If there still isn't any improvement after you've done these things, don't worry. If possible, discuss the problem with a person you trust, like a close friend or family member. You could also talk to someone anonymously using a service like [Breathing Space](#).

However it's worked out, you should be proud of yourself for taking these steps. Keep using this problem-solving approach and it'll get easier.

Next steps

Keep using the techniques from this guide – they'll continue to help you. It's important not to fall into old habits or forget how to use this problem-solving approach.

Remember that the problems you work on using these techniques don't have to be big or life-changing – they can be day-to-day issues, or even decisions you need to make as part of work or study. The more you practice, the easier problem-solving will be.

Further help

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

If you feel you need more help with your mental health, try speaking to your GP, or [search for mental health and wellbeing services in your area](#).

For information and advice when you're feeling down, you can phone [Breathing Space](#) on 0800 83 85 87.

The Breathing Space phonenumber is available:

- 24 hours at weekends (6pm Friday to 6am Monday)
- 6pm to 2am on weekdays (Monday to Thursday)

If you found this guide helpful and would like to do more work like this, [Living Life](#) offers a range of structured psychological interventions and therapies to improve mental health and wellbeing. They're open Monday to Friday, from 1pm to 9pm, and you can phone them on 0800 328 9655.

Learn more

To learn more about coping with mental health issues, [visit our other mental health self-help guides on NHS inform](#).

For information that could help solve problems related to your health, [visit our Care, Support and Rights section](#).

To find services in your area that could help with a range of health and wellbeing issues, visit [Scotland's Service Directory](#).