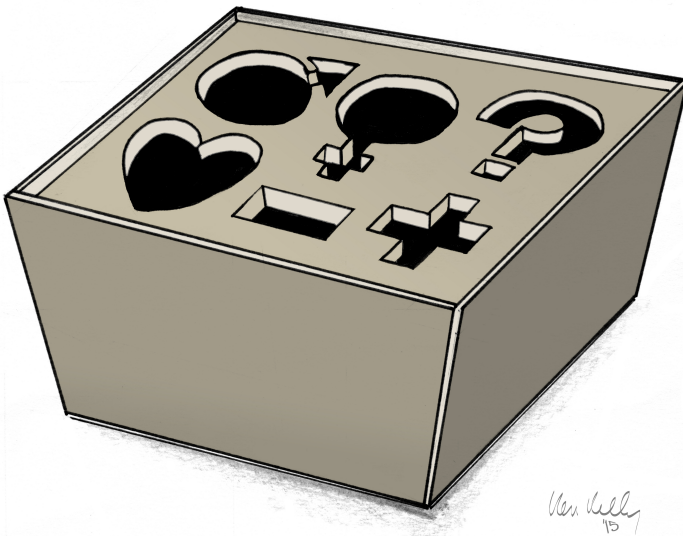


CHAPTER SEVEN



PROBLEM SOLVING

Personal or Social Problem-Solving concerns our ability to keep abreast of our personal and relationship problems. A build-up of these can have dire consequences on our mental and physical health, but there is a formula, there are solutions.

Personal Problem-Solving

Problem-solving is often associated with business or mathematical skills but research provides ample evidence that

Personal problem-solving has also been called Social Problem-Solving because it concerns our ability to be in relationship with others, with the world around us and ourselves.

good personal problem-solving skills increase our emotional intelligence¹, our confidence and our ability to be optimistic.

Some people will naturally possess these skills but they can be learned by all of us. There is a simple formula that has been observed in

people who are successful at personal problem-solving.

**Good problem-solving skills
tend to decrease depression, hopelessness
and suicidal tendencies².**

People with depression, which we know is on the increase in our society, tend to have an overload of unsolved problems.

The human brain has a natural capacity to solve up-coming problems but it can happen that due to pessimistic thinking or lack of self-confidence that we limit our problem-solving capacity and do not work with our creative brain or struggle to carry out our solutions. It may not be our personal choice, but life can overwhelm us. We may not have people in our lives who know how to help us to solve our particular problems which then build up and hamper our well-being.

Eli 'the computer guy'⁶ is a computer genius who makes free You Tube films to help anyone in business to improve their technical IT skills. He does so to help people to spend less time on technology and have higher earnings, which he would hope enables them to give more time and money to those in need!

Eli used to have nine people working for him but he ended up with a nervous break-down. He discovered how he needed to balance his technical 'geek' skills with outdoor activities, travelling and altruistic involvement.

Among other things Eli co-ordinates coastal rescue-teams. He sometimes shares part of his own story when he makes his You Tube instructional videos. This is what he shared concerning a period of depression he was experiencing:

'People like us 'geeks' who are paid to use our brains to set up or maintain business IT-systems can be more prone to depression because we often work alone and are under incredible pressure when something needs to be fixed or maintained. There might be no one else who can step in for us if we get sick or feel unwell. Your brain is your 'tool'.

I have found that when I feel this profound tiredness come on where I lose interest in everything and feel unable to cope, that is the time to PAUSE and make a plan. Even though it might upset other people it is better to pause for some weeks rather than keep going, burn out and not come back.

I find that many of my type of 'geek' people do not want to pause, they keep going and burn out. You have got to make a plan of what to do to mind yourself rather than ignore your discomfort. You have got to face it and decide what you need to do. Some people find medication helpful. I find travelling and doing something completely different for a while helps me to get out of that loss of energy and interest.'

SLEEP, A Wonderful Problem-Solver?

A good night's sleep or at least rest helps the brain to sort and 'file' a variety of under-lying personal problems but the unconscious brain can only deal with so much. If we try to avoid dealing with our problems and perhaps seek release through alcohol, drugs or loveless sexual behaviour our problems do not get solved.

We increase our problems through denying their existence and when we add unhelpful behaviour to these we multiply them. That is why personal problem-solving is such an important skill to learn early in life before we have too much of a build-up. We need to learn these simple skills that can help us to clarify what we experience, find suitable solutions and try to implement them the best we can.

Who to blame

The first step in facing our problems is to realise that this is not about blaming ourselves or others. It is about taking personal responsibility for our problems. We may not have brought them on ourselves and sometimes we cannot change a situation but we can always choose to change our attitude

and decide how to proceed. We can choose a negative hopeless attitude or we can look for a way of viewing something that increases our well-being, energises us and restores our belief in life being a worth-while occupation.

Ciara experienced an accumulation of problems which resulted in her starting to self-harm, this is what she learned from it:

When I discover a problem I now take the time to think about why there is a problem rather than just freaking out. My mum is an innovative consultant so from her I've learned to look at things from outside the box.

For example when I have a headache, ok, I can take a pain-killer but I think for me problem-solving is a better solution. I write down the problem and break it down into more specific problems which I then tackle in different ways: I draw a spiderweb (brain map) of all the possible explanations for my headache, I could be stressed, I could be dehydrated, I could be sick. I try to find the root causes and then tackle these individually rather than making a rash decision to do something.

I would say to myself 'I need to fix this'. Breaking down a problem also helps to put it into perspective. Sometimes I worry 'Will I have enough time?' or 'Will I be ready in time' but when I look at it more closely I realise that this is not the end of the world; I can decide that next time I will do certain things differently. It is a learning process.

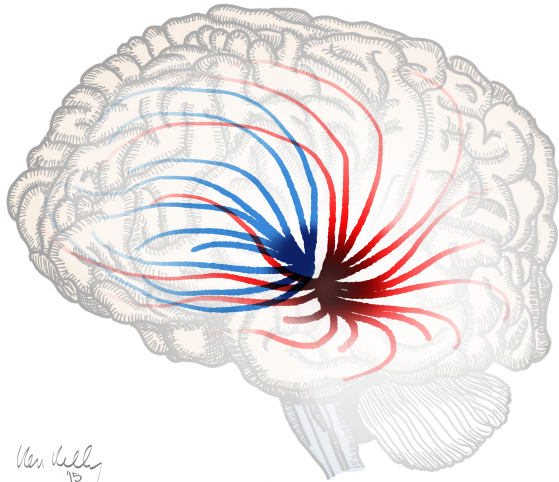
It doesn't always work but I think breaking a problem down puts things into perspective. If you rush into a problem and your brain/mind is racing you tend to freak out whereas when you take the time to stop and think of all the things associated with it, you will not frantically send emails to everyone but rather focus on the one person you need to talk to about it.

Stress and Health

We all have stressors in our lives. We decide whether to face our stressors face-on or try to escape them but in the long run facing these challenges is much more rewarding, and prevents future break-downs.

Below we see the flow of the feel-good hormones dopamine (blue) which helps us to feel motivated and persevere, and serotonin (red) which helps memory processing, mood enhancement, sleep and general good brain functioning that enables us to find good solutions to our problems.

Helpful hormones are activated when we take an optimistic 'can-do' approach even if initially we do not know the solution to our problems³.



However, when we *Ken Kelly '15* are negative or try to avoid our problems the brain freezes and our system goes into defence mode. This increases the flow of adrenalin and builds up cortisol. Our organs are now on the alert. When our system is on stand-by for fight, flight or freeze over time this can have a very depressing effect on our brain and body.

People who are stressed can also start suffering with a variety of physical or mental ailments such as heart disease, cancers, digestive problems⁴ or mental difficulties. All these can be minimised by developing one's problem-solving skills.

Seamus, a composer, performer and audio-engineer was diagnosed with lymphoma which is a life-threatening cancer of the lymph-system. This is how his problem-solving skills helped him to try various solutions to deal with the pain he experienced before finally being diagnosed and treated:

I have an almost robotic approach; if there is something wrong with me I think: 'What is wrong?' and 'How do I fix it?'

I was sick for a long time. I did not know what was wrong, nobody knew. I was in a lot of pain and trying to figure out what that was. I went to Greece for a few weeks to organise a health holiday and the pain was not too bad but when I came back it got worse.

I studied fasting and fasted for 10 days, I tried a raw vegan diet, I tried re-bounding (jumping on a trampoline), skin-brushing and many other alternative health programs. None of them made any difference. I could not sleep and I was in

too much pain to be flown to any foreign alternative health centre so I ended up in hospital.

When the doctor explained that it was lymphoma which is a form of cancer it was a shock. Seemingly lymphoma is very fast-growing and difficult to stop once it starts. I thought it might have been an appendix because my blood tests were perfect, I had been told I was in perfect health.

When the doctor said 'we have been in touch with the oncology department' it was as if he was saying 'we have been in touch with the execution chamber'. Within two days I was on chemo as they then knew exactly where it was and how to treat it.

I am not made of steel but I have this practical attitude that if I am meant to die I will, and there is nothing I can do about it. I suppose I would see dying as something positive, meeting God, and that I have to go some time. The environment was so supportive however, I remember one of the staff saying to me before one of my treatments 'You are a tough guy, you will get through it' and I got so much support when I came home. I could rest and get well.

More than likely the illness was caused by poisoning from various fumes I had been exposed to as a child and later from when I was shrink-wrapping CDs. Also I had been breathing in fungus fumes in my sound-studio which had been flooded and had no ventilation or sunlight.

Seamus has been clear of the cancer for over five years now but he is very careful around fumes and chemicals in his environment. He also eats five apricot kernels each day and makes sure to rest, where before he might have pushed himself beyond tiredness when he immersed himself in a project. And he is getting a new well-ventilated sound studio!

The DANCER

Problem-Solving Technique

One simple way of remembering the steps of the problem-solving process is through the **DANCER** formula which is based on ADAPT⁵. I like the idea of dance as we are trying to loosen up, yet learn particular steps which with practice make the dance so much easier. Turn over the page to see a visual version of this problem-solving template and examples:

D

Describe the problem(s)

Sometimes we have a number of problems all muddled together. By clearly describing individual problems we can go about processing them one by one.

A

Accept it as a positive challenge

Accept the problem(s) as a positive challenge which will have good solutions and teach you skills for future coping. Even if sometimes we cannot change the situation there and then, we can always accept it as a welcome learning experience which will stand to us later in life.

N

Name numerous possible solutions

This is where Brainstorming comes in. Brainstorming is to open ourselves to a variety of solutions without choosing which ones to go with. Alone or with someone we trust we allow ourselves to think outside the box. Crazy ideas are welcomed as sometimes good ideas come out of the unexpected. We write all of them down before we take the next step of assessing which one/s is/are most suitable. Creating a mind map or spiderweb as shown on [page 262](#) can be helpful.

C

Compare the plus and minus sides of each solution & Choose

Predict the consequences of the possible solutions. Sometimes it is a combination of a few solutions that might work best.

When we take each suggested solution from the Brainstorming mind map and assess its pros and cons, little by little a plan will emerge as we discover which are the realistic and likeable actions that we wish to take. The solution might involve getting other people onboard, developing a skill or doing something difficult.

E

Execute the favourite solution/s

By executing the most favourable solution we get a chance to see how well it works. We might set a time-limit in order to help ourselves to carry out the solution. The emphasis is on trying out the solution, as what we thought might work may not always be possible and that is ok.

Once we have executed a solution that does not work we might discover another one that will, if not, we can do more brainstorming. When something is an ongoing problem for a long time it might take time to get to the root of it. Sometimes the only way we get there is by trying different options.

The important thing is to execute the solution even if that solution is to wait for a while. At least, we know that we can relax and not worry about something because we have a plan ready to go.

R

Review how well the chosen solution worked and decide whether you need to choose another one or to brainstorm again in order to incorporate new unforeseen factors which you have since discovered.

BRAIN TRAIN

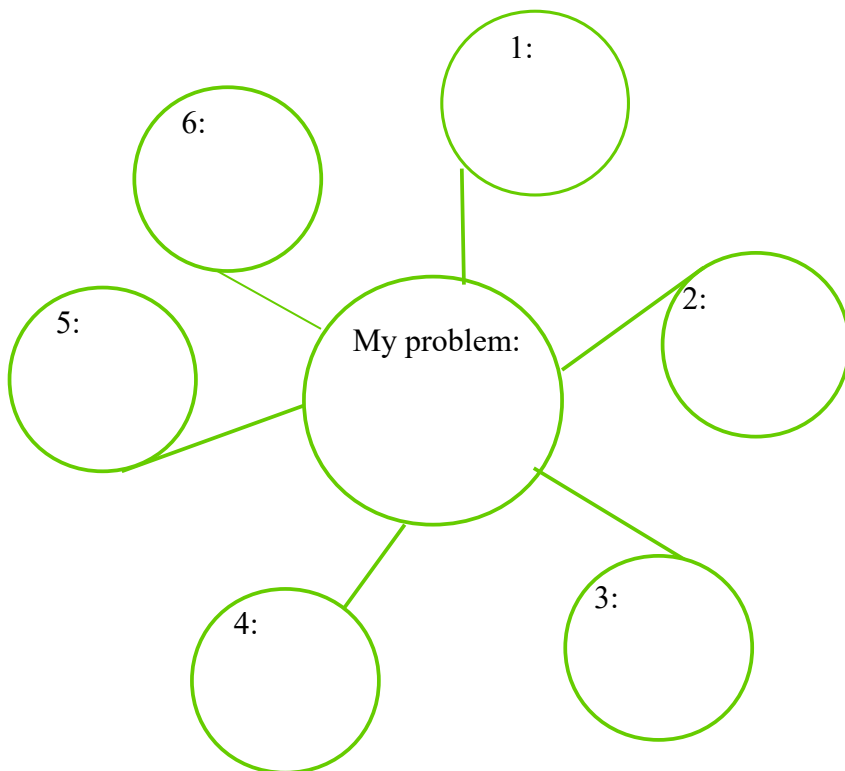
**in handling your problems using the
DANCER Problem-Solving Template**
(download from www.HappinessSkills.ie)

<p>Describe the problem/s</p>	<p>1</p> <p>2</p> <p>3</p> <p>4</p> <p>5</p>
<p>Accept the problem/s as a positive</p>	<p>These problems are all good because...</p>

Next

Tackle One Problem

Name numerous possible solutions (brainstorming) to the first problem



next:

Compare the plus and minus
sides of each solution

Choosing a solution		
As I assess the merit of each solution, the best one/s emerges		
SOLUTIONS	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

next

Execute the favourite chosen solution/s:	
Who I need to help me:	
What I need to succeed:	

next

Review

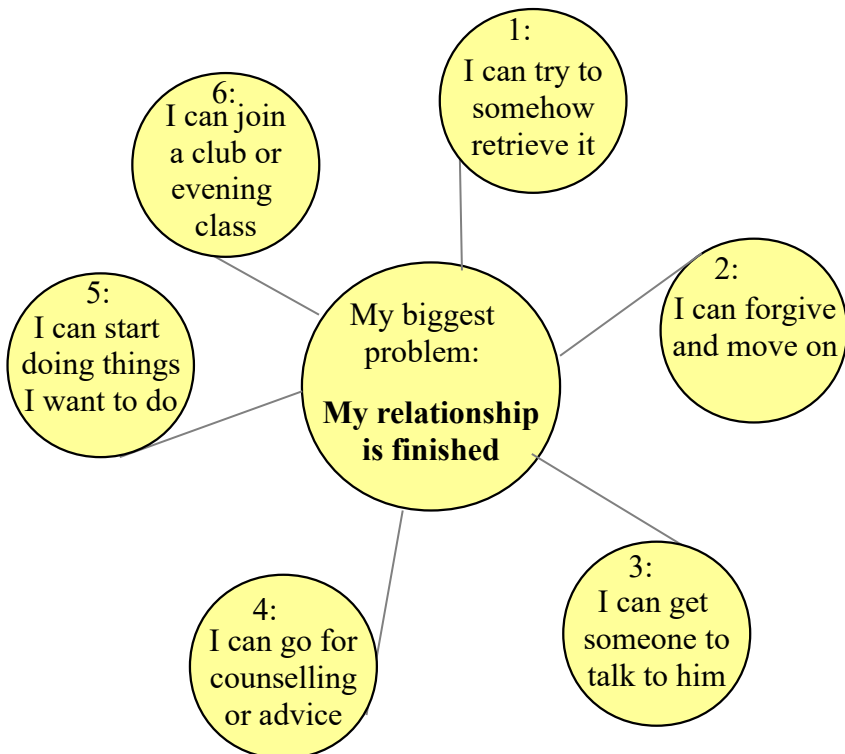
When it will be done- (do I need to rehearse it?):	
When I will review and decide whether it worked or whether I need to have another go at solving it?	

DANCER Problem-Solving Example

Describe the problem/s	<div>1 I feel horribly upset about everything</div> <div>2 My relationship with someone close is over</div> <div>3 I find no point in anything anymore</div> <div>4 No matter what I do it seems wrong</div> <div>5 There seems no point to anything</div>
E Accept the problem/s as a positive	All these problems are good, they do not feel good but there is a positive hopeful solution somewhere. It is not as bad as it feels.

Choosing One Problem at a Time

Naming numerous possible solutions (brainstorming) to the first problem



next

Comparing the plus and minus sides of each solution - then Choose a solution		
SOLUTIONS	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
1 I can try to somehow retrieve the relationship	Maybe he still wants it, maybe I misunderstood	It wasn't really that good a relationship, he was mean
2 I can forgive and move on	I will create new opportunities for myself	I may not be able to move on, others may think less of me
3 I can get someone to talk to him	He might say sorry and want us to start over	We have tried so many times, we are not good together
4 I can go for counselling or advice	Good to get another point of view, help me to move on	Not sure I can afford it, or that I trust an outsider
5 I can start doing things I want to do	I would like to do so much more with my life-	I am not sure what I want to do and if I want to do it alone
6 I can join a club or an evening class	I could meet lots of interesting people and develop hobbies	Not sure I have the energy after work

Executing the favourite chosen solution/s:	Best to forgive and let go, he would have to earn another chance. Time to move on. I will start looking at interests that will energise me and give me a new start.
Who I need to help me:	I will speak with my friend and my dad, he is usually encouraging. I will go on the net to assess my character strengths and get involved with something.
What I need to succeed:	I need to believe that this is a chance for me to start over and develop new sides of myself. That I can manage without a relationship and that I will find someone more suitable.

next

Reviewing

When it will be done- (do I need to rehearse it?):	I will spend 10 minutes every day researching my character strengths and interests. I will write down affirmations today on my ability to move on and place them beside my bed.
When I will review and decide whether it worked or whether I need to have another go at solving it?	I will review in one week and see how I am getting on then.

Problem-Solving in the Family

My Story

My siblings and I were born within six and a half year which resulted in my parents having five of us children to organise. My dad being a military man however and my mum, although previous unfamiliar with cooking and housework came up with a plan to organise us little people.

Every Saturday afternoon we would have a family council. One of us would be secretary, another chairman and another in charge of buying the goodies for this get-together.

At these meetings we would listen to, discuss and comment on our parent's various proposals:

Pocket money would be according to age, thus there would be a small raise every year. We would be expected to have our rooms tidied before tea time every day. In addition we would get extra money for doing extra house-chores like polishing silverware and bronze ornaments (which we all hated) and Hoovering.

If we saved for something my parents would supply the second half. I saved for a bike, a study table and a fabulous IKEA sofa bed.

Bedtime was according to age, an extra 15 minutes for each year, thus we were slightly staggered using the bathroom.

If we didn't smoke until we were 18 year old my parents would pay for the 20+ hours driving instruction that the Danish state requires for someone to get a driver's licence.

If we did not eat sweets during the week the reward was one krone each for fruit every Saturday. We five children would put our reward together and buy a box of grapes, apples, oranges or pears which we separate into five exactly equally sized portions!

These were great 'problem-solvers'. Another plan my parents put in place was the 'penalty-box'. We would be fined for being cheeky with mum, not tidying our rooms, ignoring a house duty or using swear words. It was only small fines but it all added up to pay for goodies for the Saturday family meeting (ice-cream and crisps).

To this day all my siblings are 'can-do' people, very involved in either their own business or the caring services and extremely devoted to their families. If there is a problem we siblings would be there either economically or emotionally for one another, so would our dad who thankfully is still around.

Problem-Solving in a group / Class room

Positive Problem-Solving using the DANCER technique can be good fun as a group brainstorms together for various solutions to a problem and looks at the pros and cons for each solution and then make a plan of execution of the chosen solution. This can then be shared with the bigger group afterwards.

The problem situation can be real or imaginary depending on the relationship of the group. When a person feels safe among friends a real problem can bond a group as each contributes to help solve a shared or personal problem of a participant.

BRAIN TRAIN

In groups of two or three choose one of these imaginary situations (or your own) and apply the DANCER technique (Describe, Accept, Name numerous solutions, Compare and choose, Execute and Review). Afterwards, share with the bigger group:

- **You feel bullied because you are not into sports**
- **Your family is arguing all the time and you hate it**

- Your alcohol consumption is getting out of hand
- You are hanging out with a negative bordering on violent group but you are afraid of leaving it
- You have fallen out with a close family member and you feel there is no way of reconciling

Problem-Solving in the Business World

Ciera's mum facilitates problem-solving professionally in corporations:

She goes into different companies and helps the company to look at a problem from various perspectives. When the problems within the company have been voiced and people feel safe enough to brainstorm around them, everyone seems to communicate better. It becomes clear that just because people do not agree it does not mean they cannot get on with one another.

When people gather to tackle a problem they start connecting with each other. They come out realising that together they can solve problems. They learn 'out of the box' thinking which helps them to better deal with future problems.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: PROBLEM-SOLVING

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