

Problem Solving

Session #6 within "Self-in-Context" Unit



VETERANS

ONWARD

Training Materials:

- Whiteboard and pens or flipchart and pens.
- Paper and pen for all participants.
- Copies of flow chart of Transactional Model of Stress (see page 7, figure 1).
- Print outs or links emailed to Assessment Tool resources:
 - Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale - Short Form (IUS – 12) which can be accessed at <https://www.midss.org/content/maximizing-scale-and-regret-scale>
 - Maximizing Scale and Regret Scale (MSRS) which can be accessed at <https://www.midss.org/content/intolerance-uncertainty-scale-short-form-ius-12>

Learning Objectives:

1. Recognise and describe common problems that we face in interpersonal relationships.
2. Examine the psychology of problem development including our own psychological responses to problems using the framework of the transactional model of stress.
3. Name, describe and apply different problem-solving theories and strategies.

Training Script:

Hello everyone, how are you today? My name is _____. I am going to be your tutor today for this training module on Problem Solving. It is the sixth session within the unit called “Self-in-Context”. This module will take between 90 and 120 minutes to complete. It follows on from the previous session on Expectation Management.

Before we look at today’s learning objectives, I’d like to set aside some time to have a conversation about anything that came up for you from last session on Expectation Management. You had some questionnaires to take away: the Relational Assessment Scale (RAS) and the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC). There may be something you want to ask or say as a result of having a look at those questionnaires, or there may be something else you want to ask or discuss

based on what we covered last session. We have 5 – 10 minutes now to discuss any points arising from last session.

[Allow 5 -10 minutes for this facilitated discussion as a whole group].

So, today's learning objectives. By the end of this module, my aim is that you will be able to:

1. Recognise and describe common problems that we face in interpersonal relationships.
2. Examine the psychology of problem development including our own psychological responses to problems.
3. Name, describe and apply different problem-solving theories and strategies.

Let's make a start on learning objective 1:

1. Recognise and describe common problems that we face in interpersonal relationships.

I am sure we will have plenty of ideas here. If you are a human, you have faced problems. If you have any relationship, you face problems within the relationship. We can speak of life as a "problem-solving cycle¹" in that, once a certain problem has been identified, tackled and solved, it's not long before a new problem arises or presents itself, and the cycle continues.

Let's think about what we mean by the word "problem". When we say humans face problems, what do we mean by that?

[Facilitate ideas gathering from the group and write ideas that emerge upon the whiteboard].

The dictionary defines the word problem as:

A situation, person, or thing that needs attention and needs to be dealt with or solved.

¹ Bransford, J. D.; Stein, B. S (1993). *The ideal problem solver: A guide for improving thinking, learning, and creativity (2nd ed.)*. New York: W.H. Freeman.

Can we think of any synonyms for the word problem – other words we can substitute for problems that mean the same thing?

[Facilitate ideas gathering from the group and write ideas that emerge upon the whiteboard].

Synonyms I can think of for the word problem, that we haven't already got there are: [delete as appropriate depending on what emerged from the participants' ideas. Continue to write these new words up on the whiteboard]

complication

challenge

dilemma

dispute

headache

issue

obstacle

question

trouble

botheration

hitch

mess

predicament

quandary

Task:

So, before we move onto learning objective 2, let's take a few moments to list and name some of the potential problems faced within interpersonal relationships.

I will start us off with 3 suggestions, and then I'd like you to take 5 minutes to list as many other examples as possible. Remember when we speak of interpersonal relationships, we can think of the 4 categories of:

- Intimate relationships,
- Friendly relationships,
- Relationships based on your career
- Household relationships.

So, my 3 suggestions of potential problems within interpersonal relationships are:

- Disagreement over money and resources
- Issues around communication
- Arguments about how to deal with children

Now, you have a go at adding to this list.

[Allow 5 minutes for participants to note down their ideas on paper. Then facilitate a 5 -10 minute discussion as a whole group to share responses, writing the idea on the whiteboard. During this facilitated discussion, ask participants to highlight from the list that the emerges the 3 problems that they are most concerned about within their own interpersonal relationships.

We have covered objective 1 in some detail. Just to remind you learning objective 1 was:

- 1. Recognise and describe common problems that we face in interpersonal relationships.**

I think we are now ready to move onto learning objective 2:

- 2. Examine the psychology of problem development including our own psychological responses to problems using the framework of the transactional model of stress.**

Task:

I'd like us to look back over the list of synonyms for the word "problem". We can use this list to help gain a greater self-awareness around recognising our own psychological responses to problems.

As you look at the list of words on the whiteboard, notice if you have any reaction, any feeling in response to the words? Is there a word you dislike more than the others? Is there a word you prefer more than the others? Make a note of your responses to these questions on your paper.

[Allow 5 minutes for participants to note down on paper their observations. Then facilitate a brief discussion as a whole group to share responses].

Discussing problems can be a topic that provokes or triggers responses in us, in that problems can be unpleasant to deal with. For some people, a problem provokes a sense of excitement and feels like a challenge to get stuck into. Other people can feel overwhelmed by the problem, and feel that they don't know where to start. Of course, as we learnt within the session of Expectation Management, the given situation and given relationship in which the problem occurs can change our response and expectation about our capacity to solve or respond to the problem. In one situation and relationship we may rise to a problem as a fun challenge. In another situation, we may feel overwhelmed by a similar problem. We will bring past experiences of problem solving to this new problem and compare this problem to past experiences. Other people's expectations about our ability to solve the problem are also likely to have an impact on how we feel about and approach the problem. There is a lot of complex psychological processes at play when we think about problem development and problem solving.

To help us explore this further, I'd like to introduce an idea known as the Transactional Model of Stress. The Transactional Model of Stress is a simple process that helps you to be more able to balance demands placed upon you (i.e. problems) with the ability to manage (i.e. deal with and respond to a problem). It was first formulated by psychologists Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman in the 1980s².

² Lazarus, R. S., and Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. New York: Springer.

Their theory has been developed and updated since³. The Model recognises that problems occur in the context of a relationship between an individual and their environment (the people around them and the situation they are in). Therefore, it is neither the individual nor the environment alone that produces stress but a complex transaction between the two. This idea builds on what we learnt about the Interpersonal Expectancy Effect and Interdependence Theory from our session on Expectation Management.

A simple way to understand the Transactional Model of Stress is to see the model as a logical working through some problem or difficulty by progressing through various stages of assessment, decision making, acting and reassessment. This can be shown visually with a flow chart (see figure 1):

³ Folkman, S. (2008). The case for positive emotions in the stress process. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, 21 (1), 3– 14.

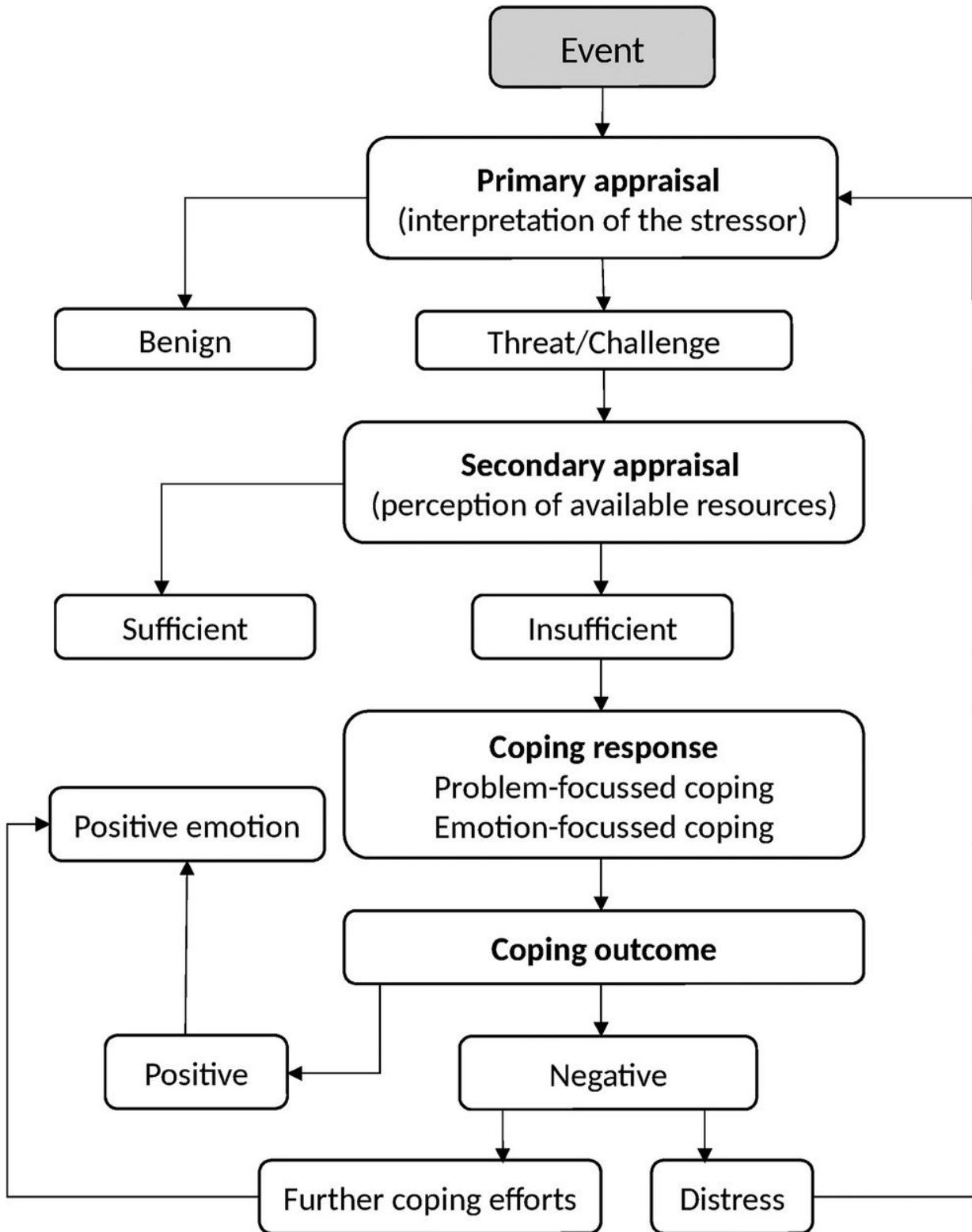


Figure 1: The Transactional Model of Stress.

In this flowchart, we see that on identifying a problem in a given situation, a person completes a primary appraisal. They are trying to get a handle on what the problem is: to describe it and represent the problem in their thinking and language, and then to be in a position to evaluate the degree of the problem.

This can lead to an evaluation that the problem or threat is benign, that is, not really a problem at all.

Alternatively, it can lead to evaluating that there is a valid problem or challenge.

At this point, the person then moves to the secondary appraisal. Now the focus is upon the resources the person / relationship has to respond to the problem in the given situation. In other words, it involves asking the question: “do I / we have the resources to respond to this”?

This secondary appraisal results in either deciding you have sufficient resources to respond, in which case the problem can be dealt with and is no longer a problem.

Alternatively, it can lead to evaluating that there are insufficient resources to adequately respond. This opens up opportunities to gather sufficient resources, in which case, you are then in a position in which the problem can be dealt with and is no longer a problem. Alternatively, you can proceed to try to cope and deal with the problem with your assessment that you have insufficient resources. This can then lead to positive or negative outcomes. Importantly, in revisions to the original 1980’s model, Folkman has since recognised and incorporated the idea, based on research, that struggling with a problem can itself produce positive outcomes as a person has chance to learn resilience and coping strategies to support them in future – they can develop their resourcefulness through the problem. And, distress within problem solving can lead onto a re-appraisal: completing another assessment to better define the nature of the problem as it now stands.

So, important takeaways from this model that can be helpful to us, here:

- Problems for which we know we have the resources to respond to can be dealt with and soon cease to be a problem.
- Deciding whether something is a problem involves balancing the challenge against our resources.
- Developing our resource bank can help us respond more effectively to problems.
- Coping responses can be varied. Some are longer term strategies that are health promoting (e.g. making use of Social Support, as we learnt in session # 3 on Social Landscape) and some are shorter-term and health diminishing (e.g. drinking to excess to avoid thinking about the problem).
- Facing problems, can in itself, help to develop our personal resource bank.

Task:

- Think of a problem that is emerging for you at present.
- Using the flowchart of the Transactional Model of Stress, complete your own primary and secondary appraisal of the situation.
- Can you identify any resources that would be useful to you in responding and solving this problem?
- What do you want to do, if anything, as a result of this primary and secondary appraisal of the situation?

[Allow 5 – 10 minutes for participants to note down on paper their responses. Then facilitate a 5 -10-minute discussion as a whole group to share responses].

Thank you. We are going to stay with this important learning outcome a little longer. As we learnt in session #2 of this unit, self-awareness is a very important tool. So, in order to gain better personal clarity and awareness of our own psychological responses to problems, I am going to offer you one of

two questionnaires to attempt. Both are assessment tools developed by psychologists to support increased self-awareness. One is called the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale - Short Form (IUS - 12). This looks at how we feel about the uncertainty that problems can throw up for us. The other is the Maximizing Scale and Regret Scale (MSRS), which looks at how content we are with situations, and to what extent we experience the problem of seeking change and variety in our lives.

[Allow 10 minutes for participants to choose their preferred assessment tool, and to then complete. Following completion, facilitate a brief discussion on any thoughts or feelings resulting from the assessment tools].

Let's move onto our final objective for today:

3. Name, describe and apply different problem-solving theories and strategies.

The Transactional Model of Stress can be considered as a problem-solving theory and strategy in that it facilitates us to think through, describe and consider the problem and the resources available to managing that problem.

There are numerous other problem-solving theories and strategies. It is likely you already have your own problem-solving theories and strategies, developed over time. Some of these will be unique to you, or you may already be using one of the many well-known, recognised models.

Today, we will examine 2 different recognised models for problem-solving. The first is known as the GROW model. The second is known as the plan-do-check-act (PDCA) cycle or Shewhart cycle.

The GROW model (or process) is a simple method for goal setting and problem solving. It was developed in the United Kingdom by business coaches Graham Alexander, Alan Fine, and Sir John Whitmore⁴ and has been used extensively in corporate coaching from the late 1980s and 1990s. It uses the acronym of GROW to help a person think through possible solutions to a problem. The acronym is as follows:

⁴ Whitmore, John (1992). *Coaching for performance: GROWing human potential and purpose: The principles and practice of coaching and leadership. People skills for professionals* (4th ed.). Boston: Nicholas Brealey.

improve products and streamline production. It is a simple model, based on the four steps of plan–do–check–act. Figure 2 shows how the model can be represented in diagrammatic form:

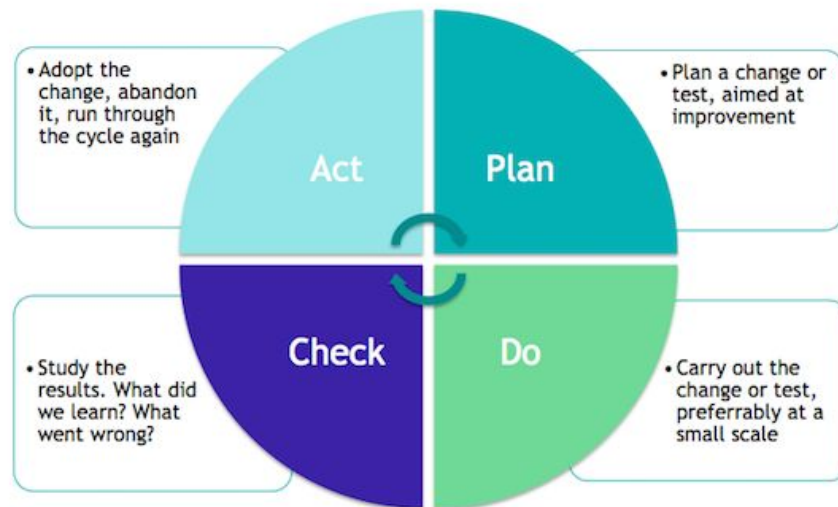


Figure 2: The plan–do–check–act cycle.

The model involves identifying a plan to respond to a problem. Part of the planning at this stage may well include defining and identifying what the problem is, as well as a planned action to respond.

The next step is to put into action the plan: to do what has been planned.

Following this, is the study and consideration of observations about the action taken: checking for the results of the doing and analysing the data that you now have.

This allows for an evaluation of what next steps could be taken. This is known as the act stage – what do you want to do as a result of the observations. At this point, you are then ready to plan again. Let’s consider this with an example to illustrate. Imagine the following problem. You have a bill to pay of \$500. That would have been fine a month ago. However, you have recently lost your job. Your partner is panicking about how this bill will be paid. They have no means to contribute to paying the bill.

The plan–do–check–act cycle can be applied as follows:

Plan – you plan to make the change of applying to the first job you see in an online job advert. This could help you to secure paid employment, so you have money to cover your bill.

Do – You complete the application and submit it.

Check – You check for any results, and receive an email to say you have been unsuccessful. You study and analyse the data. You discover that a few contacts of your applied for 50+ jobs before successfully securing paid employment.

Act – You make the decision to repeat the cycle, this time after seeking some careers guidance, honing and updating your CV and applying for more than one job.

Task:

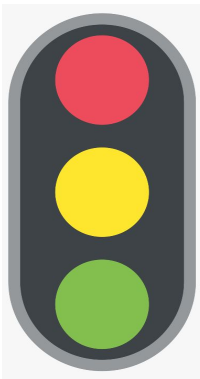
This will be our last task for today before we review our learning using the traffic light system.

I'd like you to take a moment to recall a problem you recently faced and already took action with.

Now consider if you used any aspect of plan–do–check–act cycle in the way you approached this problem. How might the plan–do–check–act cycle have helped you in your problem solving?

[Allow 5 – 10 minutes for participants to note down on paper their responses. Then facilitate a 5 -10-minute discussion as a whole group to share responses].

So, finally, using a simple traffic light system, I'd like you to evaluate your own learning today. For each objective, you are going to decide whether you feel you are:



RED / STOP	You have made no progress in learning this and are still at a "standstill."
AMBER	You have some understanding but aren't quite ready to apply it yet.
GREEN / GO	You have a good grasp of this objective and are ready to go and apply this learning in the real world.

1. Recognise and describe common problems that we face in interpersonal relationships

RED **AMBER** **GREEN**

2. Examine the psychology of problem development including our own psychological responses to problems using the framework of the transactional model of stress.

RED **AMBER** **GREEN**

3. Name, describe and apply different problem-solving theories and strategies.

RED **AMBER** **GREEN**

What do you want to do as a result of your learning today?

Thank you to everyone for your engagement and participation in the session. I hope you have learnt some useful ideas that can be applied in your daily life.