Chapter 8.  
Problem Solving

Previous chapters discussed how unhelpful thought patterns lead to feelings of depression, anger, or being overwhelmed. When clients are feeling this way, it is often hard to see potential solutions that will help change the situation into a more positive or hopeful one. In this section, we present a five step technique that will facilitate the development of more alternatives and options for managing a situation or solving a problem. The example on page 90 is as follows.

Sally is a recent widow who recently started to attend a grief support group at the suggestion of her friend Luisa. Luisa provides Sally’s transportation each week since Sally does not drive. This week, Luisa told Sally that she could not take her. Sally ended the conversation feeling alone and sad.

Step 1: Defining the problem

The first task is to define the problem as specifically as possible. This step can often be the most challenging, as sometimes several different problems can be embedded into one. Clients need to sort out each problem and pick the one that appears to carry the greatest distress.

Sally lists her problems:
1. getting to the support group.
2. finding an alternative activity.
3. managing her feelings of loneliness and sadness. 

Sally decides that she is quite committed to getting to the support group and feels more distressed about having no transportation than the other two problems listed.
Step 2: Brainstorming

Brainstorming is the step where potential solutions to a problem are proposed. The key to brainstorming is NOT to evaluate each potential solution, but just allow suggestions to be presented. Sally came up with the following options to address the problem of getting to her support group:

1. I can walk to the Senior Center.
2. I can ask a neighbor for a ride.
3. I can drive myself.
4. I can call taxi.
5. I can ask my daughter for a ride.
6. I can invite the support group to my house.
7. I can call a support group member and ask him/her for a ride.
8. I can NOT go.

Step 3: Evaluate solutions

This step allows possible solutions to be evaluated based on any criteria you want to use. For example, clients may evaluate whether they have time to devote to one solution or another, or they may evaluate each solution based on money, energy, or how much help they would need from other people, etc. As each item is examined some of the alternatives proposed may seem unrealistic, and therefore will get a lower rating than others. In rating the options, the client
may assign numbers to them, or may choose to just use + or -'s to represent the evaluation. Sally's rating is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS</th>
<th>RANK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I can walk to the Senior Center.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I can ask a neighbor for a ride.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I can drive myself.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I can call a taxi.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I can ask my daughter for a ride.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I can invite the support group to my house.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I can call a support group member and ask him/her for a ride.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I can NOT go.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, Sally's possible solutions, in order, look like this:

1. I can ask a neighbor for a ride.
2. I can call a support group member and ask him/her for a ride.
3. I can call a taxi.
4. I can walk to the Senior Center.
5. I can invite the support group to my house.
6. I can ask my daughter for a ride.
7. I can drive myself.
8. I can NOT go.

You can see from Sally's rating that she believes that asking a neighbor for a ride is her #1 choice, followed by asking a fellow support group member, and then calling a taxi, and so on.
Step 4: Select one alternative

Clients should select the first alternative solution and see what develops.

After Sally decided that asking her neighbor for a ride was the best option, she called her and found out that her car was not working.

Step 5: Select another alternative

Step 5 instructs clients to go back to the list of options and select another alternative.

When Sally could not find her list of support group members’ phone numbers, she remembered that the Senior Center is just six blocks away, so she decided to walk.

Clients complete an example on their own

Pg 94 begins a step by step worksheet that instructs clients how to problem solve. These steps include:

Step 1: What was the problem? What did you need to solve?

Step 2: Brainstorm solutions. Remember, do not worry about the quality of each solution. Just write down whatever comes to mind:

Step 3: Evaluate and rank your choices. Start by picking out the most realistic, then the second, then the third, and so on.

What criteria are you going to use to rank order your choices?

Step 4: Choose an alternative.

What are you willing to try?

What happened?
What thoughts do you have about the way you solved your problem?

How are you feeling about your problem now?

**Step 5: Choose another alternative, if needed.**

What alternative are you willing to try now?

What happened?

What thoughts do you have about the way you solved your problem?

How are you feeling about your problem now?

The next page contains another 5 column UTD for you to copy for use with your clients.
Chapter 9.
Imagery

Imagery is another tool to manage intense feelings as a “picture” of the stressful situation and its possible solutions are created in one’s mind. The relaxation exercise from “Feeling Tools” demonstrated one type of imagery. Recall that we asked clients to select a safe place they could visit for a short while in their imagination. These same visualization skills can help challenge client’s perceptions of the outcomes of stressful situations and manage intense emotions.

Identifying negative beliefs through imagery

The following presents steps towards using imagery to challenge beliefs. This is found on page 101 of the client manual.

A. Think about particular situation that has produces intense, negative emotions. Briefly describe that event.

B. What emotions were present?

C. Now sit back, placing arms and legs in a comfortable position, and imagine the situation. Try to capture all of the components of the situation, the people, the sights, the sound, the colors, etc. Try to determine what was specifically problematic; isolate the thoughts that occur. Record those thoughts in the center column of a UTD.

D. The intensity of the images often cause clients to “revisit” the upsetting situation. Encourage them to think of some calming images before continuing with the exercise.

Challenging negative beliefs through imagery
A. Instruct clients to return to the stressful situation they just visited through imagery. Review the negative thoughts. Were any perceived outcomes catastrophized? Ask clients to rate how strongly they believe this outcome will occur (from 0 - 100%).

B. Instruct clients to return to the situation, this time picturing the outcome as they perceive it will happen. What does it look like? Ask for a description. Are the original perceptions likely? Ask clients to rate how strongly they believe in their original outcome at this moment (from 0 - 100%)?

C. Can they replace the unhelpful beliefs in column 2 of the UTD with more helpful ones (column 4)?

D. What about their emotions? Instruct clients to record any changes in their emotions considering their new perceptions (column 5).

Imagery can also be useful in helping clients to prepare for a stressful event. For example, if a client becomes anxious or sad about a meeting with someone encourage use of the imagery exercise to practice and plan the kinds of things he/she would like to say. Imagery skills also come in handy when clients want to practice being assertive before they are placed in a “face to face” situation.