

Solving Problems Together in a Relationship



Have you ever had the feeling that the more you talk about something the more stuck you become? I hear this a lot in my work with men and with couples. Education about being a responsible problem-solver may have been lacking in your upbringing and, if so, you will usually resort to those patterns that are most familiar — those from your family of origin. The following problem-solving model works equally well within families and in the outside world. It is really just basic common sense.

Step 1 Have a positive attitude

It is important to embark on problem-solving with a positive attitude about the value of the exercise. If you come to it expecting to win at all costs, not prepared to compromise or listen to the other person's opinion, it is not even worth beginning the process. Carry out an attitude check for yourself and run the Respect Test. Some good questions to ask yourself are:

Am I prepared to listen without interrupting?

'Will I be able to handle hearing issues that may be difficult to hear without getting into self-righteous anger and abuse?

Do I want us both to win and come out of this situation respecting each other, or do I want to be the winner even if it is at the other person's expense?

Step 2 Make a statement of goodwill

Where there have been difficulties in resolving problems in the past it is easy to bring the memories of these circumstances to the current situation. Escalating a situation and getting away from the issue by dragging up past issues, by blaming and not by listening, may be a common pattern. A statement of goodwill works as an aid to putting us in a positive frame of mind to meet with others in the pursuit of mutual respect. Examples of such statements are:

'I care about myself, and I care about you. I want this to work out for both of us.'

'I know that we have not been able to resolve issues in the past, and I do feel worried that my old pattern may emerge again, but I am committed to working respectfully with you this time.'

Step 3 Choose a time and place

Important issues need to be addressed with the significance they deserve. It is impossible to give the necessary weight to issues if the time and place creates interference. For example, avoid distractions

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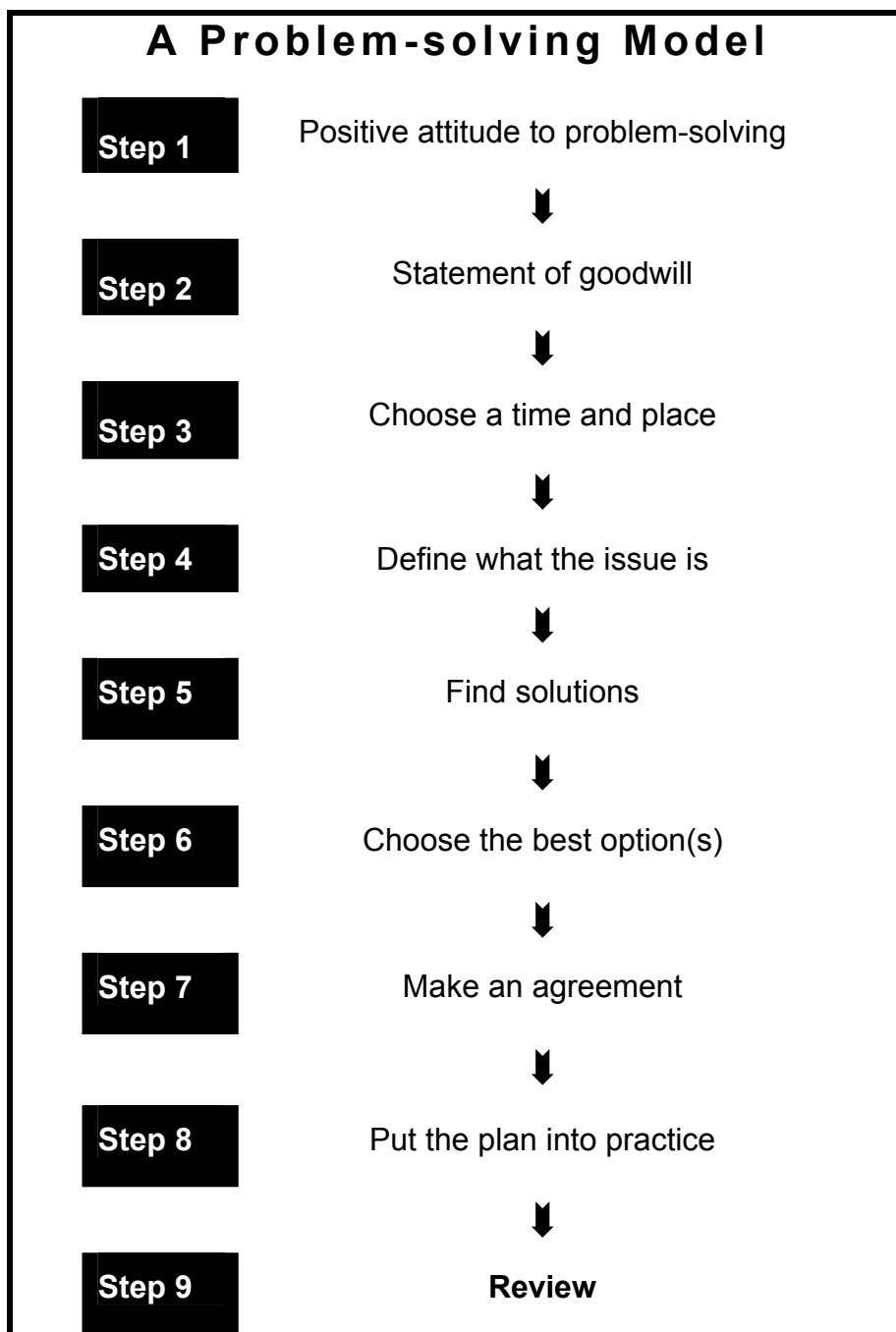


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such as the television, radio or stereo, children, visitors, phone calls, and so on. It also means not being in a drug-induced state (alcohol included). Avoid busy times such as before or during meals or meetings, or when there is insufficient time to complete the discussion.

I suggest you choose a time and place where you will not be interrupted, and where you can feel safe and comfortable. Set a time limit on the discussion, depending upon the issue involved.



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Step 4 Define what the issue is

Many men and women find it valuable to put time into the “What’s Going On?” chart before coming to a problem-solving meeting. This helps to remind the person of the complexities lying behind any issue. It also invites a clarity of expression which is often missing when there are emotionally charged issues to resolve. Keep the statement of the issue brief and keep it to one issue. One of the major problems in resolving conflict is that people try and deal with twenty problems at the same time. Let me tell you, this does not work.

Make a statement — such as ‘I have concerns about ...’

State what you are feeling — “When you ... I feel ...’

Make a statement about what you would like to be different — such as ‘I would like ...’

Notice that all three of these statements avoid the traps of blaming, getting off the topic and dishonest communication.

Allow equal time without interruption to talk about what you want to be different. Some people use a watch to time the encounter. Stay on the topic.

Step 5 Find solutions

This is the fun part of the exercise. It involves writing down all of the possible options that exist for resolving the issue. They should be as creative as possible and not restricted to what has been done before. I encourage people to sit down with a large piece of paper and write for as long as possible. This is not a time to evaluate whether these options will work or not, just an opportunity to write down what all the options are.

Step 6 Choose the best option or options

Go through the list deleting the options that are not feasible. Select the best remaining two or three and talk about these in more depth.

Step 7 Make an agreement

Be very clear about what each of you is committing yourself to. I encourage people to make a written note of these — include the date, when it will happen, where, how long and what reward will be at the end of a successful resolving of the issue. Put a review date on it so that you can come back in a month or two and evaluate how successful you were.

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Step 8 Put the plan into practice

Step 9 Review

How did it work? What is different? 'What changes have you and others noticed? 'Was it fully successful, partially successful or a failure? Do you deserve to celebrate your success? If the issue hasn't been resolved then go back to the start and work through the process again.

Alec (27) came back to a group in a very excited mood after we had explained this technique of problem-solving. He took time to tell the group how he worked through an issue with his partner Katie (25.), an issue he saw as major in respect of his relationship with her.

The issue which he had got stuck on was to do with Katie's contact with her extended family. Alec found it hard to be around Katie's family, feeling that they were critical of him. He often felt jealous when she talked about what her brothers and sisters were up to, and what her parents thought about this and that. Alec would shrug and try to ignore Katie when she talked in this way, walking out on her midway through a conversation. He was finding the situation intolerable and was actively discouraging Katie from having contact with her family.

Alec used the problem-solving outline, beginning with stating how much he cared for Katie and valued their relationship. He stated the problem as how difficult he found it when Katie talked about her family.

They both worked through the 'What's Going On?' chart, with Alec becoming aware that he was isolated from his own family and feeling that Katie had a new family now (him), and that he was afraid of what she was saying to them about him. Alec was aware of how he was trying to control and set limits on Katie's contact with her family, something he recognised that Katie was rebelling against.

Katie acknowledged how she felt about this controlling behaviour, and how embarrassed she felt when they were at family gatherings or visits to her family. Katie told Alec her family did not dislike him but thought of him as aloof and hard to get to know. They came up with the following list of options:

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- *cut the phone off, leave each other;*
- *avoid family gatherings;*
- *Alec to be more sociable;*
- *Alec to contact and heal the difference with his family; for Katie to go alone to family gatherings;*
- *Alec and Katie to talk with Katie's family about his difficulties;*
- *for Katie's family to adopt Alec as their son;*
- *Alec and Katie to invite Katie's family over for a barbecue lunch.*

They agreed that Alec would make contact with his own family and begin to heal the hurts that existed there, that he would put energy into getting to know Katie's family, and that they would host a family barbecue. These things happened and Alec felt accepted by his in-laws who got to know a different side of him. He also arranged to go fishing with Katie's father in a couple of weeks' time.

As you can see, this model can work. What it does is clarify the real issues, giving an opportunity to resolve damaging patterns of behaviour in relationships. My suggestion is that you start with a small problem or issue that won't be too hard to resolve and get used to the framework. Once you have got into the habit of using the model you can tackle more major issues affecting your relationships with others.

Communicating honestly, resolving problems so that both parties are winners, and standing up against the history of male ownership of others all of these are vital skills for living a non-abusive lifestyle. As you begin to relate to others in a more honest way you will be surprised at the depth that this will bring to your relationships. These skills require practice; at first you may find them awkward. Resolve to keep going because, like any new skill, it takes time to get it right. Talk to your support team if you are struggling; enlist their help and support.



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If you have children you will be passing on to them, through your actions, appropriate and useful ways to be with others. They will quickly acquire these skills through seeing you acting differently. As George said:

'I wanted to break the cycle so that my kids aren't afraid of me. I want to talk to the kids instead of lecturing them about what's going on, how I feel, what I'm doing. I want them to have the chance at getting it right without going through the struggle I have had to in order to survive in a relationship.'

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