



SOLUTION -FOCUSED

PROBLEM SOLVING

Finding Solutions *Without*
Getting Lost in the Problem

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**FOCUS ON THE SOLUTION,
NOT ON THE PROBLEM."**

– JIM ROHN

Introduction

Generally, when we have a problem, the focus is on what's missing – what is wrong. In doing so, we risk getting lost in the deficits, which may lead to more challenges and fewer solutions.

The solution-focused model looks at problem solving from a more positive perspective. Rather than focusing on deficits, the focus is on strengths, skills, experiences, resources, and support.

This problem solving method helps us home in on what we bring to the problem and ways to address it, rather than we are lacking. The problem becomes manageable and the process empowering.

Discover the steps in the solution-focused model and ways to apply it to your daily life. The process lends itself to most issues and the more you apply it the easier it is to use.

Using questions to identify details, you're guided step-by-step to think through your experiences and draw from your repertoire of strengths to address the challenge.

The result is less time focused on the many aspects of the issue and more time actually getting to a solution.

Learn more about the questions you can use to find your solution and how to apply each one:

- The Stages of Change
- The Basic Concepts of Solution-Focused Problem Solving
- The Exploring Change Question
- The Coping Question
- The Scaling Question
- The Miracle Question

Let's begin.

Stages of Change

Before problem solving, it's helpful to get clear about your intentions. What are you looking for from the process? **What changes will you need to make as you apply your solution?**

There are many stages in the change process, so being clear about what you need from the experience is important. It may save you a lot of time.

There are costs and benefits involved in making changes. Follow the story of Karen as she uses the information to start an exercise program.

STAGE OF CHANGE	THINGS TO CONSIDER
<p>Precontemplation</p> <p>“My doctor told me I need to start exercising to build up my strength.”</p>	<p>At this point Karen is only considering this at the request of her doctor. She is not seriously thinking about it, but it is lingering in the back of her mind.</p>
<p>Contemplation</p> <p>“I am having trouble getting up the stairs. Maybe I should see what options are available.”</p>	<p>Gathering information is the goal in this stage of change. Researching alternatives, asking for recommendations, calling to ask questions. Karen is now actively thinking about the recommendation.</p>
<p>Determination</p> <p>“My weakness is keeping me from doing things I like to do. I can’t keep up with my friends when we go to the mall. I need to make some changes.”</p>	<p>Her mind is made up. She is ready to make a commitment. Karen develops a plan to begin.</p>

<p>Action</p> <p>She buys a pair of good shoes, finds a class that fits her schedule, and begins the new regimen.</p>	<p>Karen joins a gym and starts classes three days a week. This plan works for her and she feels better after only a few weeks.</p>
<p>Maintenance</p> <p>Keeping up the schedule can be difficult with other things competing for time. Karen follows through, but it is hard some weeks.</p>	<p>She reminds herself how good it feels to take the stairs without stopping and go out with friends with no concern for how she will keep up. It keeps her motivated.</p>
<p>Relapse</p> <p>Holidays come up, she has to work late, or she gets sick and misses her classes for two weeks. It is hard to get back in the routine, but she is ready to take action again.</p>	<p>Karen asks for support and encouragement from her friends. A woman who takes the same class offers to give her a ride to help get back in the groove. She moves back into a routine without more delays.</p>

Cost and Benefits of Change

When Karen considers the costs and benefits of starting and returning to the exercise program, it helps her make the necessary changes. She is aware of the negative consequences she experienced before she began and the positive consequences after she began exercising.

By keeping these in costs and benefits in mind, she is more motivated to keep it up (maintenance stage) even when it became difficult.

Relapse is something to remember, as it happens in many situations. **If you plan for how to deal with relapses in advance, it is easier to get back to the action stage faster.**



Karen knew she needed support and encouragement to return to the regimen. By asking for help when she needed it, she was back to her classes without further delay.

*"THE PROBLEM CONTAINS
THE SOLUTION."*

– MICHAEL BIERUT

Basic Concepts of Solution-Focused Problem Solving

The underlying premise of the solution-focused method is empowerment.

Solution-focused problem solving emphasizes solutions to problems, not the problem.

These tools help you focus on the times when things are better. Knowing that you have these skills to address obstacles, you will be more confident in your ability to resolve your challenges.

The Strengths Perspective

Solution-focused problem solving is based on a strengths perspective. You focus on your strengths, skills, experience,



resources, and support rather than getting lost in the problem.

It may require a shift in your thinking, but the process you're learning here makes that easier. If you slip back into focusing on the problem, it may mean that you're not ready to make a change yet.

Layers of Support

In this model we will explore support and resources that can make a solution doable.

There are two layers of support to consider:

1. **The Inner-Circle.** The inner-circle of support includes those you're close to – your friends, family, and neighbors – and people like your

babysitter or nanny, housekeeper, pet-sitter – others that you rely on and could call on for help most of the time. These are your go-to people for quick responses.

2. **The Outer-Circle.** The outer-circle of support includes others that you may be less involved with. This may include those you work or go to church with. Your medical provider, the doorman at work, and more are also included in this outer circle of support.

There may be times when you come up with a possible solution that has worked before but need to find a support person to make it happen. Checking these layers of support will help you identify possibilities.

**“IF YOU DEFINE THE
PROBLEM CORRECTLY,
YOU ALMOST HAVE
THE SOLUTION.”**

– STEVE JOBS

Tools for Solution-Focused Problem Solving

In this section, you'll learn how to apply the tools of the trade. There are four questions you can use to walk through the process.

There are times when you need someone to bounce things off of or get another perspective. Coaches and counselors are often helpful in those situations. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. It's the smart thing to do!

The questions are designed to help you identify what you have available to solve the problem by looking at a time when things were better.

The Exploring Change Question

This is fairly basic, but it is worth starting off with this before using one of the other questions. Make a list of things you've done to address the issue.

In Karen's case of finding a way to get more exercise, the list may look like this by the time she is ready to take action:

- Talked to friends about their exercise routine
- Explored the workout room in our building
- Looked at websites for local programs
- Called someone at work about a walking club during lunch

With these things in mind, Karen will recognize that she has made some steps toward her goal. This allows her to continue to move forward without beating herself up for lack of progress. The list also gives her a chance to note anything of interest she found out in each step.

Staying motivated can be hard, so anything you can do to acknowledge progress is helpful, especially when it's in writing.

The Scaling Question

The Scaling Question is perhaps your most versatile question. It is content-free and not related to the problem. **It makes no assumptions about the direction you need to take, and you can pick from the infinite possibilities available.**

Karen may have used this in the contemplation stage of change regarding her physical discomfort before the exercise program.

Karen may ask: "On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being as good as things get, and 1 being as bad as things get, where am I today?"

And respond: "Today, I am at a 3."

Then Karen may ask: "What will it look like when I am at a 4 - what will be different?"

And respond: "I will walk up the stairs with less pain and keep up with my friends when we are shopping."

Another way to use the scaling question...

Karen may ask: "On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being as good as things get, and 1 being as bad as things get, where am I today?"

And respond: "Today, I am at a 3."

Then Karen may ask: "When things were better, what was going on? What was I doing that worked?"

And respond: "I was walking a mile each day after work with my husband. But, it is winter now, so that is not an option."

In this scenario, Karen would need to ask another question since that solution is not possible at this time.

She would ask: "What did I learn from walking after work that I can apply to finding a way to exercise now?"

And respond: "I found that if I went as soon as I got home, it gave me the energy to make dinner, clean the kitchen, and I slept better."

With this new information, Karen may decide to join a class after work instead of after dinner.

Another way of using the scaling question is to measure something on a daily basis and look at what was helpful on the days that things were better.

Karen monitors her energy level after lunch (2:00 PM) and after she gets home (6:00 PM).

Exercise: Energy level AM and PM 1 (Lowest) - 5 (Highest)						
MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
3	1.5	3	2	3	3.5	3
5	1	4.5	2	3	5	2

Question: What was different on the days my energy was higher in the evening?

Response: Days of exercise class

The Coping Question

This question is great for getting out of crisis mode or when you're overwhelmed by the problem. The purpose is to change the focus from overwhelming elements of the problem to strengths, skills, and experience you have to solve the challenge.

You recall how you coped with similar experiences. What worked? What you can

apply from that situation, even if it's not the total solution to your current issue.

Consider Lara's issue: Lara's husband is going out of town on business for two weeks. She has two school-age children who have to be dressed, fed, and on the bus by 7:30, and she has to be at work by 8:30. Her husband always gets the kids ready in the morning, and she is overwhelmed by the thought of doing all of this on her own for two weeks.

Lara starts with the exploring change question: "What have I tried to solve the problem?"

1. Joe (husband) spoke to boss about sending someone else. That won't work.
2. I asked to work from home those two weeks. My request was denied.

3. I tried to find a short-term nanny with no success.

The coping question might be a good one for this situation. She then asks herself:

“Have I had ever dealt with something like this before? How did I cope with it?”

“When Joe was in the hospital for a week two years ago, Jamie (sister) came over and stayed with us the whole week. She took care of the kids in the morning while I got myself ready for work. Since she moved, that won’t work now.”

This is a possible solution, but another support person will be needed to make it work. When looking for support people, you begin by thinking about your inner circle – friends, family, and neighbors.

If there is nobody in the inner-circle, you check the outer-circle of support, a less personal support network. That is usually professional organizations, medical team, people you work with or go to church with, online communities, and more.

“Is there someone else who can help? Any other family, friends or neighbors? Who else is in my network that may be able to help?”

“All my family live out of state now. My friends have jobs and most of the neighbors also work. There is a girl (Susie) who lives down the street that has babysat for us before. It might be possible to get her to come over or stay at night to help.”

Ultimately, your goal is to develop a plan of action.

The final questions is: “What happens next to explore this possibility?”

“Call Susie’s mom to see what she thinks. If she agrees, talk with Susie about details.”

Do it!

If you have no previous experience that applies to a situation, think of others you know that have coped with similar issues. Talk to them about it to get ideas. If necessary, ask online if there’s a community page in your area. Get creative!

The Miracle Question

The miracle question is a way of getting outside the problem by suspending reality for a few minutes to dream of a time when things will be better. It can go astray, so follow up questions may be necessary.

Chris has been struggling with health-related challenges for a few years. He's taking his medication, but the side effects are very difficult to tolerate. He feels hopeless about getting long-term results.

In Chris's situation, the miracle question would go something like this:

"Suppose tonight...after you go to sleep... you wake up and your health issues are gone. What would that look like?"

"My blood sugar would be 120 - no pain in my feet - I would have lots of energy and no more depression."

Dig deeper: "What else?"

"I would be working in my shop with Lincoln, my dog, looking at the mountains, and listening to Colorado Public Radio."

Then: "Who else would notice this change?"

"My wife would notice. She would notice that I'm not on the couch watching TV all weekend. I am not as grumpy. I'm finally working on things she asked me to do six months ago."

And: "What difference would all this make?"

"I would get more done and feel good about it. My wife would be happy and when she is happy, everyone is happy. Maybe we would even have sex!"

And: "What was going on in your life the last time things were like this for you?"

"I was getting a lot of exercise, preparing for a two-day bike tour. I spent several hours each week training for that. I felt better and got more done - barely watched TV all week. I was definitely less grumpy because I felt better. And the wife and I were more involved in things together."

Finally: "How can you recreate some of this in your life now?"

"I could dust the bike off and plan a day to ride on the weekend. I would have to put some thought into it since we have moved, but there are a lot of riding trails nearby. Maybe the wife would come with me, even if she doesn't ride."

*"EVERY PROBLEM HAS A SOLUTION.
YOU JUST HAVE TO BE
CREATIVE ENOUGH TO FIND IT."
– TRAVIS KALANICK*

Putting Solution-Focused Problem Solving To Work for You

So – this is a lot to digest at once. Just remember to choose which question seems right for your situation.

Here are some reminders:

1. Consider where you are in the change process – what stage are you in?
2. Remember, this process helps you look for experience, strengths/skills, support and resources you can use to solve the problem.

3. Always start with the Exploring Change Question. Make a list of what you've already accomplished.
4. The Coping Question is good to use when feeling overwhelmed or in crisis. Remember to dig deeper when necessary: ask yourself what, when, how, and why.
5. The Scaling Question works with things you want to measure and/or compare. What is going on now? When it was better, what was happening? How can I do that again?
6. The Miracle Question is not right for every situation. If you're feeling overwhelmed, use the coping question. When you need to look at concrete information about things,

use the scaling question.

7. The Miracle Question requires a lot of work and some finesse to get to the realistic aspects of what is better. Why is it important to you? How are you or have you made this happen before? Can you do any of that now?
8. Come up with your next steps and do it! If it doesn't work, try again.

Try this solution-focused problem solving method with your next challenge and resolve your issue faster and with less stress!

**“WHATEVER THE PROBLEM,
BE PART OF THE SOLUTION.
DON’T JUST SIT AROUND
RAISING QUESTIONS
AND POINTING OUT
OBSTACLES.”**

– TINA FEY