

Information About the Use of the HowsYourHealth Problem-Solving Website

Thousands of people have used this website to begin to solve problems. The following Table lists the most common problems they listed and examples of general methods they have chose to solve the problem (with actual examples in parentheses).

| Most Common Problems* | General Methods Listed to Begin to Solve the Problems |
|--|--|
| Concerns about Weight, Exercise, Eating Right | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting or reducing some foods (such as “junkfood”) • Increasing exercise (such as walking each day) • Switching to better foods and drinks (water, not soda) |
| Having Better Relationships and Fitting Better Into Social Situations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personally changing an attitude and ways of reacting to others (such as listening and respecting) • Reorganizing daily actions (such as go out with friends and calling family) |
| Managing Pain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise in general or targeted at pain (such as exercise to lose weight or to increase belly muscles for back pain) • Regular use of the right medicines (such as Tylenol-acetaminophen before pain gets out of control) • Stress reductions (such as by meditation or posture) |
| Concerns About Emotions: Stress, Depression, Anxiety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personally changing an attitude and ways of reacting to others (such as being less critical of self, breathing deeply when angry, not taking everything personally) • Getting healthier physically (by losing weight, exercising regularly, eating better) |
| Money | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing debt (by making a budget and sticking with it) • Saving more (such as \$100 a month or eating more at home) • Seeking employment (by setting a job application goal) |
| Bad Habits: Smoking, Drinking Too Much | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quit or reduce (such as “cold turkey”, reduce 3 cigarettes a week) • Substitute (such as get nicotine patches and use them) |

* These six problems were listed by most people (more than 8 out of 10 or 80%)

Most people know that listing a problem and a method that might solve the problem is the easy part of problem-solving. The harder part is building an actual plan to make the method work. Problem-Solving is designed to help you make a method that will work for you.

For more helpful information about PROBLEM-SOLVING we include below more information from thousands of people like you.

Problems Are Made To Solve

The moment we are born, we are solving problems. Poor problem solving is a threat to health and well-being. By the time we are in our teens about 70% of us report that we are good problem-solvers.

Problem-solving is a Way of Life

Some problems are technically difficult to solve, such as doing your own heart surgery. Other problems are personally difficult, such as losing weight or keeping a New Year's resolution. Most of our everyday problems are of the personal type.

How we solve these personal problems greatly influences our health and our ability to relate to others. For example, the first figure (following page) illustrates the habits and behaviors of good problem-solvers aged 9-18 compared to those who have difficulty most or all of the time solving problems. Poor problem-solving youths are most likely to engage in risky behaviors (30% versus 10%), have poor health habits (70% versus 40%), and withdraw into the passive world of television (50% versus 30%).

The second and third figures illustrate the increased personal and difficulties and concerns facing poor problem-solving youths compared to good problem-solvers.

In adulthood poor problem solvers are usually not very confident in managing their health problems. We have previously shown in Chapter 3, "As Good As It Gets," how poor self-management results in excessive use of the hospital and emergency room and a greater risk of harm.



Figuring out how to do my heart surgery was more difficult than I thought.

I guess I'll just try to lose some weight



Figure 1

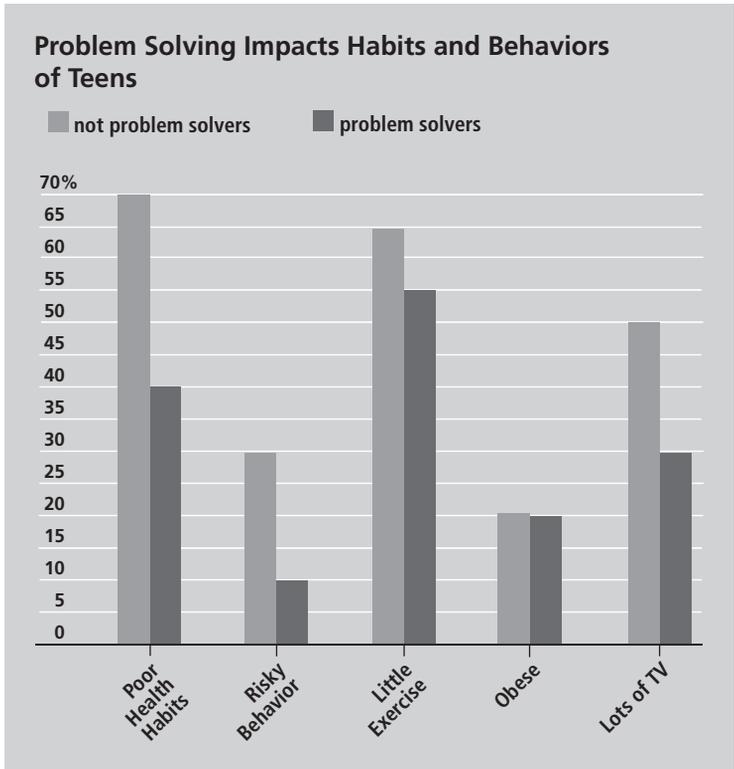
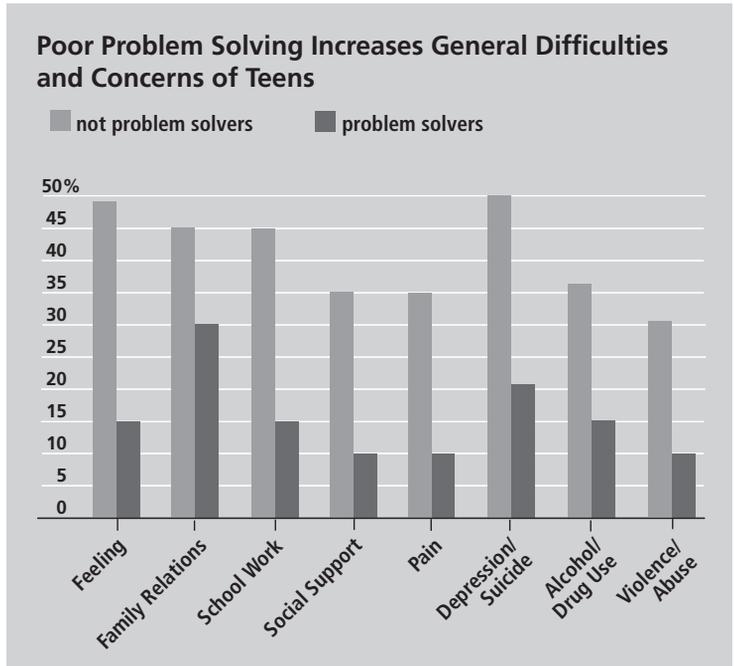


Figure 2



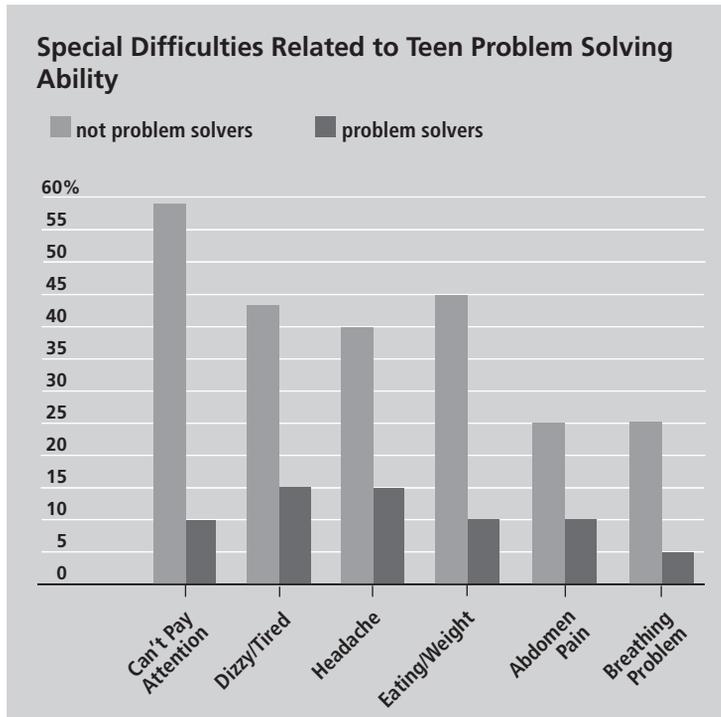


Figure 3

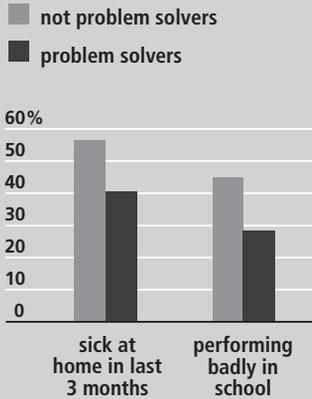
Problem-Solving Made Simple

Before an infant can speak it solves problems by testing and mimicking. Before risking injury or failure, a child learns to limit choices based on personal experience or the advice of others. By the time a child reaches adolescence, he or she has had the opportunity to collect a great deal of good (and bad) experiences.

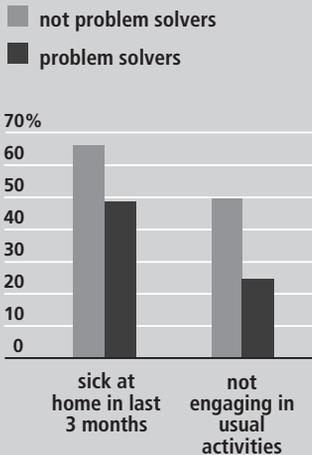
Without much thought, adults take many actions and make many decisions to solve problems. But some issues and problems are more difficult than others. For example, consider the problems of pain and emotional distress.

We all experience aches and pains. Most aches and pains go away in a few days. Our bodies have a wonderful capacity to heal. We may help our bodies by changing activities, just waiting (“tincture of time”), or taking aspirin, acetaminophen, or similar non-prescription pain relievers.

Difficulties Coping with Pain and Emotional Distress by Adolescents



Difficulties Coping with Pain and Emotional Distress by Adults



We all experience emotional distress. Emotional distress also often goes away without treatment.

However, for many people, aches and pains and emotional distress are more persistent and today's most effective medicines will not make the pain permanently disappear. For example, about 1 in 10 (or 10%) of Americans over the age of 14 begin almost every day with bothersome pain and emotional stress.

Youths who begin the day with bothersome pain and emotional distress have poor school performance; adults spend many days unable to work. It is not a nice way to live.

However, among these bothered and distressed adolescents and adults, some manage to control the situation better than others. These two figures show what happens to adolescents and adults who have persistent pain and significant emotional distress. When people say that they are good-problem solvers, they suffer less from their pain and emotional distress than persons who are not as good at problem solving.

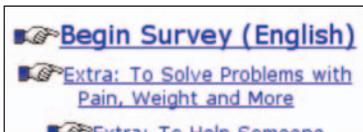
Our colleagues recently completed a study of problem-solving treatment for pain and emotional distress in the office practices of 50 physicians. Half of the patients received usual medical care. The other half used *HowsYourHealth* and received some coaching over the telephone about problem-solving and used a "seven step" approach.

Six months later the health of people using *HowsYourHealth* and problem solving techniques was much better than those patients who only received usual care. They also had better understanding of their pain and they felt in better control. They were more often "on the same page" with their doctors. The "Problem-Solving" tool on www.howsyourhealth.org is based on the results of this successful study.

How Does HowsYourHealth Problem Solving Work?

People who use this approach go to www.howsyourhealth.org. Instead of completing the HowsYourHealth survey, they use the “Problem-Solving Tool” as many times as they wish.

The majority of people who use the “Problem-Solving Tool” use it to better manage eating and weight. Other commonly chosen topics are pain, stress, and financial issues.



#1: Everyone Has Problems

Problems are part of living. Some problems are more important than others. Some are more difficult than others.

A problem may be how you manage schoolwork, work, your feelings, or pain. Not being able to manage and control problems is stressful, bad for health, and bad for how we feel.

Good Problem-Solving is useful now. Good Problem-Solving is useful in the future as new problems arise.

These next 10 screens will help you think about a problem and how to solve it. You can go backwards and forwards at any time to change what you have written.

On the next page we show six steps two people use to have healthier eating habits.

Readiness to Improve and Solve Problems

- I don't have problems (such as pain) or poor health habits (such as I don't exercise).
- I have some problems or poor health habits but I am not ready to improve them now.
- I have some problems or poor health habits and I want to start improving them.*
- I have tried to improve some problems or poor health habits but I have not been able maintain any improvement I made.*

* Go to www.howsyourhealth.org and complete "Problem Solving."



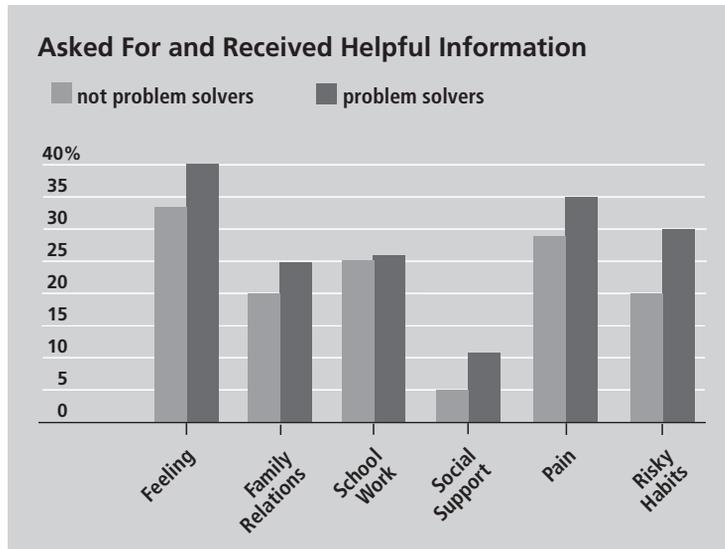
Responses of Two People Thinking About a Problem and Their Choices

| Problem-Solving Steps from the "Problem Solving Tool" | One Person | Another Person |
|--|---|---|
| 1) Identify the problems | Eating | Eating too much |
| 2) Break the problem into "bites" | Smaller portions. No fat and sugar. Exercise. | Don't add butter to bread. Choose fruits and vegetables. |
| 3) Choose the best "bite" | Smaller portions. | Choose fruits and vegetables. |
| 4) List possible steps to manage the "bite" | Have three balanced meals a day of smaller portions. Make sure the food groups are represented. Reward myself for achieving a goal. Discipline myself. | Have a fruit for breakfast. Have a vegetable or fruit for a morning snack. Have dried fruit in a bag for class time. Drink tomato juice. |
| 5) Choose the best step | Discipline myself to say "no." | Have a vegetable or fruit for a morning snack. |
| 6) What will you actually do, now? | Stop snacking on things. Stay away from the candy machine. Think twice before proceeding. Move more. | Bring a snack bag to work. Have a snack at 11 and lunch at 1. Vary snack bag items. Keep them cold. |

The seventh step has them designate two trusted "buddies" who will help them. Using "outsiders" adds definite value by helping us monitor our progress and assist us in devising strategies to change behavior and solve problems.

In contrast to adolescents who have difficulty solving problems, good problem-solvers more often talk to someone about their concerns AND report that the information was helpful. The next figure illustrates the comparison.

Teenagers who have problems with feelings, family relationships, and the other listed concerns can choose to ask for information from others or not. If they choose to ask, the information may or may not be helpful. Over time good problem solving teens are better at seeking and getting good information than poor problem-solving teens.



This 7-step problem-solving example might seem too simple or too boring to be effective. But scientific studies prove that it is really very effective.

Changing behavior and customary activities is very seldom sexy, fun, or exciting. Simple, clear goals and straight-forward methods to attain the goals will work most of the time.

Which Problems Matter Most?

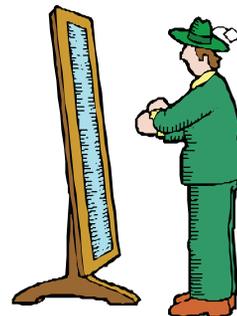
Let's presume you wanted to use this problem-solving method. On which problem or concern should you focus? The answer may not be as obvious as it seems.

First, ask yourself: "who labeled the problem a problem?"

Why Solving Problems By Yourself Seldom Works

Whenever I ask him, the man in the mirror reflects an excellent sense of taste and common sense.

Don't you agree, sir?



In America, we are often told by others that we have a problem or that we should be concerned about something. Every day you hear advertisers, friends, families, political leaders, employers, doctors, pharmacy companies, etc. tell you about a problem they want you to fix (or pay them to fix for you!) Who labeled the problem a problem?

Second, if the problem seems legitimate and has been labeled by a reliable source, ask yourself: "how big is the risk compared to other problems you have?"

For example, we mentioned that a diabetic patient often confronts many risks. The best way to manage such a long list is to work with a trusted health professional on two categories of actions.

1. What action must I take soon to avoid serious trouble? As a general rule, smoking and a blood pressure greater than 160 trumps most other risks.
2. What action can I take to reduce many risks at once? Quitting smoking is clearly the one thing smokers can do to greatly reduce their risk for heart disease, cancer, and premature death. If someone has a bit of high blood pressure or diabetes, weight loss and regular exercise can greatly reduce the need for medicines. Controlling the blood pressure and diabetes will greatly reduce risk for heart disease.

Finally, ask yourself: "what really matters?"

You have to be the judge of which problems matters most to you. Armed with the information from the first two questions you might find the "Problem-Solving Tool" useful for helping you sort out your competing choices and actions.

Good Problem-Solvers Can Be Made

We are not predestined to be good or bad problem solvers. Problem-solving is a skill that can be learned even by those who have endured difficulties for many years.

Mr. CV was a 60 year old man who had spent the past 6 years at home because of pain and a paralyzing fear that whenever he tried to do something he would become worse. The less he did, the greater the pain when he tried to do anything. He had been prescribed many pills for pain and depression but he found that the side-effects of the pills were more bothersome than the relief he obtained from the pills.

Literally by chance he was asked to complete HowsYourHealth. After completing HowsYourHealth he was telephoned by a nurse educator he had never met. She talked to him about his pain and emotional stress. Together they decided to take some very small steps to increase activity. Four telephone calls later his confidence had improved enough for him to propose activities that were even greater than either of them believed were possible when they developed the first problem-solving plan. One year later he applied for a job and is now a successful driver of commercial vehicles.

This true story is one of many that underscores one basic fact: we have the capacity to become good problem-solvers.

Postscript: Adult Problem Solving and Risk, Getting Teens to Problem Solve

Adult Problem Solving and Risk

Information about risk is distracting. Increasingly risk information is not just the product of advertisers and the office of homeland security. Even well-meaning health officials assault us with risk information to get our attention, make us seek treatment, or influence us to change our sinful ways.

For example, during the late 1990's the definition of an elevated blood sugar was lowered from 140 to 126, an elevated cholesterol from 240 to 200, and a worrisome blood pressure from 160 to 140. Even the measure of being seriously overweight (using the body mass index) was reduced from 27 to 25. These redefinitions resulted in a 30% increase in the number of Americans who have health problems compared to their older brothers and sisters.

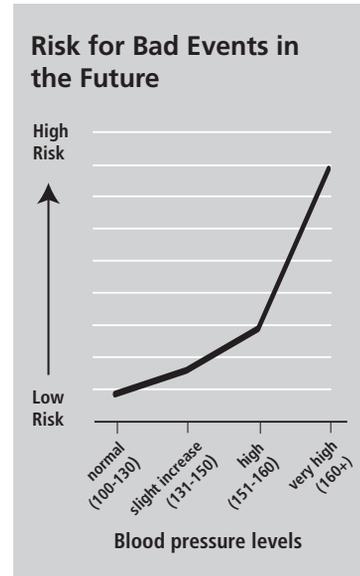
Remember that fear is the major reason we get risk wrong. Good problem-solving seldom results from a panic situation. Good problem-solving requires us to get risk right so we can focus on the most threatening problems. If we smoke, we need to remember that smoking trumps just about any risk. If we have an elevation of blood pressure (or cholesterol, or blood sugar, or weight), we need to remember this type of curve to keep the problem in perspective.

If we are now overweight and at risk for high blood pressure and diabetes later, we should not forget that you can do a lot now to avoid taking pills later. Experts estimate that when we are overweight and exercise regularly and adjust our diet, we can reduce our risk for diabetes and high blood pressure by 50%.

For example, if our upper blood pressure number (systolic) is 155, we can usually lower our high blood pressure:

- by just walking quickly for 20 minutes at least 4 days a week ($155 - 4 = 151$)
- by not adding any salt to foods and avoiding high salt foods ($151 - 5 = 146$)
- by losing weight when we are over weight. For every 10 pounds, ($146 - 4 = 142$) Lose another 10 pounds and we may be down below 140.

Now look at the risk curve again!! Nice work.



Teen Problem Solving

We include here part of the problem-solving approach from *HowsYourHealth*. It was designed by young teens. It was tested in 16 classrooms of an average public school system serving mostly white or hispanic teens. The average age of the teens was 15 years but ranged from 12-19.

Six weeks after the teens completed the problem-solving approach, 90% said that it had helped. They rated the impact as a “5” on a scale going from no impact (1) to a very high impact (10). Thirty-five percent had shown the problem-solving approach to other teens. Only 3% of the teens thought that the approach was difficult.

The section included here is designed to interest teens in “Problem-solving.”

You might have the following problem.

You have a big argument with a close friend. You think that he or she just did not understand you and would not listen to what you were saying. What would you do?

First, I would: _____

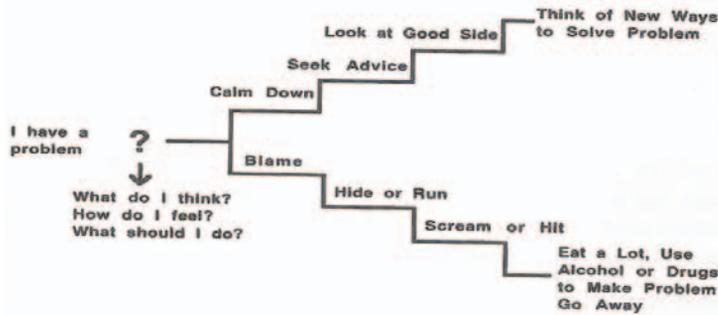
Second, I would: _____



“Up-the-Stair” Actions

Persons who have talked to many teenagers have found that the way in which teenagers solve problems affects the way teenagers feel. Study the diagram below.

Note how certain methods for dealing with a problem lead up-the-stairs toward better feelings and often solve the problem.



Also notice how other methods for solving serious problems go down the stairs to bad feelings and often made the problem worse. For example, yelling, or hitting is a down-the-stairs way of dealing with a problem.

Were your two methods for dealing with the problem "up-the-stairs" or "down-the-stairs" actions?

- Both were "up-the-stairs".
- Both were "down-the-stairs".
- One was "up the stairs" and one was "down-the-stairs".



When You Have a Problem, Which Stairway Do You Take? Down the Stairs Actions Can Be Dangerous

Some teenagers who feel depressed or sad have thought about harming themselves - even committing suicide.

Many persons think about suicide during a very bad time. Then they find better ways to solve the problem and the thought goes away. Teenagers sometimes need more time for the thought to go away. Therefore, they need to talk to someone about the problem.

Another example: Some teenagers use illegal and dangerous drugs. This is a problem because the drugs can

kill and often get the teenager in trouble with the law and they do not solve or change the problem.

Actions and Consequences

Quick actions lead to quick consequences. Quick actions can lead to quick harms. Talking things through gives you time to think about actions and consequences.

Most teenagers say they talk to their parents, other teenagers, and other adults about problem solving. Their ideas about problems, situations, actions, and consequences may be helpful. Therefore, in a class or a smaller group of friends, you may want to talk about your plans and exchange ideas.

Changing unwanted habits and feelings into desirable habits and feelings is a challenge. American teenagers find that getting answers to questions about their health, alcohol, drugs, and school is often easy. However, they say they have difficulty finding answers to questions about solving personal problems or about feeling better about themselves.

Let's talk about a way to look at personal problems – we call this problem-action-consequence thinking. All choices and actions have consequences. This means that how we act and react causes actions and reactions from others. When we yell, someone will get angry. When we blame, someone will get defensive. If you imagine how the other person might think, feel or act, you usually can understand how your actions will affect the other person.

Feelings and Actions are Connected

Can your problems lead to dangerous actions?

“Up the Stairs” Actions:

- Doing well
- Feeling good about yourself and others

“Down the Stairs” Actions:

- Hurting yourself and others – legal problems, damaged future
- Having sex – pregnancy, infections
- Drugs and drinking – legal problems, damaged future
- Avoiding and failing – school problems

Looking at Ourselves

Imagine a situation where someone has just given you a dirty look or has said something bad to you. OR

Imagine that you just noticed that you have lost all of your important notes for a school paper. You worked very hard on the notes for almost a week because it is your favorite class. If you get a good grade on the paper, you will get a good grade in the class.

For either the dirty looks or the lost homework, **what would you do?**

Answer “yes” if the statements below describe actions that are like you. Answer “no” if the actions are not like you at all.

1. I would think about something else: try to forget it; or would do something like watching TV or play a game to get it off my mind.
 yes no
2. I would just accept the situation because I know I cannot do anything about it.
 yes no
3. I would keep wishing this thing had never happened or that I could change what had happened.
 yes no
4. I would yell, scream or hit something.
 yes no
5. I would try to feel better by eating a lot, smoking, drinking beer or, using other drugs.
 yes no
6. I would find out who was to blame for the situation, and blame them (or myself) for making me go through this.
 yes no

If you have checked any Yes responses it means that you sometimes go “down-the-stairs” towards harmful actions and unhappy feelings. The problem may not be solved.

Try this exercise one more time, using the following situation:

You and a parent have been having a serious argument. Your parent is upset about several problems and you are told “Don’t you ever talk to me like that!”



What would you do?

1. I would try to see the good side of things and /or concentrate on something good that could come out of the situation.
 yes no
2. I would try to calm myself by talking to myself, praying, taking a walk, or just trying to relax.
 yes no
3. I would turn to other adult(s) to help me feel better.
 yes no
4. I would talk about how I was feeling to one of my friends.
 yes no
5. I would try to solve the problem directly.
 yes no
6. I would think of ways to solve the problem and talk to others to get more facts and information about the problem.
 yes no

If you said “Yes, this is what I might try to do,” you are “going up the stairs” toward solving problems and happier feelings.

This ends the sample from HowsYourHealth.

Additional information for teens about “How to Problem Solve,” “Knowing and Setting Limits,” and “Popular Pressure Lines” is available on the website.