

Session 9: Problem Solving.

Objectives:

In this session, the participant will:

- Learn the five steps to problem solving.
- Practice the steps using a problem the participant is experiencing now with eating less fat/calories or being more active.

To Do Before the Session

Have materials ready:

- New Keeping Track book and last sessions book in which you've made comments.
- Pages for Session 9 participant notebook.
- To record participant weight, Lifestyle Balance Update for each participant and or Group Session Update log begun at Session 1.

Weigh the participant. Graph.

Receive and review Keeping Track records. Discuss successes and difficulties in meeting goals. Review the last session, including home activities. Graph activity.

Did you have any trouble Keeping Track last week? Were you able to stay under your fat gram budget? Reach your goal for physical activity?

Graph physical activity.

Were you able to get rid of the problem food cue and add the positive cue for being more active? What problems did you have? What could you do differently next week? Praise all progress, no matter how small. Discuss barriers and problem solve with the participant.

Introduce the upcoming sessions and the problem solving process.

In the first eight sessions of the Lifestyle Balance program, you learned *how* to eat healthy and be more active. Healthy eating and being active will help you lose weight and be healthier in general. We also hope it will reduce your chance of developing diabetes.

But healthy eating and being more active means changing your habits, and making the

changes a permanent part of your lifestyle. Many things can get in the way of changing habits. That's what we'll focus on in the next several sessions. We will discuss:

- Negative thoughts,
- Slips and your reactions to slips (a slip is when you don't follow your eating or activity plan),
- Stress, and
- What people say and do (or "social cues").

All of these things can get in the way of healthy eating and being more active.

What are some examples of things that get in the way for you?

Name several problems that the participant has already discussed at earlier meetings, if possible. E.g., You wanted to go out for a walk, but it was too cold. You wanted to eat less fat, but your children wanted you to buy potato chips.

It's inevitable that problems like these will come up.

But problems can be solved. Today we're going to talk about the *process* of problem solving. This is the process that you and I will be working on together throughout the study.

Explain the five steps to problem solving.

In general, there are five steps to solving problems.

1. The first step is to **describe the problem in detail. Be specific.**

For example, instead of defining the problem as "I eat more fat than I should," be specific about the kinds of foods you eat that are high in fat--maybe high-fat desserts or red meats. Be specific about when you eat them, and describe these situations in detail. For example, you may eat high-fat desserts when you go to your mother's house and she offers them to you.

Also, **look at what led up to the problem.** Many problems involve a chain of actions: one action leads to another and then another and eventually this leads to inactivity or overeating. This is called an "**action (or behavior) chain.**"

Try to see the steps (or "links") in the action chain, including:

- **Things around you that cue (or prompt) you to eat or to be inactive.** We've talked about food and activity cues before. Examples are a bakery near where you work, television watching, or a carton of ice cream in your

freezer.

- **People in your life who don't support your efforts** to lose weight and be more active. Examples are a co-worker who offers you doughnuts every morning, children who insist that you deep-fry chicken rather than baking it, or a spouse who wants you to watch TV in the evening rather than go for a walk.
- **Thoughts or feelings that get in your way.** Examples are defeating thoughts like, "I'll never be disciplined enough to walk every night." Or feelings of boredom, stress, loneliness, or anger that lead to overeating.

Here is an example of an action chain *[refer to the diagram]*:

Sarah is a busy woman with a job and a family. Yesterday she was extremely busy at work and she **didn't eat lunch** because she didn't have time to go out. In the afternoon, her **boss was very critical** and demanding, and **Sarah felt stressed and anxious**. At the end of the day, Sarah **came home tired, upset, and hungry**. She **went right to the kitchen**. She immediately **saw a package of cookies on the kitchen counter**, and before she knew it, she **ate a fair number of the cookies**.

It may seem complicated to look at a problem in this much detail. But actually, it makes problem solving much, much simpler.

- You see that the real problem may not be the last step (eating the cookies) but rather all of **the things that led up to it** (like not eating lunch and so on).
- Uncovering the action chain will help you to **find the "weakest links" in the chain to break**. There's a saying that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. By naming all of the links in the chain, you will be able to find the weakest ones, the places where you can make a change most easily.

2. Step 2 is to **brainstorm your options**. What are all of the possible solutions to the problem? "Brainstorming" means to create a storm of ideas in your brain. Let the ideas pour out, no matter how crazy they may seem. Anything goes. The more ideas the better. And it's actually helpful to include some crazy, extreme ideas because it helps open your mind and stir up your creative juices.

By brainstorming, **you'll see that you aren't at all powerless to change your situation**. You have many options. Here are some possible ones for Sarah *[refer to work sheet]*.

3. Third, **pick an option to try**. Weigh the pros and cons of each option, and choose one (or it might be a combination of several) that is **very likely to work** and that **you can do**. In other words, be realistic. You should be confident that you will succeed.

It's also helpful to try to **break as many links as you can, as early as you can** in the chain.

For example, it will be much easier for Sarah to control her eating in the evening if she eats some lunch and doesn't arrive home hungry. It will be easier for Sarah to avoid eating too many cookies if she doesn't buy the cookies in the first place. Another reason to try to break an action chain as early as possible is that **you will have more links to work with**. If eating lunch doesn't help Sarah and she still arrives home tired, upset, and hungry, she can still choose low-calorie snacks like fruit when she gets home.

Let's say that Sarah chooses the option of packing a quick bag lunch.

4. Fourth, **make a positive action plan**. This is where you spell out exactly:
- What you will do,
 - When you will do it, and
 - What you need to do first.
- Also, make a plan for any roadblocks that might come up,
- And build in steps that will make success more likely. For example:
Will it help you to involve someone else?
Can you do anything to make it more fun and enjoyable?
Will it help if you:

Write your plan down and post it on your refrigerator or calendar?

Tell your plan to someone else, so you're committed to following it?

Join an exercise class or club so you're more committed?

Make a date with someone to go for a walk?

Sometimes if you build in a step to get yourself over the first "hump," then everything begins to snowball and the rest is much easier.

For example, here is Sarah's action plan [*review work sheet*].

5. The fifth step of problem-solving is to **try it and see how it goes**. Did it work? If not, what went wrong? Use what you have learned to problem solve again and make a new action plan. Remember, **problem solving is a process**. **Don't give up**. It often takes many tries to find a solution.

Review another example if you think it would be helpful. Use one that is tailored to the individual (for instance, an example of the food preferences of the family getting in the way of the participant's goals).

Now let's apply this process to you.

Have the participant practice the steps using a problem he or she is experiencing now.

For next week, I want you to work on solving a particular problem. Think of a problem that you're having now with eating less fat/calories or being more active.

Complete the **Lifestyle Balance Problem Solver** work sheet with the participant.

For next week:

- Keep track of your weight, eating, and activity.
- Follow your action plan. And answer the questions on the work sheet.

Any questions?

Collect completed Keeping Track book from last session and review and make comments in the Keeping Track book before the next session.