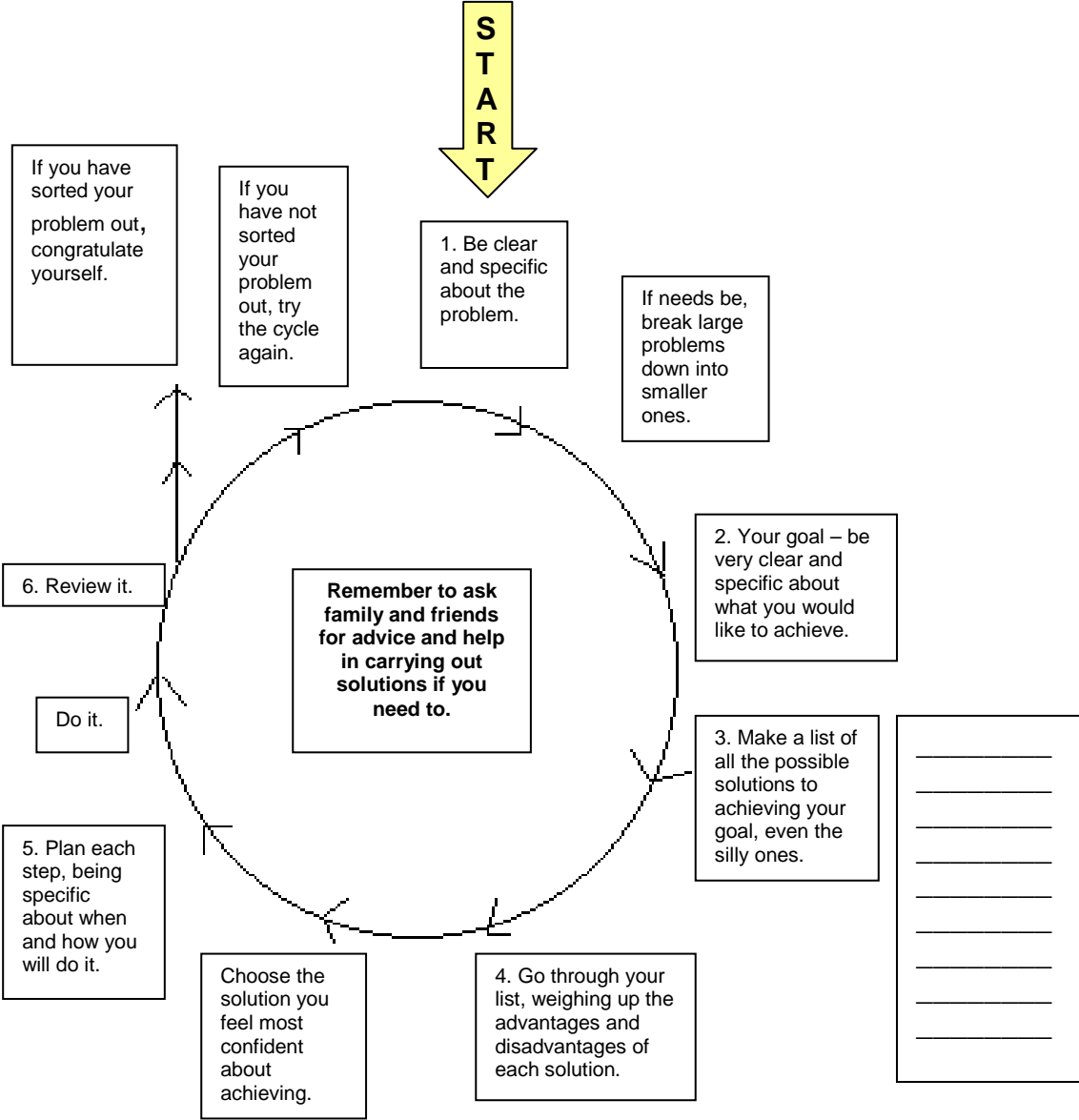


# Structured Problem Solving

Problem-Solving is a very helpful approach for practical problems if used in a structured and systematic way. It involves a number of steps as outlined within the following diagram (Neurolink 2005):



The service-user should be introduced to these steps of problem-solving in sequence, illustrating each step by relating this to an identified practical problem e.g. *'I've not managed to sleep at night due to my baby crying through the night'*.

**STEP 1:** The first step involves being very clear about the nature of the problem e.g. *what?, when?, where?, who is involved?* In some cases, for complicated or large problems, it will be important to break up the problem into smaller parts and then to work through the steps of problem-solving for each part.

**STEP 2:** The next step involves being clear about the goal or objective. It is most helpful to identify a goal or objective which follows SMART principles: *Specific; Measurable; Achievable; Relevant; with a Time-frame.*

**STEP 3** involves a creative thinking task: *quickly make a list of as many possible solutions as you can think of, commencing with the ridiculous (this helps the person to become creative and open-minded) and moving onto the more sensible and realistic – use your sense of humour.*

**STEP 4** requires the person to quickly consider the pros (advantages) and cons (disadvantages) of each listed solution, discarding unlikely solutions and deciding upon a preferred likely solution.

**STEP 5** involves the person in thinking through how best to implement the selected solution, being very specific e.g. *exactly how you will do it, when you will do it, whether you will do it alone or with someone else.* Anticipated obstacles to implementation should also be considered at this stage, together with planning a contingency plan in the event of any of these obstacles arising. The next stage is *to do it.*

**STEP 6** involves the person in reviewing and evaluating their solution, having implemented it e.g. *has the problem been solved?, what can you learn from it?, do you need to try out another solution?* If the problem remains, then it is best to quickly move through the steps again, selecting an alternative solution. It is also useful to give special attention to re-defining the problem (step 1), as the original problem may have subtly changed. It is important to realise that there is never one solution which works for all people or for all problems.

### **Structured Problem Solving: a short exercise**

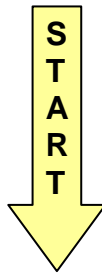
You can try out the problem-solving cycle for yourself – consider one of the practical problems that a service-user or carer often describes to you and work your way through the above steps – *use the problem solving worksheet to make some notes.*

**Remember:** when using problem-solving with a service-user / carer, your role will be to explain and guide them through the steps of problem-solving, not skipping any of the steps. This will involve engaging them in a collaborative exercise. Your role will be to help them to be very clear and specific, to generate their own potential solutions, decide upon their chosen solution, arrive at a specific action / implementation plan, to encourage them to carry out the plan and to give praise / affirmation for their efforts.

It is very useful when starting to use problem-solving as a structured process to record each step in a worksheet or workbook. For this, there are many useful available guided materials – *for examples, refer to the Neurolink self-help booklets & to Williams’ (2001) somewhat lengthier client workbook on problem solving.*

John Butler – Consultant Nurse  
PSI Resources: brief description of key interventions  
2007

## Structured Problem Solving Worksheet



1. The Problem:

If needs be, break large problems down into smaller ones.

If you have solved your problem – well done! Reward yourself.

2. Your Goal:

6. Review: has the problem been solved or do you need to go round the cycle again?

**Remember to ask family and friends for advice and help in carrying out solutions if you need to.**

3. List all the possible solutions, even the silly ones:

5. Plan a series of steps for implementing your preferred solution:

4. Quickly weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of each solution & choose your preferred solution:

Now do it!