



Sigmund Transactional Analysis, Inc.

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The Four Steps to Problem Resolution

Once you have cleared yourself of negativity in regard to a situation by using the **Ten-Minute Practice** and the **Five Steps to End Abuse**, you will want to begin the process of problem resolution. The premise underlying this practice is that there are four definable steps to problem resolution—and the process requires all four steps. People fail to resolve problems because they are unaware of or neglect to complete one or more of these four steps; they fail even if they are of good mind and good heart.

If the problem involves more than one person, each individual needs to define the four steps [define the problem?] for himself or herself; after which, everyone involved can begin a process of negotiation and compromise that allows for differences of opinion, feelings, wants and needs. The **Four Problem-Resolution Steps** are as follows:

1. Define the problem. To successfully begin any problem-resolution process, you need to be succinct in your definition of the nature and extent of the problem. Having a detailed and accurate description of the issues enables you to weigh the significance and solvability of the problem. In situations that involve more than one individual, each person's definition of the problem may be different, since it is based on the perceptions of the person who is making the definition. Indeed, where overt conflict exists between people, the definitions may vary greatly.

Each person should state his or her definition of the problem. It's important here to avoid arguing or blaming one another—statements like “Sally does this to me.” Instead, begin with the phrase, “I’m having a problem with. . . .” Self-referencing as you define the problem will keep you from falling into Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim roles; it also helps to stimulate positive, productive thinking.

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Here are some suggestions to consider in resolving problems:

A. Resolve one problem at a time. People generally get overwhelmed when presented with more than one issue to resolve all at once. Resolve each problem completely before moving on to the next.

B. Do not attempt to resolve a problem with someone who is tired, hypoglycemic (hungry), intoxicated, or upset (frightened, angry and hurt); or if the person is preoccupied, falling asleep or just waking up. Successful problem resolution calls for you to think about the other person, so that you can determine a good time to discuss the problem—a time when the other person is most likely to be receptive. One way to determine that is to think what would be a good time, place and method for the other person to approach you if the roles were reversed. Usually a combination of what you know about the other person and how you could be approached if the roles were reversed will give you the best chance of presenting the issue successfully.

C. Always bring the best of yourself to resolving the problem, and always relate to the best of the other person. This is necessary no matter how strongly your feelings are running and no matter how widely each person's perceptions and opinions of the problem seem to diverge.

Here's the part of this suggestion that most people need to be gently reminded about: You must continue to bring the best of yourself to the discussion, and continue to relate to the best of the other person, even when the other person does not live up to his or her best. Your doing the right thing is not dependent upon the other person's reciprocating in the moment.

2. Define the significance of the problem. Once you have defined the problem, the next step is to determine its importance to you. You need to understand the problem's significance in order for any proposed solutions to be meaningful. You can determine the significance of the problem by answering the following questions:

A. "Why is this (person, place, thing, etc.) a problem for me?"

B. "Why is this problem important to me?"

C. "[Since I know that people tend to react to problems by repeating patterns they learned as children,] what elements in this current issue are similar to events or persons in my childhood experiences?"

3. Define the solvability of the problem. Once you have defined the problem and its importance to you, you are ready to consider what you would be willing to do in order to resolve the problem. This is a brainstorming step. Let yourself creatively fantasize about possible contributions to the resolution process. Don't censor or edit your ideas. Simply start each potential resolution step with the statement, "I'm willing to resolve this problem by. . ."

Frequently, even very intelligent people will mistake the purpose of this step: Instead of thinking creatively, they list things they've already done that didn't work, or that someone else sabotaged so that the problem wasn't resolved. Learn from past mistakes, but only put on your solvability list what you are willing to do right now in order to resolve the problem. Then prioritize your list in order of which steps offer the best chance of a successful resolution.

You will want to listen for and correct three victimization speech patterns, if you start expressing them during this step:

A. "I tried to," "I try to," and "I'll try to" reinforce failure in the past, present and future. Change to "I did," "I do," and "I'll do."

B. "I couldn't," "I can't," and "I won't be able to" reinforce past, present or future inadequacy. Change to "I could," "I can," and "I will be able to."

C. "I didn't know," "I don't know," and "I won't know" establish a lack of awareness in the past, present or future. Change to "I did know," "I do know," and "I will know."

Here's an easy way to help you know the things you need to know in order to identify and resolve a problem: Any time you start to say, "I don't know," say instead, "I'm going to breathe, relax, and allow the information to come to me."

4. Apply yourself to the solvability of the problem. After you know what the problem is, why the problem is important to you, and what you are willing to do to resolve it, apply yourself to the ideas you prioritized on your list in step three. You will need to continue to relate from the best of you to the best of every other person involved in the problem resolution, no matter how well the others conduct themselves. Your resolution of the problem is dependent only on you and your ability to stay within the boundaries of your

own integrity. Stay within those boundaries even if the other person doesn't cooperate, and you will at least come out of the encounter feeling good about yourself. And feeling good about yourself makes it much easier to work on resolving the problem at a later time, still operating from and for the best of all concerned.

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The Four Problem-Resolution Steps evolved out of the discounting theory presented by Schiff and Schiff (1971), Mellor and Sigmund (1975) and Sigmund (1981).

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