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Bridge4Mothers

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PSL Programme — Personal, Social and Learning-to-Learn Competences

Positive self-talk should be realistic and supportive. It helps you focus on possibilities rather than limitations.

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Problem-Solving & Decision-Making Guide

Introduction

Problem-solving and decision-making are important skills for learning, work and everyday life. They help people understand challenges, consider different options and choose practical actions.

Some problems are simple, while others may involve uncertainty, strong emotions or several possible solutions. Approaching a challenge step by step can make it feel more manageable and reduce the pressure to find an immediate answer.

This guide provides practical tools to help participants:

- identify and understand problems clearly;
- ask useful questions;
- reflect before reacting;
- gather and evaluate information;
- consider different perspectives;
- compare possible solutions;
- make informed decisions;
- review outcomes and learn from experience.

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1. Understanding the Problem

Before trying to solve a problem, it is important to understand what is actually happening.

People sometimes react to the first sign of difficulty without identifying the real issue. Taking time to define the problem can prevent confusion and lead to better decisions.

Describe the Problem Clearly

Try to explain the problem in one or two clear sentences.

Instead of saying:

“Everything is going wrong.”

Try:

“I am finding it difficult to complete the task because I do not understand the instructions and the deadline is approaching.”

Ask yourself:

- What exactly has happened?
- When did the problem begin?
- Who is involved?
- How is the situation affecting me or others?

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- What information do I already have?
- What information is missing?
- Which part of the situation can I influence?

Separate Facts from Assumptions

Facts are details that can be checked or confirmed.

Assumptions are ideas that we believe may be true, but which have not been confirmed.

Example:

Fact:
“I sent an email two days ago and have not received a reply.”

Assumption:
“They are ignoring me.”

A more balanced response would be:

“I have not received a reply yet. I can send a polite follow-up or check whether the message was received.”

Separating facts from assumptions can reduce emotional reactions and support clearer thinking.

Identify the Main Problem

A situation may contain several difficulties.

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For example:

“I am struggling with a training course.”

The main problem could be:

- lack of time;
- unclear instructions;
- limited digital skills;
- difficulty understanding the content;
- fear of asking for help;
- low motivation.

Identifying the main issue helps you choose the most useful response.

Reflect on What Is Within Your Control

You may not control every part of a situation, but you can often influence:

- your response;
- the questions you ask;
- the effort you make;
- the information you gather;

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- the support you request;
- the action you take next.

Focusing on controllable actions can make a difficult situation feel more manageable.

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2. Step-by-Step Problem-Solving

A structured process can help you approach challenges calmly and systematically.

Step 1: Define the Problem

Write a clear description of the situation.

Ask:

- What is happening?
- Why is this a problem?
- Who is affected?
- What needs to change?

Try to avoid blaming language.

Instead of:

“My colleague is difficult.”

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Try:

“My colleague and I have different expectations about how the task should be completed.”

Step 2: Identify the Desired Outcome

Think about what you would like to achieve.

Ask:

- What would a better situation look like?
- What is the most realistic improvement?
- What needs to happen first?
- What would be a satisfactory outcome?

The desired outcome should be clear and realistic.

Step 3: Gather Information

Before choosing a solution, collect the information you need.

This may involve:

- asking questions;
- checking instructions;
- reviewing previous messages;

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- speaking with the people involved;
- researching reliable sources;
- checking dates, rules or responsibilities;
- identifying available support.

Avoid making an important decision based on incomplete information.

Step 4: Generate Possible Solutions

Think of several possible ways to respond.

Do not reject ideas too quickly. At this stage, the aim is to identify options.

Possible solutions may include:

- asking for clarification;
- requesting support;
- changing the timeline;
- dividing the task into smaller steps;
- using a different method;
- discussing the issue with the people involved;
- finding additional information;

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- trying a temporary solution;
- combining two approaches.

Step 5: Evaluate the Options

Consider the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

Ask:

- What could work well?
- What difficulties may arise?
- What resources are needed?
- How may this affect other people?
- Is the option realistic?
- Is it safe and respectful?
- What may happen in the short term?
- What may happen in the longer term?

Step 6: Choose a Solution

Select the option that seems most practical and appropriate.

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A good solution does not always need to be perfect. It should be reasonable based on the information currently available.

Step 7: Create an Action Plan

Decide:

- what you will do;
- when you will do it;
- who can support you;
- what resources you need;
- how you will recognise progress.

Example:

“I will contact the trainer this afternoon, ask for clarification on the task and request an example. I will then divide the task into three smaller sections and complete the first section tomorrow.”

Step 8: Review the Result

After taking action, reflect on the outcome.

Ask:

- Did the solution improve the situation?
- What worked well?

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- What did not work?
- What did I learn?
- Do I need to adjust the plan?
- Is another solution needed?

Problem-solving often involves testing, reviewing and adapting.

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3. Asking Effective Questions

Asking questions is a key part of problem-solving and decision-making.

Useful questions can clarify a situation, reveal missing information and help people consider alternatives.

Clarifying Questions

Clarifying questions help you understand what something means.

Examples:

- “Could you explain that in more detail?”
- “What exactly is expected?”
- “Which part should be completed first?”

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- “What do you mean by this instruction?”
- “Can you give me an example?”

Evidence-Based Questions

These questions help you check whether information is reliable.

Examples:

- “Where did this information come from?”
- “Is the source reliable?”
- “Can this information be confirmed?”
- “Is this fact or opinion?”
- “Is the information current?”
- “Are there other sources that support it?”

Reflective Questions

Reflective questions encourage deeper thinking.

Examples:

- “Why do I see the situation this way?”
- “Could there be another explanation?”

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- “What assumptions am I making?”
- “How might another person view this?”
- “What have I learned from a similar experience?”
- “What would I advise someone else to do?”

Solution-Focused Questions

These questions help move towards action.

Examples:

- “What can I do next?”
- “Which option is most realistic?”
- “What is one small step I can take today?”
- “Who could support me?”
- “What resources are available?”
- “What could make this solution more effective?”

Ask One Question at a Time

Asking too many questions at once may create confusion.

Instead of:

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“What happened, why did it happen, who was involved and what do you want to do?”

Try asking one clear question first:

“What happened?”

Then continue based on the answer.

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4. Reflective Thinking

Reflective thinking means taking time to examine a situation, your reaction and the possible consequences before acting.

It can help people recognise patterns, learn from experience and make more balanced decisions.

Pause Before Reacting

Strong emotions may influence the way we interpret a situation.

Before making a decision:

1. Stop for a moment.
2. Take a slow breath.
3. Identify what you are feeling.
4. Check the facts.

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5. Consider possible responses.
6. Choose the most constructive action.

Useful phrases include:

- “I need a moment to think.”
- “Let me check the information first.”
- “I would like to consider the options.”
- “Can we return to this after I have reflected?”

Reflect on Emotional Reactions

Ask yourself:

- What emotion am I experiencing?
- What triggered this feeling?
- Is the emotion affecting my judgement?
- Am I reacting to facts or assumptions?
- Do I need more time before deciding?
- What outcome do I want?

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Emotions are important sources of information, but they should not always determine the final decision.

Consider Different Perspectives

A situation may look different depending on a person's role, experience or needs.

Ask:

- How might another person understand this situation?
- What information might they have?
- What concerns may be important to them?
- What would be a fair outcome?
- Have I listened to all relevant viewpoints?

Considering different perspectives can lead to more respectful and effective solutions.

Learn from Previous Experience

Think about a similar situation you faced before.

Ask:

- What did I do?
- What worked?

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- What did not work?
- What would I change?
- What skills did I use?
- What advice would I give myself now?

Reflection turns experience into learning.

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5. Evaluating Information

Good decisions depend on accurate and relevant information.

Not all information is equally reliable, especially online.

Check the Source

Ask:

- Who created the information?
- Is the person or organisation qualified?
- Is the source recognised or trustworthy?
- Is the information based on evidence?
- Is there a clear purpose behind the message?

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Check the Date

Information may be accurate but outdated.

Ask:

- When was it published?
- Has the situation changed?
- Are there more recent sources?
- Does the date matter for this decision?

This is especially important for rules, deadlines, health information, technology and employment opportunities.

Compare More Than One Source

Do not rely only on one source when the decision is important.

Compare information from:

- official websites;
- qualified professionals;
- trusted organisations;
- reliable educational sources;

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- direct communication with relevant people.

If sources disagree, investigate further before deciding.

Distinguish Fact, Opinion and Advertising

A fact can be checked.

An opinion expresses a personal view.

Advertising is designed to persuade people to buy or choose something.

Ask:

- Is this claim supported by evidence?
- Is the language emotional or exaggerated?
- Is the source trying to persuade me?
- Are disadvantages or limitations mentioned?
- Is important information missing?

Be Careful with Online Information

Before sharing or using online information:

- check the original source;
- confirm the date;

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- look for supporting evidence;
- avoid relying only on headlines;
- check whether an image or quote is presented accurately;
- consider whether the content may be misleading;
- protect personal information.

If you are unsure, ask someone with relevant knowledge.

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6. Decision-Making Strategies

Decision-making involves choosing between two or more options.

Some decisions can be made quickly, while others require more careful thought.

Identify the Decision

State clearly what needs to be decided.

For example:

“I need to decide whether to attend an evening course.”

A clear decision is easier to evaluate than a general concern.

List the Options

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Write down all realistic choices.

For example:

- attend the course now;
- choose a different course;
- attend online;
- postpone the course;
- request support with the schedule.

Including several options can prevent “either-or” thinking.

Use a Pros and Cons List

For each option, record possible advantages and disadvantages.

Option: Attend the course now

Advantages:

- I can develop the skill quickly.
- It may improve employment opportunities.
- The course is available nearby.

Challenges:

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- It may be difficult to balance with work.
- There may be travel costs.
- I may need childcare support.

A written list can make the decision clearer.

Use Decision Criteria

Decision criteria are the factors that matter most.

These may include:

- cost;
- time;
- safety;
- personal values;
- learning opportunities;
- family responsibilities;
- long-term benefits;
- practical difficulty;
- effect on other people;

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- available support.

Rank the criteria from most important to least important.

Consider Short- and Long-Term Consequences

Ask:

- What may happen immediately?
- What may happen after several weeks or months?
- Will this decision support my future goals?
- Could there be unintended consequences?
- Is the short-term difficulty worth the long-term benefit?

Use the "Best, Worst and Most Likely" Method

For each option, consider:

- What is the best possible outcome?
- What is the worst realistic outcome?
- What is the most likely outcome?
- Could I manage the worst outcome?
- What could reduce the risk?

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This can help create a more balanced view.

Set a Decision Deadline

Spending too long on a decision can increase stress.

Choose a reasonable date or time for deciding.

For example:

“I will gather the missing information today and make my decision by Friday.”

Not every decision requires complete certainty.

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7. Managing Difficult Decisions

Some decisions involve uncertainty, risk or strong emotions.

Avoid Deciding Under Pressure

When possible, avoid making important decisions when you are:

- extremely tired;
- angry;
- frightened;
- under strong pressure;

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- missing essential information.

Ask for time when necessary.

You may say:

- “I would like time to consider this.”
- “I need more information before deciding.”
- “Can I respond tomorrow?”
- “I would like to discuss this with someone I trust.”

Ask for Advice, but Keep Ownership

Advice can provide new perspectives, but the final decision may still be yours.

When asking for advice, explain:

- the decision you need to make;
- the available options;
- what matters most to you;
- the information you already have;
- your main concerns.

Choose advisers who are trustworthy, informed and respectful.

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Notice Decision Biases

A bias is a thinking pattern that may influence judgement.

Examples include:

- choosing the first option without considering alternatives;
- following others without reflection;
- focusing only on information that supports your existing opinion;
- avoiding a good option because of one past negative experience;
- continuing with a poor decision because you have already invested time.

Ask:

“Am I considering the full situation fairly?”

Accept That Some Uncertainty Is Normal

It is not always possible to know exactly what will happen.

A responsible decision is based on:

- the best available information;
- realistic evaluation;
- personal values;

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- possible consequences;
- appropriate support.

A decision can be reasonable even when the outcome is not guaranteed.

Personal Problem-Solving Activity

Define the Challenge

The challenge I want to address is:

The facts I know are:

The assumptions I may be making are:

The main issue is:

Identify the Desired Outcome

I would like the situation to improve by:

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A realistic outcome would be:

Gather Information

The information I still need is:

I can find this information by:

The person I can ask is:

Consider Possible Solutions

Possible solution 1:

Possible solution 2:

Possible solution 3:

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Compare the Options

The main advantage of each option is:

The main risk or difficulty is:

The option that best fits my needs is:

Create an Action Plan

The first step I will take is:

I will take this step by:

The support I may need is:

Review the Decision

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I will review the outcome on:

I will know the decision is helping when:

If the plan does not work, I will:

Final Reminder

Good problem-solving does not require having every answer immediately.

Remember to:

- define the problem clearly;
- separate facts from assumptions;
- ask useful questions;
- gather reliable information;
- consider different perspectives;
- compare several options;
- reflect before reacting;

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- make a realistic action plan;
- review the outcome;
- learn and adjust when necessary.

Approaching challenges step by step can lead to more thoughtful decisions, greater confidence and stronger independent thinking.

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