

An introduction to basic problem solving skills

Discipling people with life-controlling problems

Teacher Notes – with yellow background to show what is added for the teacher

By Dave Batty

The new Christians you are training in Teen Challenge have problems. If they didn't have any problems, they should not be in your program. If they are to become a successful Christian, then one of the important skills they need to develop is a godly way of solving the problems in their lives.

This is not a workshop to teach you how to fix all the problems in the lives of your students. Quite the opposite—our goal is that you can learn how to train your students to learn effective problem-solving strategies which they can apply in their life. In raising up students to be disciples of Jesus, we want them to learn problem-solving strategies that are based on Biblical principles.

It is not possible in one workshop to teach everything that needs to be learned to be about how to solve problems. In one respect, the students are in Teen Challenge for approximately one year to learn this. But specifically, what do they need to learn about how to solve problems?

Advance Preparation

If at all possible, have students for the local Teen Challenge complete Project One before you start teaching this workshop. This is not a project for the staff to complete on their own life. We want to have some actual case studies—examples from the students in their program identifying the problems they are currently facing in their lives.

If you are unable to have students do this in advance of this training workshop, you can use the samples provided with this teacher's manual for this training. However, it would be better if you can use real examples from their own students.

A. What are their old ways of solving problems?

How did they solve problems before they came to Teen Challenge?

Teacher notes

Have them pair off and brainstorm for 2 minutes on the answer to this question. Then ask for some of their responses.

The main focus of this workshop is to identify how the Teen Challenge students have attempted to solve problems in their lives. If those participating in this training are graduates of Teen Challenge, then you can ask them to also reflect on their own life before Teen Challenge and share personal answers.

Sample answers:

1. Go get high or get drunk
2. Run from their problems
3. Ignore them or deny them
 - delusion & denial
4. Fight
5. Used force to get others to do what they wanted them to do.
6. Sinful strategies to solve problems
 - Lie
 - Manipulate others
 - Deceive others
 - Use one sin to cover up another sin

B. What are the big issues related to solving problems?

Teacher notes

As you go through this, use some of the problems identified by students on Project One. You may want to first list some of the different problems that were identified on these projects to simply bring to their attention the kinds of issues their students are currently struggling with. You may find some of these problems are very small and others are major.

In this part of the workshop, we are simply taking a broad overview look at problem-solving. In Part C, we will take a more detailed look at this whole issue. Plan to spend more time on Part C than Part B.

1. Face your problems. Don't run from your problems.

Not all the problems in my life are caused by me. Some of them are caused by other people. However, many of the problems in our lives are the results of our own decisions. Whatever the source of the problem, we need to face it. James 1:2 talks about facing our problems with God's help.

2. What is God's way out of this problem?

You need to be very intentional about looking at the old strategies you used for solving problems and ask yourself, "Is this the strategy Jesus wants me to use today in addressing this problem in my life?"

Discovering God's way of solving a problem may be very simple, or it may be quite complex. The key point we are addressing here is that as a follower of Jesus, I need to be very intentional in asking for God's help in solving each problem in my life.

Example from Jesus' life—John 8:1-11.

When Jesus got up from writing in the sand, he gave them an answer that was from God. The Pharisees thought they had designed a trap for Jesus.

Jesus didn't run from the problem, he faced it and handled it in a way that honored God, and the woman.

3. What is God's way to live healthy and avoid this problem in the future?

Solving a problem is one part of being a successful disciple of Jesus. Another equally important part is learning how to live my life the way God wants me to live, and to avoid creating problems in my life. Preventing a problem is much better than waiting until the problem is full blown in your life, and then beginning to address it.

C. What are the basic steps to using in solving problems?

There are no simple "magic wand" solutions that will instantly make all your problems go away. Some small problems can be quickly solved. But other problems—life-controlling problems—may take many months and lots of hard work to overcome.

Teacher notes:

After you have presented all 8 steps, take some of the problems listed on Project One and use them as a case study, going through all 8 steps and discussing how these 8 steps could be applied by this student to address this problem.

After you have done this process with the whole class, you may want to break the class into small groups of 2-4 students per group and have them go through these 8 steps, each using a separate case study—a problem from Project One. Then each group could give a report to the whole class on their case study.

Let's look at a few basic steps that can be used in solving problems.

1. Ask yourself, "Do I want to change?"

Or do you simply want to get away from the painful consequences of the problem in your life? Do you simply want to get rid of the symptoms, or do you really want to go to the root of the problem and get rid of it?

For example, you can get rid of the cob webs in a room, or you can get rid of the spiders that are making the cob webs.

Another issue to consider is this: are you blaming the other person for the problem and saying, S/He needs to change!” Is your perspective that you are right and the other person is wrong? “They are the one who needs to change!”

This point does not focus on what the other person did. It simply focuses on you. Do you want to change? Perhaps it would be good to ask, “Does God want you to change?”

2. What caused this problem?

We are not looking for someone to blame. That will do little to resolve the problem. Instead, we need to try to see what are the root causes to this problem. Sometimes one problem is connected to another problem. What is the surface problem may simply be a symptom of a deeper problem.

Identifying the cause is one step toward finding the best solution to use in solving this problem.

Many times problems involve other people. One of the first steps is, “Let’s agree on what is the problem.” If there is not agreement on the problem, then you will have a hard time gaining agreement to work together to solve it.



Another issue that many times is involved in problems and conflicts is “false beliefs” or incorrect information. The lack of information and a person “filling in the blanks” on their own, without getting the truth from the other person can create misunderstandings and make problems worse.

Many times problems are caused because people do have genuine disagreements about a particular issue. But when there is a lack of information, or a person embracing their own opinions without getting the facts, these only feed the problem.

Proverbs—on waiting to get all the facts before drawing a conclusion.

3. What does God’s Word say about solving this problem?

For some problems there are very specific verses that speak to the cause and the solution. Others may require you to search for Biblical principles that can be applied to a problem that is not specifically addressed in the Bible.

Make sure they are correctly applying the scriptures. You can take a verse and use it in a situation that the abuses the meaning of the scripture. For example, Luke 9:5 applies

to short term evangelism, and is not a verse to justify leaving your wife or husband to get a new one.

One example is Matthew—leave offering and go to your brother and make it right

4. Apply the “put off, put on” strategy of Colossians 3:1-17

The Bible tells us to put out of our lives the sin and other activities that hinder our relationship with God. So to stop doing these sinful things is part of the answer. At the same time the scripture tells us to “put on” or replace these sinful behaviors and attitudes with new actions. When we put on the new things that God wants in our lives, we can experience the new life that He has planned for us.

This problem solving strategy has two equally important parts. Put off or get rid of the sinful ways of doing things, and second, add to our lifestyle the new ways of responding to these problems.

5. Demolish arguments that set themselves up against God’s truth

2 Corinthians 10:5 tells us to demolish every thought that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. We can’t simply put these old ways of responding in a “closet behind closed doors.” We need to get rid of them. Put these old sinful ways out of our life.

6. What is the damage in my life that this problem has caused?

What steps do I need to take to repair this damage?

Sometimes problems cause damage—both in our lives, and the lives of others around us. We need to assess the damage and then take steps to resolve that damage.

Teacher Notes:

In discussing this point, explain that sometimes the damage is so significant that we will go to major efforts to repair this damage. This may be more important than assigning blame for who did what wrong.

My example of going to a person to resolve a problem. I felt the other person was wrong, but I took the initiative to resolve it, even though the other person did not admit any wrong-doing on his part. I was the one who wrote a letter of apology to resolve the issue. I was more concerned about repairing the damage than getting the other person to admit his part in the problem.

7. What growth needs to take place in my life so that I can overcome this problem?

What is God's part?

What is my part?

What is the other person's part?

Sometimes we want God to simply pass his “magic wand” over our life and instantly make our problems disappear. However, what is needed is that you take a careful look at what changes you need to make in your life and take responsibility to make those changes. In James 1:5 God promises to give wisdom to all those who ask for His help.

Teacher Notes:

In looking at resolving a problem, we can easily feel reluctant to do anything where there other person is the one at fault. But in responding as a mature Christian, we need to seek to understand:

what is God's part

what is our part

and what is the other person's part.

We should not try to get the other person to do their part—that is not our responsibility. We need to clearly understand our part, and do that, no matter how the other person chooses to respond.

We need to be careful not to try to do God's part. Let God take care of his part, and let God be the one to deal with the other person if they are not willing to take care of their part.

8. How does a person of accountability fit into this solution?

Some problems we can solve all by ourselves. But many problems may require the help of others if we are to successfully overcome the problems. Who is a safe person, with a good understanding of the Bible that can help solve this problem?

Teacher notes:

Sometimes a situation can be resolved with the help of another person. When you look at the Matthew 18:15-17 pattern for handling a problem, it says to first go to the person privately and seek to resolve it. If that fails, then bring one or two others as witnesses. This step involves a 3rd party who can help to resolve this—a person of accountability.

Conclusion

Our goal is to provide students with “tools” that they can put in their “toolbox for life” and use when needed to address the problems in their life. We all need to learn to use Biblical strategies in solving the problems in our life.

We all will encounter problems in our life. How we respond to these problems is the key to being a successful disciple of Jesus.

Teacher Notes:

After going through all 8 basic steps then give several different examples and show how these steps can be used to solve a problem.

You could use examples from Project One, connected with this workshop.

Also refer them to the GSNC course, *Growing Through Failure*, which offers additional training on dealing with problems.

DRB examples and other issues:

1. Herb Meppelink to Steve S—give people permission to not be perfect

He wanted to try a solution to a problem. Herb told him that it would not work, but he gave him permission to try it. Steve tried it and it did not work. When he came back and told Herb, what do you think was Herb’s response? He was not irritated at Steve, but smiled and said, “OK.”

Herb gave Steve permission to try a solution. He gave Steve permission to not succeed. How often do you get angry when people do not follow your advice? Are you willing to let others learn, and when they make a mistake know that they will not be rebuked?

Herb had a saying to all new staff. He said, “You need to learn to laugh at your mistakes. Because whether or not you do, we will!!” And he said this with a smile. He was giving new staff a simple rule for working with him. You have permission to not be perfect. You will not get crucified if you make a mistake. He created an atmosphere where people were willing to take risks, knowing that he would not rebuke them if something did not work out.

2. Student in Indianapolis with trust issue

A 17 year old student in TC was 3 weeks from graduation. She was an excellent worker and when she was put in charge of a work project, she provided excellent leadership to see the work completed. Things went smoothly when she was in charge.

But on other work projects, she was the source of many problems. These were projects where she was not in charge. She created so many problems that she ended up on discipline. Sitting in my office, we were talking about her discipline issues. After 45 minutes I was no closer to understanding the real root of her problem.

Then I asked her, “Is the problem that when you are on a work project where someone else is in charge, you don’t trust that person?”

“Yes,” she responded.

In the recent weeks leading up to her graduation she had been having several conversations with her parents, and she strongly disagreed with what they wanted her to do.

So I asked her, “Do you have a problem trusting your parents?”

“Yes,” was her response.

Then I paused and asked another question, “Do you have a problem trusting God?”

“Yes,” was her response.

Now we had identified the root problem, but she was only a few weeks from graduating. This was not a problem to be resolved in a 5 minute prayer or a 30 minute class assignment.

But her surface behavior was only a symptom of a deeper problem.

In this case, this problem would easily set her up for relapse after leaving TC.

Interestingly, this problem relates directly to the Personal Task #2, of the Infant Stage of The Life Model. So how might you pursue helping this student overcome this problem of distrust?

One option—do a very intentional study of the issue of trust in the Bible.

See if there are issues that she can identify that make it hard for her to trust other people.

Are there any people that she does trust at a deep level? If so, who are they, and why does she feel she can trust them?

Does she have an understanding of what appropriate trust is?

It is not wise to trust everyone, but if you feel you cannot trust anyone, that also is a problem.

What are some specific things she can do to begin to build trust?

What are the Middle Column “Community and Family Tasks” that can help a person build trust in others?

Another option is to show her the problems that will develop in her life from Column 3 of the Life Model chart for this Personal Task. Ask her to do a self-evaluation to see if any of these are already evident in her life.

Have her do a report on someone else who learned to trust that can be a positive example to her.

Have her meet with her parents on this issue, and look for ways they can develop mutual trust and respect.

Do the parents have the same problem? Do they distrust their daughter? If so, then they too may need to grow in a way that will build a new level of trust with their daughter, and perhaps see her as an adult, not a child.

3. The problem of staff (or students) expecting the leader to come up with solutions to all the problems

Both staff and students can report to the director a problem, and expect the leader to be the one to come up with all the solutions. The staff takes no ownership of being responsible with coming up with a solution.

One option is to bring to the leader a possible solution, not just the problem. This can be a means of helping the staff develop leadership maturity. Instead of saying, “You need to fix this problem,” you are bringing an option. The leader may approve it, or may change it, but you have given the leader a starting point for discussion.

As the leader, how do you delegate decisions? Do you empower your staff to make decisions without your approval? And what if they don’t do well? Are you willing to live by the premise, “Anything worth doing is worth doing imperfectly”? If you say, “I don’t trust them,” then when will you be able to trust them?

If you do not delegate to your staff the power to make some decisions, then how will they learn to make decisions?

As a leader we can sometimes become so confident in making decisions that we want to make all of them all the time.

If you have leaders, are you giving them the confidence to make decisions? How can you do this? When they come asking for you to make a decision, tell them, “I want you to make that decision. I trust you. I will back your decision.”

If the issue is a significant and you want to have input on it, one option is to have them make a decision, and come to you for approval before implementing it.

4. Do you want to control others?

When a leader wants to control others, this can often be a sign of a problem in the leader. This desire to control others is likely motivated by fear. Yet these leaders are often domineering! So how can fear be motivating them?

How does God treat us? He does not control us. Why?

Because he loves us! His primary motivation in relating to us is love.

If we use love as our motivation in how we relate to others, then this allows us to not feel the need to control others. Fear or any other motivation sets us up to treat people differently. We feel compelled to control them because we don't trust them. Or selfishness may be what dominates our motivation.

5. When talking makes things worse

The book by this title speaks to the problem people have by assuming "If you would listen to me and do what I say, then we would all be fine!" This is the myth of uniformity—assuming that deep down we all agree. But that simply is not true. We do have genuine differences. If we assume the problem is simply that you lack the information that I have, then frustration will continue to grow and the problem will be unresolved.

How do we come to a solution even though we disagree on some of the issues involved? In some cases, we need to ask, is this difference really going to make a significance difference 5, 10, or 30 years from now? Some problems also beg the question—is me fighting for my position worth the cost or potential damage to my relationship with this person?

6. Problem with student lying

She had been in program for 7 months, yet still lying. Her counselor wanted her dismissed from the program. So when I talked to her, she readily agreed that she was still lying. When I asked her how much she had lied before coming to TC, her answer was, "All the time." When I asked how much she was lying now, she replied, "About 10% of the time."

When I asked her if she really wanted to be in TC, she assured me that she did. This problem is a life-controlling problem, and likely not resolved in a day or a week. The fact that she had made significant progress was clear. Was she growing in areas of character development that would enable her to be stronger in telling the truth? Are the staff setting her up for success by affirming her and praising her when she tells the truth?

7. Fear—panic attack

Some problems don't offer a quick first solution. One man found that he was experiencing panic attacks at work when confronted with conflict situations with other people. Even though he prayed, he did not find that prayer solved the problem.

So he went on the internet and googled "how to overcome panic attacks". There he found several articles on this subject. One offered the strategy of not trying to fight the flood of emotions when they come, but to embrace them. Acknowledge them, and tell yourself that they will soon pass. Don't try to keep from having a panic attack, but tell yourself that you will soon get through it.

When he was faced with another conflict situation, the feelings flooded in again, but this time instead of fighting them, he embraced them, and in less than one minute the feelings calmed down and he was able to talk slowly and move through and beyond the panic attack.

In the days that followed, he continued to use this strategy in dealing with conflict situations and found that the panic attacks became much weaker. Now when he is in a conversation that is difficult, and he begins to feel the emotions of fear rise, he simply acknowledges that it is there, and if necessary, waits for a few seconds for it to pass before he speaks.

These simple strategies can be approached simply as a self-help strategy. On another level, you can use these strategies, and at the same time intentionally reach out to God for his strength and help in facing these problems. The more we engage with God in these situations, the more we develop a closer walk with the Lord.

In this example, the solution does not automatically require deep analysis into the root causes of these panic attacks. If we find a solution that moves us to a place of victory, then there is no need for in depth analysis of your past.

However, if you are unsuccessful in finding any solution that works, then you may need to take a closer look at the root of this problem and determine why it still is such a stronghold in your life. There may be unresolved issues from your past still causing present damage. Or the damage may be caused by a recent trauma. The application of biblical strategies of embracing God's peace and fixing your eyes on Jesus may be part of the solution to this problem.

8. Problem with temptations to sin

Relate to GSNC course, Temptation.

Personal Problem Assessment Project One

Instructions: You are being asked to fill out this project so it can be used in a staff training workshop. Please do not put your name on this project. Thank you so much for your willingness to help with this project.

1. What is one problem you are facing in your life today? Briefly describe it.

2. What do you think is the cause(s) of this problem?

3. What damage is this problem causing in your life, and the lives of others?

4. What do you think are the steps to solving this problem?
