

How to Bring Mindfulness to Problem Solving

Good morning, I'm Dr. Pat Cyganovich and together with my colleague Dr. Michael Hibbard we are pleased to join you as part of the ProActive Caring-School Exchange to talk about the **process**--not the topic--of problem solving. Mike and I are both recently retired; I was the principal of a middle/high school and Mike concluded his career as assistant superintendent. We have helped teachers, administrators, students and business people learn to solve problems in a thoughtful, systemic way and are excited to have this opportunity to share problem solving thinking with you.

Everyone has problems. Sometimes they are life changing, important issues like illness or family decision. More often they are the everyday problems of life--what to make for dinner, how to juggle the family schedule, where are the sneakers that your four year old insists on wearing today.

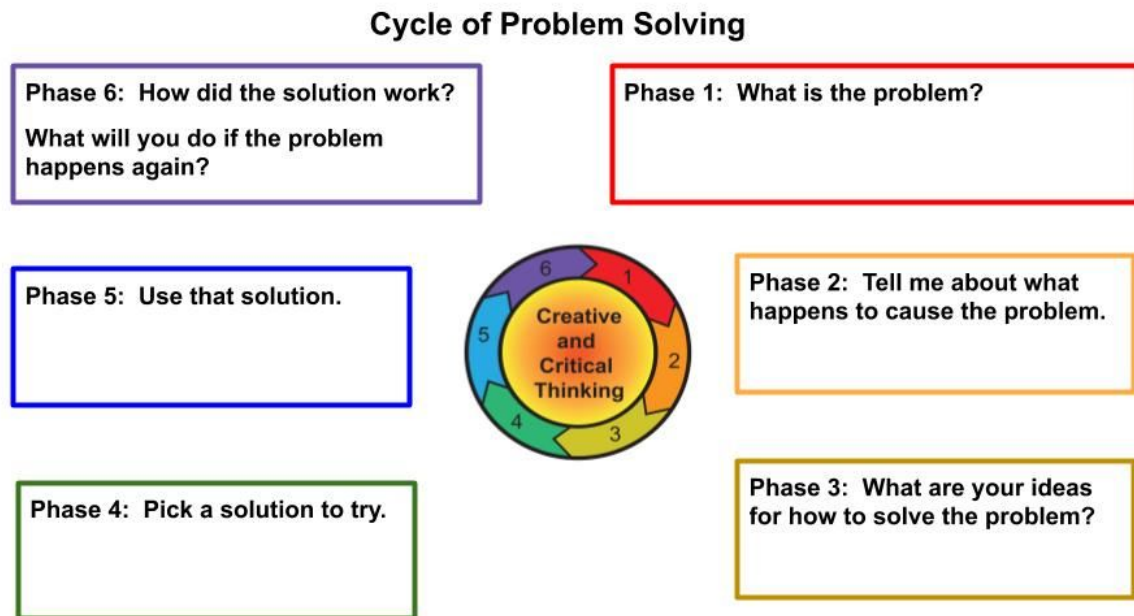
Right now in our current world situation, even the small problems are feeling quite large. Meals are more complicated with everyone home all day. Three children under the age of 10 for 95 days and counting is getting more stressful by the minute. Helping with math homework and convincing your youngster that yes he still

has to read the book is both trying and tiring. Over the last month Peggy and Lisa have been talking with you about strategies and activities that can help de-escalate behaviors and promote calm. They have in fact been making the behavior-mindfulness connection. Mike and I would like to add to their work by sharing a process of thinking for solving problems in which the strategies you've already learned can be applied. Think of this approach as a mindful, purposeful way for you to help your youngsters solve problems for themselves. And for you to learn a system that may help you solve the problems that you confront everyday at home or even at work.

No one really wants a problem. They have such a negative sound. But problems can also be very positive experiences when we think of them as the challenges, decisions, opportunities and the means for seeking mental, and physical health. The Cycle of Problem Solving is a way of thinking through a problem to a solution. It's a six phase process that you can use with your youngster to solve the problems they encounter. At first you would think through the six phases together. Later with practice, it's our hope that your youngster can learn to use the Cycle more independently. In both cases, the skills you have been learning can be applied to solve the problem. The Cycle gives a structure to deciding what skills to use, or what needs to be done to solve the

problem as well as plan for ways to evaluate the solution and make improvements in the future.

Let Mike show you what the Cycle looks like:



The Cycle of Problem Solving has six phases that can be used with any kind of problem. There are questions to ask - we call them guiding questions -- for each phase that match the problem you are helping your youngster to solve. Phase 1 is identifying the problem. The child is asked to describe what is happening and state the problem in his or her own words. In Phase 2 the child describes what he or she believes caused the problem. The child brainstorms ideas for solutions in Phase 3 and might suggest one or two ideas. It is a good idea to encourage the child to come up with one or two more. Sometimes this extra effort results in the best idea. The

child can use Post-its or pieces of paper to write an idea -- one idea per Post-it. If the child is too young to write then the adult records what the child says. All the Post-it ideas are displayed. In Phase 4 the child picks one Post-it idea to try and you ask how he or she will use that idea. Here the child is making a plan which he or she carries out in Phase 5. In Phase 6 you help the child reflect and talk about how well the plan worked and talk about using the plan in the future. The graphic of the Cycle of Problem Solving and the guiding questions and statements give the child the structure and the vocabulary for solving problems.

Creative and critical thinking are important parts of solving problems; you can see them in the center of the Cycle. The child uses creative thinking when he or she thinks “outside the box” to try to think of different ways to solve the problem. The more ideas “created” the more chance there is to find the best one. You can help children use creative thinking to think of many ideas with strategies such as brainstorming. When brainstorming, children are encouraged to think of as many ideas as possible, even crazy ones! You and your youngster can each make a list of five ideas for example, share them and then try for three more! Another strategy for creative thinking is to ask your youngster for ideas by putting themselves in someone else’s shoes or by asking “Why if.....” questions. There

are no judgements made; all ideas are welcomed and accepted as possible solutions to the problem.

Critical thinking is when you help your youngster consider the effects of the various possible solutions and make a judgement to try one or more.

The Cycle of Problem Solving can be very structured for those youngsters who need more direction. Sometimes youngsters find they can't reach a solution to their problem. In that case you can help them return to one of the beginning phases to evaluate what went wrong. Is the problem clear? Do we need to think about more options? What are additional possible solutions we can list?

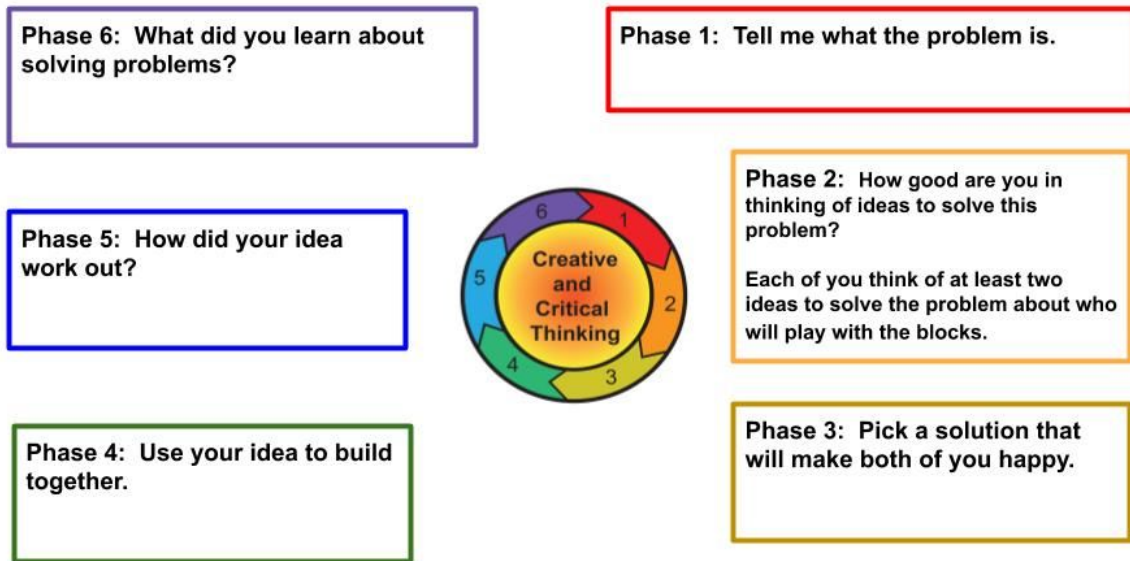
The Cycle can also be a physical tool for younger children. You can draw the Cycle on the driveway in chalk. To help children understand that they are making a mindful decision about how to solve their problem, ask them to literally move through the phases as they talk with you about the steps they are taking to come to a solution.



Two children can easily erupt in a conflict when there is disagreement about playing with toys. In this example, the Cycle of Problem Solving is used to help youngsters solve the problem of who should play with the magnetic blocks. Children move to each spot on the Cycle while “solving” the problem with the help of the babysitter.

Here are the questions the babysitter asked the children.

Cycle of Problem Solving



The children complain that the conflict is that both want to use the blocks. After they list four ideas for solving the problem such as play with another toy, build something smaller, wait until one is done and build something together (Phase 2), the babysitter helps them consider the different suggestions and to select one (Phase 3). After the children shared the blocks and built a fort together the babysitter asked them to think about how the idea worked.

Of course helping children resolve their differences is not always as easy as this! But the problem solving thinking process can be introduced at a very young age in an authentic way. Paying close attention to what was accomplished--in this case the details of the fort--also shows that their work was appreciated.

Here's another example for an older child trying to decide what to wear to school.

Cycle of Problem Solving

Phase 6: How good was my choice about what to wear? What information will I need to make a better choice tomorrow.

Phase 1: I don't have anything to wear! What am I going to wear to school today?

Phase 5: Get dressed in time to make the bus. How do I look? What do my friends think about my choice?



Phase 2: What do I have to know to pick out something to wear? Is it a gym day? What's the weather? What's clean in my closet? Will my mother iron for me?

Phase 4: How much time do I have to get dressed? I'll pick these clothes to wear.

Phase 3: How many outfits should I try on?

As you look at the Cycle and the questions you can see problem solving at work. This child has identified her problem. She is doing research about her day and the condition of her clothes to help make some choices of what to try on. She makes her choice and gets some feedback from her friends. Finally at the end of the process she considers how best to decide what to wear to school in the future. Who knows, maybe she will conclude she should do her own laundry!

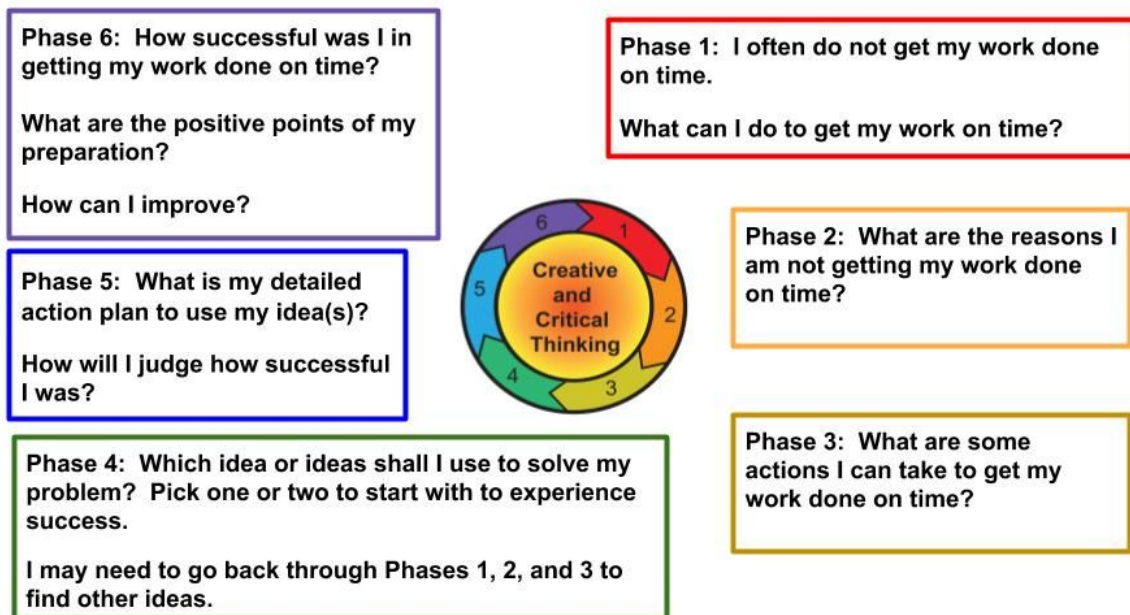
Finally, here's an example of a child who has used the Cycle of Problem Solving and Guiding Questions several times and is now learning to be more independent.

Andy's teacher reported that he has been late turning in his homework. Working with his parents, Andy used the

Cycle of Problem Solving to write his own guiding questions for each of the phases of problem solving. He brainstormed many ideas for getting his work done on time and picked one. Andy's plan was to do his homework at the kitchen table (not in his room as was his practice) right after school and to show his finished homework to his parents. Since this solution resulted in an improvement, Andy planned some additional ways to continue to improve. For each plan Andy used the Cycle and wrote his own questions to guide his work; these were displayed on the refrigerator!

You can see that although this child is more independent he is still going through the same process to solve his problem on improving the completion of his homework.

Cycle of Problem Solving



Mindfulness means paying full attention to something. It means slowing down to really notice what you're doing. Being **mindful** is the opposite of rushing or multitasking. When you're **mindful**, you're taking your time.

In our very busy, stress filled world, especially now, we often rush to solve a problem so we can move on to other things, and sometimes that's the next problem. We hope showing your child how to more independently solve problems in a structured, purposeful way using the Cycle of Problem Solving enhances the mindful behaviors and strategies you have been learning. And maybe this thoughtful approach to problem solving will be helpful to you as you solve the problems you encounter at home, at work and in your community.

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