DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Support And Family Education

Session Seven –
Problem-Solving Skills for Families

Materials Needed:
Handout L: Problem-Solving Skills

As the popular bumper sticker says, "Stuff happens." Problems are an inevitable part of life, and learning how to cope effectively with problems is important. Confronting problems can be challenging, especially if difficulties accumulate, involve numerous people, and/or involve a sense of helplessness. We often don't deal with problems effectively when we're overwhelmed by strong emotions.

Problem solving can be especially challenging for families coping with mental illness. When family members attempt to address problems with the consumer, frustration and challenges may arise. Family members may be repeatedly disappointed at their loved one's past poor decisions and their consequences. Families may resent their sense of burden that they "have to" make all the decisions, only to feel angry when their loved ones fail to comply.

Further, individuals with mental illness may face special challenges dealing with problems, such as heightened emotionality, irrational thinking, impaired judgment, impulsivity, and distorted perceptions. Consumers may resent their perception (or the reality) that they have little or no input in important decisions.

This session will review several problem-solving styles, strategies for effective problem solving, and a specific process that can be helpful in addressing problems. You will have an opportunity to practice the process with a real-life problem.

I.   Common problems for families dealing with mental illness

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Discussion Question: What are some challenges that your family faces?

Possible answers may include:
- Disagreements among family members
- Financial difficulties
- Medication compliance
- Drug and alcohol use/abuse
- Lack of participation in family activities (e.g., including doing household chores, going to church)
- Failure to follow household rules (e.g., issues about smoking)
- Coping with potentially stressful life events (e.g. family celebrations, moving, deaths)
- Threats of danger (e.g., suicidal comments/behavior; threats and/or acts of violence)
- Coping with the mental health system (e.g. changes of provider, inpatient admissions, insurance)
- Others?

II.   Styles of problem solving

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Discussion Questions:

- Do you know of someone who seems to be able to cope with whatever life sends his or her way? What does he/she do?
- What are some ways that we cope with problems in our lives? What are the benefits? And the costs?
- Are you open to learning new ways of coping with problems?

A. Theorists have described several different styles of problem solving. We will now describe each style (as described by Mueser & Gingerich, 1994), as well as potential benefits and consequences of each style. As the styles are described, think about which style best describes your approach to problems. You may also recognize other family members'/friends' styles. Understanding and respecting different approaches to solving problems is helpful in understanding others.

   1. Avoidant style: "If I don't see the problem, it's not there."

      - Description: This style may reflect denial of the existence and/or severity of the problem, or a decision to avoid dealing with the problem.

      - Potential benefit: With this style, you don't have to admit to yourself or anyone else that a problem exists.

- Potential consequences: Avoiding problems usually makes situations worsen over time. In addition, strategies that might have been effective if you had confronted the situation earlier may no longer be feasible.

2. Discouraged style: "I can't do anything about it anyway, so why even try? It won't make any difference."

- Description: Because families often feel powerless and discouraged by previously failed attempts at solving problems, this style is understandable. Inertia can take hold in a family, barring efforts at change.

- Potential benefits: This approach allows for passivity, and others will not hold you accountable for doing anything.

- Potential consequences: This attitude increases disappointment and the sense that there isn't anything the family can do to deal with the problem. Potentially helpful solutions may be missed.

3. Take-over style: "People should do what I think is best; I'm in charge."

- Description: Family members may attempt to take control of various situations, believing that the family system would work well if others simply abided by their decisions.

- Potential benefits: Family member feels productive by taking action and making changes for the family. Changes occur.

- Potential consequences: This style places full responsibility for problems on one individual. Although the "take-over" approach can seem initially empowering, it can also involve a sense of burden. Further, the decision-maker misses potentially constructive solutions from other family members.

4. Talking style: "If I talk about the problem long enough, it will get solved."

- Description: This style emphasizes talking about the problem, which can ease distress.

- Potential benefits: Family members are talking with one another and specifically addressing the problem.

- Potential consequences: Simply talking about the problem doesn't actually do anything towards solving the issue (unless you're talking about solutions). This approach can be a form of procrastination.

5. Active style: "If there is a problem, there must be a solution."

- Description: This approach involves directly assessing the problem, exploring potential solutions, and taking concrete action. This has been found to be the most effective problem-solving style.

- People who use this approach commonly

  a. See problems as inevitable, and don't blame themselves for their occurrence.
  b. See problems as challenges to be confronted (rather than threats to be avoided).
  c. Recognize that attempting a solution (even if it doesn't work) is better than never trying to do anything about the problem.
  d. Believe that there is a solution to every problem, or at least something that can be done to improve the situation.
  e. Believe in their ability to find a solution.
  f. Recognize that solving most problems takes time and effort.

- Potential benefits: All family members are involved in the problem-solving process; decisions made using this approach are more likely to be implemented and effective.

III.   Tips for effective problem solving

Before outlining a specific strategy for solving problems, we will review a few general guidelines on increasing the likelihood of having a successful outcome. [parts adapted from Mueser & Gingerich, 1994; Woolis, 1992]

A. Approach the problem with an upbeat, optimistic outlook.

1. Research has found that a positive frame of mind fosters creativity and effective problem solving.
2. A positive attitude can make family interactions about the problem go more smoothly.
3. Timing is important. Select a time to address the problem when you and your family members are feeling calm and able to focus. You may choose to ask your loved one, "Is this a good time to talk?" Or you may schedule a regular time (e.g., after dinner on Sundays) to discuss family issues.
4. Rather than dwelling on how disruptive the problem has been historically, try to focus on how the problem can change for the future.

B. Respect each person's perspective.

1. Try to consult everyone involved in the problem or situation.
2. Try to see the problem from each person's point of view. Otherwise, you're likely to choose solutions that others do not feel good about and are therefore not willing to use to solve the problem.

C. Avoid blaming.

1. Often, people try to determine the cause of the problem, thinking that this is where the solution lies. It is important to remember that searching for a cause is not the same as defining and implementing a solution.
2. Blaming usually impedes problem-solving because looking for a cause takes the focus away from looking for solutions.
3. Blaming also tends to make people feel attacked, which can lead to a denial of the problem or refusal to help in solving it.

D. Compromise if necessary.

1. Be flexible when considering solutions. This ensures consideration of many viewpoints and allows others to feel that their input is important.
2. If everyone is encouraged to contribute during the brainstorming, he/she will be much more likely to participate when it is time to implement the solution.

E. Be flexible and patient, especially when first learning these skills.

1. Remember that there rarely are obvious "right" or "wrong" answers. You are striving to find a solution that might work well for this particular problem at this time.
2. Reassure yourself by remembering that ALL families disagree about issues and have different opinions. Your challenge is to work together to deal with the problem. The process of confronting and solving problems as a team has the potential to bring your family closer together.

IV.   <u>Specific steps in solving problems</u>

Next we will outline a specific step-by-step method of solving problems. This approach can be used by individuals, groups, couples, or families. If solving problems in a group or family, it is helpful to designate someone as the note-taker.

A. Problem-Solving Steps
  1. <u>Get the family together</u>.
      It is essential to involve everyone in the problem-solving process. Meeting together ensures that everyone has a shared understanding of the problem and can contribute to the process. Families may choose to schedule a family meeting to discuss the problem.

  2. <u>Decide on a definition of the problem.</u>
      Family members often have different perceptions of the problem, or may have different information related to the problem. This important step involves discussing the problem from everyone's perspective and putting all the information together to define the problem clearly. It is important to be as specific as possible.

      This step also gives family members a sense of being valued and involved in discussions about the problem, which may lead to everyone's being more actively involved in selecting and implementing a solution.

      These questions may help the family define the problem (McFarlane et al., 2002)
      ▪ When did you first notice the problem?
      ▪ When does it occur? (time of day, situation, common triggers, etc.)
      ▪ Is the problem related to biochemical factors (e.g., changes in medication or substance abuse)?
      ▪ How often does the problem occur?
      ▪ Is the problem getting worse? At what rate?
      ▪ Does the problem occur with certain people or under certain conditions?
      ▪ Who is affected by the problem, and how?
      ▪ What has been tried to alleviate the problem in the past? What was helpful?
      ▪ With what activities does the problem interfere?

 3. <u>Brainstorm possible solutions.</u>
      Brainstorm as many possibilities as you can. It is important for everyone to voice at least one idea for the family to consider. All family members should refrain from criticism or evaluation of the suggestions during this step. Be creative and allow extreme solutions, as these may introduce an element of humor and help the brainstorming process.

4. <u>Do a cost-benefit analysis of each possible solution.</u>
   Discuss each possibility identified in the previous step. Identify and list the benefits of each solution and the possible costs (financial, emotional, time-wise, etc.). When providing negative feedback, be sure to criticize the idea – not the person who proposed the solution. Think about solutions tried in the past that did not work as sources of useful information. Consider that you may not have all the information necessary to select a good solution, or that the best solution might lie in a combination of solutions identified in Step 3.

5. <u>Decide on the best solution.</u>
   As a group, select one solution to implement, based on its practicality, its potential impact on the problem, the necessary resources, etc. The family's agreement on the solution is essential to its effective implementation. If the family simply cannot agree, they may select one plan to try with the understanding that another option will be tried if this strategy doesn't work.

6. <u>Develop a specific plan for how to implement the chosen solution.</u>
   Problem solving is not over just because you've selected a solution! Break the solution down into small, manageable, specific tasks. Select someone to carry out each task. You may also define feasible deadlines for each step.

7. <u>Evaluate whether the solution was attempted and whether or not it worked.</u>
   After step six, select a timeline for re-evaluation of the solution. At that time, reconvene to discuss the progress made to date, challenges encountered, and whether the problem has been solved. If a problem remains (or a new problem has emerged), discuss additional steps that need to be taken or whether a new solution is needed. You may need to repeat the problem-solving process if the new problem cannot be easily solved.

B. **Group Activity**

Depending on the size of your group, break the class into small groups of four to five people. Guide each group to define a particular problem (possibly using an issue relevant to several members). Instruct each group to go through each of the problem-solving stages (using <u>Handout L</u> as a guide). Give the group 10-15 minutes to accomplish this task. Next, invite each group to share its process and decision with the class. Discuss their experience of the problem-solving activity.

Discussion Questions:

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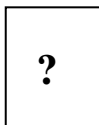
- How would this strategy work at home with your loved one?
- What obstacles might you envision for using this approach?

Engage the group in problem solving about how participants can adopt this process at home.