

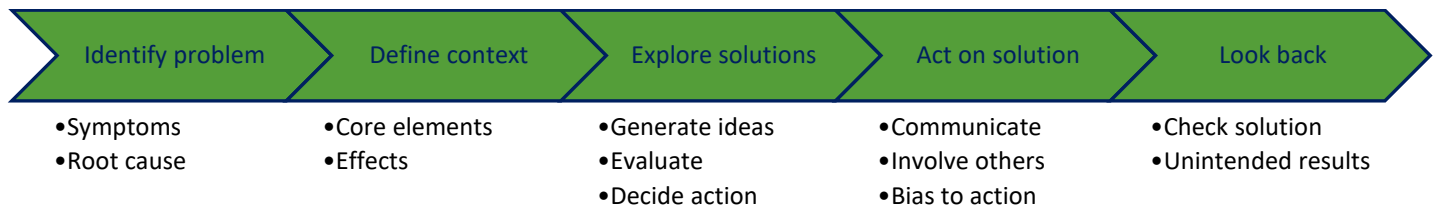
Problem Solving

Problem solving is one of the most essential skills in life. Regardless of who you are or what you do, you will face obstacles. How you face such challenges will often be a determining factor in how successful you are at life. There are many ways to solve problems, and your solution will depend on the problem itself and the context your situation as well as the knowledge, skills, experience, attitude and values you bring to the challenge. Despite the lockstep method below, praying through your problems is always the first step.

There are three elements common to every problem: 1) a goal to accomplish (if none, then there is no problem), 2) some kind of barrier to that goal, and 3) people as either part of the cause or the solution. Keeping these three in mind will help keep you focused on what you need to address.

IDEAL 5-Step Process

The basis of problem solving is not complicated. To some degree, most people solve problems intuitively. Yet, thinking through a problem and its parts usually generates a better solution. There is still plenty of room for intuition in the process. Consider approaching your problems with the IDEAL 5-step process. ¹ ([Click here](#) for a larger image. [Click here](#) for another example)



- 1. Identify the problem** (e.g., your car will not start)
 - a. Symptoms – What are the symptoms of the issue? Is the car making any noise? Are the lights coming on?
 - b. Root cause – Symptoms only point to or give us clues the root cause or the underlying issue. There are many reasons why a car will not start.
- 2. Define the context of the problem**
 - a. Core elements – The parts of the problem and root cause (e.g., the starter, the battery, gas in the tank).
 - b. Effects – The symptoms or the various ways in which the problem affects something else. How will this affect my ability to get back and forth to work, pick up the kids after school, etc.?
- 3. Explore strategies**
 - a. Generate ideas – What can you do to address the issue? Can you fix it? Do you need others to help?
 - b. Evaluate alternatives – What makes sense based on values, priorities, relationships, time, money, etc.?
 - c. Decide action – In most cases, you will employ one solution at a time; however, multiple phases can be a part of one plan (e.g., you could try to fix the car, then call for a friend, and then call for a tow truck).
- 4. Act on best solution**
 - a. Involve others – Who needs to know about what you are doing? Who can help? Whom will the solution affect?
 - b. Communicate – What do others need to know either to be a part of the solution or discontinuing behavior that supports the root cause?
 - c. Bias toward action – Time rarely makes problems “go away.” Likely, the car will not start again without intervention. Yet, timing is important, too. Calling your friend to help fix it might not be good at 3:00 a.m.
- 5. Look back and learn**
 - a. Check solution – If you have solved the problem on the first try, then great! If not, learn from the any additional information or experience related to the problem. Do you need to adjust the solution a bit or does the problem require an entirely new solution? Return to your alternatives and repeat steps 3 and 4 as needed.
 - b. Unintended results – Sometimes one solution produces unintended consequences. The decision to call a tow truck now leaves you without a car and a towing bill. Higher repair costs are also likely.

¹ Adapted from <https://ccmit.mit.edu/problem-solving/>