Problem Solving

The part of the brain just behind the forehead (called the frontal lobes) helps us plan for the future, weigh options, think before acting, and solve problems. Mood disorders cloud this area, which can make people feel overwhelmed or emotionally reactive. They may worry over details, paralyzed with indecision; or, they may jump too quickly to decisions in an impulsive, reactive way.

Problem solving can be broken down into a few essential steps. When our frontal lobes are working well, this all happens intuitively. If that’s not the case, the steps below will help you slow things down so you make decisions that work for your life and not just your emotions.

1. Describe the problem

Describe the nature of the problem, the people involved, and what your ideal outcome would be. Think about what factors are causing the problem, or causing it to persist. Don’t rush to judgments or solutions just yet, even if it feels urgent.

2. Brainstorm

Think of as many possible solutions as you can. Write them down. In the brainstorming phase, the goal is to generate a lot of ideas, so have fun with this part and let go of your judgment. Ideas tend to flow from one to another, so allow ridiculous ideas to come— even if they are unrealistic they may trigger you to think of new and creative solutions.

3. Edit and Decide

For each solution, think about how likely it is to work, how difficult it would be to carry out, and whether it carries a risk of causing problems. Your best guess will do fine here. You can rate each one from 1-10 in those areas. Finally, choose the solution that offers the best balance of benefits, risks, and ease of implementation.

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 1/3/2017