

## [TRACK 2: FIVE PROBLEM SOLVING STEPS]

Linda, Social Worker

[Linda]

When I work with cancer survivors, the best first step I recommend in solving a problem is to identify exactly what the problem is. However you do that, by talking it through with someone else or writing it down, you will be better focused on what you are up against. Sometimes, the simple act of defining the problem will suggest steps to a solution. Look at the problem in as many different ways as you can. Use different words to restate the problem. Are other people affected by the problem? How do others, such as your family, your friends, your doctors, or your boss, see the problem? Now, what you want to do is rephrase your problem as a goal that you want to work toward and achieve. Don't be surprised if your definition of your problem changes as you go through the other steps of problem solving. That's fine. Problem solving is not a simple process, but one that changes, just like you and your cancer. Your definition doesn't need to be perfect; just do the best you can. You can always change it later.

[Narrator]

Step 2: Get the Facts that are related to the problem.

[Linda]

All good problem-solving starts with information and knowledge. So, I work with cancer survivors to get the facts that are as up-to-date as possible. This involves finding reliable sources of information. Talk to your oncology nurse or social worker, if one is available. You might also turn to cancer organizations, advocacy groups, support groups of other cancer survivors, the Internet, friends, and of course, your own family. Look at the way you rephrased your problem as a goal and ask yourself if you can reasonably achieve it with all the information you now have. If not, decide what other information and resources you may need. Are they available? Ask questions. Do your homework. Don't always accept the first answer you get. Don't be surprised if the answers to some of your questions result in more questions. You will find that the gathering of information never stops. If that seems like a lot of work, you may soon realize that this work is giving you the power and opportunity to improve your treatment, and possibly, your quality of life. As you increase your skills, you may find that you want to share your information with others. There are many survivors out there who are willing to share their experiences. Remember, of course, that each person's situation is different, but common threads are there for all to share.

[Narrator]

Step 3: Create a plan and think it through carefully.

[Linda]

Plan out the ways you are going to solve the problem. Consider the pros and cons of your approach. Think about obstacles that might get in your way. How can you overcome them? What kind of help might you need? Can you accept that help? Use your resources gathered in getting the facts. Did they change your options, add to your options, or even take some of your options away? How will your plan affect your family and those around you? Get support for your plan from everyone you can. But don't be afraid if not everyone agrees with your plan; understand their viewpoint if they are an important part of your team.

[Narrator]

Step 4: Carry out your plan.

[Linda]

Approach your plan with the attitude that it can work. Carry out whatever steps you can on your own. This doesn't mean that you have to play the "strong, silent type" who doesn't need anybody's help—in fact, by all means, seek the help of other people. But as you carry out your plan to a successful completion, you will feel more confident, more optimistic, and more in control of your situation. And once you have carried out the first three steps, you are more likely to want to keep your plan moving.

[Linda]

This doesn't mean that you might not feel depressed, discouraged, or sad at times -- but it helps to move forward and do your normal daily activities as much as physically possible. If you cannot do this, if you feel too depressed or discouraged -- seek help and support immediately. Depression is a common problem during cancer, but help is available. Problems are harder to solve when you are struggling with depression. Here are some signs to watch for that may mean you have become depressed:

- Feeling helpless and hopeless.
- Losing interest in your usual activities.
- Being unable to concentrate.
- Feeling very sad.
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits.
- Not wanting to be with family and friends.

[Linda]

If any of these symptoms last for longer than two weeks, talk with your doctor, nurse, or social worker. If symptoms continue, ask for a referral to a counselor who works with people facing cancer. And please, don't wait. Aside from making you feel miserable, depression can actually interfere with the healing process, which is the last thing you need during treatment.

[Narrator]

Step 5: Check your plan as you go and adjust it as needed.

[Linda]

Set small goals as you move forward. Keep records of how your plan is going. Review your progress. Does something need adjusting? Have you found some new information? Have you found more resources? Have your circumstances changed? Think about these things, make any changes you think necessary, and keep going. You can only solve the problems facing you one step at a time.

[Narrator]

To help you learn this skill, listen to the following three case examples. They will show you how the problem solving process works. Try the exercises and think over the questions provided to help you practice these skills. Let's begin.