

# Problem Solving

**in Low Intensity CBT  
(Physical Health Series)**

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### Acknowledgement:

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**Image above:** Clinical Training (CEDAR) at the University of Exeter's Streatham Campus. **Image right:** The Sir Henry Wellcome Building for Mood Disorders Research at the University of Exeter.



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# About the authors



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# Part 1

## Doing Problem Solving: The Seven Steps

*When we are depressed or anxious our problems can sometimes feel overwhelming, like there are no solutions. Problem solving is an evidence-based intervention that helps you initially distance yourself from your problems to help you think about different types of practical solutions that there may be. Problem solving has seven steps and can be supported by your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner.*

### Step 1: Identify the Problem

Your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner will help you identify a problem to work on as clearly and precisely as possible. This may be working towards reaching one of your goals you will have already identified and discussed. You should seek to break each problem down into its major parts. For example a financial problem can be broken down into the components of debt, income and expenditure.

### Step 2: Identify the Solution

You should then try to identify as many potential solutions as possible. At this stage, nothing should be rejected, no matter how apparently ridiculous solutions may seem. Solutions can be generated to address different parts of the problem identified in Step 1.

### Step 3: Analyse Strengths and Weaknesses

Use **Worksheet B** to subject each potential solution to an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, to assess the main advantages and disadvantages of each solution. Advantages and disadvantages can refer to the likelihood of success, possibility of being able to undertake the solution, resources etc. In the final column, put a 'yes' for potential solutions you may want to try out, 'maybe' for those you will give further thought to later on and 'no' to those that you feel you can reject at this time.

### Step 4: Select a Solution

You should now choose a solution based on the analysis of strengths and weaknesses in Step 3. Pay attention to the resources available to undertake the selected solution. This is important since choosing a solution that cannot be undertaken will only lead to a failure.

## Step 5: Plan Implementation

The solution you have chosen may require careful planning. Therefore you should seek to outline the steps you will take and any resources you have identified may be needed. Try to ensure that the steps are specific, linked and realistic. Your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner will likely help you to do this using the 'Four Ws' – what, where, when, with whom – to help you develop your implementation plan.

## Step 6: Implementation

Now you have developed your solution, it is all about putting your solution into action. Use **Worksheet C** to record what you did and how it went. This will help you and your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner highlight things that went well or discuss things to do differently next time if needed.

## Step 7: Review

You should also use **Worksheet C** to review how well your solution worked. Maybe it worked a little or not at all. The advantage of problem solving is that alternative options always exist. With the aid of your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner this section will be used to gather information on the progress of your plan. If the solution has worked, you should continue to apply the solution or think about generating new ones, based on what you learnt here, to apply to other problems. If it did not work, then perhaps go back to Step 4 and consider adopting a new solution to try.

## Remember

Keeping records of how you did using problem solving is essential for you and your Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner to review your progress and help you problem solve any difficulties.

## Remember the seven rules of Problem Solving:

1. **Identify the Problem**
2. **Identify the Solution**
3. **Analyse Strengths and Weaknesses**
4. **Select a Solution**
5. **Plan Implementation**
6. **Implementation**
7. **Review**





# Part 2

## Problem Solving

Worksheet A

### Problem Solving

#### STEP 1 Problem Identification

Write the problem you want to try and solve here.

#### STEP 2 Solution Identification

What solutions are there? Don't reject anything at this stage, however silly it may seem!

#### STEP 3 Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis

What are the strengths and weaknesses for each solution?  
Use worksheet B to write these down for each solution considered.

#### STEP 4 Solution Selection

Review strengths and weaknesses on worksheet B, select a solution and write it below.

#### STEP 5 Implementation Plan

What steps will you take to apply your solution?

#### STEP 6 Implementation

What did you do? Use worksheet C to keep a diary of exactly what you did.

#### STEP 7 Review

How did it go? Use worksheet C to review how well your solution worked.

Part 3

Problem Solving

Worksheet B

Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis				
What are the strengths and weaknesses for each solution? For each solution considered write these below.				
Solution	Strengths	Weaknesses	Choice yes/no/maybe	



# Part 4

## Problem Solving Worksheet C

### What Did You Do and How Did It Go?

#### STEP 6 Implementation

What did you do? Write below exactly what you did.

#### STEP 7 Review

How did it go? Write below how well your solution worked.

## Part 5

# Derek's Recovery Story

*Derek's story is about someone who used problem solving to help him improve his low mood and quality of his life following his kidney failure and having to undertake weekly dialysis.*

Derek is 62 years old and four years ago was diagnosed with end stage renal failure. As his illness progressed over the course of these four years he slowly went from working full time, being fully involved in family life with a passion for indoor bowling to giving up work, withdrawing from his family and no longer playing his beloved bowls. Now he had started dialysis three times per week, his life had basically been reduced to visiting the hospital, watching tv and sleeping. This was affecting his mood, his relationships with his family and in a strange sort of way he felt alone.

One day whilst on dialysis, Tom, another dialysis patient, started to talk about how he got so low that his wife had 'dragged him' along to see the psychologist in the renal unit. The psychologist had explained how there was help out there and could help him make a referral to the local 'Speak Easy' service, which could be accessed through his GP practice. Derek was very unsure about all of this however. How could anyone help him with his low mood when anyone would be depressed having to be on dialysis most of the time and feeling unwell the rest! However later that evening when Derek was recounting this discussion to his wife Vera, the conversation was hardly over before Vera was on the phone and had made an appointment with the 'Speak Easy' service.

Ten days later Derek found himself in the waiting room waiting for his 'Speak Easy' appointment. He was still very sceptical about all this. However, he felt that

having the appointment would likely be the lesser of two evils especially when compared to the wrath of Vera.

Initially during the appointment Derek felt his scepticism was well deserved. He found that he was talking to Sarah, a Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner, about the things 'going through his head', and 'what he was doing more or less of', and how he 'felt in his body'. To begin with none of this made sense or seemed to recognise that he was down because he was ill.

However once Sarah began to explain how giving up on things or his common thoughts that 'He could no longer do anything now he was ill' all impacted upon each other and could make him feel worse physically as well, he started to take notice. At the end of the assessment he could see more clearly how, although his dialysis may indeed make him feel more exhausted and sleepy, his physical feelings could also be made worse because of his low mood. Also for the first time Derek could begin to see that just being on dialysis need not necessarily make him depressed.

Discussing the appointment with Vera on the way home he also realised that being on dialysis did not necessarily have to lead to low mood. If it did how come so many of his fellow patients were not depressed! Just as they entered the drive way, Vera thanked him for talking to her about his low mood. She noted that in the last year or so she had seen him

getting lower and lower yet he had never mentioned this to her. For the first time in a couple of years Derek also felt that he was not so alone with his illness and perhaps he was not a lost cause.

The following week Derek turned up to his appointment, feeling a little less sceptical. During the session Sarah first recapped his week and checked his understanding about how the way he feels emotionally about his illness may also be impacting upon his physical health as well as the obvious consequences of his illness. After discussing this they collaboratively discussed the range of interventions that may be helpful for Derek. In particular they discussed something called problem solving. Derek found that he was particularly drawn to problem solving, feeling that this was a good practical way to try and work his way out of his depression.

At times he had felt a little helpless to try and deal with the many challenges that being a dialysis patient presented him with. Sarah talked through problem solving and how there was good evidence to support its use amongst people who had depression as well as a long term illness. She then discussed how to do it and talked him through a 'recovery guide'.

However before starting problem solving, Sarah highlighted the value in setting some goals, and suggested how sometimes the goals set by patients with long term conditions had to be revised from those they had before they become ill.

**Problem solving helps patients to step back from their problems, generate potential solutions and then choose and implement these.**



This made a lot of sense to Derek as upon reflection he realised his reluctance to revise goals often meant he was setting hurdles too high.

Sarah first encouraged Derek to select a problem that he felt he would like to work on. Although Derek was aware it may have sounded silly, he really felt that were he able to start playing bowls again then it would really help to lift his mood. Whilst choosing this as the problem however Derek was less than convinced that it could be solved as he had stopped playing in the first place because he often felt so exhausted after dialysis.

With the aid of his Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner Derek decided on the following goals, some of which he found were slightly revised from previous goals given he had to take account of some of the physical limitations imposed by his dialysis.

Derek began by writing his problem into Step 1 on **Worksheet A**. Using the space below he was then encouraged to identify as many solutions as possible to help him solve his problem. Derek started off really easily but after identifying a couple of solutions began to struggle. Sarah really helped at this point encouraging him not to rule anything out too early on, but to include everything.

This really helped as although Derek initially identified 'stop dialysing', which even when writing it down sounded like a silly idea, it did help him to think about 'change type of dialysis' which may be a better idea. After Derek had identified a few solutions he was encouraged to move on to Step 4 and start to think about the strengths and weaknesses for each. Sarah did encourage him however to continue adding to the list of potential solutions between sessions as they may occur to him, or in conversation with Vera.



Derek's Goals

Goal number 1

To play bowls again with John on times when feeling physically able

Today's date: 6th June

I can do this now (circle a number):

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Not at all		Occasionally		Often		Anytime

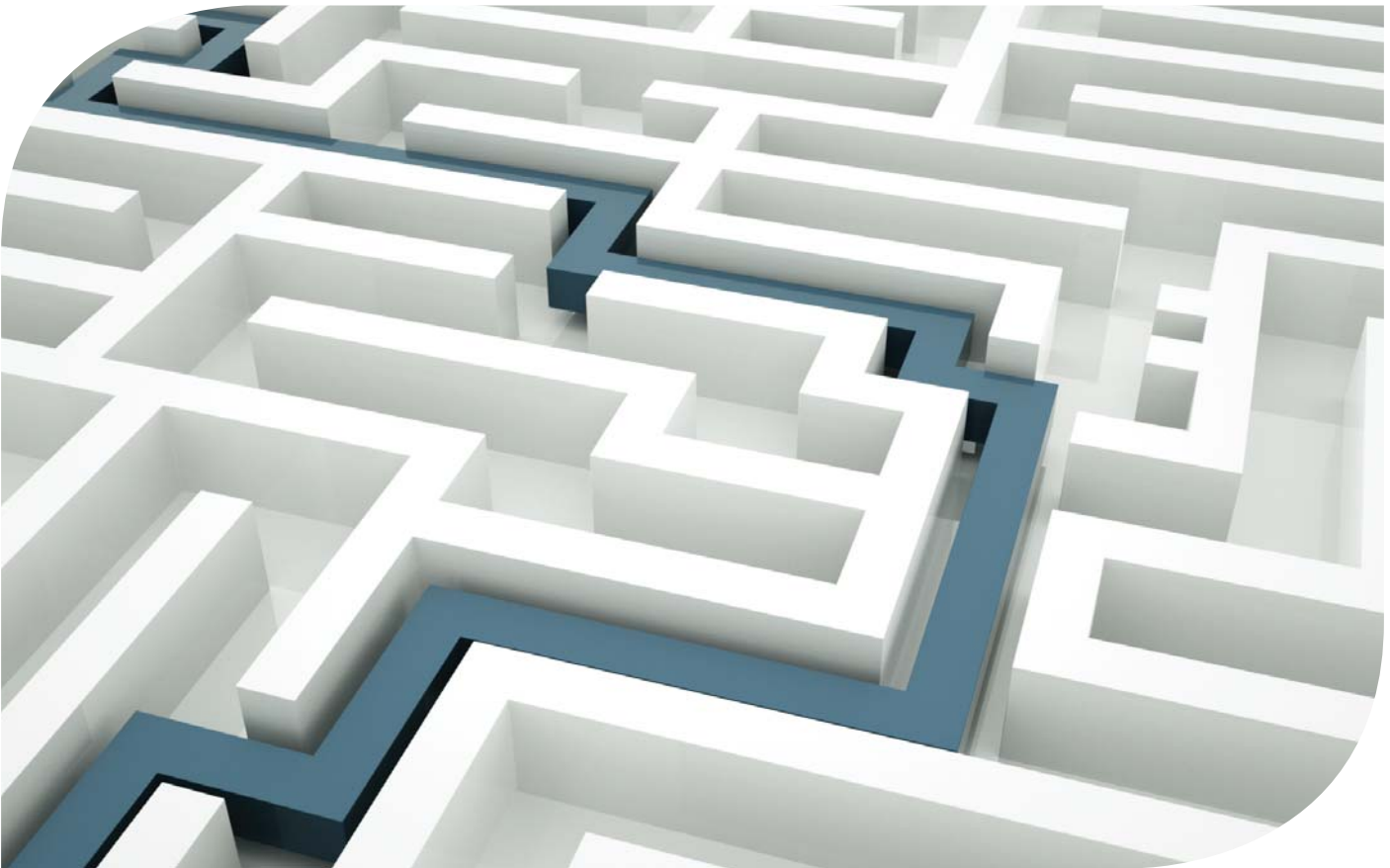
Goal number 2

To do more less physically demanding activities with my grandkids

Today's date: 6th June

I can do this now (circle a number):

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Not at all		Occasionally		Often		Anytime



# Derek's Problem Solving

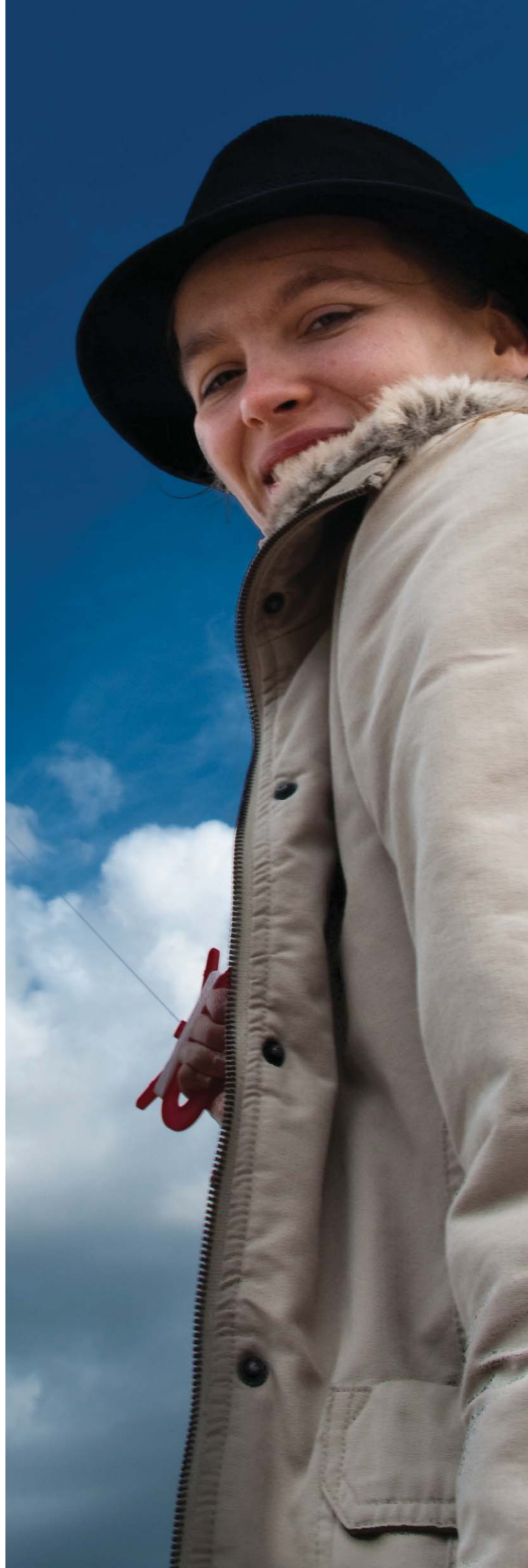
## Worksheet A

Problem Solving	
<b>STEP 1 Problem Identification</b> Write the problem you want to try and solve here.	
To be able to play bowls again with John even though I often feel tired and exhausted after dialysis.	
<b>STEP 2 Solution Identification</b> What solutions are there? Don't reject anything at this stage, however silly it may seem!	
-Give up bowls -Identify if during the week there are times I feel better to play bowls -Stop dialysing	-Change type of dialysis -Identify different type of bowls to play
<b>STEP 3 Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis</b> What are the strengths and weaknesses for each solution? Use Worksheet B to write these down for each solution considered.	
<b>STEP 4 Solution Selection</b> Review strengths and weaknesses on Worksheet B, select a solution and write it below.	
Identify if during the week there are times I feel better to play bowls	
<b>STEP 5 Implementation Plan</b> What steps will you take to apply your solution?	
Develop a 'how do I feel physically scale' use the scale every day over the next week to rate how I feel. Next Tuesday identify if I have any better times to play bowls. If any better times contact John on Tuesday to arrange a game of bowls for the next week.	
<b>STEP 6 Implementation</b> What did you do? Use Worksheet C to keep a diary of exactly what you did.	
<b>STEP 7 Review</b> How did it go? Use Worksheet C to review how well your solution worked.	

Derek now moved on to **Worksheet B** where he was asked to write down all the potential solutions identified in Step 2 and write down all the strengths and weaknesses for each. Derek found this quite an easy task to do and having to do it in a clear and structured manner really helped. For some of the solutions identified Derek was quickly able to realise that there were no strengths and Sarah encouraged him to leave these blank. After Derek had identified at least one strength and/or weakness for each solution Sarah encouraged him to carry on thinking about these and adding them between sessions.

He was then asked to move to Step 3 and review the strengths and weaknesses identified and to use this to choose a solution to try out or reject ones that were not appropriate. Two potential solutions jumped out to Derek – ‘*change type of dialysis*’ or ‘*identify if during the week there are times I feel better to play bowls*’. Whilst both seemed good solutions Derek decided to go with ‘*identify if during the week there are times I feel better to play bowls*’ as he felt this was something he could start straight away. He wrote this in Step 4 in **Worksheet A**. He was now encouraged to think about the steps he needed to take to apply his solution. The first thing that sprung to mind was how would he know when he felt better or worse? Sarah helped him to think about developing some type of diary that he could use to rate how he felt, using a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 equalled ‘terrible’ to 10 ‘great’.

After this Derek then broke the solution down into a number of different steps, with Sarah helping him to make his plan to do these as explicit as possible, where necessary helping him to state a time. Derek found this really helpful as he could see that by breaking a larger solution down into smaller steps each step did not seem so overwhelming.





# Derek's

## Problem Solving Worksheet B

Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis			
What are the strengths and weaknesses for each solution? For each solution considered write these below.			
Solution	Strengths	Weaknesses	Choice Yes/No/Maybe
Give up bowls	I would not have to worry about not being well enough to play.	I really used to enjoy bowls and would lose all my friends.	Maybe
Identify different type of bowls to play		I really enjoy my indoor bowls. Can only think about short mat bowls as an option and don't see how this would be easier.	Maybe
Stop dialysing		Really silly idea, I would be dead!	No
Change type of dialysis	Never thought of it before but the nurse did mention different types of dialysis and perhaps one would be better suited to me?	Even if I was able to change dialysis it would take a long time and may need extra surgery etc.	Yes
Identify if during the week there are times I feel better to play bowls	Never really thought to see if there are times I feel better or worse after dialysis? If there was, then knowing this would help.	What if I find out I feel really lousy all the time, this could make me feel even worse.	Yes

All that was now left was for Derek to actually put his solution into action. He was encouraged to do this over the course of the next week and to use **Worksheet C** as a kind of diary, to record what he had done, and how well things had gone for him.

The following week Derek turned up to the session with Sarah, with Workbooks in hand. After reviewing the problem statement and completing the measures Derek was delighted to tell Sarah how he had got on. Overall he had done what was planned and felt it was a really positive experience. Discussing what he had written in **Worksheet C** with Sarah, he could see that he had learnt a lot. Not least that although he might have thought he always felt ill; in fact his health did vary during the week. Generally he felt very tired on the mornings before he dialysed, exhausted afterwards and later into the evenings. However he was surprised to see that overall he felt a lot better the day following dialysis, especially from lunchtime onwards. He also noted that he felt quite good over most of the weekend when he did not dialyse.

Using this knowledge Derek was able to put the final part of his solution into play and phone John to organise a bowling time based around times when he felt better. Derek was now looking forward to his bowling later that week and was keen to see how it goes. He had also decided to use problem solving to see about trying to select an activity for the weekend he felt he could physically cope with for him to do with his family and young grandchildren.

Later that week Derek went bowling with John and thoroughly enjoyed it. Although he was a bit more tired than he used to be at the end of the game he felt this was well worthwhile and for this first time actually began to see that possibly he could have a life on dialysis.



# Problem Solving

## Worksheet C

### What Did You Do and How Did It Go?

#### STEP 6 Implementation

What did you do? Write below exactly what you did.

I used the scale developed with Sarah to rate how I felt physically during the day. Although I started off finding it hard to think about this using a 10 point scale, I soon got used to it and actually found it helpful.

This morning I discussed the diary with Vera and noticed that how I feel physically did vary during the week. Noticing that there were better and worse times I was able to identify that I tend to feel more tired the morning before dialysis, and after dialysis. However this made me aware that the day I don't dialyse, especially from lunchtime I tend to feel not too bad, and also over most of the weekend when I don't dialyse.

Knowing this I got in touch with John and we have now booked to go bowling on Thursday lunchtime.

#### STEP 7 Review

How did it go? Write below how well your solution worked.

I think this went really well. It really helped knowing how I felt over the week, not only as this helped me to solve how best to go bowling and link it with my dialysis and how I felt, but also to help me realise that I don't feel really bad all the time. I can do things. I will see how I feel and do manage after bowling, but at least I am going to give it a try.

Breaking things down really helped and it was good to include everything when thinking about solutions. Doing this was also helpful as I involved Vera, and had not realised really how I had cut her out of all this, when previously we shared everything.

I am planning to organise a day out with my daughter and grandkids as well now on Saturday. I am aware that this will be a bit more strenuous, so plan to use problem solving again to think about different types of activities to do, or different things I can do to help me keep up with an active 6 and 4 year old. This really helped thanks.



# Part 2

## Problem Solving Worksheet A

Problem Solving	
<b>STEP 1 Problem Identification</b> Write the problem you want to try and solve here.	
<b>STEP 2 Solution Identification</b> What solutions are there? Don't reject anything at this stage, however silly it may seem!	
<b>STEP 3 Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis</b> What are the strengths and weaknesses for each solution? Use worksheet B to write these down for each solution considered.	
<b>STEP 4 Solution Selection</b> Review strengths and weaknesses on worksheet B, select a solution and write it below.	
<b>STEP 5 Implementation Plan</b> What steps will you take to apply your solution?	
<b>STEP 6 Implementation</b> What did you do? Use worksheet C to keep a diary of exactly what you did.	
<b>STEP 7 Review</b> How did it go? Use worksheet C to review how well your solution worked.	

# Part 2

## Problem Solving

### Worksheet A

Problem Solving	
<b>STEP 1 Problem Identification</b> Write the problem you want to try and solve here.	
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<b>STEP 7 Review</b> How did it go? Use worksheet C to review how well your solution worked.	

Part 3

Problem Solving

Worksheet B

Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis			
What are the strengths and weaknesses for each solution? For each solution considered write these below.			
Solution	Strengths	Weaknesses	Choice yes/no/maybe



Part 3

Problem Solving  
Worksheet B

Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis			
What are the strengths and weaknesses for each solution? For each solution considered write these below.			
Solution	Strengths	Weaknesses	Choice yes/no/maybe

# Part 4

## Problem Solving Worksheet C

### What Did You Do and How Did It Go?

#### STEP 6 Implementation

What did you do? Write below exactly what you did.

#### STEP 7 Review

How did it go? Write below how well your solution worked.

# Part 4

## Problem Solving Worksheet C

### What Did You Do and How Did It Go?

#### STEP 6 Implementation

What did you do? Write below exactly what you did.

#### STEP 7 Review

How did it go? Write below how well your solution worked.





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