

# EXPERIENCING ISOLATION DUE TO COVID-19?

## ONE WAY TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy evidence based approach to help you develop and apply problem solving skills.



# EXPERIENCING ISOLATION DUE TO COVID-19?

## YOUR WELLBEING SERVICE IS HERE TO HELP

With restrictions placed on us by COVID-19, we're all required to keep our distance from others. At times this may require students to mix only with flat mates in their household bubble. Whilst helpful in stopping the spread of the virus throughout our community, it can present problems.

This self-help approach is here to help you enhance your problem solving skills to overcome challenges you may face in your household bubble, or restrictions in your life under COVID-19 more generally. It has been designed for you to work through on your own. At times however, you may find yourself struggling with a specific Step.

### **IF SO, YOU ARE NOT ON YOUR OWN!**

Trained Practitioners at the University of Exeter Wellbeing service with expertise in supporting this approach are ready to offer e-mail support.



*You are in control of the way you choose to work through this workbook. Therefore, the speed you want to go using the workbook is down to you alongside how you put the techniques you'll learn into practice.*

## THE PROBLEM WITH COVID-19

COVID-19 is often requiring us to face challenges and difficulties we've never faced before.

However, this doesn't mean you won't have the knowledge and skills to overcome them. You will already have faced many personal challenges and developed a number of techniques to arrive at successful solutions. However, it's also likely you've never taken a step back to systematically apply the knowledge and skills you have to solve new challenges you are currently facing. This is especially relevant with respect to trying to solve many of the novel challenges presented by COVID-19.

This self-help approach will help you develop skills and systematically apply a well-established and evidence-based problem solving technique to overcome any problems you may currently be experiencing. Currently many students are seeking support from the Wellbeing Service for difficulties arising from an experience of isolation because of COVID-19.

This approach is therefore focussed on addressing a sense of isolation. However, it can also be easily applied to any other difficulties you experience whilst at University, or indeed throughout your careers.



## HELPFUL TIPS

Before you get started, sharing some tips may be helpful. Many of these have come from people that have used self-help approaches before.

### Give it your best shot

Because it's unlikely you'll have directly experienced demands imposed on you by COVID-19 before, you may initially struggle with some of the problem solving steps. But just give the approach your best shot. That's all anyone, including yourself, can ask.

### Schedule working on this approach alongside your other demands

You should go at a rate best suited to you when working through this approach. However, often slow and steady works best. If other demands make it difficult for you to find time to work through this approach then think about ways you can engage with it alongside other demands you face.

### Consider requesting support from others in your Household Bubble

You may be feeling isolated even when part of a household bubble. However, collaborative problem solving can be really helpful. So consider talking to other members of your bubble about working with you to problem solve. It's possible they consider themselves isolated too.

### Involve family and friends

If you're using this self-help approach from home then having others around may be helpful working through some of the problem solving steps, perhaps helping you look at things differently or sometimes just for a chat.

### Ask for help

Although this is a self-help approach, if you find yourself struggling then please send the Wellbeing Practitioner an email, being as specific as possible about the difficulty you've experienced. They will get back and provide specific advice on ways to overcome any difficulties you are experiencing when engaging with this approach.

## APPLYING A PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES WITH ISOLATION

This self-help approach consists of three steps:

STEP 1: Identify a practical problem you're currently facing

STEP 2: Ensure the problem you've selected can be solved

STEP 3: Systematically apply problem solving

*Stage 1: Identify potential solutions*

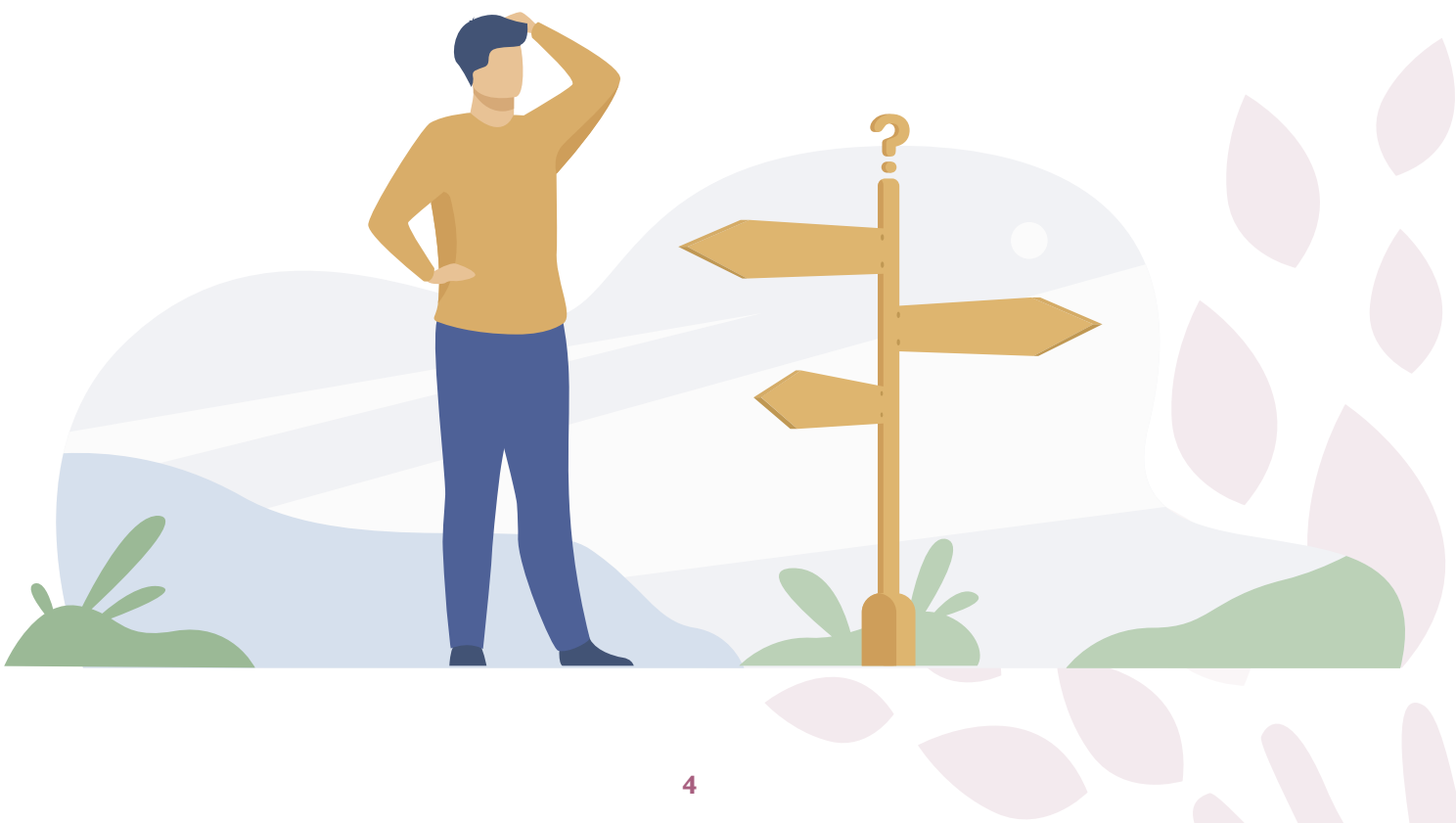
*Stage 2: Analyse strengths and weaknesses*

*Stage 3: Select a solution*

*Stage 4: Planning*

*Stage 5: Put the solution into action*

*Stage 6: Review how it went*



## STEP 1: IDENTIFY A PRACTICAL PROBLEM YOU'RE CURRENTLY FACING

Although you may be facing many problems associated with isolation at present, try to identify one that is having the greatest impact. For example, maybe you're struggling to get along with other members of your household bubble? Before you do however, you can break the problem down.

### CONSIDER

If the problem you've identified just seems too big to get on top of, look at ways you may be able to break it down. For example, if you're experiencing isolation consider potential reasons for this. It may be that you're struggling to get along with others in your household bubble? So, consider possible reasons.

For example, is the support bubble otherwise getting along? If it is then maybe identifying a challenge you face, perhaps struggling to make new friends, could represent the problem to solve.

Or maybe no member of the household bubble is getting on with the others? In which case maybe solving a problem at the level of the household bubble is necessary? If so, it may be worth thinking if this problem solving approach may be helpful for all members to use to find a solution. Two heads (or more!) may be better than one!



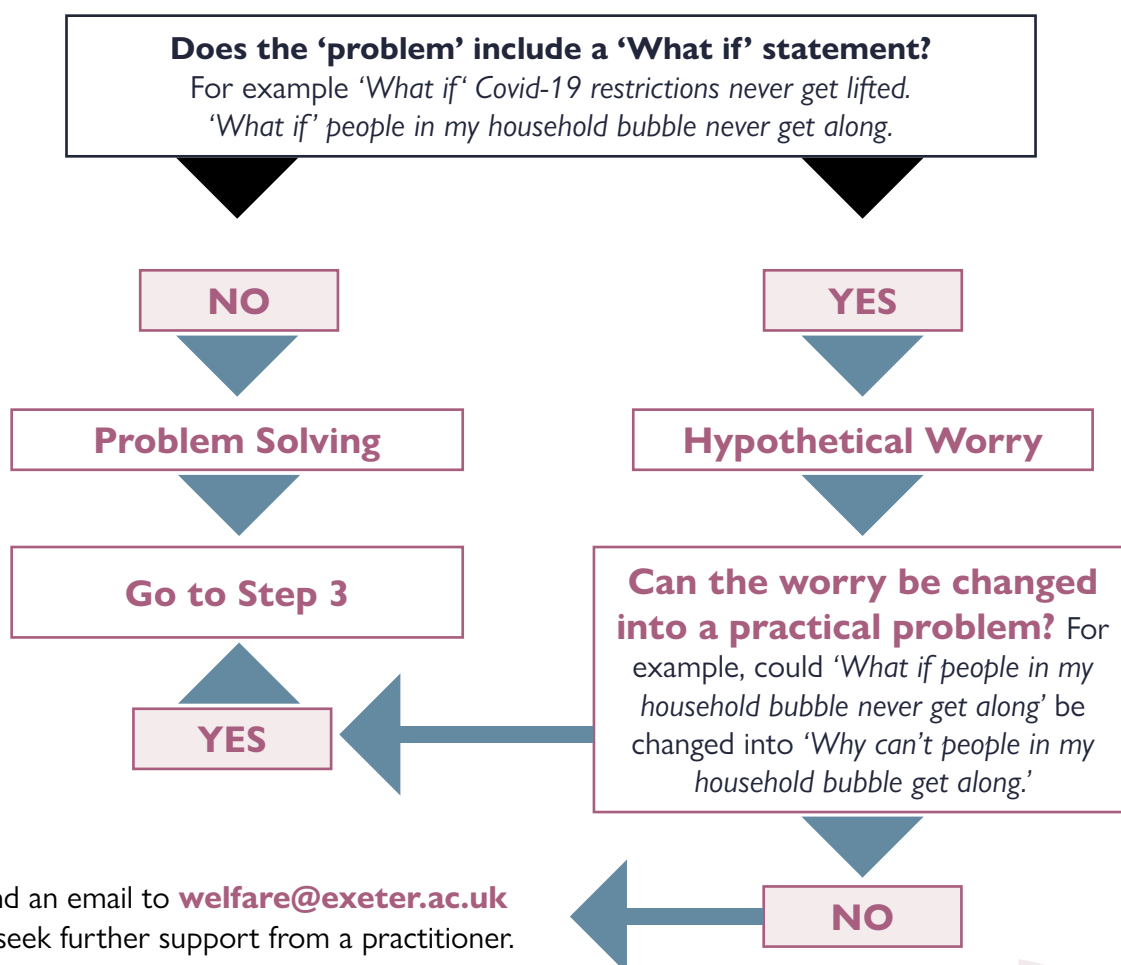
WRITE THE PROBLEM YOU'VE CURRENTLY IDENTIFIED BELOW

If you find yourself struggling to break your problems down, then send an email [welfare@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:welfare@exeter.ac.uk) to seek support from a trained practitioner.

## STEP 2: CAN YOUR PROBLEM BE SOLVED?

Hopefully you've now identified a problem to work on. However, to solve a problem it needs to be practical and have a solution. Sometimes what are seen as practical problems can actually represent *hypothetical worries* that have no solution.

Use the diagram below to separate practical problems from hypothetical worries.





## STEP 3: SYSTEMATICALLY APPLY PROBLEM SOLVING

### STAGE 1: IDENTIFY POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Write the problem that you may have broken down or converted from a hypothetical worry and work through the **PROBLEM SOLVING WORKSHEET**.

## MY PROBLEM SOLVING RECORD WORKSHEET

<b>What is the worry you'd like to try and solve? Convert this into a practical problem if not already done so.</b>
My worry:
My practical problem?:
<b>Identify a solution</b>
Identify as many potential solutions as possible to the problem identified and write them down. Don't worry at this point if the solution seems ridiculous.
What are the potential solutions? (Remember not to dismiss anything too early!)

**REMEMBER:** Don't dismiss anything too early!



## STAGE 2: ANALYSE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Consider the strengths and weaknesses for all potential solutions you've identified. If possible, maybe working with others, perhaps members of your Household Bubble, family and friends, could be helpful?

Think about the following:

- Given restrictions imposed by COVID-19, is a solution possible?
- Do you believe the solution is likely to work?
- Are you going to be able to try the solution out?
- Can you get hold of everything you need to try the solution out?  
If not, this may represent a weakness of that solution.
- Could the solution cause even more problems?

Write all the solutions you've thought of on the [MY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESS WORKSHEET](#).

In the final column put:

- YES For solutions you'd like to try out.
- NO For solutions you think you can reject.
- MAYBE For solutions you may want to think about more.

## NEED HELP?

If you struggle to identify solutions or find yourself thinking things such as "What if I can't find any solutions?" then send an email to your wellbeing practitioner [welfare@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:welfare@exeter.ac.uk). They'll be happy to help.



# MY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES WORKSHEET

**My Problem – write the problem that can be solved here:**

**Strengths and weaknesses of each solution?**

SOLUTION	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	CHOICE (YES/NO/ MAYBE)

### STAGE 3: SELECT A SOLUTION

Select a solution you'd like to try out.

THE SOLUTION I'M GOING TO TRY OUT.

### STAGE: 4 PLANNING

Solutions often require careful planning. To make a solution more achievable, think about the steps and resources you may need. This may include things such as time, support, equipment and ways to apply any solution within COVID-19 restrictions.

Ensure all steps are specific, linked, realistic and possible with restrictions. To make the steps more specific it can be helpful to think about the '4 Ws':

**WHAT** are you doing?

For example, have a video-chat with other members of my 'Household Bubble' to generate ideas as to how we can get along better.

**WHEN** are you going to do it?

For example, tonight, when your module assessment has been submitted.

**WITH WHOM** will you be with?

For example, with other members of my 'Household Bubble'.

**WHERE** are you going to do it?

For example, in my room.

WHAT STEPS WILL I FOLLOW TO APPLY MY SOLUTION?

e.g., What, When, With Whom, Where. What resources do I need? Are there any restrictions I need to take notice of?

## STAGE 5: PUT THE SOLUTION INTO ACTION

Now it's time to put your plan into action! It's really important to write down what you did when trying out your solution.

- It's best to do this as soon as possible after doing it.
- Rather than relying on your memory, people sometimes find it helpful to use a notebook or your mobile phone to help you write down exactly what you did soon after doing it.

WHAT EXACTLY DID I DO?

## STEP 6: REVIEW HOW IT WENT

Some solutions may have worked, some may have worked a little and some may not have worked at all. Whether or not the solution worked, reviewing it can help you learn.

### HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS THE SOLUTION?

What went well? What didn't go to plan?

If the solution to reduce your experience of isolation has worked, you may want to think about generating new solutions based on what you learnt here. You can then apply these to other problems you may be experiencing now or in the future. These may be related to COVID-19 or indeed other aspects of your study.

If the solution didn't help solve the problem, work forward from **STEP 2** and consider if any of the other solutions you generated may help.

**REMEMBER:** Regardless of whether the solution worked or not, every time you try a solution you're learning about the types of things that work and those that don't. All this information is good, as it may help you generate further solutions that may work.

## REMEMBER, IF YOU ARE STILL STRUGGLING WITH ISOLATION OR WITH OTHER DIFFICULTIES YOU FACE AT UNIVERSITY, YOU'RE NOT ON YOUR OWN!

You can always send an email to [welfare@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:welfare@exeter.ac.uk) to seek specific support. Or if you believe you're struggling more generally, then why not contact Wellbeing Services on [exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/contact/makeanappointment](https://exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/contact/makeanappointment) to explore the range of options they can offer to help you through this difficult time.



# AUTHORS

**Professor Paul Farrand** is Director of the Low-Intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (LICBT) portfolio within Clinical Education, Development and Research (CEDAR); Psychology at the University of Exeter. His main clinical and research interests are in LICBT, especially in a written self-help format and has developed a wide range of written CBT self-help interventions for depression and anxiety. He sits on the Department of Health Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme Expert Advisory Group and national level committees developing a broader psychological therapies workforce and at an international level concerning worldwide developments in LICBT. Clinically, he has been Psychological Lead attached to Head and Neck specialties for over 20 years and Academic Lead for the University of Exeter Wellbeing Service.

**Mark Sawyer** is Head of Wellbeing and Welfare Services at the University of Exeter. Earlier in his career he worked as a social worker in educational settings and adult mental health. He has also worked as a senior lecturer and counsellor in Higher Education, and more recently is working alongside senior colleagues at Exeter to develop a whole institutional approach to university mental health.

---

Copyright © University of Exeter [2021] (acting through CEDAR; Psychology Department). All rights reserved.

Except as set out below, no part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored or transmitted in any medium by electronic means or otherwise, without the written permission of the owner. You may download a copy of the publication for your personal use and/or for individual clinical use only, provided you acknowledge the source. Please be aware you will need a separate license if your organisation requires use of this publication across its entire service. This publication does not replace therapy. Neither the copyright holder, the authors, nor any other party who has been involved in the preparation or publication of this publication warrants that the information contained herein is in every respect accurate or complete, and they are not responsible for any errors or omissions or the results obtained from the use of such information.

## **Acknowledgements**

Selected specific factors are derived from the Problem Solving protocol developed by Professor Pim Cuijpers (2004). To ensure suitability for the University of Exeter Student community, Matthew Clayman commented on drafts of this approach and fed into student focused examples. Illustrative work used throughout this workbook has been provided by the Design Studio.