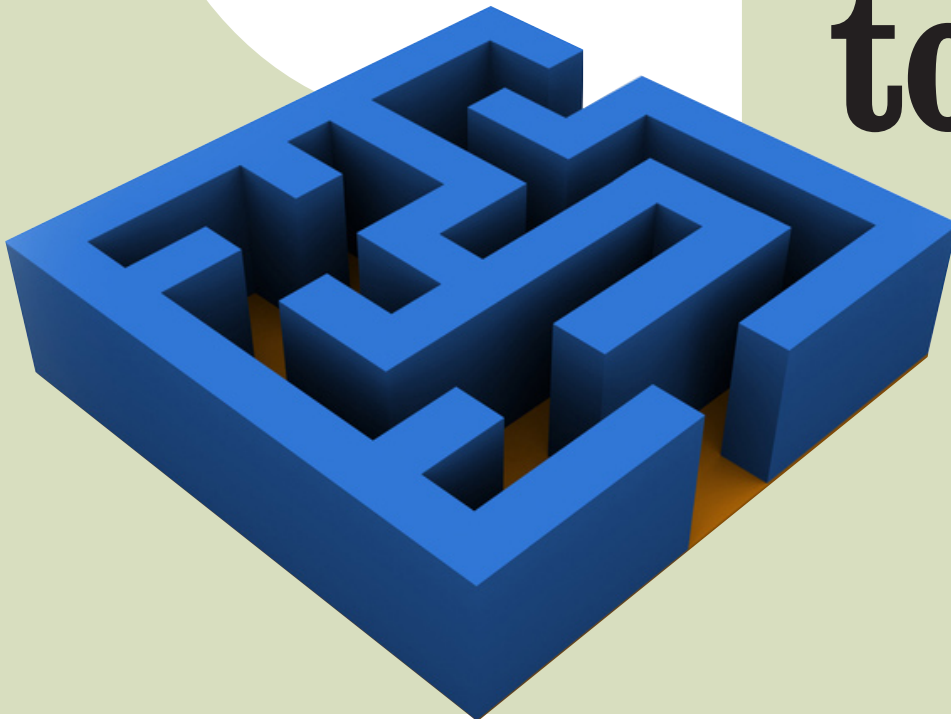


Owner's Guide to Difficulties



Pre-illustrated edition | by Peter Albert



Life consists mostly of difficulties.

Many people regard this view as pessimistic, but most of the world knows that it's true. Denying it does no good. Admitting it opens up the possibility of learning to cope with difficulties more effectively and reducing the suffering that seems to be built into human existence.

Perhaps this denial explains why the two most useful tools for handling difficulties have been so neglected. These tools have been around for a long time and are well known in some circles, yet I rarely seem them practiced. And I have never seen them presented together as they are here.

It's a popular superstition that preparing for difficulties is a form of "negative thinking" that will somehow help bring trouble about. Nonsense! By this logic, fire extinguishers cause fires and health insurance makes people sick. Preparing for difficulties makes them easier to handle when they show up.

There is another reason to learn to handle difficulties...

Success and happiness depend on how we handle difficulties.

Problems cause stress, and stress makes us stupid so that we can't solve problems. When stress and problems chase each other round and round, they create a vortex of difficulty, sucking us down.

Escape the vortex by handling the stress and the problem simultaneously with the two tools I will describe here. These tools are for people lazy enough to invest a minute today to save hours next month. The tools are easy to learn and practice, and can reduce the effort that your life requires. For when you handle difficulties effectively, you learn and grow from them.

Why I wrote this

When I was a rehab counselor, I looked for tools to help my clients cope with life. The two most useful were the CALMER and SOLVER, both taken from various sources. (My contribution was to make them more memorable by forging the acronyms.)

With the CALMER, my clients learned to zap stress in seconds—anywhere, any time. The SOLVER gave them a systematic way to solve any problem life might dish up.

The two tools worked so well that I started using them myself. I found they reinforced each other. Doing the CALMER gave me the cool head I needed to solve problems. The step-by-step approach of the SOLVER took my mind off worries and focused it on solutions, which helped me calm down.

They became my constant companions, helping me handle new situations, large and small. In the process, my difficulties became teachers instead of enemies. (Not that I wouldn't rather play hooky).

I found myself asking “Why didn't someone tell me these things earlier?”

Don't Panic!

Stress is an emotional and physical response to the perception of danger. This perception is usually automatic. Stress is not a situation, but our reaction to it, often called the “fight or flight” response, which we share with a wide variety of animals. Parts of our inner brain become active, as does the unsympathetic nervous system (commonly but mistakenly called the sympathetic nervous system.) Adrenaline pumps into our bloodstream. Blood flows away

from our brains and into the smooth muscles of our arms and legs. We become strong but stupid.

We often react with fight or flight when we have no need to fight or flee: when we are stuck in traffic, encounter a problem at work, or experience criticism (real or imagined). We lose control of ourselves just when we need a cool head. By panicking we may endanger ourselves and others.

When difficulty hits, we usually need to head off fight-or-flight so we can deal with it coolly. But how?

‘C’—Continuous, Conscious, Centered breathing

Whoever first said you should take a deep breath when stressed was way off the mark. What they should have said is this: practice deep, relaxed diaphragmatic breathing regularly. When stress hits, keep doing it.

We tend to stop breathing when stress hits, and many people breathe shallowly the rest of the time, moving their chests instead of their bellies. If you tell someone to take a deep breath, they will often strain to inflate their chest. This is not relaxing.

Don't strain at breathing; instead, learn to breathe diaphragmatically by moving your belly. Practice this, say, 10 times a day for a minute each time. The extra oxygen that flows to your brain will make you smarter and more than make up for the small effort this takes. Breathing out is more relaxing than breathing in, so do it slowly. Focusing attention on your breath, if you have time, can be calming. It is a common form of meditation practice. But when a stressful situation hits, the most important thing is to just keep breathing. Your brain needs the oxygen.

Learning to breathe effectively isn't as easy as reading about it, but it pays off big. I once worked in a prison. The stress of dealing with criminal personalities (among the staff) robbed me of sleep. So I bought a wristwatch with a repeating countdown timer with an alarm. Several times each shift it would remind me to practice my breathing. That kept me breathing between alarms as well, and sleep returned.

‘A’—Amused face

About a hundred years ago, the noted American psychologist William James said that we don't smile because we are happy; we are happy because we smile. Like most clever sayings, it's only about 16.7% true, but that's enough to be useful.

Your body helps its brain decide whether there is a physical emergency at hand. If you frown, that suggests an emergency. If you smile, you're telling your brain, "Hold the adrenaline! No crisis here. See, I'm smiling." Your brain believes this (if you do the other things suggested here), and what's more, it's true.

Smile with the eyes as well as with the mouth. It doesn't have to be a great big Alfred E. Newman "What me worry?" grin. A faint Mona Lisa smile will do.

‘L’—Learning mindset

“The trouble with people is not that they don’t know but that they know so much that ain’t so.”

— Josh Billings

Smart people get that way by learning from everything that happens to them. When something happens we don’t like, we’ve got a choice: reject it or be open and learn. If you choose “learn,” give yourself credit.

We value knowledge and hate uncertainty. We often believe confident people when we ought to know better. Most of all, we believe our own hidden assumptions. But when difficulties lead to stress, it’s likely that one of those hidden assumptions is causing mischief.

It’s time to get back to “I Don’t Know”—the state of mind you had as a child. You can’t learn if you already know.

Admitting “I don’t know” does three things:

- acknowledges reality
- normalizes the fact that you don’t know
- opens your mind to learning.

The payoff from a difficult situation comes when you choose to learn from it.

‘M’—Mental control

Most of us help talk ourselves into fight or flight. Either aloud or silently, you will say something like, “*&#!” or just, “I can’t stand that!” No wonder we stress out.

Instead, replace that with a phrase such as:

“Alert mind, calm body”

—Charles Stroebe, M.D., *QR: The Quieting Reflex*

“What’s happening is real and I’m finding the best possible solution right now.”

—Robert K. Cooper, *Health & Fitness Excellence: The Scientific Action Plan*

Sometimes I’ll tell myself, matter-of-factly, “I don’t like that.” I tend to shrug my shoulders and the next thought is “so what?” I’m not trying to hypnotize myself into happiness with hype. I’m just trying to stay in neutral. “I don’t like that” works for me.

You can also imagine a pleasant scene—a memory or fantasy—to help relax yourself. Try a scene from nature.

‘E’—Erect Posture

Most of us were told to “stand up straight,” or “sit up straight” so many times when we were little that we confused these ideas with all the other nonsense that adults were telling us at the time. But it’s actually a good idea.

When we prepare to flee or fight, we crouch. The brain, sensing this, infers an emergency. If you want to stay calm, sit or stand at your full height. The right posture can help ensure the

flow of blood and oxygen to your brain (helping you stay smart) and send a message to it that you are ready to face the world.

But relax. You can bend your knees a little. Don't suck in your gut. (You want to use it for breathing, remember?) Just lengthen your spine rather than slouching. Imagine that a balloon is attached to the top of your head and pulls you effortlessly upward even as your muscles relax. You look better that way, anyhow.

If you balance your body over your spine, it will take *less* effort than slouching.

‘R’—Relaxed muscles

Our muscles tense when stress hits, contributing to the fight or flight response. In particular, the jaws, tongue, and shoulders tend to tighten up. Notice these parts of your body, and give them permission to relax.

You can learn to relax your muscles with relaxation tapes. Progressive relaxation involves tightening and then relaxing various muscle groups. Autogenics involves suggesting to yourself that your muscles relax. I recommend *Letting Go of Stress* and other tapes & CDs by Emmett Miller, M.D.

Any kind of meditation also helps.

Here are some suggestions for relaxing muscles on the spot:

- feel a wave of relaxation pass through your body
- imagine your muscles are filling with warm oil
- deliberately tense your muscles, especially jaws, tongue, and shoulders, and then relax them.

CALMER summary card

Conscious breathing.

Amused face.

Learning mindset.

Mental Control.

Erect posture.

Relaxed Muscles

Rehearsing the CALMER

Here's the catch. When you bump into a difficulty in the dark, you will forget to do the CALMER. Unless you rehearse.

At first, you can just do two or three steps slowly. Add more. Work up to using all six simultaneously. You will naturally get faster at this so that you can relax yourself in a few seconds.

Do it regularly. In her essay, [10 Best-Ever Anxiety-Management Techniques](#), Margaret Wehrenberg says she has her patients practice diaphragmatic breathing one minute 10–15 times a day “every time they find themselves waiting for something—the water to boil, the phone to ring, their doctor’s appointment, the line to move at the bank”. Why not do this with the CALMER? The extra energy you will have during the day will more than pay for the time you spend doing this.

Use mental rehearsal. In a state of deep relaxation (preferably), imagine a stressful situation you may encounter. At first just let this mental movie run its course. Then play it again, but this time, imagine that you are doing the CALMER and that you handle it successfully.

CALMER SOURCES

Health & Fitness Excellence: The Scientific Action Plan by Robert K. Cooper, Ph.D. I first read about this process, which Dr. Cooper calls the “Instant Calming Sequence,” in Chapter 7 of this book. It’s still the best source of information on The CALMER. The rest of the book lives up to its title. It’s excellent.

QR: The Quieting Reflex by Charles Stroebe, M.D. A more detailed approach.

Note: Dr. Cooper says it takes less than a second. Dr. Stroebe says it takes six seconds.

You be the judge.

The SOLVER

If you put a group of people in a room and ask them to come up with a systematic way of solving problems, they will probably invent something like the SOLVER. The sources I’ve seen on systematic problem-solving use the same six steps.

Some problems are easy to solve, or there may be little at stake, or you may need to make an immediate decision. Some problems are unsolvable. But if the stakes are high, if the problem is difficult, and if you have some time, use the SOLVER.

Having a systematic, step-by-step approach reduces worry. Use a pencil and paper for this process. If you don't have a pencil, a computer will do.

The SOLVER easily lends itself to group process if it is understood by all parties. If it became the norm for individuals, groups, and businesses, perhaps it might penetrate the political process as well. When you finish reading it, consider how it differs from the usual process, where we propose solutions in isolation and decide on them individually, pro or con. With the SOLVER, we decide what problems to solve and what to accomplish, then look for the best solution.

'S'—State the problem clearly

Ever solve the wrong problem? I'll bet you got the wrong answer. Investing time to find the right problem and state it clearly in writing is well worth the effort. Revise your problem statement as many times as necessary until you cannot improve on it. If the other steps in the SOLVER cause you to rethink the problem statement, go back and revise it again.

It's often a good idea to solve a more general problem. So a question like:

"How can I afford such and such?" becomes...

"Am I in the right line of work?" becomes...

"what do I enjoy doing more than what I'm doing now that also pays better?"

Play around with the problem statement. If Isaac Newton had asked the narrow question, "why do apples fall?", he probably would have discovered only that the stems break.

‘O’—Observe and Outline

That is to say, analyze it. Ask yourself:

- What causes the problem?
- What are my feelings about it?
- What has been tried already?
- What information is available? Which information is false or misleading? (Probably more than you suspect.)
- Who might know something useful to me?
- What do I want instead of the problem?
- What are my criteria for a solution?
- And so forth...

Outlining effectively groups similar ideas together. Grouping makes it easier to generate new ideas—and new questions, as well. It aids both creativity and organization. Here are two ways to outline:

- ① Use a cluster diagram, with lines drawn from a central idea. (Tony Buzon has trademarked the name Mindmap™ to refer to this use of a cluster diagram.)
- ② Use an outlining program, such as the outline view in Microsoft Word.

Finally, simplify your analysis by highlighting the main points. Sometimes the hard part is discovering the underlying simplicity.

‘L’—List possible solutions

You’ll never get close to all possible solutions, but pull out the stops. When you list an idea, list any variations you can think of, including the opposite of the idea.

Do not evaluate during this stage.

Most of us have a lot of unconscious, implicit assumptions. This is a good time to bring them up and challenge them. Dumb solutions often work well. Get in touch with “I Don’t Know.”

After you’ve exhausted yourself and written down all the solutions you can think of, take a break and then write some more.

If you are doing this in a group, have people write their lists separately. “Brainstorming” in a group inhibits creativity. Do not discount an idea just because it is similar to one already proposed; slight differences can be important.

‘V’—eValuate

Once you have far more ideas than could possibly be of any use whatsoever, it’s time to evaluate and make a plan.

Eliminate anything that is genuinely dangerous, e.g., robbing a bank. There are famous stories of people taking huge risks and succeeding brilliantly against the odds. They are good stories because they are unusual. Usually, it’s best to have the odds on your side.

But be slow to eliminate ideas that are merely uncomfortable. Good solutions often are.

If you have the opportunity to test your plan before fully committing yourself, do so.

Your brain may work best when you are not watching. Forget about the problem for a while. Go to a show. Visit a friend and talk about anything else. Sleep on it. Then decide.

Once you have a plan, decide how long you will stick with it until you expect to see results.

‘E’—Execute the plan

Don’t procrastinate, but don’t let others rush you into action against your own better judgment.

Tokugawa Ieyasu (the basis for the title character in the novel *Shogun*) unified Japan under his rule in 1600. He was known for waiting for the right moment, then acting boldly.

‘R’—Review

When the time is ripe, review your plan and see if it actually works. If you are getting what you want, fine. If you are not getting what you want, go back to a previous step.

The plan may work, but take longer than you want it to. In this case, your best course of action may be to stick with it rather than abandon it too early.

But it’s easy to fool yourself. Your plan may be a mistake. Most of us hate to admit it. Use the learning mindset to take an honest view of the situation. If your plan isn’t working, get another one. You may simply have run afoul of the law of unintended consequences. All of our actions are experiments since there is no way to know the outcome with certainty beforehand. Sorry. I don’t like it either.

Even if you made the right decision, you may need to revise it. Your plan may simply need adjusting. So adjust.

SOLVER summary

Solve any problem by working through the following steps, one by one, in order. You can always go back to an earlier step, but you can't skip steps.

State the problem clearly in writing

Outline the problem.

List all solutions you can imagine. Do not evaluate.

eValuate the solutions and make a plan.

Execute your decision.

Revision and revise

SOLVER Sources

I first read about systematic problem solving in an anonymous publication of the Washington State government used in a chemical dependency training. Since then, I have seen other versions of the same ideas fairly often. (I see people practice them less often). They all seem similar. I've heard the idea comes from W. Edwards Deming, but I have been unable to confirm this.

Managing Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide by Gillian Butler, Ph.D. and Tony Hope, M.D. contains a chapter on problem solving and a lot more besides.

Unsolvable problems

There are problems that cannot be solved. In these cases, accept reality and enjoy life as best you can.

But worry, fear, regret, and so forth often prevent us from enjoying life even when there is nothing we can do to improve it. We are bedeviled by cycles of automatic thoughts that we feel powerless to break.

But break them we can. [Cognitive alchemy](#) shows us how to break the cycles of automatic thoughts and achieve greater piece of mind.

Problems with your own behavior

When problems arise from our own behavior, the real problem is to change oneself. It's easy to change, but staying changed is hard.

Happily, research in the past few decades has shown us how to do that. One branch of this research is the “Transtheoretical approach” as described in the book *Changing for Good* by James Prochaska and others. Everyone (but the authors) calls it the [Stages of Change approach](#). In my words (not the authors'), to get from *Before* to *After* you go through four stages: *Think, Prepare, Act, Maintain*.

Think of change as a board game where you have to complete certain tasks to move from one tile to the next and eventually reach your goal. You want to avoid landing on the center tile—Relapse—but you probably will, at some point, just like you probably will land on somebody else's property in a game of Monopoly.

You can reduce the odds of this with a [relapse prevention](#) plan: list your banana peels (things you might slip on), make plans to deal with each, and list your warning signs. When you do relapse (it's normal), set aside guilt and revise your plan. That's why I call relapse the “Revision Stage.” Having a plan to come back from relapse is just as important as a plan to prevent it.

Conclusion and beyond

John Lennon sang, “Life is what happens when you’ve made other plans.” Plan now for unexpected difficulties. If you practice the CALMER and the SOLVER in easy times, they will work more smoothly in the hard. Doing this will take a little effort; not doing it will take much more.

The CALMER will enhance even good situations. Occasionally using The SOLVER on a smaller problem, when it is not really necessary, is a good way to prepare for the large ones we like to think will never happen.

It often seems that life is mostly difficulties. But handling them calmly and skillfully, without excessive resistance, creates lasting benefits that make the good times flow more smoothly. One learns new skills and gradually becomes more relaxed and happy.

My hope for you is that these two tools will become your constant companions, serving you in hard times and easy, and that your difficulties will become stepping stones to greater joy.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Albert lives in Portland, Oregon and has worked as an addiction counselor, a market research analyst, and a computer instructor. He has produced and hosted live cable access call-in programs, and he played the lead role in a Mandarin Chinese comedy. He combines backgrounds in psychology, mathematics, and economics to help businesses get the most from Excel and transform PowerPoint from a mind-numbing prop into a potent graphic communication tool that supports public speaking.

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