

Chapter Three: The Key to Good Fit Coping: Step Two

I can face things that are out of my control, and not act out of control.

– Lynn TerKeurst

Step Two asks that you pick one problem from your stress list. In this step, your client goes deeper, examining one problem at a time.

Which to choose?

The most stressful one... *or* the one that's most mysterious or vexing ... *or*

... any one you want, so you can see how this works! No right or wrong choices here, just pick one, and you're on to Step Two.

Step Two is a game changer, very powerful. My clients finishing therapy or checking in midstream often name Step Two as a huge help and a tool that really makes a difference.

Step Two of the Four Steps

Here's how Step Two works:

A) First, define the problem. State it simply. Capture what angle of this problem needs to be addressed. Since there can be a lot of different angles to a problem, it helps to be precise.

Let's say your client wants to look at work issues. Is it working a 40-hour week? Is it work politics? Is it rumors of a massive layoff that have been circulating? Is it a micromanaging boss? Just name the specific challenge or relevant angle which they want to explore.

Naming the problem is a relief – and it aids the active coping muscles to clarify this. Yep, active coping means you're leaning in toward what's stressful. It takes courage to move out of avoidance mode, but it is so much more satisfying, and relieving once stress is faced.

Then they'll rate their stress level on the 1-10 scale, 10 is high. It helps to ask your client to recall the context. The last time this happened, what feelings, thoughts and physical sensations were they experiencing?

B) Now name the parts of this problem that are not in control (not changeable) and those things that are in control.

That's about it for Step Two! Every problem has these two sides – in control or not – able to change or not going to change. From there, you will have a map for the best next steps. An added option is to **C) List any AHA's** or new awarenesses that are unearthed in the Step Two work.

Let's try Step Two with a common challenge – Making time for exercise when time is short. Paul was struggling with this area. After having a lot of prior success with working out he'd recently lost his mojo.

Step Two: Example One, Paul

A) Name the problem, stress level and context:

Problem: Not feeling motivated to work out, after having past success with it.

Rate the stress level the problem causes, 1-10 scale, 10 is high end. **4.5/10**

Recall the context: *I was sitting at my desk in my gym clothes. It was early evening, after work. Part of me knew I should go, but I just couldn't get motivated to make it happen. I was thinking "I'm so lazy," and I was feeling quite defeated. I worried that others would think I'm weak.*

B) Name the in control, and not in control sides of this problem. Make two columns – the left side for what is in Paul's control; the right side is for what is not in his control.

IN CONTROL or CHANGEABLE

Changing up my routine besides the gym
Exercise helps physical and mental health
Pushing through the blah, going anyway
Limit distractions / exercise first
Recall benefits (better sleep, energy)
Restart, minimum amount, put in calendar

NOT IN CONTROL or NOT CHANGEABLE

Need to fulfill work hours and projects
The longer I stall, the more defeated I feel
The current list of distractions that sidetrack me
Thoughts like "I'm lazy" that go nowhere
Whether or not I sleep well
Worry I'll get weak

OK – this is the backbone of step two – separating any problem into what is, and what is not, in your control. This exercise helped Paul realize some of his negative thoughts were making this harder, such as thinking "I'm lazy." (Negative thoughts will be covered in Chapter Four.)

But facing into his avoidance and discussing it in the session made him see that he gets a lot out of exercise. Taking a break for two weeks did not mean he'd lost all his past work. His routine was daunting to just jump back in to. He was getting in a lot of steps. This is the regained perspective active coping can bring.

C) AHAs: Paul does benefit from working out. He isn't too far gone from his routine. There may be days he can try other options, as well as going to the gym when that works.

Step Two: Example Two, Amy

Another common problem is making time for meditation / mindfulness. This is strongly recommended for mental health, especially anxiety. But it can be hard to get started or stick to it. A lot of clients will tell me it's hard to sit still. Yet even minutes make a big difference. This skill also increases emotional intelligence and intuition, which are key skills for mental health and thriving.

Let's see how Amy works with this problem using Step Two.

A) Problem, stress rating, context: **Problem:** Difficulty meditating. For Amy, making the time and getting still feel impossible. **Stress rating: 8.5/10.** **Context:** *The last time I tried to meditate, my thoughts were going a mile a minute. The kids came in and interrupted. It felt impossible to get quiet. I thought, "I'll never get this right! Maybe mindfulness is not for me."*

B) Naming what's in control and what's not:

IN CONTROL

Try it when kids aren't home
Giving myself grace as I start out
Watching my self-care choices
Trying guided meditations at times
This can help me "sit with my stuff"
I could use an app, start small

NOT IN CONTROL

Hard to do when I have the kids
Unexpected needs of the kids, house repairs
My preference to talk to friends if stressed
Prefer to be active, take walks, vs. be still
This contradicts my passionate, active mind
I get bored easily

Step Two helps Amy see some of her identity feels like it's not suited to meditation. Yet she knows she needs more ways to relax and to be with challenging emotions that can arise. She knows that this is one of her goals for therapy.

Amy knows some of her favorite influencers swear by meditation. Maybe she just needs to find a method that works for her active, movement-oriented self. She could also do research (she loves to do that) about how people have surmounted obstacles to meditating. She could try walking with mindfulness, also called walking meditation, or guided meditations, versus listening to podcasts.

Step Two started Amy on the path of brainstorming, which we cover in the next chapter. For now, she has reset. She decides to keep working on this in a few different ways, such as guided meditations. (Recordings like these can be found on InsightTimer.com or YouTube.)

Step Two: Example Three, Janet

Here is one more example of Step Two from therapist and client Janet, who is dealing with another common challenge zone – money worries.

A) Problem, stress rating, context:

Janet's problem: My finances are unclear right now, and accounting and financial clarity feel out of reach at times. **Stress level: 6.5/10.** Context: *Since going full time into private practice, income has become more unpredictable. Though I vow not to get behind with accounting, I often do, and get frustrated by the time it takes to catch up. I think, "What's wrong with me?"*

B)

IN CONTROL / CHANGEABLE

Updating budget and spread sheet
Catching up on reimbursements
Updating debt management
Handling old insurance claims
Scheduling a weekly time to do this
Future accounting plans after catching up
Researching inner issues with money

NOT IN CONTROL or CHANGEABLE

Larger economy cycles, global economy
My immigrant past, family money history
Need to keep track of billing, of taxes
Bad experiences with past accountants
Unexpected vet bills
Slower summer season for new clients

In the initial approach to this step, Janet felt overwhelmed and unsure about what to do first. She had that “ugh” feeling about doing her accounting work.

C) The AHAs after Step Two? Amy realized there was a lot in her control about ways to catch up and increase her financial clarity. It didn't feel that way when she started with Step Two. Also, she had more awareness of all the work she had done since going full time into private practice. She could give herself a bit more credit here, maybe some compassion too.

Sure, facing money stress is not the most fun thing to do, except for reimbursements involving back payments. But fleshing this out left her feeling more empowered, and more hopeful. Cool!

After Step Two, and then using a tool from the upcoming Step Four, Janet’s stress rating went from 8.5 to 3. Wow, a big drop! She also saw her Fight Flight Freeze response more clearly, and the visceral relief the TMSC tools provide. In her words, “I’ll know if my perspective’s off” when she has a high stress rating. Now she has options for that.

With an 8.5/10 stress rating, she felt stuck and kept circling in that panicked state. She kept avoiding the money work, but then would stay anxious. Now, she knows that high stress levels can be a signal to breathe and take some active coping steps. In the end, avoiding made her stress much higher than just facing toward her stress.

Let’s Try Step Two

In terms of stress management, coping with what you CAN control is different from coping with what you CAN’T control. This is helpful to know because once you split the problem into these sides, the next steps and best coping options will be clearer. Stress drops!

A “Goodness of Fit” between the controllability of the stress, and what you use to cope, is a powerful key in the TMSC model. This is called “Good Fit Coping.” Having good coping choices based on whether the stress is in your control or not will vastly improve stress management. A true game changer, but I repeat myself.

Try Step Two – a key pivot point of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. (You can also find all the worksheets in the Appendix).

Step Two

A) Name the Problem, Stress rating, and Context:

Problem: _____

Rate the stress level, 1-10, 10 is high: _____ Context: _____

B) Name what is in my control, or changeable, and what is not, about the situation.

IN CONTROL

NOT IN CONTROL

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

C) Note any AHA's: _____

What are AHAs? These are insights and realizations from active coping work that may surprise you and your client. For example, perhaps there is more in control than previously thought. Or, when it is clearer which side is more stressful, that area can be focused on for lowering stress.

One can worry about what's not in our control or perhaps not be thrilled to address tasks that are in our control. TMSC practice will increase the ability to minimize procrastination. Insights like this help minimize time-wasting angst and keep us moving along with what's important.

Procrastination is passive coping and tends to increase stress. Any active coping, once we get used to using those muscles, keeps a lid on any rising stress. With TMSC practice, clients will then know how to move forward, or certainly have some ideas about what next steps to take. Impressive!

Onward!

Conclusion

The TMSC provides research-backed coping tools. First, have clients use Steps One and Two. Then, they can follow up with Steps Three and/or Four. With a few weeks of practice, you and your clients should be able to jump to whatever step is most relevant and useful for the current stress.

One of the hardest things for clients is slowing down to try some of these steps. It means leaving that familiar avoidance mode. The stress cycle wants to keep building, so it takes strength and maturity to slow down. Yet, active coping will change their life. Once they stop

avoiding stress, relief and confidence soon follow. It is worth that initial discomfort to shift gears. Active coping does get easier with practice. And it's a huge help with shifting procrastination.

Action Step

Have your clients try Step Two with any challenge they are facing. Choose one problem at a time to use with Step Two. Sometimes, focusing on a problem will bring up other problems. Stay focused; complete one problem at a time. Then use Step Two again for the next problem.

Have your client note any AHAs. They can get a small aha from just sitting and facing into the problem: noting the context, the emotions, the thoughts, the physical sensations. Ask what hits them after Step Two. Often, you will hear surprise. "More of this is in my control than I thought." What a relief to discover that!

Please join me in the next step, Step Three – Problem solving. This step will help your client build on the solid foundation they created from Step Two's work to better understand the stressor.

See the Appendix for the worksheets.

***To invite Denise to speak to your group, email
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