Training module 5

Problem solving and Goal achievement

In this module you will:

- Identify a problem you would like to solve
- Work out solutions to tackle the problem
- Decide on a course of action
- Learn how to set SMART goals
- Understand how to review goals.

Training module 5:
Problem solving and Goal achievement
March 2015

Module contents

Part A: Description of module

How can this module help me?

The purpose of this module is to help give some structure to the often difficult process of identifying and solving a problem. Once we know a problem exists it can be hard to find a solution and even harder to take the action we need to take. If we have a number of problems at the same time this can sometimes feel overwhelming and it can feel like there is no clear way through. We end up stressed, unhappy and worried but without doing anything to actually resolve the problem.

This module tries to break down the whole process of problem solving into a series of simple stages which you can tackle one at a time. Although in this module we talk about solving problems, exactly the same methods can be used to set and achieve specific goals. For this reason, the module is called "Problem Solving and Goal Achievement".

How does this module work?

You can work through this module on your own but you might find it much easier to work through the module with the support of your keyworker or a friend you trust. The module itself is broken down into a series of clear and simple steps:

Step 1: Identify the problem

Step 2: Brainstorm all possible solutions

Step 3: Evaluate the solutions and choose the best one

Step 4: Form an action plan

Step 5: Implement the action plan

Step 6: Review the results

Throughout the module we will be using a fictional example of a lady called Sarah to help illustrate the process of problem solving and goal achievement. Don't worry if your situation is nothing like Sarah's – it is purely an example to help clarify the process of problem solving. Just to give you a bit of context, below is a brief summary of Sarah's current situation:

"Sarah gave up her job about two years ago. She had enjoyed her work, but long-term mental health problems eventually made it impossible for her to continue. Since leaving her job Sarah has worked hard to combat her mental health problems and her efforts, in combination with the right medication, have recently started to really improve things.

Nevertheless, Sarah can still struggle to motivate herself and her confidence is lower than it has ever been. Since stopping work she has gradually lost contact with her old work colleagues and she now finds herself feeling isolated and lonely. She feels she doesn't have any significant structure or focus to her days and that her options are limited as, being on benefits, she doesn't have much money. She feels like she is in a rut and doesn't know how to get out."

Throughout the module there are coloured boxes to help you:

Example
e.g. **The purple boxes are where we use Sarah as an example to illustrate the exercise.**

Exercise
The blue boxes direct you toward an exercise.

Sheet to Fill In
The yellow boxes are sheets for you to complete. If you would like any additional copies of these sheets, just ask your keyworker.

Part B: Identifying the problem

The first stage in problem solving and goal achievement is to identify the problem that you wish to solve. This can be easier said than done as sometimes we can avoid acknowledging that a problem exists, or we might simply find it difficult to see the issues because we are so close to them. This is where talking can help. You might find that, through your discussions in keywork, you gradually get a clearer idea of what issues you currently have and where you would like to take action to improve things.

Example

e.g.

After speaking to a friend, Sarah wrote down a list of her problems as she saw them:

- I feel lonely
- My confidence is very low
- I don't have much structure to my day and what I do have I don't find satisfying
- I find it difficult to motivate myself
- I don't have much money
- I don't have a job

Talking through this list with her friend Sarah realized that her main feeling was one of frustration. Because she was starting to feel better in herself she was ready to move forward with her life, but she didn't know where to begin. Her current lifestyle and routines didn't satisfy her anymore and she wanted a new challenge.

Sarah decided that the first problem she was going to address was her lack of structure. She felt that if she was more active this might help address quite a lot of the problems which she had listed. Her problem was simply stated as:

"I don't have enough satisfying structure to my day".

Exercise

You might already have a clear idea of the problem you would like to work on or the goal you would like to achieve. If you do not, however, then on page 5 is a list of some areas where issues can occur in life. The list is not comprehensive; it is just a tool to help you focus, so you may well identify an area which isn't mentioned. Read through the list and give yourself some time to think about it.

When you are ready you can then use the sheet on page 6 to write down one or more problems you would like to tackle.

Examples of areas for problem solving and goal setting

Personal life	- Structure - Hobbies - Housing - Leisure - Living skills (e.g. cooking or cleaning)
Relationships	- Parents - Friends - Children - Colleagues - Partner
Physical health	- Weight - Fitness - Alcohol use - Drug use - Sleeping - Smoking - Healthy eating
Mental health	- Loneliness - Confidence - Anger - Low mood - Assertiveness - Thinking styles - Anxiety
Employment	- Education - Training - Experience - Finding a job - Change of career
Finances	- Budgeting - Benefits - Gambling - Debts - Savings

Problems I would like to tackle:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

If you have identified more than one problem, the next stage is to choose which one you will focus on first. This may be the first time you have tried problem solving in this way. If it is and you are learning a new skill then you might want to choose the issue which is the least complicated or the least difficult to overcome. Once you are more familiar with the process of problem solving you might then choose to come back to your list and choose a slightly more complicated or challenging problem.

Once you have decided which problem you will focus on write it down below. Try and make it as clear and as short as possible (as with the example of Sarah on page 4):

My selected problem is (please write below):

Part C: Coming up with solutions

By this stage you have chosen the one problem that you would like to focus on. The next stage is to brainstorm as many solutions to the problem as you possibly can. The trick here is not to rule anything out at all – write down everything that you can think of. There is no such thing as a bad idea at this stage, feel free to be as creative as you like! Later on, we will go through the various solutions and assess their individual merits, but for now the only job is to get down as many ideas as possible. Ideally try and get five or more solutions down. Keep them as short as possible – you don't need to go into any details at this stage.

Again, you might find this particular task is easier if you get support from another person. Your keyworker might be able to help you come up with some possible solutions, so consider bringing this sheet to your keywork meeting.

| Example |
| --- |
| **e.g.** Sarah has identified her problem as "I don't have enough satisfying structure to my day". She sat down with a friend to brainstorm various ways in which she could tackle this problem. Her possible solutions were:

▪ Get a paid job
▪ Join the local gym
▪ Re-train as a veterinary assistant
▪ Find a local voluntary job
▪ Socialise more with friends |

| Exercise |
| --- |
| On the next page is a brainstorming sheet. Write your chosen problem in the box at the top and then write down as many solutions as you can in the boxes below. If you come up with more than seven solutions (congratulations if you do!) then just continue on another sheet. If you think it might help, you can use a blank piece of paper and scribble down as many ideas as you can think of first before completing the sheet on the next page. |

My selected problem is:

Solution 1:
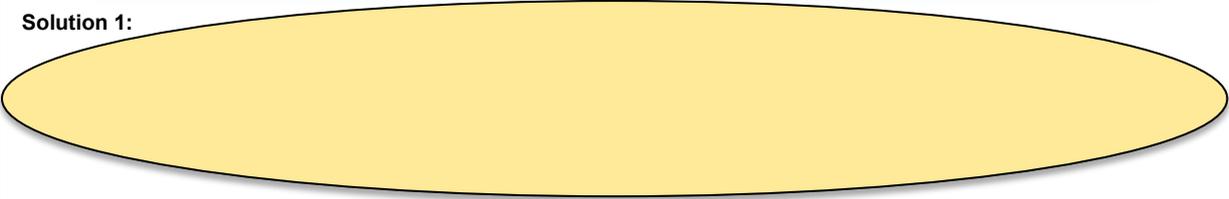
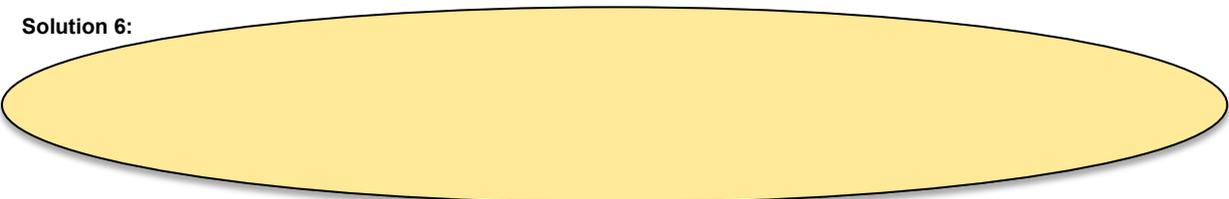**Solution 2:**
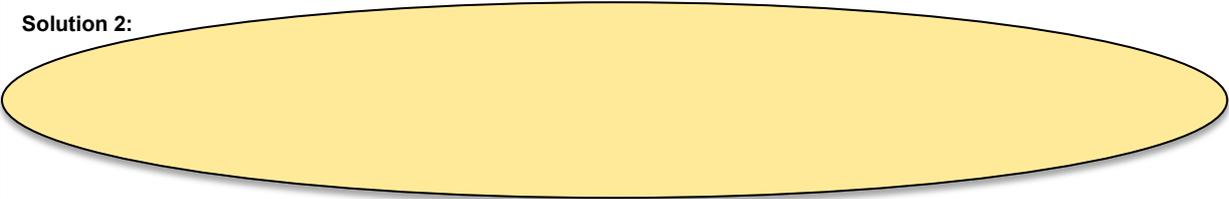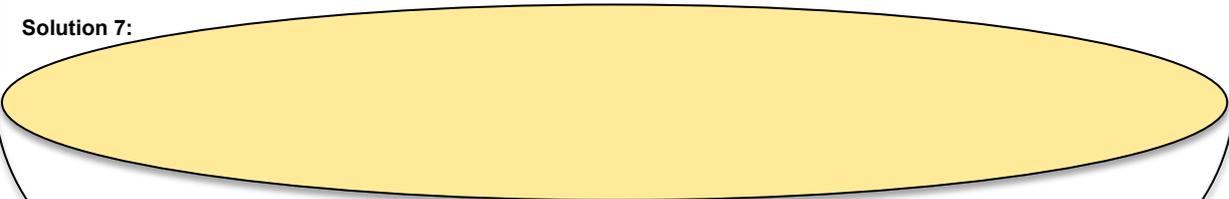
Solution 3:
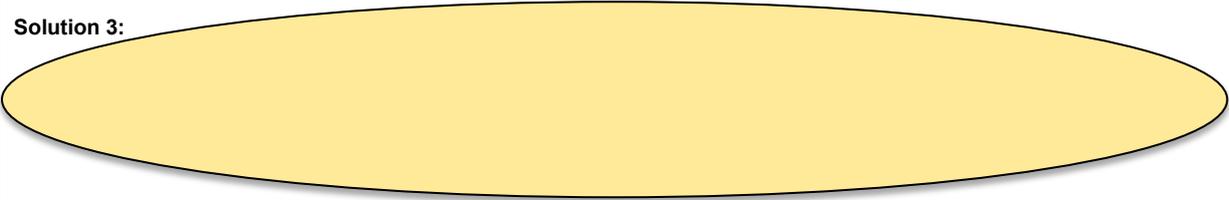
Solution 4:
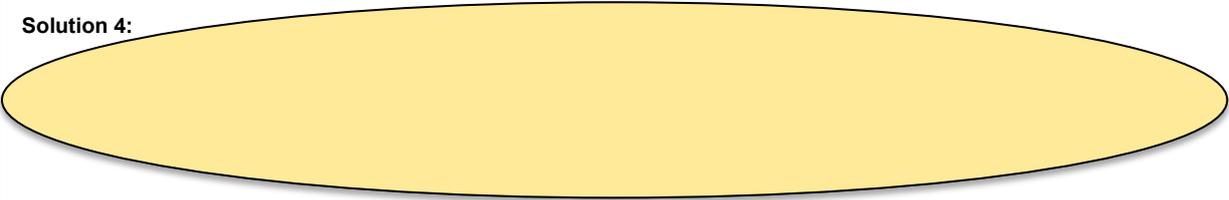
Solution 5:
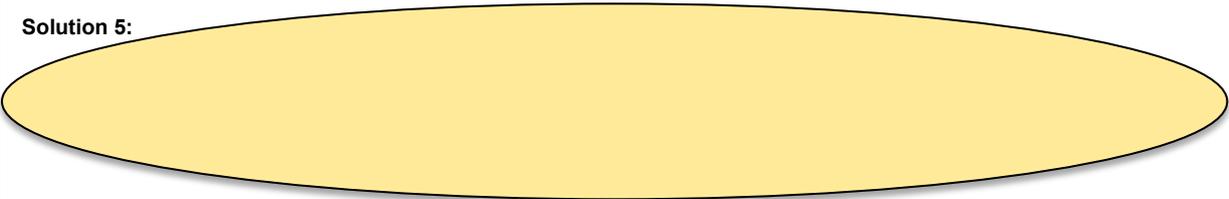
Solution 6:

Solution 7:

Part D: Evaluating and choosing a solution

By this stage you have listed your current problems and you have chosen one to focus on. You have then brainstormed possible solutions. The task now is to evaluate all of the different solutions you have listed and to then choose the one solution which seems to be the best one for you.

To help you evaluate each solution you can use the decision sheet on pages 11 and 12. The decision sheet has six columns:

Column 1: Possible solutions	This is where you write down each of the possible solutions you came up with on the previous page.
Column 2: Pros	Here you write down all the advantages and benefits of the solution.
Column 3: Cons	Here you write down all the disadvantages or limitations of the solution.
Column 4: Benefits score	Given the advantages and disadvantages, score the solution on the benefit which it brings. Score between 1 and 5 where 1 is low benefit, 3 is medium and 5 is high.
Column 5: Achievability score	Give a number between 1 and 5 to score how achievable the solution is, with 1 being not very achievable and 5 being very achievable.
Column 6: Total score	Multiply the benefits score by the achievability score to get your total score. The higher the number, the better the solution.

You might find that just writing down the pros and cons is enough for you to choose the best solution. If so, then please feel free to ignore the scoring system. If, however, you are struggling to make a decision, then you might find the scoring system useful.

Example

e.g. On the next page is an example of a completed decision sheet for Sarah. You might find it helpful to look at this before completing your own decision sheet.

Exercise

Once you have read the example, try completing your own decision sheet on pages 11 and 12.

Example – Sarah's decision sheet

Write your problem here: I don't have enough satisfying structure to my day

	Possible Solution	Pros	Cons	Benefits Score (15)	Achievability Score (1-5)	Total Score (benefits x achievability)
1	Get a paid job	▪ More money ▪ Sense of achievement ▪ No need to claim benefits ▪ Meet new people ▪ Gain confidence	▪ I don't really feel ready for this ▪ Might be hard to get a job without a recent reference ▪ Lots of pressure and stress	5	1	5x1=5
2	Join the local gym	▪ Easily achieved ▪ Will make me fitter – lose weight ▪ Gym is very near by	▪ Gym membership costs a lot – I don't think I could afford this ▪ Not sure this would give me the sense of achievement I'm looking for	3	3	3x3=9
3	Re-train as a veterinary assistant	▪ I've always wanted to do this ▪ There is a local college which runs this course ▪ I meet the criteria for the course ▪ I could get funding to pay the course fees	▪ The course only runs from October – I'd have to wait six months for the course to begin	5	3	5x3=15
4	Find a local voluntary job	▪ Would give me a real sense of fulfilment ▪ Would provide me with a reference for when I look for paid work ▪ Meet new people and develop new skills ▪ Lots of local voluntary options	▪ No extra money!	4	5	4x5=25
5	Socialise more with friends	▪ Would be fun ▪ Would partly address my issues around isolation	▪ Wouldn't meet anyone new ▪ Wouldn't give me the sense of reward I'm looking for ▪ Short term solution only	2	4	2x4=8

Decision Sheet – side 1

Write your problem here:

_____

_____

_____

	Possible Solution	Pros	Cons	Benefits Score (1-5)	Achievability Score (1-5)	Total Score (benefits x achievability)
1						
2						
3						

Decision Sheet – side 2

	Possible Solution	Pros	Cons	Benefits Score (1-5)	Achievability Score (1-5)	Total Score (benefits x achievability)
4						
5						
6						
7						

Choosing the best solution:

Having now evaluated your solutions you hopefully have a clearer idea as to which is the best one for you. This might well be the solution which scored the highest, but it doesn't have to be – you might have a strong inclination to go with another solution even if it didn't score the highest.

Example

e.g. Having completed her decision sheet Sarah narrowed her options down to two solutions:
 	
    ▪ Train to be a veterinary assistant (scored 15)
    ▪ Find a local voluntary job (scored 25)
 	
Although Sarah really wanted to go for the training, after careful thought she decided that the best solution for her at this time would be to find a local voluntary job. She felt that this was something she could achieve quickly and easily without undue delay. She hoped that, in a few months' time, she might then be in a position to move on to a new goal of registering for the veterinary course.

If you are struggling to make a choice it might be worth considering the following points:

- Sometimes the best solution can be a combination of two or more options. See if you can take the best bits from two different ideas to get one really good solution.
- The best solution might not be your ideal one, but may be the solution which is the easiest or quickest to implement.
- There may not actually be an 'ideal' solution – it might be about finding the best fit and then compromising. Your goal is not to find *perfection*, but rather a way of *improving* things.
- The decision you make is not a lifetime commitment! You can change your mind if things don't work out and choose a different solution.
- Problem solving systems are all well and good, but the risk is that we can get caught up in the process and worry about getting it right. Sometimes any decision is better than none – just try a solution out and see what happens.
- It is really helpful to get suggestions and opinions from others but don't forget that this is your choice.

Once you have chosen your solution it is time to start forming an action plan to carry it out, and this is covered in the next section.

Part E: Goal Setting

Setting goals is important. They give us clarity as to what we want to achieve and help us focus our energy and attention. By setting sharp, clearly defined goals, we can take pride in the achievement of those goals and see forward progress in what might previously have seemed a long, frustrating grind. We can also raise our self-confidence as we recognise our own abilities and competence in achieving the goals we have set.

There is a system for setting goals which is commonly acknowledged as being the most effective. It is called the SMART system of goal setting. Each letter of the word SMART stands for an adjective that describes an effective way to set goals:

| **S** Specific	Good goals are specific and give details. A poor goal would be vague, like "I will be a better friend". A good goal would be more specific, like "I will be punctual when meeting friends and will let them know in advance if I am likely to be late".
M Measurable	In order to keep yourself motivated you need to be able to measure your progress. Only then will you know when your goal has been achieved.
A Agreed	If achieving your goal requires input from others, make sure that this has been agreed with them in advance.
R Realistic	There is no point setting a goal which is unlikely to be achieved. "Winning the lottery" is a poor goal as you are not in control of whether it happens or not and the likelihood of it happening is slim. A good goal is an achievable goal.
T Time-bound	Goals must have a realistic deadline. Without deadlines it's easy to put goals off and forget about them.

Breaking down your goal

The first step in setting your SMART goal is to break your goal down into small, achievable steps. By doing this you will get a clear understanding of all the smaller tasks that are involved in achieving your bigger goal.

The best way to break your goal down into bite size chunks is to work backward from your goal and to brainstorm all the things you will need to do to achieve your goal. Each time you identify a smaller goal ask yourself if there is any way that it can be broken down into even smaller mini goals.

Try brainstorming the steps to achieve your goal on the sheet on the next page. Don't worry about the order at this stage, just write down the steps as you think of them.

Brainstorming sheet:

Break down your goal into smaller steps using the sheet below.
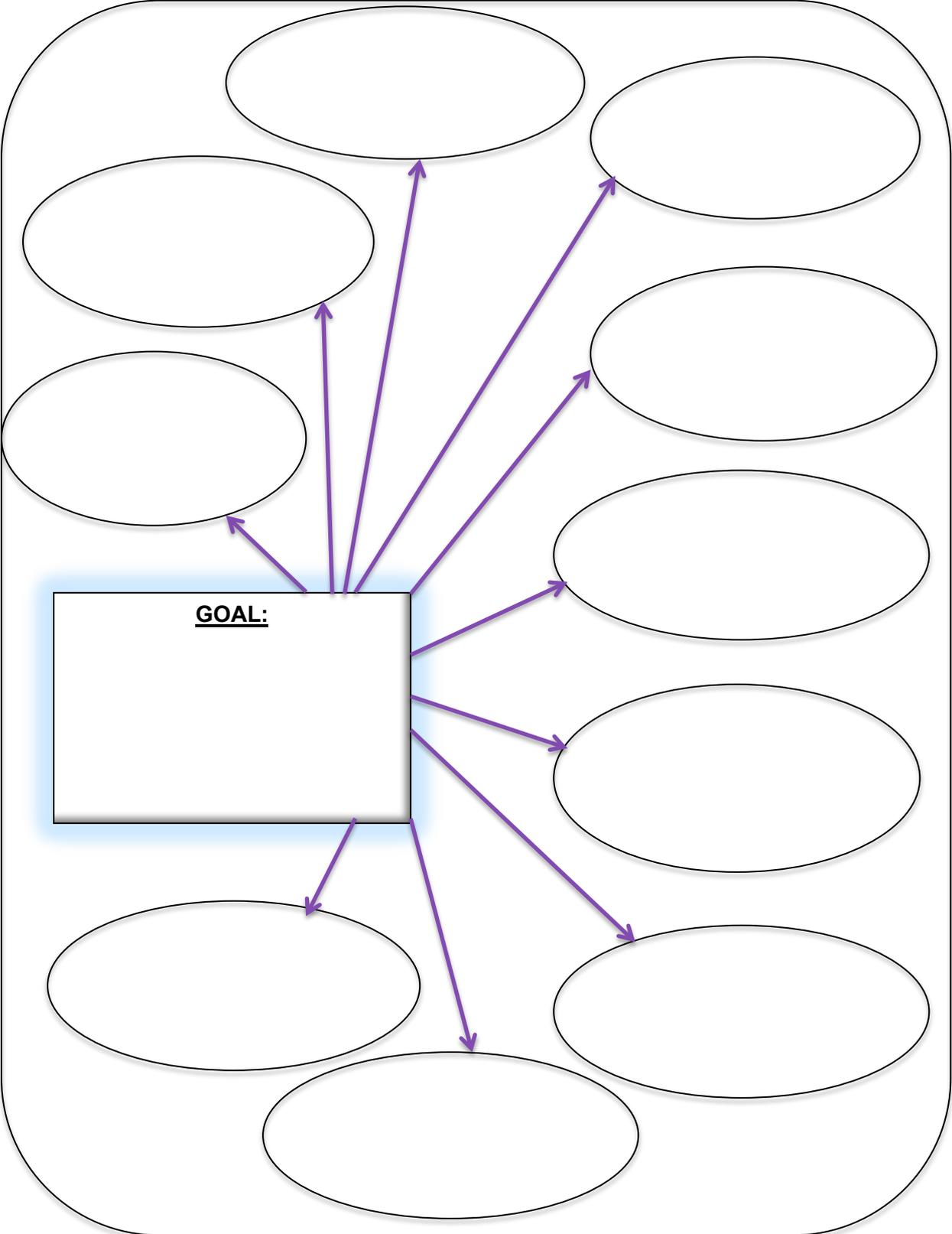
GOAL:

Set your goal

So far in this module you have identified a key problem you would like to address, and you have come up with the best solution to that problem. You have brainstormed the solution and broken it down into smaller, achievable goals.

The next stage in the process is to set your SMART goal.

On pages 18 and 19 of this module you will find a goal setting sheet which takes you through the process of setting your SMART goal. Use the steps you have identified in the brainstorming sheet on the previous page to break your goal down and set time frames for achieving each step. Before filling in your goal setting sheet you might want to take a quick look at Sarah's example below.

Example

e.g.

Sarah's goal is to find a local voluntary job. She brainstormed the steps she would need to go through in order to reach her goal and she came up with the following points:

- I need to research what voluntary work options there are locally – probably best to go to the CAB for this.
- I need to consider my options and decide on which ones would suit me best
- I need to apply for those posts which interest me most and meet with managers
- I need to look at my schedule so I can fit in my new voluntary work amongst my existing commitments

Sarah then used these individual steps to complete her SMART goal setting sheet, which you can see on page 17.

Example – Sarah's Goal Setting Sheet

State your goal in as few words as possible. *My goal is to:*
Identify and start a local voluntary job

Why do you want to reach this goal? *This goal is important because:*
It will give me more structure, help me meet new people, build my confidence and provide me with a reference for when I start college

How will you know when you have reached your goal? *I will know I've reached my goal when:*
When I have started a voluntary job and attended it regularly for six weeks

When do you want to achieve this goal by? *I will reach my goal by (date):*   15th / August /

Steps to achieve my goal

	Describe action required	What help or resources do I need?	Date to achieve by	Tick when action completed
Step 1	Arrange and attend meeting with CAB to look at voluntary work options.	▪ Bus fare to get to meeting	15th May	☐
Step 2	Consider options, research organisations and decide on the best two positions.	▪ Use of internet in library to research ▪ Discuss options with friend	25th May	☐
Step 3	Contact the two organisations I have shortlisted. Arrange and attend meetings to discuss voluntary work.	▪ May need bus fare, but if local I could walk to meetings ▪ Smart clothes for meeting	15th June	☐
Step 4	Decide which of the two voluntary positions to pursue. Contact them to offer my time.	▪ May need reference from last employer ▪ Support from friend to help me decide which position to pursue	20th June	☐
Step 5	If accepted by first choice, to start voluntary work. If not accepted, to pursue second choice. Attend voluntary work regularly for six weeks.	▪ I will need to decide which days and hours to offer ▪ I will need to review my existing commitments and timetable.	15th August	☐

Goal Setting Sheet – side 1

State your goal in as few words as possible. *My goal is to:*

_____

_____

Why do you want to reach this goal? *This goal is important because:*

_____

_____

How will you know when you have reached your goal? *I will know I've reached my goal when:*

_____

_____

When do you want to achieve this goal by? *I will reach my goal by (date):* _____ / _____ / _____

Steps to achieve my goal

	Describe action required	What help or resources do I need?	Date to achieve by	Tick when action completed
Step 1				☐
Step 2				☐

	Goal Setting Sheet – side 2			
	Describe action required	**What help or resources do I need?**	**Date to achieve by**	**Tick when action completed**
Step 3				☐
Step 4				☐
Step 5				☐
Step 6				☐
Step 7				☐

Part F: Implement and review goals

Once you have a detailed action plan it is time to put it into practice. As you carry out the actions in your plan it might be worth remembering the following points:

- Take one step at a time. Try and avoid getting ahead of yourself or putting yourself under unnecessary pressure
- As you achieve each action point make sure you acknowledge your progress by ticking the box to say it has been completed. It can be surprisingly satisfying!
- Consider rewarding yourself as you progress with your plan.
- Review your progress regularly – keywork meetings can be a good place to do this.

Once you achieve your goal make sure to give yourself all the credit you deserve. With all the new problem-solving skills you have developed you can now think about tackling another problem in the same way.

What should I do if I start to struggle?

If you find yourself struggling to achieve your goal, below are a few suggestions of things you might try:

- Seek support and advice from your keyworker or a trusted friend or family member. Achieving goals can be hard if you try and do it on your own.
- Consider reviewing the deadlines you have given. Are they generous enough or do you need to give yourself a bit more time?
- Rather than focussing on those aspects of the goal you have not yet achieved, shift the focus onto those aspects which you *have* achieved. Sometimes our biggest enemy is negative thinking.
- You may want to review your individual action points. It might be that one particularly challenging action point can be broken down into several smaller ones which would be easier to achieve.
- If you find yourself struggling with the solution you have identified, then it might be worth going back to your original list of possible solutions (on page 8) and choosing an alternative. Viewing the problem from another angle can sometimes help.
- In the end, if you really don't think things are progressing at all and it is starting to get you down then it might be best to put that particular goal on hold for the time being. You can just go back to your original list of issues (page 6) and choose a goal which you feel more confident with.

And finally, …

Once you feel more confident with problem solving and goal setting you won't necessarily want to work through this whole module each time you want to set a goal. On the next page is a form which you can use which brings together the key elements of this module onto one single sheet. Just ask your keyworker to print out a few copies for you.

Appendix 1 – Short problem solving and goal setting sheet

Choosing a solution – side 1

Please write the problem you would like to overcome below:

_____

_____

List possible solutions below		Advantages	Disadvantages
1.	→		
2.	→		
3.	→		
4.	→		
5.	→		

Based on the advantages and disadvantages identified, write your chosen solution below:

_____

_____

Setting goals – side 2

Based on your chosen solution, state your goal in as few words as possible. *My goal is to:*

_____

_____

Why do you want to reach this goal? *This goal is important because:*

_____

_____

Steps to achieve my goal

	Describe action required	What help or resources do I need?	Date to achieve by	Tick when action completed
Step 1				☐
Step 2				☐
Step 3				☐
Step 4				☐
Step 5				☐
Step 6				☐
Step 7				☐