EXECUTIVE PLUS/STEP:
MANUALIZATION OF
PROBLEM SOLVING TRAINING AND
EMOTIONAL REGULATION TRAINING
May 2013

Joshua Cantor, Theodore Tsaousides,
Wayne A. Gordon, Margaret Brown, Teresa Ashman, Kristin Dams-O’Connor*

© 2013, Brain Injury Research Center of Mount Sinai,
Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY

For further information, contact: wayne.gordon@mssm.edu

* All authors are faculty of the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, except for Dr. Teresa Ashman, who is now at the Shepherd Center, Atlanta, GA.
Problem Solving Workbook
SWAPS Basics
Defining a Problem: Examples

These are examples of a “problem”:

- You need to **make a decision**, and you don’t know what’s best.
- You want to visit a new friend, which calls for **planning ahead**, and you’re not sure how.
- **Something goes wrong**, like you’ve forgotten your key, and you don’t know how to make it right.
- You get **overwhelmed**, for example at a family gathering, and all you can think of is shouting.
- You’ve **lost focus** on what you set out to do; you’re not “on task”.
- **Something unexpected happens**, like your car won’t start when you need to get somewhere quickly.
- **You experience distress**, like finding yourself feeling very sad or angry.
- **You harm someone**, like hitting a person (for any reason) or calling them names.
STOP LOG

Date:____________________
Initials:________________

Describe STOP! moments that you encountered today:

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________
S W A P S Worksheet

Initials: ______________________
Date: ______________________

Stop! Is there a problem? ______________________

What is the problem and should I try to solve it?

Alternative solutions?
1. ______________________
2. ______________________
3. ______________________
4. ______________________
5. ______________________
6. ______________________
7. ______________________
8. ______________________
9. ______________________
10. ______________________

Satisfied with the outcome?

No, not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Yes, very
SWAPS Basics
Step One: STOP! Is there a problem?

Kinds of changes that may signal problems for you or for anyone – changes in:

- Your emotional state, like noticing that you’re nervous or afraid
- Your physical state, like beginning to feel your heart race
- Your cognitive state, like finding yourself confused
- Your income, like losing money on the stock market, or being denied on an application for benefits
- Your health, like getting sick or injured
- Your family life, like getting married or divorced, or having a child
- Other important parts of your life, like losing a job, moving, ending a relationship

Strategies that may help you say STOP!:

Use Time to Your Benefit

- Schedule periodic STOP! moments throughout the day. Ask yourself whether any of the types of changes listed above are going on in your life.
- Set your watch to beep to remind you to STOP!
- Be aware of time: Forgotten an appointment? Does a meal need to get made?
- Ask yourself questions periodically throughout the day:
  - Am I on task?
  - Should I STOP?
  - What goal am I working on now?

Use People to Your Benefit

- Pay attention to people’s behaviors and emotional signals that may be saying STOP!
- Ask someone for help by giving you cues to STOP! (a wink, a clearing of the throat or other quiet ways of signaling you)

Use STOP! Logs

- Use STOP! Logs to write down moments during your day when you said STOP!
- Develop a list of situations where you may need to STOP! based on review of your STOP! Logs.
- Identify triggers/causes of problems based on your STOP Logs.

Other Good Ideas

- When you’re doing something new for you, be prepared to STOP!
- Take a break for important questions – some call them existential questions, like: “Am I happy with my life? Am I on a good path?”
- Identify Emotional Regulation strategies that help you say STOP!
- Think of SWAPSing and STOP! moments as a life-long undertaking.
SWAPS Basics
Step Two: **What is the problem and should I try to solve it?**

- The key idea in Step 2 is **clarification**. Some people find it useful to first clear their minds, before going further. A few deep breaths can help.
- One way to proceed is to ask, **What is going on right now?** If the answer is crystal clear, write it down.
- If you can’t come up with a definition of the problem right away, start by **listing all the components** or parts of the problem you’re trying to define:
  - People involved
  - Sensations you’re feeling
  - Emotions you feel
  - Behavior of others, your behavior
  - Triggers/causes
  - Worries you have
  - And, the like
- Ask yourself, “**Is there more to this problem?**” Add to your definition of the problem as you go along, especially during Step 3 when you consider solutions.
- Ask yourself, “**Am I focused on the problem I need to address right now?**” Make sure you’ve stayed on track and haven’t been sidetracked as you considered how to best define the problem.
- The final part of Step 2 is **deciding if this is a problem you should try to solve.** This may not be fully clear until you get to Step 3, but some problems obviously should be taken on right away, while others clearly can’t be solved at all.
SWAPS Basics

Step Three: Alternative solutions – What are they?

Basic suggestions:

- Write down your ideas; or use a voice recorder.
- Set a time limit, say 15 minutes.
- Be specific.

Key aids to listing as many as possible of the alternative ways to solve the problem:

(1) Stay non-judgmental.
- Write down all the alternative solutions you can think of.
- If you hear yourself saying No to an idea, write it down anyway. That’s a practical way of being non-judgmental.
- Don’t linger to think at length about what you just wrote; move on to the next idea quickly.
- If you’re SWAPSing in the group, don’t discuss an idea, just offer it.
- Don’t be afraid to list similar or the same things twice, you can eliminate duplicate ideas later.

(2) Reach outside your own mind.
- Review the components of the problem from Step 2.
- If you’re doing this in the group, turn to members who haven’t contributed and ask, “Any ideas?”
- If you get stuck, take a break or review the components of the problem again.

(3) Think about your goals and priorities in dealing with this situation.
- Ask yourself: “What is my ultimate goal?”
- Refer to the components of the problem and decide if there are priorities in solving the problem.

(4) Relax. The list you generate is not the final step; it’s only part of the process.
SWAPS Basics
Step Four: **Pick** and **Plan**!

*Step 4 is really two steps: First you *pick* what you think is the best way to solve the problem, and then you *plan* a way to get it done.*

**Picking the best alternative:**
- Write down again your *ultimate goal*.
- Take each option on your list and ask **four questions**:
  - Will it help me achieve or at least get closer to my *goal*?
  - Is it *feasible*?
  - Can I afford the *costs* (financial, emotional, cognitive, fatigue, time)?
  - What are the *benefits*, and do they outweigh the costs?
- Don't be afraid to *discard* an alternative.
- Be open to unusual alternatives.
- When the list gets shorter, compare one alternative to another, using the four questions.
- If you encounter difficulty, ask for help from someone you trust.
- Pick something! You can always come back to the problem and SWAPS it again.

**Planning to get it done:**
- What are the actions needed in getting this done?
- If you need to act now or you can take all the actions right now, *do it now*!
- If you can't do it now or can't take all the actions now, schedule each *needed action*. Use your Daily Planner to set a date and time.
- If you can't schedule every part of the solution, schedule **what you can** and place the remaining needed actions on your *To Do List*.
- If you can't do any of the above, either *eliminate it* as the “best alternative” and choose another, OR back up to a prior step and re-SWAPS, so that you emerge with a good alternative solution that allows a feasible plan to be developed.
SWAPS Basics
Step Five: Satisfied?

After you have carried out Steps 1 to 4, you need to determine if you are satisfied with your plan. If you are not satisfied with your plan, you should repeat Steps 2, 3 or 4 until you are satisfied. If you are satisfied with your plan, you need to carry it out.

After you have done the things that you planned to do to solve the problem, ask yourself if you are satisfied with the outcome. If the problem remains unsolved or gets worse or the situation changes, this is a STOP! moment and you need to go through the SWAPS process again.
Sample SWAPS

Initials: JD
Date: 11/14/2019

1) **STOP is there a problem?** Having difficulty dealing with unpleasant or distracting stimuli like noise and people or things close to me.

2) **What is the problem? And should I try to solve it?**
   - It makes it difficult for me to concentrate and do mental work
   - I get irritable and tense and very impatient
   - I have fear and panic and disorientation
   - I can’t always avoid it
   - It is a problem even when there is nothing going on and I don’t have a task to do
   - My work environment is even more stimulating/distracting than group

3) **Alternatives and Options**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Pick and Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Make a conscious effort to structure your activities so that you can avoid noise, especially when you are most susceptible</td>
<td>Yes – start this weekend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Ask your supervisors at work for a separate space &amp; more noise control/silence</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Use noise cancelling headphones</td>
<td>Yes – start this weekend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Avoid noisy environments as much as possible, especially when you need to focus</td>
<td>Yes – already doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Earplugs</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Use a baseball bat to get people out of your way</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Listen to music</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Threaten others who get in your way</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Expose yourself to small amounts of noise gradually</td>
<td>Y – doing in attention training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Do an Emotional Cycle</td>
<td>Y – done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Listen to a book on tape</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Use relaxation/breathing strategies</td>
<td>Yes – already doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Take breaks from noisy environments</td>
<td>Yes – already doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Use tranquillizers</td>
<td>Yes – will talk to my doctor at my appointment on November 3rd.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4) **Pick and Plan**

5) **Are you Satisfied?** Yes.