Is problem-solving training a key ingredient in reducing youth depression?

1 in 10

About one adolescent in 10 experiences depression. Those who find it hard to solve problems with peers and family, or around school issues, have a higher risk of depression than other youth. Strong problem-solving skills can protect youth against stress and help safeguard their well-being.

Several evidence-based therapies for youth depression include training in problem solving as a component. Problem-solving training can also be a free-standing intervention.

THE AIMS OF PROBLEM-SOLVING TRAINING	THE PRACTICAL SKILLS OF PROBLEM SOLVING
• Improve youth's **confidence** in their ability to solve problems • Improve the **practical skills** they need to solve problems	1. Define the problem 2. Brainstorm possible solutions 3. Decide which is the most promising solution 4. Implement the solution and evaluate its success

What does evidence tell us about the effectiveness of problem-solving training for youth depression?
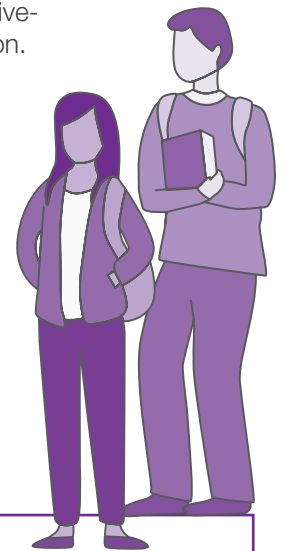
We considered a broad range of literature from around the world:

- Clinical guidelines from **four countries** recommend problem solving in combination with other support for youth depression. No guideline recommends problem solving on its own.
- **Four trials** of problem-solving therapy show mixed results. A high-quality trial found that a brief problem-solving intervention was more effective than self-help booklets in helping youth solve problems, but not in reducing symptoms of depression or anxiety.
- **Two exploratory studies** suggest that improving problem-solving skills as part of broader cognitive-behavioural therapy improves treatment outcomes, even for youth experiencing severe depression.

Consultation with youth advisors

A consultation with Canadian youth advisors highlighted a need for problem-solving training to be reworked. They pointed out that it should be:

- **Youth-driven:** Youth themselves, rather than therapists, should define the most important problems in their lives.
- **Comprehensive:** Problem-solving training should consider more complex root causes, which may need additional therapy techniques.
- **Strengths-based:** Language should point to positives, rather than deficits (e.g., referring to challenges rather than problems).
- **Personalized:** Problem-solving training should acknowledge that youth's problem-solving styles vary with personality, situation and type of mental health difficulties, and so approaches may also need to vary.

Policy implications

On its own, problem-solving training may help youth who wish to boost their coping skills. For youth who need treatment for depression, clinical services and community clinics may want to offer problem-solving training as part of a broader evidence-based therapy package until further evidence becomes available. Those designing and delivering problem-solving training should revisit the treatment manual with youth in mind to make sure the training is youth-led and strengths-based.

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