

Background

Rebecca is a twenty-five year old Maori woman. Rebecca started problem solving therapy one week after presenting to hospital after an overdose of sleeping tablets and painkillers. She had one previous suicide attempt that occurred when she was a teenager.

Rebecca lives with her partner of nine years and their two children, aged six and three. Rebecca is the only child of her biological parents, who separated when she was eight. Rebecca's mother died by suicide when she was ten and Rebecca went to live with her father. She left home at sixteen years of age to live with her current partner. Rebecca's recent suicide attempt occurred around the fifteenth anniversary of her mother's death by suicide. She had also recently experienced the sudden accidental death of a close friend.

Step One – Problem Orientation

Rebecca felt quite overwhelmed and negative about herself in most areas of her life. When Rebecca discussed her problem solving style with the therapist she realised that she often tried to avoid problems or reacted impulsively when she felt she couldn't bear the problem any more. Rebecca described behaviours such as leaving bills unopened when she was not sure how to pay them, not answering the phone if she was angry with someone, and drinking alcohol to try and feel better.

Step Two - Identifying and Recognising Problems

The therapist introduced Rebecca to Step Two and explained that sometimes, even though no obvious problem exists, thoughts, feelings, physical symptoms and feelings can be used as indicators that there is a problem. They used the worksheet to identify indicators of the existence of a problem for Rebecca. These included feelings such as feeling angry, sad, uptight, anxious or panicky; behaviours such as drinking a lot of alcohol, withdrawing from talking, yelling at the kids and not answering the phone; physical symptoms such as difficulty sleeping, feeling lethargic, feeling nauseous and feeling agitated; and thoughts such as "I'm a terrible mum" and "I'm useless at everything".

The therapist then showed Rebecca how to track backwards from when she first identified one of these indicators to try and work out the problem that had triggered it. When she got stuck with this tracking process, she used a problem checklist to prompt her. The following initial problem list was generated.

Problem Areas

- Drinking too much alcohol to stop feeling so horrible
- I don't know how to relax
- Low self esteem and confidence
- Issues with my dad and the anger and aggression he shows to the family
- Unresolved grief relating to mother's death
- Sleep difficulties
- Sadness without knowing what I am sad about
- I don't feel good about how I parent my son
- I am not happy with my weight
- I am not sure what work I would like to do
- I find it hard to ask for the help or support I need
- Sometimes I feel really stressed and I take it out on the kids
- I find my energy levels are quite variable and I don't know why

Step Three - Selecting and Defining A Problem

Rebecca decided to select the problem, "I don't feel good about how I parent my son". She chose this problem because she was aware that the school holidays were imminent. She found this a particularly challenging time with her son because he had a high level of energy and creative ability and wanted a lot of time and attention from her. Rebecca also had a three year old daughter and Rebecca found it hard to balance their interests. She also found it hard to keep up with all the household requirements at this time. This problem felt like the most urgent problem to Rebecca because she often found herself feeling angry and frustrated during the holidays. It also seemed likely to have a range of practical solutions.

Next, Rebecca and the therapist focussed on defining the chosen problem more clearly. They began by getting all of the available facts. Rebecca used the questions in her workbook to guide her through.

The problem occurred on week days when her partner was at work. The problem took place at home and involved Rebecca and her two children. When she imagined waving a magic wand she imagined herself feeling relaxed and confident about the holidays, her son receiving the level of activity he needed to keep him happy and for her daughter's normal routine to be maintained. She also imagined the normal household tasks being maintained.

The problem statement that Rebecca came up with was:

"I don't know how to give my son the level of activity and attention he wants in the holidays as well as maintain my daughter's routine and all my usual household chores".

Step Four - Generating Solutions

Rebecca felt a little daunted when she first tried brainstorming. She felt a bit embarrassed coming up with ideas that she thought were not very good. But with the help of the therapist she gained momentum and surprised herself by the number of possibilities she came up with. The therapist wrote the problem up on the whiteboard and Rebecca came up with the list of ideas below.

- Invite friends over for my son to play with
- Ignore the household chores during the week
- Cook meals in advance and freeze them
- Ask my stepmother to look after my daughter for a couple of mornings
- Arrange time out for myself without the kids
- Make a star chart to use when I want my son to do something quiet for a while
- Ask my partner to take some time off work
- Join forces with another at home mother
- Hire a student to help out with the chores for the holidays
- Hire a student to help out with the kids
- Disrupt my daughter's routine for a couple of weeks and do outings in the mornings
- Ask my son about some of the things he would like to do
- See if my son can stay with my brother and his boy for a couple of days
- Rent a lot of dvds and computer games
- Rent a Playstation
- Plan the time to help me feel more secure about it

Step Five – Decision Making.

When Rebecca applied the “initial selection” to her brainstorm list, she decided to cross out ignoring the household chores which would have negative effects on her and her family's wellbeing, and joining forces with another mother which she did not regard as being feasible.

Then Rebecca grouped the remaining ideas. She grouped them into four categories: activities for her son to do; getting help over the holidays; methods of organising the time; and strategies to manage her stress. She decided to consider the consequences of three possible options: planning the holiday time in advance, hiring a student to help out, and asking her partner to take some leave.

After thinking about the advantages and disadvantages for each of these possibilities Rebecca discarded the idea of asking her partner to take time off work. This had negative financial implications and would use up her partner's annual leave.

These disadvantages outweighed the positive elements of having his help. Similarly, the financial cost of hiring someone to help out made it impractical.

Rebecca decided that planning the time in advance had several advantages and few disadvantages, so she chose this solution.

Step Six - Creating An Action Plan.

Rebecca then created the following action plan to guide her in making her "school holiday schedule".

- Buy some poster sized cardboard and coloured pens (tomorrow)
- Draw a grid to show the ten workdays of the school holidays and divide these into one-hour blocks (also tomorrow)
- Put in any regular appointments, engagements or time for daily chores first
- Ask my son about any ideas he has about what he would like to do in the holidays (after school tomorrow)
- Spend one hour with my son, adding his ideas for activities and my own to the chart (within the next two days)

Step Seven – Evaluating Progress

The idea of making a holiday plan had been met with enthusiasm by Rebecca's son and he was happy to help make the chart. Together they compiled a list of possible activities and discovered they had far more ideas than they could possibly manage in one holiday period. This was a surprise for Rebecca who thought she lacked ideas and creativity with her son. She realised her difficulty was more about finding it hard to respond creatively when she was feeling stressed and pressured.

Rebecca was now looking forward to the holidays and feeling excited about some of the planned activities. The goals she had set seemed attainable and feasible and she noticed she was generally feeling better and more confident. Her sleep had settled somewhat and she felt ready to address a new problem. She was also surprised but pleased that facing up to her problems had helped her to feel better.