



## Two Churches, One Marriage

### Problem-solving Skills: Creating New Possibilities



### Education

#### A Step-by-step Approach to Problem-solving

The problem-solving approach outlined below can be used with any type of problem. It is probably too cumbersome or involved for most of the problems that couples face on a daily or weekly basis. This strategy, however, should be implemented when the couple gets stuck on a particular issue, or keeps having conflict over an issue.

**Step One: Define the Problem** – The first problem-solving step is to define what issue will be addressed. In some cases, the problem will be easy to define. In other cases, it may be difficult to determine how specific or how broadly to define the issue. As a couple, you may need to discuss whether the issue should be limited to talking about one specific behavior (not taking out the trash), or should address a broader issue (the proper division of chores between a husband and wife).

**Step Two: Identify the Underlying Needs** – One of the key reasons that individuals may get stuck in problem-solving is that they get invested in their own solution for a problem. The more invested that each person becomes to his or her solution, the farther apart the couple seems to be in solving the problem. Finding a common ground can sometimes be accomplished by looking behind the solutions to uncover the underlying needs. In one marital therapy case, the wife angrily complained that her husband, a beekeeper, was often late for dinner because he was tending to the hives on their farm. She felt that he did not appreciate the effort she put into cooking a nice meal when he was late. He responded that it was difficult at times to pull away from what he was doing, and didn't mind if the food was a bit cold. Her desire to have her husband arrive on time for dinner reflected an underlying need to feel appreciated for all of her work as a housewife. When the husband understood this, he was able to find alternative “solutions” or ways of expressing his appreciation to his wife, which in turn made her less angry when he was occasionally late for dinner. In a similar manner, clarifying the needs that you and your partner have regarding a particular issue may open the door to alternative solutions that neither of you had previously considered.

**Step Three: Brainstorming** – Once the need or needs have been identified, the next step is to brainstorm possible solutions. During brainstorming, both you and your partner should try to identify as many solutions as possible, without worrying if the ideas are feasible or practical. Brainstorming is meant to be a creative process, encouraging you both to “think outside the box” and identify unconventional solutions that may not have been previously considered. You should



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not critique any idea or solution at this stage since an outrageous idea may have some merit or provide the inspiration for another idea. Couples need to be careful not to exit this step too quickly. You and your partner should put time and energy into brainstorming ideas, considering the problem (and possible solutions) from as many different angles or perspectives as possible. Exploring how other couples have handled similar issues can also facilitate brainstorming since they may have an outlook or perspective much different from your own.

**Step Four: Evaluate the Ideas** – After you have generated a sufficient number of ideas through brainstorming, you can begin to evaluate the ideas. One way to do this is to list the advantages and disadvantages for each idea. Outrageous or unconventional ideas should not be immediately discarded since they may have some merit, or could perhaps be modified into a more realistic solution. After evaluating each option, you will need to choose an option that seems to offer the best solution to addressing both you and your partner's needs. Hopefully, you will be able to identify a solution that seems to be a win-win for both parties. Sometimes, finding an acceptable solution requires compromise. Solutions that strongly favor one person's needs over another's are less likely to be as successful as those that require compromise from both individuals.

**Step Five: Implement the Solution** – In this step, you will need to discuss the specifics of how to implement the solution. Each of you, for example, will describe what you will do to put the solution into practice. It is usually recommended that the solution be implemented on a trial basis, and then the results re-evaluated to see if the solution worked (see Step Six). Therefore, you and your partner should agree on how long to try the solution.

**Step Six: Evaluate the Success of the Solution** - The sixth step is to evaluate if the problem has been successfully resolved. Are both of you satisfied with the outcome? If not, you could consider trying an alternative solution. Or, it may be necessary to go back to an even earlier step to make sure the problem and needs have been properly defined, or to brainstorm new solutions in the hopes of identifying a better alternative.