

# PLANNING AN INTERVENTION FOR A DISTRESSING SITUATION

Suggestions for  
How to Address the Distress  
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## TO KEEP IN MIND

1. See all the CAIS Handouts and intervention suggestions at <https://www.improvingmipractices.org>
2. A **distressing situation** is any situation that results from or increases distress. It can involve **any one's behavior** (including our own behavior, behavior of someone else, or behavior of a person with cognitive changes) that is **distressing to a person with cognitive changes, to someone else, or to us.**
3. In nearly all cases a distressing situation or behavior is **unintentional**. People usually **aren't aware** their behavior is distressing (e.g., they aren't aware the noise they are making is bothering the other person), or they **can't control** it easily (due to cognitive changes).
4. A distressing situation usually reflects **distress** or an **unmet need or desire** (e.g., the need to leave an environment that is too noisy or confusing).
5. It is important to **focus on the distress** rather than simply on a behavior. That is, focus on the **feelings** behind a behavior, or that result from a behavior (e.g., the fear a person might feel that resulted in their striking another person).
6. Examine the situation in order to discern the **reason** it is occurring. Think about what a person is saying and doing to better understand how this person is feeling and what the cause or trigger of their behavior or distress might be (e.g., anxiety due to a misinterpretation of what someone said).
7. **Address the cause** or trigger of the situation and what this person is feeling. For example, remove the noise that is distressing this person, or reassure this person to allay their anxiety, rather than trying to make them stop their behavior. When you address the distress or the cause of behavior, the behavior, as well as the distress is often reduced.
8. Consider **who is concerned** or distressed by the situation (e.g., this person with cognitive changes, family, someone else, you). Why are they distressed about the situation or behavior? Try to keep them a part of the process as you work toward resolution. When you try an intervention, look to see if their distress is reduced. Make **their reduced distress** part of the **goal** or criterion of success.
9. Consider the **goal of intervention** (of the support strategy). Is the situation or behavior causing harm or is it primarily distressing to an observer or someone else? If the latter, then it may be more helpful to decrease the distress rather than trying to stop or reduce behavior. For example, if a daughter is embarrassed by her father's behavior because he used to be very dignified and proper, then it may be more helpful to support the daughter in her changing view of her father now that he is ill, rather than trying to change her father's behavior.
10. **Watch** a person's reaction to your own behavior, movements, and what you say to see if you are unintentionally engaging in behavior that is distressing or confusing to this person.

## PROBLEM SOLVING OUTLINE AND PLAN

Here is an **outline** for problem solving, as well as an elaborated description of a systematic problem solving approach to use when developing an **assessment** and **intervention plan** regarding a distressing situation. These can be used by a **group** of people or by an **individual**, and by professionals, family, or **anyone** who is concerned about a distressing situation.

# PROBLEM SOLVING OUTLINE FOR A DISTRESSING SITUATION

## 1. Problem

Describe:

- a. **Situation**
  - What occurs, where, when, frequency, who is involved
  - Antecedents and Results
- b. **Why** is the situation a **problem**?
  - Who is raising the concern?
  - Who is in danger or discomfort?
  - Does the situation or any behavior need to change (e.g., can you change others' exposure to or tolerance of the situation rather than trying to change the situation or behavior itself)?

## 2. Goals

Identify:

- a. **Goal of each person** involved (including anyone doing behavior that needs to change)
- b. **Specific objectives** with measurable results

## 3. Causes

Discern:

- a. **Why** is the situation or behavior occurring?
- b. What is the **unmet need** or desire?
- c. What are the **feelings** within the situation or behind the behavior?
- d. What is the role of the following and how is each of the following making it easier or harder for the person(s) involved in this situation?
  - **Person(s)** (Medical, physical, emotional, cognitive, habits, preferences, needs)
  - **Environment**
  - **Interactions** among the persons involved
  - **Task** structure and timing

## 4. Strategies

Generate and use by:

- a. Reviewing results of interventions attempted **previously**
- b. **Brainstorming** ideas that address the Person(s), Environment, Interactions, Task
- c. **Deciding** on an **intervention** plan for this situation
  - Add or modify **objectives**
  - Define **steps** and ways to implement specific intervention strategies and timing
  - Identify **who** will implement
- d. **Implementing** the intervention plan

## 5. Evaluation Process and Criteria

Ensure the strategies are effective:

- a. Identify **criteria** for success (How do we know the intervention strategies worked?)
- b. **Communicate** with those who saw the situation or behavior as a problem
- c. Ensure **distress** is resolved for everyone
- d. **Document** results of interventions
- e. Evaluate and **revise** intervention strategies as necessary

## ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION PLAN

This is a description of a systematic problem solving approach to use when developing an **assessment** and **intervention plan** regarding a **distressing situation**. A brief outline of this is above with the title “Problem Solving Outline for a Distressing Situation”.

### ASSESSMENT

#### 1. Describe and Examine the Situation

- a. Describe details
  - Be specific and use objective terms (e.g., Ms. S struck Ms. Z’s shoulder with her open hand when Ms. Z was leaning over to tie Ms. S’ shoe”, rather than “Ms. S was combative during care”)
- b. Discern a pattern to the situation by noting:
  - What occurs
  - Who is distressed in the situation or engages in behavior that is distressing
  - When it occurs
  - How often it occurs
  - Who else tends to be involved in the situation
  - Evidence of unmet needs, expectations, or desires triggering the situation
- c. Describe conditions regarding the behavior
  - What happens before the incident (antecedents)
  - What happens after the incident (results)
- d. Document a baseline for a period of time.
  - Document the occurrence and conditions of the situation over time

#### 2. How much of a problem is the situation?

- a. Who is identifying the situation as a problem?
  - Family member
  - Professional
  - Person with cognitive changes
  - Others
- b. Who actually experiences the situation as a problem? Who is in physical or other danger or discomfort because of the situation?
- c. Can the problem be solved by reducing others’ exposure to (or by increasing tolerance of) the situation rather than changing the situation or behavior (e.g., by addressing perceptions and tolerance of comments from a person with cognitive changes who can’t control their impulses easily)?
- d. How serious or challenging is the unmet need or desire?

#### 3. Discern why this situation is occurring

- a. What are the **unmet needs** or desires of the person(s) involved?
- b. What are the **feelings** behind the situation?
- c. How are this person’s **cognitive changes** contributing to the situation (e.g., is this person misinterpreting the environment or what someone said)?
- d. Did something in the **environment** trigger or contribute to the situation (e.g., is there too much noise or confusion, or is there a change in the environment)?
- e. Did something in an **interaction** between this person and someone else trigger or contribute to the situation (e.g., did someone use sentences that were too long, or did someone move too fast)?

- f. Is there something about a **task** this person is expected to perform that is too overwhelming or difficult (e.g., is this person having trouble keeping the order of the task steps straight)?
- g. Have this person's **preferences, habits, or expectations** been affected (e.g., is this person used to eating breakfast before taking a bath or shower)?
- h. What role is this person's **medical, physical, and emotional health** playing?
- i. Is there a **past** or current **experience** of emotional, physical, or sexual discomfort, pain, or trauma that is affecting this situation?

#### 4. Identify conditions likely to increase the effectiveness of interventions.

- a. Identify successful and unsuccessful interventions attempted in the past.

### INTERVENTION PLAN

#### 1. Determine the goal of the intervention

- a. Focus on all person's involved, but especially on the **person with cognitive changes**
- b. Review this person's own **life goals**, both long-term and immediate
- c. Identify this person's own goal for this situation
- d. Identify other people's goals for this situation
- e. Agree on a **primary goal** (e.g., the goal may be to decrease distress for this person, or to increase someone else's tolerance of the situation rather than to reduce the situation).

#### 2. Brainstorm intervention ideas

- a. Consider modification of the:
  - **Environment**
  - **Interactions** with person(s) involved
  - **Tasks** presented to this person with cognitive changes
- b. **Accommodate** this person's own habits, preferences, cognitive status, physical and emotional status.

#### 3. Decide on, implement, and evaluate an intervention plan

- a. Define **objectives** in very specific terms.
- b. Define the intervention **steps** and conditions (e.g., Ms. S will be approached from the front, or Ms. S will be observed closely in an interaction for signs of anxiety).
- c. Identify the **criteria** for a **successful** intervention (e.g., specify the number of times over a specified period of time, the situation must occur for the intervention to be seen as effective). State how you will know when the intervention is working.
- d. Outline a method of **evaluation** of the intervention plan.
- e. **Implement** the intervention strategies consistently.
- f. Document the times the situation occurs. Has the **situation improved**?
- g. Is the **distress resolved** and the unmet needs or desires met?
- h. Communicate with the person who **first raised concern** about the situation and with those for whom the situation was seen to be a problem. Elicit their **reactions** regarding the success of the intervention.
- i. Evaluate and **revise** the intervention plan as needed.

#### Adapted from Source:

Weaverdyck, S.E. (1997) "Assessment and Care/Service Plans". In National Alzheimer's Association (Ed.) Key Elements of Dementia Care Manual. Chicago, Illinois: Alzheimer's Association.