

Troy was a 16-year-old Caucasian male presenting with depressive symptoms that had worsened in recent months. Following a thorough assessment that included a structured interview, Troy was diagnosed with major depressive disorder. For example, he established a "cool-off zone" in his room that allowed him space and time to get control of his feelings. As his confidence grew, he assumed more independence in the problem-solving process. He seemed to enjoy reciting the steps for the therapist at the beginning of each session and even attached a copy of the brainstorming rules to the refrigerator at home. Troy's father helped by prompting him to use the skills at home and being more mindful of ways that he might unwittingly support Troy's avoidance. Over time, Troy's family began using the skills to address common problems at home. Over the course of the 12 sessions, Troy made demonstrable progress. His mood improved, and he reported feeling more confident in his ability to manage his anger and irritability. His father noted that Troy seemed less stressed in general, was talking more at home, and had begun playing in pick-up soccer games with his friends. The two were getting along better but "still had their moments." Instead, she emphasized how stepping up to take some action could make things better and that the "practice" would make him get better at solving future problems. After some discussion, Troy agreed to give it a try, and the therapist noted that learning any new skill requires effort and persistence, much like what he had shown in refining his soccer skills. To end the initial session, the therapist overviewed the major problem-solving steps and "talked through" each step in solving a hypothetical problem. His father described Troy as "going through a major shift in the wrong direction" over the past several months. Troy had become irritable and sometimes lashed out verbally at his siblings with no obvious provocation. Though they used to get along well, Troy rarely engaged in conversation with his father, resorting instead to nods and simple "yes and no's." He also withdrew from extracurricular activities, deciding not to rejoin the soccer team despite the fact that he had lettered as a freshman. Taking time to think it over and gather some information, he observed that he usually thought of calling his mother right after school when he still had energy and "things to talk about." The problem was that his mother was at work during that time and would often return his messages later in the evening when he was too tired to talk. During the brainstorming step, Troy quickly discounted each alternative he came up with. The therapist reminded him that evaluation was not allowed at this point and encouraged him to "just let ideas flow." To address this, the therapist added two joint sessions in which Troy and his father learned some communication and negotiation skills and practiced collaborative problem solving, targeting relationship issues. The goal was to help Troy learn how to better cope with his negative emotions and motivate him to begin engaging in activities that he used to find enjoyable. Contacted by phone, Troy's mother described him as "just going through the motions" and agreed that he had become very irritable in recent months. Troy was clearly able to engage in PST, but he did not appear to be very motivated to participate in the program. His father was very receptive to the proposed treatment plan and demonstrated concern about Troy's recent decline and struggles with anger. Though he was generally open to allowing Troy a role in family decision making, he tended to get more dictatorial at times of stress. After Troy noted that he now really enjoyed talking with his mother on the phone, the therapist encouraged him to use the skills to plan more pleasant activities. In discussing the rationale for PST with the therapist, Troy acknowledged that it could be helpful "for someone else."

He said he "just had too many problems" and that every time he tried to "fix them they just get worse." The therapist contrasted Troy's avoidant style with a more adaptive approach to problems. After reviewing the list, the therapist suggested that they start with a problem that was fairly straightforward and not too emotionally charged. Troy also devised plans for better coping with his anger and irritability. After the divorce of his parents about a year earlier, Troy's grades began to decline to the point that he failed two courses. His therapist suggested PST in combination with pleasant events scheduling. Over the next few sessions, Troy was able to identify a few problems to work on and developed an implementation plan to try to solve one of them. Experiencing some success motivated Troy to apply his new skills to other problems. His mother lived out of state, but the two remained close by talking on the phone and sharing a 1-month visit at her home during the summer. She told him that it sounded like his problems just seemed so overwhelming that he stopped trying to solve them and that when we stop trying it often causes more problems. The therapist taught Troy to interpret his negative feelings as a cue that a problem existed and some action was needed. Troy selected a problem that involved calling his mother. Eventually, Troy chose to talk with his mother about scheduling their phone calls for early in the evening. Troy lived with his father and two younger brothers. As a homework assignment, Troy was asked to make a list of 10 problems he faced during the week. As part of his plan, he would record things he wanted to tell her in the notes section of his cell phone. After a couple of practice runs using role play, Troy called his mother, and the two agreed to the plan.