Choosing Life: Empowerment, Action, Results!

CLEAR: Core Skill Session 3
Stressors and SMART Problem-Solving
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Stressors and SMART Problem-Solving

(60 Minutes)

Session Aims:

- To introduce CLEAR Thinking to counter unhelpful thoughts and replace them with helpful thoughts.
- To use SMART Problem-Solving to find solutions to problem situations.
- To teach a new relaxation technique.
Summary of Activities:

Check-In (10 minutes)
- The purposes of this activity are to set a positive tone for the session, to create a safe environment, to increase self-esteem, and to shape positive behaviors. Goals set during the previous session are reviewed and the activities and purposes of this session are outlined.

What are My Current Stressors? (10 minutes)
- The client identifies a short list of stressors in order to create an opportunity to learn, apply, and practice the CLEAR Thinking and SMART Problem-Solving skills in the remainder of the session. The client’s uses the Feeling Thermometer to assess his or her comfort level with each identified stressor. The client learns that in response to each stressor, there are choices about the way one can think and act. The goal is to come up with helpful and healthy thoughts and actions.

What is CLEAR Thinking? (10 minutes)
- The purpose of this exercise is to introduce CLEAR Thinking. The client learns how to counter or argue against unhelpful thoughts and replace them with CLEAR Thoughts. The characteristics of the client’s Ideal Self should help influence his or her CLEAR Thinking.

What is SMART Problem-Solving? (15 minutes)
- The client identifies a problem situation that is interfering with achievement of his or her goals and applies SMART Problem-Solving steps to this situation.

How Can I Relax? (5 minutes)
- The client learns and practices a relaxation technique.

What’s Next? (10 minutes)
- The purposes of this activity are to reinforce today’s learning, set weekly goals, and to motivate the client to return to the next session by wrapping up on a positive note.
Required Materials: Core Skill Session 3

Handouts
- Relaxation: Releasing Tension
- SMART Problem-Solving Guidelines

Worksheets
- Applying SMART Problem-Solving

Wall Charts
- Feeling Thermometer
- Guidelines for Goal Setting
- SMART Problem-Solving Guidelines

Laminated Cards and Additional Items
- None

Materials Needed in Every Core Skill Session
- Client Workbook
- Goal Card
- Handout: Guidelines for Goal Setting
- Worksheet: Goal Log
Activity 1: Check-In

Time
- 10 Minutes

Activity Materials
- Worksheet: Goal Log

Counselor Note
The purposes of this activity are to set a positive tone for the session, create a safe environment, increase self-esteem, and shape positive behaviors. Goals set during the previous session are reviewed and the activities and purposes of the session are outlined.

Goal Check-In
- Welcome back! Let’s start off by sharing the positive steps you’ve taken over the past week.
- These positive steps might include the progress you made on your goals, something beneficial you did for yourself, or an important insight you gained about your thoughts, feelings, or behavior.

Engage the client in a discussion. Encourage the client to report progress on the two goals set at the end of the last session:

1. A short-term weekly goal that supports accomplishment of the client’s long-term life goal identified during Core Skill Session 2.
2. A short-term weekly goal that relates to the last session’s topic and supports the client’s prevention goal.

In response to accomplished goals:
- Praise the client’s efforts and success.
- Relate the accomplished goal to the F-T-D framework.
In response to unaccomplished goals:

- Praise any small effort and approximations to achieving the goal.
  - In order to maintain a safe and non-judgmental environment and in response to clients who may lose their motivation by not having accomplished their goals, positively reframe the unaccomplished goal (i.e., “You did not accomplish your goal because you were trying to take care of yourself by not creating more stress.”).
  - Model goal setting by suggesting that perhaps the “right” goal was not chosen the previous week (e.g., “Maybe the goal was too difficult or could not realistically be accomplished within the designated time frame.”). Use this as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of setting realistic goals in order to optimize success.

- Identify barrier(s) to goal accomplishment and apply SMART Problem-Solving steps to any barrier(s).

- Relate the unaccomplished goal to the F-T-D framework.

Record the client’s progress against each goal in the client’s workbook.

**Introduction to Today’s Session**

Introduce today’s session.

- I see you’ve been working really hard. Unless there is something pressing that you feel we need to discuss today, let me introduce today’s session topic to you.

- Remember that our sessions are about looking at how our feelings - meaning our Feeling Thermometer and body reactions - thoughts, and actions are related to each other. Understanding how our feelings, thoughts, and actions affect each other can help us to make healthy choices, to think and act like our Ideal Self, to have less stress, and to protect ourselves and other people.

- Today we will be looking at some of the stressors or problems that you have experienced recently. We will then talk about some helpful ways to cope with your stressors.
Introduction to Today’s Session - continued

▶ We will also learn a technique called SMART Problem-Solving and apply it to current problems in your life that are keeping you from reaching your goals. Finally, we will learn a new relaxation technique that will help you release some of the stress you accumulate in daily life.

▶ Any questions before we get started?

Answer any questions the client raises.
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Activity 2: What Are My Current Stressors?

Time
- 10 minutes

Activity Materials
- Blank notebook paper

Counselor Note
The client identifies a short list of stressors in order to create an opportunity to learn, apply, and practice the CLEAR Thinking and SMART Problem-Solving skills in the remainder of the session. The client’s uses the Feeling Thermometer to assess his or her comfort level with each identified stressor. The client learns that in response to each stressor, there are choices about the way one can think and act. The goal is to come up with helpful and healthy thoughts and actions.

Identify Current Stressors
- We’re going to talk about problems or stressors in your life and ways to solve them.
- Everyone has problems of some kind—with relationships, family, friends, housing, paying bills, work, school, doctors, case workers, and so on.
- These problems make it hard to focus on the positive parts of your life and achieving your big goals, like staying healthy. Sometimes stressors may also get in the way of your life goal, <insert client’s selected life goal from the previous session>.
- What are some of the stressors you are facing right now that have put you at a 40-100 on the Feeling Thermometer?
- How are these problems getting in the way of reaching a positive goal in your life?
Allow the client the opportunity to identify 2-3 important personal stressors. Write each issue on a sheet of paper. Use the Feeling Thermometer to assess the client’s comfort level with each stressor.

Ask the client to select a stressor that the client would like to focus on during the session. Encourage the client to select a stressor that he or she is moderately uncomfortable about (40-60 on the Feeling Thermometer). A stressor that causes high discomfort (i.e., above a 70 on the Feeling Thermometer) may be perceived as too overwhelming. The client may not be able to successfully apply the skills of the intervention to coping with the stressor.

The problem should be defined as specifically as possible. Break the stressor into smaller and more concrete pieces. For example, if the problem is “my boyfriend,” identify what about the boyfriend is a problem (i.e., “My boyfriend is the problem because he won’t wear a condom.”, “He never contributes to the rent.”, “He gets mad if I don’t get high with him.”)

The client may not wish to share all of his or her problems; be sensitive to the feelings of individuals who do not wish to share.

How Do I Cope with Stressors?

- Different stressors and problems can come up in life. The key is how you deal with life problems so that they don’t negatively affect you.

- How do you usually cope with your stressors?

Engage the client in a discussion. Listen for problematic coping strategies (e.g., alcohol or drug use) that can be addressed in subsequent CLEAR sessions.

- You mentioned earlier that you are at a <insert Feeling Thermometer reading> on the Feeling Thermometer in response to <insert identified stressor>. How do you cope with this particular stressor?

- We will spend the remainder of our session talking about ways that you can lower your Feeling Thermometer reading and feel more comfortable about some of your current stressors.

- We can cope with stressors in two ways.
How Do I Cope with Stressors? - continued

► One is CLEAR Thinking. CLEAR Thinking is thinking differently, i.e., seeing the situation in a different way; saying more positive and helpful things to yourself; and arguing against the negative and unhelpful thoughts you have.

► Another way to cope is SMART Problem-Solving. SMART Problem-Solving is acting differently, i.e., brainstorming different choices and selecting the best one.

► We are going to spend the remainder of this session practicing these two skills.
Activity 3: What is CLEAR Thinking?

Time

- 10 Minutes

Activity Materials

- None

Counselor Note

The purpose of this exercise is to introduce CLEAR Thinking. CLEAR Thinking consists of three techniques: (1) self-talk — saying more positive and helpful things to one’s self; (2) reframing — seeing a situation in a different way; (3) arguing against the negative and unhelpful thoughts one has.

CLEAR Thinking

- CLEAR Thinking is thinking differently.
- Let’s first focus on what I mean by thinking differently.
- Sometimes you can’t change the situation, but you can make the most out of it.
- For instance, you are not able to change the fact that you have HIV. However, you can focus on the positive aspects of living with HIV and reframing the situation. For example, sometimes people appreciate life more because of having HIV. They are more motivated to work toward their goals.
- To get started, I would like you to use your Feeling Thermometer to rate your level of comfort related to certain ways that you may usually think.
- I will read a thought that you might have when you are about to go in for a job interview. Tell me where you would be on the Feeling Thermometer if you had this thought.

Read each situation and ask the client to state his or her Feeling Thermometer reading.

1. You are on your way to the interview and you say to yourself, “I am confident, and I am going to do really well in this interview.”
2. You are on your way to the interview and you say to yourself, “This is going to be very hard, and I might blow it.”

3. You are on your way to the interview and you say to yourself, “If I don’t do well, this means I will never find a job.”

▶ How do different things you say to yourself can change your Feeling Thermometer reading?

▶ Which thought would set you up to do best on the interview? Why?

▶ As you can see, our thoughts have an affect on our level of comfort and the way we act.

Ask the client to practice CLEAR Thinking by applying it to the stressor identified in Activity 2.

▶ Let’s look at one of the stressful situations you had listed. In that situation, what are some unhelpful things you might say to yourself?

Use the Feeling Thermometer to assess the client’s comfort level with unhelpful thoughts.

▶ When you think of those unhelpful thoughts, where are you on the Feeling Thermometer?

▶ How could you use CLEAR Thinking in this situation?

▶ CLEAR Thinking is thinking differently, i.e., reframing by seeing the situation in a different way; using self-talk to say more positive and helpful things to yourself; and arguing against the negative and unhelpful thoughts you have.

▶ Keeping your Ideal Self in mind, how could you see the situation in a different way? Say more positive and helpful things to yourself? Argue against the negative and unhelpful thoughts you have?

▶ What helpful things could you say to yourself instead?

▶ Is there a more positive way you could look at the situation?

Use the Feeling Thermometer to assess the client’s comfort level with CLEAR Thinking.
CLEAR: Core Skill Session 3

CLEAR Thinking - continued

- Where does CLEAR Thinking put you on the Feeling Thermometer?

- As you can see, CLEAR Thinking can be an effective way of lowering your Feeling Thermometer reading.

- How could the outcome of a situation be different based on your CLEAR Thinking and a lower Feeling Thermometer reading?
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Activity 4: What is SMART Problem-Solving?

Time
- (15 Minutes)

Activity Materials
- Worksheet: Problem-Solving Guidelines
- Worksheet: Applying SMART Problem-Solving

Counselor Note
The SMART Problem-Solving method is introduced. A problem identified by the client is used to illustrate the method. This skill is intended to create behavior change. It slows down reaction speed by encouraging the client to think before they act. The impact of how skipping “thinking” about various choices might negatively impact an outcome is discussed.

Problem-Solving

Introduce Problem-Solving

- Another way to cope with stressors is SMART Problem-Solving.

- SMART Problem-Solving is acting differently, i.e., brainstorming different choices and selecting the best one.

- Sometimes you can change a situation if you look at the different choices that you have in handling it and then choose the best option. For instance, you may be stressed because your partner is hesitant about using a condom. You want to stay healthy. There may be different steps that you can take to cope with or change the situation (e.g., talk to your partner assertively about your desire to use a condom, think about whether you want to continue being intimate with him or her, etc.).

- Out of the stressors you mentioned earlier is <insert identified stressor>. 

Let’s use this stressor as an opportunity to practice SMART Problem-Solving.

Give the client a copy of the Problem-Solving Guidelines handout.

To get us started, I’m going to give you a copy of the SMART Problem-Solving Guidelines.

Let’s go over the steps to be sure we are clear on all of them. We are going to follow these steps in planning a solution to the problem we are working on today.

Explain the five steps for SMART Problem-Solving.

**Step 1: S = State the Problem**
- Is the problem stated clearly? (Writing it down will help you define it clearly.)
- Is it complete?
- What’s your reading on the Feeling Thermometer when you think about the problem?

**Step 2: M = Make A Goal**
- Exactly what do you want to accomplish? What do you want to change from the way it is now?
- Is the goal stated clearly?
- Is it specific, so you can tell for sure when you have achieved it? (Again, writing it down will help.)
- Are you sure this is the goal you want? Can you make a commitment to working on it?

**Step 3: A = Actions - List the Actions You Might Take**
- Are these all of the actions you could reasonably take that would achieve your goal?
- Is each action stated clearly?
- Do the actions specify just one thing to do, as opposed to several things at the same time?
- Does each action describe something you will do, as opposed to how you will feel or think? (It’s best to have at least three actions to choose from if possible.)
Problem-Solving - continued

Step 4: R = Reach a Decision About Which Actions You Could Take

- Have you picked the best course of action, the one with the most pros and the fewest cons?

- Are there any skills or resources that you will need to be successful? (Anything that is not a skill can be considered a resource. People can be a resource; time can be a resource; money can be a resource; objects and materials can be resources.)

- How will you get the skills that you need, if you don’t have them already?

- How will you get the resources that you need, if you don’t have them already?

- What is going to be your plan for taking the action? What are the specific steps?

- What things can get in the way of taking this action and being successful with it? Is there anything you know about for sure that will make it difficult? Is there anything that might go wrong?

- What are your plans for dealing with these barriers, so they don’t keep you from taking the action you want to?

Step 5: T = Try It and Review It

- Did the action work out as you expected?

- Were you successful in taking your action? Completely? Partly?

- Would you do anything differently if you were starting again?

- Did the action you took achieve the goal you wanted to accomplish? Completely? Partly?

- Do you need to make a new plan in order to be successful in taking this action?

- Do you need to find a new action that will move you forward toward achieving your goal?

▶ OK, now let’s start working on our problem. Let’s follow the steps and apply them to this problem.
Distribute the Applying SMART Problem-Solving worksheet and work through each of the steps, applying the questions above to the specific problem identified in Activity 2.

- That was very good. I’m sure these ideas are going to help you in working on this problem.

- SMART Problem-Solving is a skill you can use in many different situations.

Use the Feeling Thermometer to assess the client’s optimal reading for effective problem solving.

- I would like to ask you one more question before we move on to the next activity. Where do you need to be on the Feeling Thermometer for you to be able to apply these SMART Problem-Solving steps?

Facilitate a discussion about the impact a high level of discomfort has on SMART Problem-Solving. Typically, extreme discomfort, and sometimes extreme comfort, may cause us to “jump into” an action. Encourage the client to identify the Feeling Thermometer reading where he or she can engage in optimal SMART Problem-Solving.
Activity 5: How Can I Relax?

Time

- (5 minutes)

Activity Materials

- Relaxation: Releasing Tension

Counselor Note

The client learns and practices a relaxation technique. A client who feels relaxed and comfortable may have a lower Feeling Thermometer reading and may have more helpful thoughts and actions.

Relaxation Technique

Introduce the Relaxation Technique.

- We’ve worked hard today. Now we’ll use a relaxation activity to help reduce stress and feel more comfortable. A person who feels relaxed and comfortable may have a lower Feeling Thermometer reading and have an easier time using CLEAR Thinking.

- Sometimes we store stress in our bodies and tense up without even being aware of it.

- We might clench our jaws, tighten our shoulders, tighten the muscles in our feet, or furrow our eyebrows.

- We carry this tension around for the day and the stress begins to build up over time.

- I am going to show you an exercise that will help you become more aware of areas in your body where you hold tension. By becoming aware of those parts of your body, you will know where to focus your relaxation for some immediate relief.

Allow the client to get comfortable in his or her chair.

- I would like for you to get comfortable in your chair and loosely close your eyes.
I am going to name certain parts of your face and body. When you hear me name a part, I would like for you to take a breath and on the exhale let that part of your body relax.

Let’s take three deep breaths before we get started.

Model taking in and exhaling three breaths.

Slowly name each of the body parts below and give the client 6-7 seconds to release tension in that area.

- Jaw
- Mouth
- Eyes
- Forehead
- Shoulders
- Neck
- Arms
- Hands
- Thighs
- Calves
- Feet

Wait one minute to let the client relax.

Now, as I count from 5 to 1, let yourself become more alert.

5...4...3...2...1. Pause.

Yawn and stretch.

Open your eyes gently.

Where did you feel the greatest release? Were you surprised to find so much tension in that part of your body?

How do you feel after the physical relaxation?

How do you think relaxation can be used to help the CLEAR Thinking and SMART Problem-Solving process?
Relaxation Technique - continued

Encourage a discussion about how relaxation can be used to regulate emotions in a high stress situation. By remaining calm in high stress situations (i.e., maintaining a lower Feeling Thermometer reading), one can get in touch with his or her Ideal Self characteristics and use CLEAR Thinking and SMART Problem-Solving to better assess and control the outcome of the situation.

Distribute a copy of the Relaxation: Releasing Tension activity.
Activity 6: What’s Next?

Time
- 15 minutes

Activity Materials
- Goal Cards
- Handout: Guidelines for Goal Setting
- Worksheet: Goal Log

Counselor Note
The purposes of this activity are to reinforce today’s learning, set weekly goals, and to motivate the client to return to the next session by wrapping up on a positive note.

Review of Session Content
Review today’s session.

► Today we talked about CLEAR Thinking and SMART Problem-Solving. We learned some more about how our feelings, thoughts, and actions are interconnected. We got a better understanding of this connection by taking a look at a recent event in your life. The interplay between your feelings, thoughts, and actions are often automatic, but we learned that you can slow down this process by staying calm and paying attention to how these interactions occur. Slowing down the process will help you in deciding how you might change the outcome of a situation.

► We then learned about SMART Problem-Solving and how you can use it to overcome barriers in your life. We practiced applying SMART Problem-Solving to current situations in your life. Finally, we ended with a relaxation technique to help you remain calm and level-headed in stressful situations, allowing you to think and act as your Ideal Self would.

Praise the client for something positive he or she did during the session. E.g., “I really liked that you engaged in every activity we did today.”
Review of Goal Guidelines

Review the Guidelines for Goal Setting.

**Guidelines for Goal Setting**

- Important to you, and you are committed to it.
- Realistic. Not too hard and not too easy (40-60 on the Feeling Thermometer).
- Brief, specific, and clearly stated.
- Easy to tell when you have accomplished it.

Answer questions and clarify as necessary.

Refer to the client’s prevention goal related to core skills.

The client’s Ideal Self characteristics, prevention, and life goals should be consistently integrated into weekly short-term goal setting.

The client is encouraged to identify two goals:

1. A short term weekly goal that supports the client’s accomplishment of the long-term life goal identified during Core Session 2.
2. A short term weekly goal that relates to today’s session topic.

If the client appears to struggle with having two simultaneous goals, the client may select only one goal related to today’s session.

**Suggestions for Weekly Goals**

Give the client suggestions for weekly goals.

- **Some examples of possible goals for this week could be:**
  - Carry out the action selected during SMART Problem-Solving activity.
  - Apply CLEAR Thinking to an identified stressor.
  - Spend five minutes a day doing a relaxation activity.
  - Take a step toward accomplishing my long-term life goal.
Discuss the goal with the client. Have the client record it on the Weekly Goal Card. Record it on the Prevention Plan in the client’s workbook.

- I also would like to follow up with you about your life goal. Is there a weekly goal that you would like to set related to your Life Goal? We will review your goal at the beginning of our next session to see how you did.

Discuss the goal with the client. Have the client record it on the Weekly Goal Card. Record it on the Prevention Plan in the client’s workbook.

Closing

Announce the day, date, and time of the next session.

Ask the client to share something he or she got out of, or liked best about today’s session. Model this by going first. Acknowledge and praise the client as appropriate.

Have the client identify benefits of participation in CLEAR. Ask the client the following questions:

- What did you like most about today’s session?
- What did you learn that you can apply to your life?
- What could be improved about today’s session?

END OF SESSION