
UNIT 4 PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

Most people spend more time and energy going around problems than in trying to solve them.

- Henry Ford

Structure

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4.0 INTRODUCTION

Norman Vincent Peale, the author of the bestseller, *The Power of Positive Thinking* had said that how you think about a problem is more important than the problem itself. So always think positively. We have to accept that problems are a part of our lives. We also need to understand that the solution for a problem lies more within us than in external sources. Such an outlook is based on the conviction that an analytic mind and perseverance can help in overcoming problems. Therefore, it reposes faith in the ability of distant learners to analyze the problematic situation and identify the resources at their disposal with which they can overcome the problem. However, they may require your guidance in such processes. The previous unit prepared you to develop reading and writing skills in learners. But reading and writing skills can be put to good use only if the learner is confident and can solve the problems faced. This unit will help you in developing the skills required for problem solving.

It has been rightly said that Student Support Services are important from the psychological perspective. Traditional students have many physical clues of their attachment to the institution. Providing support services to the distance learners is essential for developing the feeling of belonging to the institution for students who do not have access to traditional clues (Usun, 2004). As you are involved in providing student support services, students may look up to you for guidance for their problems. Therefore, in this unit we shall first discuss, scientific attitude, which is, essential for problem solving. Thereafter we have discussed how you can help your students in developing scientific attitude, make sound decisions and identify and

utilize the strengths and opportunities for overcoming weaknesses and threats. Next, our discussion centers on the management of stress and time and thereafter on the need for building confidence in learners.

4.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Describe how a problem is to be approached;
- Describe how you can develop skills for problem solving;
- Discuss how you can help learners in managing stress;
- Elucidate how you can assist learners in managing time; and
- Explicate steps for building confidence in learners.

4.2 APPROACHING A PROBLEM

If you are providing student support services to distance learners, you may often find students approaching you with their problems. With the passage of time, you may find that the nature of problems is quite diverse. However, you may also feel that the problems can be classified into certain broad categories like academic, administrative, and personal. Again, within these categories, you may find that there are many variations. For instance, administrative problems could be of various types like not receiving Self Learning Materials on time, not receiving the Admit Card for examination, problem in changing the medium of instruction and so on. Academic and personal problems also vary. You may also feel that there cannot be a standardized solution for the diverse problems faced. This is because the student population in distance education and the problems faced by them are heterogeneous. Another reason why standardized solutions are not always possible is that the same situation may be problematic for some and not so for others. Besides, how people approach a problem is also different. The next section will help you in understanding this.

4.2.1 Perception of a Problem

As you train your students for problem solving, you will first have to keep in mind that we may perceive the same problem in different ways. Hence, looking for a standardized solution may not be advisable and this is more so with a group of distance learners, with a heterogeneous profile. The content given below will help you in understanding this:

We find that the same situation is perceived and approached in different manners. There cannot be a standard solution but there is at least an approach that works, irrespective of the nature of the problem. Such an approach towards problem solving involves scientific method, which in turn requires a mindset or in other words an attitude – the scientific attitude. We shall discuss these in the next section.

Approach towards a problem

Ask your students to imagine a situation in which they are late for an important appointment some distance away but find their car/two wheeler has developed a problem. Ask them how they would solve the problem.

You may find that people perceive and react to a problem in different ways. While some would concentrate on fixing the vehicle first, others may first telephone to cancel/postpone the appointment. Some would leave their vehicle and try to get a lift or borrow someone's vehicle. You will find some saying that they would never face this kind of problem as they are never late and maintain their vehicle regularly. Some would say that they would quickly telephone and meanwhile check for the problem in the vehicle and if it is a minor one repair it. Yet some may abandon the vehicle as well as the appointment and go back home. We find that some naturally look for alternative resources, some are effective planners, and some leave a problem as such, and so on.

Source: Christopher, E.M. and Smith, L.E. (2009). Brain teasing activities to promote creative problem solving. My car won't start. Leadership Training. New Delhi: Viva. pp.98-100.

4.2.2 Scientific Attitude for Problem Solving

As scientific attitude is the precondition for adopting scientific method, let us discuss it first. What is meant by scientific attitude? What is its relevance for problem solving? Scientific attitude is a complex of several attributes. These attributes are too numerous to be listed. Hence, it is difficult to define scientific attitude. However, some of the important attributes that constitute scientific attitude are the following and you may think of some more:

- **Having faith in cause and effect relationship:** For example, low grades in the term end examination may be traced back to improper study habits.
- **Having objectivity:** This implies being free of all kinds of biases, while considering something. For example, the reaction to information should not be coloured by its source or any other thing. The information itself should only matter. For example while assessing an assignment, neither the student who has submitted it nor anything else except the assignment should matter.
- **Emphasis on empirical evidences:** Information supported by evidences may only be believed. Hence reactions should be elicited only by authentic information, rather than rumors, gossips and informal messages from grapevines.
- **Open minded, i.e. being receptive to novel ideas;** having a disposition to review earlier beliefs: For example, even after several decades of successful distance education, there are many who refuse to believe in it. Are they being open minded?
- **Critical thinking:** It is the ability to reflect, think rationally and originally, analyze and synthesize. Critical thinking actually requires both objectivity as well as open-mindedness.

The attributes discussed so far comprise scientific attitude. Some one equipped with scientific attitude will adopt scientific method for

problem solving. Scientific method, propagated by Francis Bacon, involves the identification of a problem and inductive and deductive thinking. There is an attempt to find a tentative solution to the problem and thereafter on the basis of the evidences available, the solution is accepted, rejected or modified. We shall not go into the details of this method. Scientific attitude and scientific method are integral to each other. Someone who adopts scientific method for solving a problem will not believe in half baked information nor will s/he get perturbed with rumours and hearsays. S/he will also be in a position to analyze the cause of the problem, collect the necessary information regarding the problem and search for viable solutions. Instead of looking for quick solutions and hastily conceived plans, which may themselves be fraught with problems, s/he would prefer to take an in-depth view of the problem. Hence, not only in carrying out investigations and studies but also for solving problems faced in daily life and those faced by distant learners, adopting scientific method helps. It has been rightly stated that through application of scientific attitude, a scientific domain of the world is created (Grinnell, 1992).

We come back to the question—Why is it necessary to nurture scientific attitude in distant learners? We have discussed that it helps in problem solving by adopting the scientific method. Let us discuss this point with certain hypothetical situations:

- A distant learner panics midway through her educational programme as someone tells her that students passing out from distance education institutions are not treated at par with those from the conventional system for employment.
- A distant learner gets anxious on hearing from some source that courses offered through distance education are not recognized.
- A distant learner following completion of the first year of one programme wants to drop out and apply for a related programme as someone has advised him that the latter would be a better choice.
- A distant learner does not find time to study.
- A distant learner is stressed as term end examination approaches.
- A distant learner is confused and is unable to decide in which programme to enroll.
- A distant learner is unable to work on the assignments.

Distant learners being at a distance from the institution may be vulnerable to hearsays and rumours. Scientific attitude ensures that no idea/solution/decision is treated critically till its soundness is judged by the weight of the evidence (Gauld, 1982). Hence, grounding in scientific method and developing scientific attitude will equip the learners to solve problems on their own.

You may ask your students to adopt the following steps for problem solving through scientific method:

- Identify and define the problem in an unambiguous manner
- Try to analyse the cause(s) of the problem
- Acquire relevant and authentic information about the problem and analyze it

- Think about the possible solutions, i.e. the alternatives, some of which may even appear unconventional
- Develop a strategy
- Evaluate the solution
- Adopt/reject/modify the solution.

4.2.3 Developing Scientific Attitude for Problem Solving

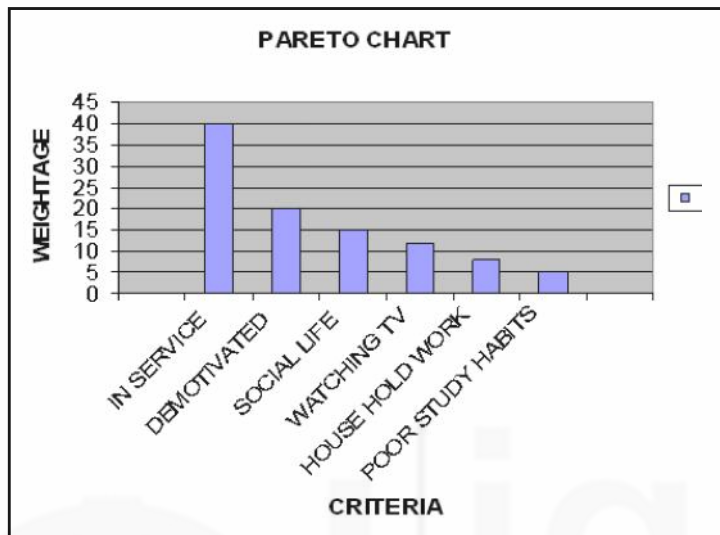
As a provider of student support services, if you can develop scientific attitude in your learners, they will be equipped to solve many of the problems on their own. How can you develop it in your learners? Developing scientific attitude may take a long time as it may involve unlearning unscientific attitudes. A lecture on the importance of scientific attitude may not suffice but may nevertheless be a beginning. You may also encourage students to carry out activities that can lead to the development of attributes comprising scientific attitude. Some of the activities are the following:

- **Discussions:** You may hold a discussion among your students during which they are encouraged to narrate anecdotes and experiences from real life supporting scientific attitude for problem solving.
- **Debates:** Participation in debates necessitates thought processes, listening, logically putting up arguments and counterarguments, placing arguments logically and in the proper sequence, being open to diverse but rational views and the like. This encourages critical thinking, essential for scientific attitude.
- **Brainstorming:** It brings out the originality of thought and encourages creative solutions. This technique also encourages participation of various members of the team.

For effective brainstorming, debates and discussions, you will have to create an environment that encourages freedom of thought and expression and at the same time moderate discussions so that the focus is not lost and there is no unpleasantness among the participants.

- **Exercises requiring inductive and deductive reasoning:** Logical thinking is essential for problem solving. Hence, providing learners with real and hypothetical situations and asking them to identify and state the problem in clear terms, bring out the specificities and arrive at a solution, examine it and then infer, will develop the abilities to analyze and synthesize.
- **Root Cause Analysis:** The objective of this technique is to help in arriving at the root of the problem. In this method you may present hypothetical problematic situations to your learners and ask them “**Why**” several times till they reach the fundamental cause of the problem. For example, a student confused about the course in which to enroll, may be asked several times ‘why’ till she sorts out the conflicting and confusing choices and clarity emerges.
- **Establishing Cause and Effect:** As a subsequent step to root cause analysis, you may ask your learners to prepare a flow chart to represent the relationship between an effect (the problem) and its potential causes. The diagram may help in drawing out the factors blocking the solution.

- **Pareto Charts:** A Pareto Chart is basically a bar graph and factors leading to a problem may be represented as different bars. The height of the bars represents frequency, which may be construed as the intensity of the factor. The plotting is done in a descending manner with the smaller ones towards the right. It helps to analyze the causes of a problem by identifying the factors leading to it. It is not necessary that all the factors leading to the problem be eliminated as some of them may be important.



In this example of a Pareto chart there is a hypothetical situation in which the problem is the lack of time for studying. There are various criteria like being in-service to poor study habits that consume/waste time. These criteria may be studied to determine those that cannot be helped and those that can be mitigated/eliminated. Thus it helps in analyzing the problem and in looking for a long term solution.

4.2.4 Applying SWOT for Problem Solving

SWOT analysis is used in business to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the business environments. It is a tool for reflection (Dess, Lumpkin and Taylor, 2005). The principle underlying strategic management process may also be applied for solving problems faced by individuals.

Strategic management process consists of the following five steps (Bratton and Gold, 2003):

1. **Mission and goals:** describes the values and aspirations.
2. **Environmental analysis:** Environmental analysis searches the internal environment for strengths (**S**), weaknesses (**W**) and the external environment for opportunities (**O**) and threats (**T**).
3. **Strategy formulation:** involves the evaluation of interactions among strategic factors and making strategic choices for meeting the goals.
4. **Strategy implementation:** involves the implementation of the strategy.
5. **Strategy evaluation:** determines the extent to which the actual change and performance match the desired change and performance.

These strategic factors are summarized by the acronym SWOT. While Strengths and weaknesses are internal factors, opportunities and threats are in the external environment. Learners may be guided to analyze their situation along the dimensions of SWOT. You may ask your students to list their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Let us try to understand this with the following **example**.

Problem: Lack of motivation in distant learners

Strengths: Sound previous knowledge required for the course in which enrolled.

Weakness: Not having enough confidence to study in isolation from peers and teachers.

Threats: Limited access to library, social commitments.

Opportunities: Availability of adequate self learning material in different media, scope for learning at own pace, time and place.

Even if we are aware of our goals, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, **articulating and listing them** helps in bringing them to the fore and addressing them. Hence, the learners may be asked to carry out this. Now the focus has to be on how best to tap the strengths, utilize the opportunities, overcome the weaknesses and face the threats. Thereafter the strategy to attain the goals may be fixed in the light of the SWOT. The learner needs to be assured about the strength and opportunities and motivated towards overcoming the threats and weaknesses. This is an attempt to develop optimism and look at the brighter side of a situation.

4.2.5 Decision Making for Problem Solving

Now let us discuss yet another aspect of problem solving, i.e. decision making. As stated by **Ritchie and Thompson (1988)**, problem solving includes decision making activities, which include the following steps as given in the following figure:

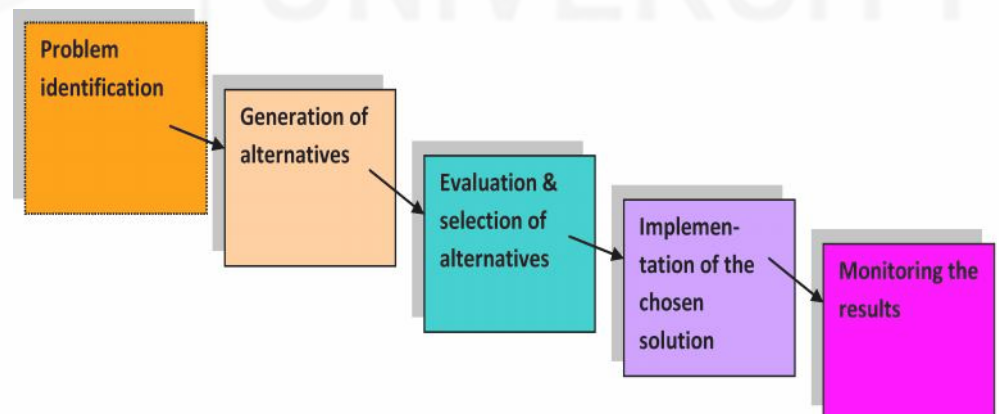


Figure 4.1: Decision making for problem solving

Many of the problems could be solved if right decisions are taken. Let us study this **example**.

Problem: Medium chosen is Hindi but the learner is facing problem in comprehending the content in the study materials as the language used is replete with difficult words, not used in daily life.

Step I: Problem identification: Difficulty in comprehending the content in the study materials.

Step II: Generation of alternatives:

- Opt for a change to English medium
- Buy a Hindi dictionary and continue with Hindi medium

Step III: Evaluation and selection of alternatives:

First option: Not having adequate communication skills in English. Hence rejected.

Second option: better to continue with Hindi medium and use dictionary. Hence selected.

Step IV: Implementation of the chosen solution, with a few units.

Step V: Monitoring the results.

In the light of the results the process may be repeated with the other alternatives.

Activity: Read about scientific method and its utility in research.

Check Your Progress 1

- Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below.
 b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Think of a problematic situation commonly faced by distant learners. Explain how approaching the problem with scientific attitude can lead to the solution.

.....

2) Critically evaluate any one method discussed for developing skills for problem solving.

.....

3) In the perspective of the programme in which you have enrolled, list the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities as perceived by you.

.....

4.3 MANAGING STRESS

What is exactly meant by the term, 'stress'? Stress is difficult to define as it is subjective. Its causes, symptoms and results are not fixed. Stress arises when individuals perceive that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with the threats to their well-being (Lazarus 1966). There are many more definitions that emphasize that stress is the result of demands exceeding the capabilities of an individual. In everyday usage stress generally connotes emotions like anxiety, fear, irritation, frustrations and the like (Organ and Bateman, 1986). As some one providing student support service to distant learners, you may come across, especially before the term end exams, learners who appear to suffer from symptoms like restlessness, inability to concentrate, not confident about their studies, continue to procrastinate important things, irritability, anxiety, depression, negative self image, low self esteem, lack of interest, and the like. These symptoms indicate that the student could be under continuous stress. These are some of the symptoms of long term stress, which is in response to a problem which persists over a long period of time. Stress may also be due to a problem that is restricted to a shorter period of time. For instance, you may find a crowd about to board a local train. The people may exhibit symptoms like dilated pupils, tense muscles, increased heartbeat, sweating and so on. These symptoms also indicate stress. These symptoms unlike those mentioned earlier are temporary in nature. They are more associated with the fight-flight response to stress. In the literal sense, this means readiness to fight the danger, or take flight from the situation. This type of stress is unavoidable and is also necessary. If such stress was not suffered by the people getting ready to board the train, in all probability the train would be missed. Such stress that makes us enhance our level of alertness and activity and work for a cause is known as 'eustress'. On the other hand long term stress that reduces our zeal for work and affects our health is 'distress'.

There are situations for which immediate flight/fight is not possible. They lead to gradual building up of stress and may lead to distress. First you have to understand the factors that lead to such kinds of stress and then help your students in managing it. An in-depth study of stress is beyond the scope of this unit. We shall emphasize more on stress management and that too in the context of distant learners. Why is it necessary for you to understand stress management? Many distant learners are in-service and have to juggle their time among household activities, career, social life and education. Such learners may be under tremendous work pressure. Some learners are no longer young and have resumed studies after a gap of a few years. Many are distant learners for the first time. Besides, isolation from peers and the problems of dealing with a formless institution and faceless teachers may be intimidating. Hence, there could be many reasons for enhanced stress level among distant learners.

To some extent stress is experienced by more or less all of us. Minor reasons like not getting the newspaper on time in the morning to major ones like the loss of a dear one, could lead to stress. Stress can be caused by many factors—academic, social, career related, personal and so on. In case of distant learners, many of these could combine to develop stress. Another important thing is that just as problems are perceived with subjectivity so are the factors leading to stress. Working

online may be a relief for some but stressful for others. Again, what causes stress today may not remain stressful in the future. People who are active and competitive may respond differently from those with a laid back attitude to a problem. While moderate degree of stress may even be beneficial, continuous and higher degrees of stress are harmful. Moderate amount of stress is in fact necessary for achievement. But prolonged stress may have impacts on health, family life, career and education. In case of distance education, it could lead to lower achievements and even drop outs.

You may come across students seriously preparing for their assessments. They appear to be confident and focused but nevertheless suffer anxiety regarding their performance. Are they also under stress? On getting a new job, we may be excited and under stress. Is it harmful? Do you feel stress can also have a positive impact? As said by Hans Selye, (a doctor by profession who is famous for his work on stress), stress is not something necessarily bad. Stress that leads to creativity and productivity may be desirable against that which affects creativity and productivity. Therefore it is the stress with a negative impact that needs to be managed.

As stated by Organ and Bateman, (1986) stress can be caused by factors that are social, physical, environmental and academic. We have discussed earlier that stress is usually associated with emotions like frustration, fear, irritability and anxiety. Frustration may be due to non reinforcement to one habituated to reinforcements. For example one getting appreciations regularly in the classroom in the conventional system may be stressed due to lesser frequency of reinforcements in distance education. A delay in feedback like delayed knowledge of grade in assignments can also be frustrating. At times conflict between equally strong but incompatible urges can cause frustration. For instance, there may be conflicting desires of appearing for term end examination in June and that for spending the summer vacation in the hills with family members. Anxiety and fear and hence irritability are often caused by ambiguities, change and the fear of unknown. If students are new to distance education, they may not understand the system well and hence suffer stress.

Stress Management

It is said that stress to some extent is unavoidable and hence can only be managed and not eliminated. What should you do when you find your students are stressed? You may adopt the following steps (Source: Adapted from European organization for the safety of air navigation, 1996):

- **Recognizing:** Recognizing stress in learners and identifying the causes are necessary. Focus on recent and sudden changes in the behavior of your learners. Talk to them to confirm if they are really stressed.
- **Emotional support:** Communication and dialogues are essential for providing emotional support. Break in communication can in fact lead to stress. Communicate with your learners so that they feel that there are two people working on the same problem and that they are not grappling alone.
- **Logical support:** People often have knowledge of the solution; they only need to be encouraged to come out with it. Ask for the

solution, the alternatives, the priorities and motivate students to weigh the options and take the best decision.

Stress management for distance learners is often closely related to time management. We shall discuss this in the next section. You may also find that our discussions related to problem solving are relevant for stress management. You may guide your students to prioritize their work and prepare a schedule and motivate them to stick to it. You should try to build their self confidence by urging them to think positively. You may also advise them about stress busters like physical exercises, meditation, getting enough sleep. You could also ask them to practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing, yoga, meditation, imagining situations that are peaceful such as a riverside and mentally being there for some time. For beating stress these techniques are more useful than wasteful stress responses like sleepless nights, smoking, drinking several cups of coffee and the like.

How to prevent stressful situations?

You may like to prevent stress in learners rather than trying to manage it later on. For this you may take the following steps:

- *Guide learners in time management techniques.* We shall discuss it in the next section.
- *Lessen ambiguities by organizing sessions for orientation and induction to the concerned programme.*
- *Provide timely information* through mail, telephone, letters, manuals, brochures and the like to reduce uncertainties and thus stress. In case something gets delayed, inform about the delay, giving the reasons.
- *Provide timely feedback* for instance, regarding assignments.
- *Develop proper study habits:* Encourage students to get into the habit of making notes, regularly auditing them to check if they need to be updated, supplementing them, revising the notes regularly, carrying out assignments and projects on time, and the like.
- *Encourage collaborations:* During academic counseling sessions, you may organize group activities so that learners get to know each other and work together. Working with peers reduces stress.
- *Positive thinking:* Encourage your students to have only positive thoughts as actions are the products of our thoughts.

Activity

1. Read about Hans Selye and his contributions to understanding stress.
2. Think, if you are under any kind of stress. Determine the cause(s). Is it possible to eliminate/lessen them? If yes, how? if no, how, will you manage it?

4.4 TIME MANAGEMENT

Time is the most important among all the resources as its management is the key to efficient management of all the other resources. It

requires nothing beyond common sense to understand that time is precious and has to be utilized well. Yet we often struggle to manage time. It has been rightly stated that the way you spend your time determines how you live your life and who you are. Tomorrow is connected to today just as today is connected to yesterday (Douglas, M.E. 1975, quoted by Misra and Misra, 2001).

You will find that chatting on the telephone and internet takes up more time than we used to spend in writing letters. Watching television, having scheduled and unscheduled visitors, meetings, carrying out activities without clear objectives, searching for misplaced, attempting too many activities simultaneously, are certain things in which we often invest time. At times pursuing our hobbies and activities about which we are passionate also takes up a lot of time. What are your views regarding these activities as far as time management is concerned?

Activity

Ask students who approach you with problems related to time management, to list the causes of wastage of time and ask them to introspect.

Excerpt from a survey report on utilisation of time

A survey was carried out to determine if the huge amount of knowledge available through abundant number of seminars, books, pamphlets, articles and films on time management, are actually being applied by people in their own lives. A questionnaire was distributed among sales representatives and engineer managers to find out how time was used by these people and also to determine whether the different demands of the two types of jobs would cause them to use their time differently. It was found that for both the categories the top time wasters were the same, i.e. telephone interruptions, drop in visitors, scheduled and unscheduled meetings, and crises, lack of self discipline, procrastination and unclear communication. Among the top five time wasters, both the categories listed only one item which could be described as a personal shortcoming and this may be due to the human tendency to locate the source of problem to an external source than within them. The conclusion drawn from the survey was that the term 'time management' is a misnomer and it should be called self management as it is the key to time management.

Source: LeBoeuf, M. (2001). Managing time means managing yourself, In M. LeBoeuf, (Ed.), *Essence of time management*. Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House. Pp. 31-35.

Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: 'I don't much care where.. . .

Cat: Then it doesn't matter which way you go.

This is a dialogue between Alice and the Cheshire cat in the novel, 'Alice in wonderland' written by Lewis Carroll. As long as we do not know where to go, i.e. have no fixed goal, we are unlikely to reach anywhere.

As you know, distance learners are not only adult learners but are also often in-service and with social commitments. Therefore, for them time management is all the more necessary. You have to impress upon your students that time is a unique resource that cannot be saved but is

always spent, but it has to be done wisely and that the way we spend our time is usually habitual. How can you help your students in managing time? You may take the following steps:

- **Setting goals:** You may explain to your students the need for setting goals. There is a need to have goals to know exactly where we want to reach and figure out our priorities. Without proper goal setting, we may fritter away time on low value or conflicting priorities. However, we need to remember that the goals should be specific and realistic. It is also important to determine the time we can devote to the goals we have set and set the deadline for each goal. It would also be better to have only a few goals at a time. Read the following dialogue.
- **Prioritise:** The process of setting priorities involves planning. It has to be done strictly on the basis of the goals.
- **Time analysis:** There is a need to analyse the way time is spent to determine wastages and proper utilisation of time.
- **Learning to say no:** Often claimants on our time are many and we need to resist the pressure than imprudently acceding to it (Wilkinson, 2001). This is important as it helps in checking over commitment, which dilutes effectiveness (Mishra and Misra, 2001). It is important that we do not take up work load more than we can reasonably cope up with.
- **The 80:20 Rule:** This is also known as the Pareto Principle or the '80:20 Rule'. This says that typically 80% of unfocussed effort generates only 20% of results. This means that the remaining 80% of results are achieved with only 20% of the effort. This ratio is only a generalization and may have some variations.
- **Set aside some time for organising:** We need to set aside some time for thinking, planning and reflecting.
- **Select prime time:** We have our prime time i.e. the part of the day when we are at our creative best and work with peak efficiency. For some it is morning (roosters) and for some it is late in the night (owls). Important activities can be carried out during the prime time.
- **Procrastination:** It is a major stumbling block in attaining goals. As suggested by Mishra and Misra (2001), we usually procrastinate, because of the following reasons:
 - *Unpleasantness of the task:* If an activity is perceived to be unpleasant, it is not taken up. However even unpleasant tasks may be attacked head on as getting such tasks finished leads to greater satisfaction (Figure 4.2).
 - *Difficulty of task:* A task perceived to be difficult is also put off. Such tasks may be analysed into smaller constituent units and we may focus on one unit at a time.
 - *Indecision as a cause of procrastination:* Taking decisions as mentioned in sub-section 4.2.4 may help in starting to move on particular course of action.

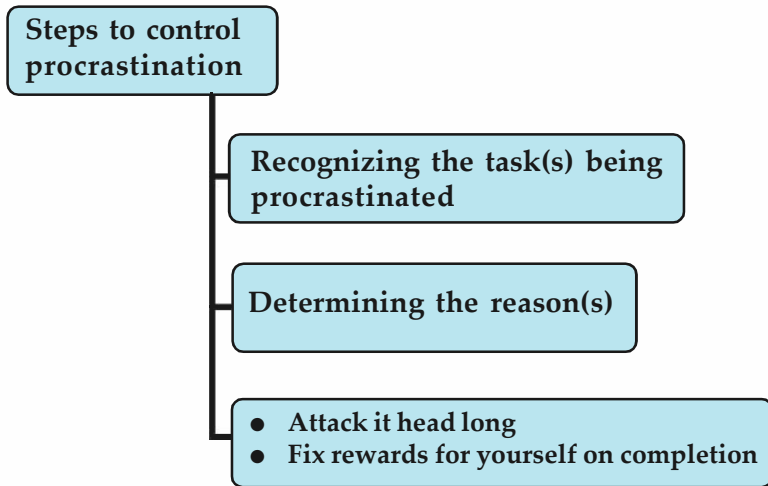
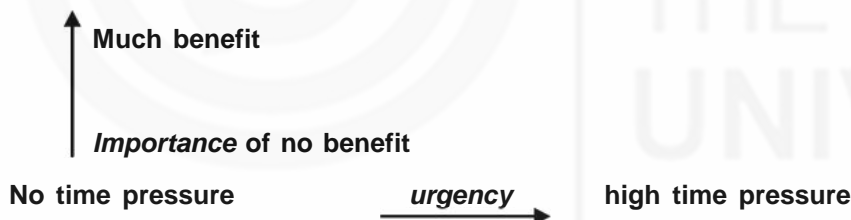


Figure 4.2: Steps to control procrastination

Activity log: Activity logs help in analyzing how one actually spends time. The first time some one who finds it difficult to manage time, prepares an activity log, s/he may be surprised at the amount of time wasted. Doing this for several days helps in establishing patterns regarding utilization of time. It can also help in identifying the prime time.

Preparing a grid for managing time: The grid depicted below is a tool that can help in sorting out activities as per their urgency and help in managing time.

Important but not urgent	Important and urgent
Low in urgency and importance	Urgent but of low importance



Source: Smith, S. (1999). Develop yourself, In S. Smith (Ed), *Be Your best*, New Delhi: Kogan Page Pvt. Ltd. P68-69.

While tools for time management like the grid discussed above, planner (yearly, monthly and daily), time logs and the like may be helpful for time management but they are to be treated only as means. Preparing them should not be a time consuming activity. Moreover, these tools are only as good as the users and depend on how well they are used.

Excerpts from: A Case Study of Teachers Coping as Distance Learners at the Open University, Malaysia

In a study by Dass (2001) on 534 distance learning students at Universiti Sains Malaysia, the two greatest challenges indicated by the majority of those surveyed were time management (75.5 percent) and study-related problems (74.9 percent). It is generally perceived that distance learning is convenient but later realized to be time-consuming and more demanding than traditional courses (Tucker, 2003). Thus, it has been reported that fewer than 50 percent of distance-education students finish their courses (Carr, 2000). At the University of Phoenix however,

65 percent of its learners satisfy the requirements to graduate. This is attributed in part due to the university understanding important learner considerations such as the importance of interaction between professor and other learners in the class, hand-holding their students and providing a 24x7 technical support (Martinez, 2003). In short, supporting learners by providing good administrative support is crucial.

At OUM, it was found that the main problems faced by the teachers were associated with life-related commitments. The teachers' primary complaints were that they found it difficult to juggle between study, work and family. Taking note of this problem, OUM included time management as one of the main topics in its counselling sessions for these teachers.

Source: Latifah Abdol Latif, Ramli Bahroom and Zoraini Wati Abas, "A Case Study of Teachers Coping as Distance Learners at the Open University Malaysia", in a book titled: *Rethinking Teacher Education*, Persatuan Perkembangan Profesionalisme Pendidikan Sarawak (PROFES), pg. 174-184.

4.5 CONFIDENCE BUILDING IN LEARNERS

So far you have read about the necessity for approaching a problem with a scientific attitude, making sound decisions, managing stress and managing time. Will these abilities have any impact on the level of self confidence? Why? Self confidence is the key to success. It is said that our abilities are quite similar but we differ due to the extent to which we are confident of them. The higher rate of drop out in distance education is a reflection of the lower levels of confidence among the students. You may find some young children quite confident of themselves, while there could be many adults who are not so sure of themselves. Confidence can be built in people. Therefore, you have to work towards raising the confidence level in such students.

There are certain behaviours that are usually exhibited by those who are confident and some by those who are not. Go through the comparison given below in the table.

Learner with confidence is likely to:	Learner having lower level of confidence is likely to:
prefer a seat in the front row	prefer a seat not in direct view of the teacher
be interactive	have his/her own comfort zone and prefer to stay within it; avoid interactions
look straight towards the teacher	avert the eyes of the teacher
be social	be a loner/befriend those like him/her
be willing to take responsibilities and lead	avoid taking responsibilities
be balanced in speech	be imbalanced in speech; may speak very less or could be garrulous; may leave sentences unfinished.
have realistic aspirations	have aspirations that do not match the actual potential

What are your views regarding the characteristics of the two kinds of students – confident and not so confident. Are there other such characteristics that you can think of? Is there also a third category of learners, those who are overconfident? What are your views about them?

How can you build confidence in learners? A positive self image is the key to confidence. Hence, it is necessary to ensure that students have a positive self image. Our self image is based on our experiences and perceptions of ourselves. It can be positive or negative. It influences the way we behave and how we feel about ourselves (Smith, 1999). Motivation and satisfaction about the task in which one is engaged greatly influences self esteem. A distant learner who is no longer motivated and satisfied with the educational choice s/he has made may not have a positive self image and hence confidence. As stated by Ritchie and Thompson (1988), there are three psychological states that are critical in determining a person's motivation and satisfaction on the job. These states are:

- **Experienced meaningfulness:** The work must appear to be meaningful and worthwhile.
- **Experienced responsibility:** The doer must believe that s/he is personally accountable for the outcomes of the efforts.
- **Knowledge of results:** The doer must be able to determine whether or not the outcomes of the work are satisfactory

Distance learners often fail to remain motivated. They may also not be satisfied with the choice they have made regarding their education. In such cases you have to remind them that the educational programme in which they have chosen to enroll is worthwhile and also make them feel that they themselves are accountable for successfully completing it. Timely feedback regarding assignments, projects, dissertations and so on will provide them with the much needed knowledge of the results.

We have mentioned some steps that you may take during the academic counseling sessions and other suitable occasions for building confidence.

Think of some more such steps that may be added to this list:

- **Be self confident:** For building confidence in others, you yourself need to be self confident. Only if your students find you enjoying a high self esteem and having a positive image about yourself, you can inspire confidence in them.
- **Induction:** Organizing induction programme for distance learners has many advantages. It provides the learners with the necessary information. The students can use it as a platform for clearing their doubts.
- **Regular information:** You have already read the need for authentic and timely information. Providing timely information to your learners even without their seeking it is necessary to reduce uncertainties and retain confidence.
- **Solving problems:** Persistent problems may take a toll on confidence. Hence, help your learners in identifying problems and solving them as discussed in the very first section of this unit.
- **Time management:** Try to help your students in managing time. One who is in a hurry and with incomplete preparation may not feel confident.
- **Study habits:** Develop in learners proper study skills. Note making, carrying out content analysis, regularly updating and revising the notes makes one feel confident before the assessments.

**Learner Support:
Development of Skills**

- **Communication Skills:** Often knowledge and skills possessed remain unexpressed due to the lack of communication skills. You may encourage learners lacking communication skills to express themselves at brainstorming sessions, debates, discussions and classroom interactions, so that they overcome the inhibitions faced in communicating orally. Your feedback in the assignments submitted by your learners can improve their skills of written communication.
- **Collaborative learning:** A social environment with peers reduces isolation. Hence, try to facilitate collaborative learning by building teams. Facilitating team work can enhance the confidence level of learners.
- **Appreciation:** Timely and positive feedback in the form of acknowledgement and appreciation builds self esteem in learners.
- **Positive Image:** Try to develop in your learners a positive image. You may apply the SWOT technique we have already discussed. Remind them of their achievements. Encourage them to identify their strengths and opportunities. Repeat to them so that they can overcome the weaknesses.
- **Accept self and others:** Remind them that no one is perfect. They need to accept themselves, people and at times even situations in life.

The following tool may be used in assessing one's self image and help take steps for being more positive. You may try this out with yourself and with your learners.

Answer the following questions:

- Review the self-made hurdles to your success.
- What habits, attitudes, beliefs and expectations do you have that act as hurdles in reaching the goals?
- What situations do you find uncomfortable and hence avoid?
- What boundaries do you place about yourself?

Steps to improve self image:

- Develop your goals.
- Be positive and consistent
- Remind yourself of your goals daily
- Keep imagining what it would be like to have success
- Focus on what you want to achieve
- Be a self starter

Repeat to yourself 'I can be successful' daily. Give yourself positive feedback and congratulate yourself on your success. Our self image is one of the most important influences on our behaviour and success.

Source: Smith, S. (Ed.) (1999). Develop Yourself in *Be Your best*, New Delhi: Kogan Page Pvt. Ltd. p 61.

Check Your Progress 2

- Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below.
 b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Give an example of a situation that leads to eustress.

.....

2) A 'To Do' list made on a daily basis for managing time is a tool, only as good as the one which makes it. Justify.

.....

3) Do you agree with the statement – 'Development skills for problem solving, managing stress and time is a prerequisite for building self confidence in learners? Give reasons for your answer.

.....

4.6 LET US SUM UP

The nature of problems varies. The perception of a problem is also subjective. Hence, looking for standard solutions for even common problems may be futile. However, the approach towards solving problems, irrespective of their nature should be scientific. Problem solving through scientific method involves identifying and clearly defining the problem; analyzing the cause(s) of the problem; acquiring necessary and authentic information about the problem and analyzing it; thinking about the possible solutions and evaluating the solution. Activities like brain storming, inductive and deductive reasoning and the like may help in developing critical thinking, planning and decision making and thus lead to scientific attitude. SWOT analysis used to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the business environments can help in problem solving by overcoming threats and weaknesses through opportunities and strengths. Decision making is crucial to problem solving.

Distance learners may experience greater stress than those in the conventional systems. Hence, stress management is necessary. This requires identification of stress and thereafter adopting techniques like regular communication with learners, helping them in managing their problems. Time management is also important and this can be done

by setting goals, fixing priorities, maintaining time log and so on. There is also an overriding importance of developing positive image in distant learners as it leads to confidence.

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4.8 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Time management is one such problem. Analyze the causes for not finding time and remove time wasting activities.
- 2) Brain storming brings forth creative solutions but shy students may not be very interactive. Unconventional solutions may not be acceptable to many.
- 3) You may write the Strength, weakness, opportunities and threat (SWOT) of the programme as perceived by you.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Preparing for an achievement test is due to eustress.
- 2) Lot of time may be consumed in making a 'To Do' list but it may not be adhered to.
- 3) Ability to adopt scientific method enables one to solve his/her problems to a great extent. This builds confidence. Someone who can manage time and his/her problems will not be a victim of severe stress.