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Breaking Free from Problem-Solving Mode

A Pain Reprocessing Therapy Approach

What Is Problem-Solving Mode?

Problem-solving mode is a mental habit in which the brain continuously scans for potential threats and rehearses how to manage them — even when no actual problem is happening right now. Pain Reprocessing Therapy (PRT) identifies this pattern as a key driver of chronic pain and symptoms, because it keeps the nervous system in a constant state of low-level alarm.

Common examples include:

- Imagining bad things happening to loved ones and rehearsing how you'd respond
- Replaying a difficult conversation and rewriting what you wish you'd said
- Mentally preparing for medical results you haven't received yet
- Anticipating problems at work and pre-solving them in your head
- Lying awake running through tomorrow's challenges and possible complications

Why Problem-Solving Mode Keeps Us Stuck

When the brain is constantly solving problems, it receives a clear message: things are not safe. If everything were OK, there would be nothing to fix. This chronic sense of danger activates the nervous system's threat response — the same system responsible for generating neuroplastic pain and symptoms.

The more time we spend in problem-solving mode, the more our brains interpret ordinary life as dangerous. Over time, this becomes a self-reinforcing cycle: anxiety fuels more problem-solving, which fuels more anxiety, which fuels more symptoms.

Problem-Solving Mode vs. Present-Moment Awareness

Problem-Solving Mode

- Mind in the future or past
- Focused on potential threats
- Signals danger to the brain
- Keeps nervous system activated
- Fuels chronic pain and symptoms

Present-Moment Awareness

- Mind anchored in the now
- Oriented toward actual experience
- Sends safety signals to the brain
- Allows nervous system to calm
- Supports symptom relief over time

The Alternative: RAIN

Instead of reaching for problem-solving, PRT encourages shifting into present-moment emotional awareness. One helpful tool is RAIN, developed by mindfulness teacher Tara Brach and used in mind-body therapy:

R — Recognize

Notice what you are feeling and name it. "I am feeling fearful. I am feeling grief. I am feeling vulnerable." Simply naming the emotion activates the prefrontal cortex and begins to calm the threat response.

A — Allow

Let the feeling be there without trying to fix, suppress, or escape it. Allowing physical sensation and/or an emotion to take up space—rather than fighting them—signals to the brain that the feeling is not dangerous.

I — Investigate

Get curious about what is underneath the feeling. Where do you feel it in your body? What is it connected to? What do you most need right now? Bring warmth and interest rather than judgment.

N — Nurture

Give yourself what you need in this moment. A few deep breaths. A hand on your heart. Self-compassion. Connection with another person. A break. The nurture step closes the loop—the nervous system receives the message that you are safe and cared for.

Practical Steps for Breaking the Pattern

1. Notice when you've entered problem-solving mode

Common signs: mental rehearsal, replaying conversations, running through scenarios, catastrophizing, difficulty being present, physical tension, a sense of low-level dread. These are signals from the nervous system—not emergencies.

2. Shift attention from thoughts to body sensations

When you catch yourself in problem-solving mode, gently redirect your attention to what you can feel in your body right now. Tension in your chest? Tightness in your shoulders? Simply noticing physical sensation without judgment interrupts the thought spiral.

3. Use the physiological sigh to downregulate

Take a double inhale through the nose (a deep breath in followed by a quick additional inhale to fill the lungs completely), then a long, slow exhale through the mouth. This is one of the fastest ways to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and signal safety.

4. Practice tolerating stillness

Problem-solving mode is often a way of avoiding uncomfortable feelings by staying busy in our heads. Practicing sitting with stillness—even briefly—teaches the brain that quiet is safe, not threatening.

5. Remind yourself: not every problem needs to be solved right now

Ask: "Is this an actual problem I need to address in this moment?" If not, gently set it aside. You are not abandoning responsibility — you are teaching your nervous system that the present moment is safe.

The key message your brain needs to receive:

"Right now, in this moment, I am safe. There is nothing I need to fix."

The more consistently this message is sent—through saying it directly to ourselves, mindful awareness, self-compassion, and allowing feelings—the more the nervous system learns to release the alarm, and with it, the pain and symptoms.

Based on principles of Pain Reprocessing Therapy (PRT) and the RAIN practice developed by Tara Brach