

Problem – Goal Framework

From feeling stuck to taking positive steps forward

When life feels difficult, the mind can become absorbed by the problem. We may know exactly what we do not want, yet struggle to describe what we would like instead. The Problem – Goal Framework is a practical way of moving from a problem-focused description towards a clearer, realistic direction for change.

The framework does not minimise what is difficult. It gives the difficulty a place, then asks a different question: *If this began to improve, what would I notice?*

Why this can help

A problem can feel large, vague and permanent: “I have no confidence,” “I cannot cope,” “Everything is overwhelming,” or “I keep procrastinating.” Goals become more useful when they describe something observable and achievable: speaking once in a meeting, opening an important email, taking a ten-minute walk, asking for support, or beginning a task for five minutes.

The purpose is not to force positivity. It is to create a bridge between where you are now and where you would like to move next.

A useful framework

Problem: What is happening now?

Impact: How is it affecting you?

Preferred outcome: What would you like to be different?

Goal: What would tell you that change is happening?

First step: What is the smallest realistic action you can take?

Step 1 — Understand the Problem

Start by describing the difficulty as specifically as possible. Avoid turning the problem into an identity. “I am a failure” gives you very little to work with. “I have been avoiding two important tasks because I feel overwhelmed when I think about them” gives you information.

Questions to explore

- What is happening?
- When does it happen most?
- When is it less difficult?
- What thoughts, feelings or physical sensations appear?
- What do you tend to do next?
- What keeps the pattern going?
- What have you already tried?
- Are there practical, environmental, sensory or relational barriers?

Separate facts from conclusions

It can help to make two columns. In one, write what you can observe. In the other, write the meaning your mind gives it. For example, the observable fact might be “I did not finish the report by Friday.” The conclusion might be “I never get anything right.” The first can be problem-solved; the second may need to be questioned.

Look for exceptions

Ask when the problem is slightly easier. Exceptions can reveal useful conditions: perhaps you start more easily when somebody is present, when the task is broken down, when you have written instructions, when the environment is quiet, or when there is a clear deadline.

Understanding a problem is not the same as blaming yourself for it. The aim is to identify what can realistically be changed or supported.

Step 2 — Turn the Problem Into a Goal

Now ask: *What would I like instead?* Try to describe the presence of something useful rather than simply the absence of the problem.

Problem-focused: “I want to stop procrastinating.”

Goal-focused: “I want to be able to begin important tasks without waiting until the pressure becomes overwhelming.”

Problem-focused: “I do not want to be anxious.”

Goal-focused: “I want to recognise anxiety earlier and have two strategies I can use when it rises.”

Make the goal meaningful

A useful goal should matter to you, not simply satisfy somebody else’s expectations. Ask: Why does this change matter? What might it make possible? How would daily life feel different?

Make it observable

Imagine a camera could record the improvement. What would it see you doing differently? Observable goals make progress easier to notice.

Make it flexible

A goal is a direction, not a test of your worth. If circumstances change, the goal can change too. Neurodivergence, disability, health, caring responsibilities, finances and environment may all affect what is realistic. Adjusting a goal is not failure.

From outcome to process

Some outcomes cannot be fully controlled. Instead of “I will get the job,” a process goal might be “I will prepare my application and submit it by Thursday.” Focus your effort on the part you can influence.

Problem – Goal Worksheet

1. The problem I want to work on

2. How this is affecting me

3. What I would like instead

4. How I will know things are improving

I will notice myself _____

Other people might notice _____

5. My first small step

6. What might get in the way?

7. What support or adjustment could help?

8. When will I review this? _____

When a Goal Feels Too Big

If you repeatedly avoid a goal, that does not automatically mean you are unmotivated. The step may be too large, unclear, emotionally loaded, poorly timed, or dependent on support you do not currently have.

Shrink the step

Instead of “sort my finances,” the first step might be opening the banking app. Instead of “write the report,” it might be creating the document and writing three headings. Instead of “be more social,” it might be replying to one message.

Use a 0–10 scale

Ask how achievable the next step feels. If it is a 2/10, make it smaller or add support. A small step you can actually take is often more useful than an impressive plan that remains untouched.

Identify the barrier

Is the barrier fear, perfectionism, executive-function difficulty, sensory overload, uncertainty, low energy, lack of information, shame, practical access or something else? Different barriers need different solutions.

Build in support

Support might include body doubling, reminders, visual prompts, a quieter environment, extra time, written instructions, accountability, breaking the task into stages, professional support or asking somebody to help with the first step.

Review without judgement

If the plan did not work, ask “What did I learn?” rather than “What is wrong with me?” A framework is useful because it can be revised. Progress often comes from adapting the plan until it fits the person and the circumstances.

A Message From Me

When you have been living with a problem for a long time, it can begin to feel as though the problem describes who you are. It does not. A difficulty is something you are experiencing, not your whole identity.

You do not need to know the entire route before you begin. Sometimes it is enough to identify what you would like to be a little different and choose one step that feels possible from where you are today.

Try not to dismiss small changes. Starting five minutes earlier, asking one question, making one phone call, saying no once, taking a break before you reach empty, or recognising a pattern sooner can all be meaningful movement.

Your goal does not need to look impressive to anybody else. It needs to be relevant, realistic and supportive of the life you are trying to build.

If you get stuck, return to the framework: What is the problem? What is its impact? What would I prefer? What would improvement look like? What is the smallest next step? What support would make that step easier?

Space to Breathe Therapy

This resource is intended for psychoeducation and self-reflection and is not a substitute for individual medical or mental-health assessment or treatment.