

## Session 5: Problem Solving

### What the heck is going on here?

Ambiguity. Families with mental health or addiction issues experience a high degree of ambiguity. There is more than one interpretation or meaning in so many of the interactions that family members experience ambiguous loss: it's clear that you are losing something, but do not know what that is. Often it is difficult to know what to do with the uncertainty, and a sense of fear or dread can permeate the transactions. Recognizing and tolerating ambiguity is the first step in effectively identifying and solving any issue.

### What do I do when I don't know what the problem is?

Wisdom from horse trainers is that you have to go slower to get there quicker. This is a time for allowing yourself to be quiet and think about what is most troubling to you. As Al-Anon recommends, when you do not know what to do, you don't have to do anything. First, take your time to get into your wise mind. Ask yourself your questions and listen non-judgmentally to your own response. If you do not have a response allow yourself to be aware of that, nonjudgmentally. Temporarily let go of the question and come back to asking it again later with a fresh look. The challenge with ambiguity is that there is more than one possible question, and more than one meaning. There is confusion.

### What if I know the choices and I don't know what to pick?

If you know the choices and you don't know what to select, you may be experiencing ambivalence. Ambivalence is different from Ambiguity. With ambivalence there is more than one possible solution to the problem as it is clearly defined. According to Mihaela Berciu "When ambivalence is welcomed, normalised, and embraced, a deeper self-understanding is achieved and, as a result, we make better decisions about complex life issues, without feeling overwhelmed." For example, "I could wash my hands of this problem, or I can find a way to respect that we see the way going forward differently."

### Am I required to change to solve my problem?

As you look at what is prompting you feel uncomfortable, or to believe there is something needed, notice if a change is needed within yourself, your ability, and/or your willingness. When change is dependent on you, it is most likely within your reach.

### Is my loved one required to change to solve my problem?

As you look at what is prompting you feel uncomfortable, or to believe there is something needed, you may notice that the change that is needed is your loved one's thoughts, actions, or feelings. In this case accomplishing your goal is dependent on another person for agreement, ability, and willingness. That's a big task. Your goal may not be shared, and you may struggle to get close to your desired outcome. You may find that even when your loved one does change it may not be enough, the right kind of change, or enough of the change.

### What could be the reasons that my solutions are not working?

If your loved one attempts to change it may be change in a way that renders them ineffective in their own lives or relationships. Marsha Linehan recommends considering asking six questions when what you and/or your loved one is doing is not working. 1) Do you have the skills that you need? 2) Do you know what you want in the interactions? 3) Are short term goals getting in the way of long-term goals? 4) Are emotions getting in the way? 5) Are assumptions getting in the way? 6) Is the environment more powerful than your skills?

### When the solution to the problem becomes the problem.

Often, we are doing what we think will provide the most help in resolving an issue, and the solution becomes part of the problem. For example, if we decide to help our loved one wake up to their alarm by coming in to make sure they are awake, we may actually teach our loved one to sleep through their alarm and only get up when we wake them up. Consider whether your solution is providing too much of something that used to work: Too much closeness, too much distance, too many rules, too much freedom.

### Choosing the right solution.

When we focus on the problem, we go towards the problem. When we focus on the solution, we go towards the solution. When we come to an agreement that is halfway between two people the resolution tends to be fragile over time as each side begins going back towards what they each initially wanted. Think about what would happen when there is no more problem and allow yourself to move toward that.

### Be patient with yourself and others.

If this situation were going to improve based on effort and love, there would be no problem. You have already tried to be loving, smart, and creative. Be patient. There is no one size fits all when working with mental illness or addiction. Consider these assumptions from Dialectical Behavioral Therapy as you struggle to come to solutions to your current problem. 1) You are doing the best you can. 2) Your loved one is doing the best they can. 3) You both have to do better, try harder, and be more willing to change. 4) We are all fallible and we are at least in partly guilty of whatever we are being accuse. Remind yourself that you are human, and you will make mistakes. Discoveries are located on a pile of things that did not work. Living with mental illness and addiction is too much for any person to manage on their own. Reach out. Be kind.