

# **MAKING LIFE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES**

**Skills for Achieving Goals®**

**A Workbook for Students**

Developed by

Christine Maguth Nezu, Ph.D., ABPP

Arthur M. Nezu, Ph.D., DHL, ABPP



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Christine Maguth Nezu is Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences and Professor of Medicine at Drexel University in the USA and an award-winning psychologist and researcher.

Dr. Art Nezu is Distinguished University Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Professor of Medicine, and Professor of Public Health, also at Drexel University, and an internationally acclaimed researcher and scholar.

Both are co-developers of *PROBLEM-SOLVING LIFE SKILLS TRAINING*.

## ABOUT THIS MANUAL

This manual is based, in part, on *Emotion-Centered Problem-Solving Therapy: Treatment Guidelines* by Arthur M. Nezu and Christine M. Nezu and published by Springer Publishing Company (2019).

There is a series of animated videos on YouTube that provide additional information and examples of the lessons contained in this manual. Go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3s5oJgJIHrgoIkjXdL0kBsKlnvPkxH65>

For more information about Full of Possibilities, Inc., go to: [www.fullofpossibilities.org](http://www.fullofpossibilities.org).

# Making Life Full of Possibilities

Skills to Achieving Goals

A Workbook for Students

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# INTRODUCTION

***MAKING LIFE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES*** can teach you how to handle difficult challenges at school, with relationships, or life in general.

Students like yourself can experience different kinds of problems. These can include being away at boarding school, missing family and community, feeling lonely, feeling under pressure, getting sick, being molested or bullied, or feeling nervous about the future.



To help you with problems you have now (or ones that you might have in the future), this Workbook will teach you useful and practical “emotion-centered problem-solving skills.” These skills will help you:

- To use your feelings to help guide you to your goals
- To set goals that you can achieve
- To be creative in thinking of good solutions
- To make better decisions
- To know what to do when faced with obstacles

People who learn these skills find them to be very useful and effective across many areas of their lives. The more successful you are in overcoming what is preventing you from reaching your goals, the less “stress” you will experience— all this helps to improve your overall physical and mental strength. In other words, solving problems helps you to “**MAKE LIFE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES.**” Lesson 1 will teach you all about “stress”

# LESSON 1

## Problems = “Stress”

*“You can’t stop trouble from coming,  
but you don’t have to give it a chair to sit on”*

—African proverb

We all face big and small problems in life. This simply means that we have “stress”— all of us.

**STRESS** is a part of everyone’s life. It is a normal and daily event. Sometimes stress is good, for example, when it helps to motivate us to work hard, practice a skill, or achieve a personal goal. But when stress becomes too much, it can become harmful.



Too much stress can lead to medical problems, such as heart disease and migraine headaches. It can also lead to anxiety, sadness, and anger.

Stress can make any current problem, such as pressure with school demands, even worse.

Any major change in life can be stressful. Even positive events, such as getting high scores on national examinations, attending a good secondary school or training program, starting a business, getting married, or having a child can be stressful, because these changes use our physical, emotional, or spiritual energy.

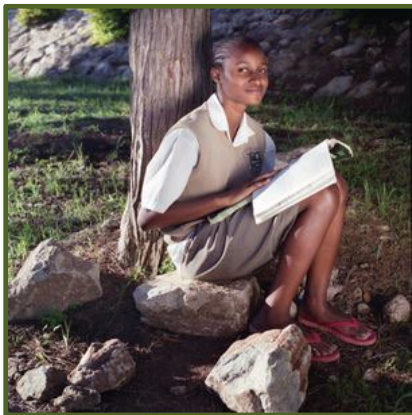


It's not just the event itself, but how we react to it that creates positive or negative consequences. For example, how we think and feel about the constant crying of a newborn (see it either as annoying or as a testimony of the “miracle of life”) will determine our emotional reactions. So, being in school can make some kids happy, but can make others worry about whether they can meet the expectations of parents, mentors, and teachers.

Reaching your goals in life is more likely if you learn to handle stress effectively and handle problems that may be holding you back. This Workbook will teach you a method for how to use your emotions wisely to successfully manage these stressful problems in living.

If these situations are handled with life skills like “emotion-centered problem solving” included in this Workbook, then the stress is likely to make you stronger. On the other hand, if you are unsuccessful in dealing with stress, it is likely that it can lead to difficulties with your health or feelings.

## **Learning Life Skills Is Important to Becoming an Adult**



When you were younger, you counted on your family and community for everything. Now you must learn how to accomplish things and make many decisions for yourself.

Being able to achieve your goals may require a *different* way of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

This program will teach you how to become stronger on your way to becoming an adult.

## What Problems are You Currently Experiencing?

The following is a list of common problems experienced by students in secondary school that can be stressful:

- Problems with other students
- Confusion about the future
- Medical problems or pain
- Anger
- Sadness
- Not being understood
- Pressures of schoolwork
- Feeling lonely
- Family problems
- Spiritual/religious worries
- Bad memories of a past event
- Trouble sleeping
- Feeling overloaded/overwhelmed
- Feeling irritable or anxious
- Unwanted sexual interest from another person

Are you currently experiencing any of these problems? If so, which ones would you like to try to handle now?

Write them down on the next page. If you have a problem that is not listed above, write that one down instead.



1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_



So... What Do I Do Now About My Problem?

## LEARN TO BE A GOOD PROBLEM SOLVER!

### How Do I Do That?

By following the lessons in the *MAKING LIFE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES* Workbook. These lessons can help you become a better problem solver. The next section describes what it takes to be a successful problem solver.



### What is a “Good” Problem Solver?

A good problem solver is one who is:

- Flexible
- Can adjust to changes that occur in life
- Understands that sometimes dealing with problems takes creativity, time, and energy



- Thinks of problems as a chance to learn and become stronger
- Is not impulsive wanting to solve the problem without thinking
- Does not avoid trying to solve the problem
- Is thoughtful in trying to handle the problem

**Remember:** We can't control life or prevent every problem from occurring. *But* we can try to manage the way we solve problems to get through whatever happens in life.

## **The Four Problem-Solving Lessons You Will Learn in This Workbook:**

- **Bringing Down “Brain Overload”**
- **Using Imagination to Increase Hope**
- **The “*Stop, Be Aware & Slow Down*” Method**
- **Planful Problem Solving**

For more information about stress, watch the YouTube video, Lesson #1: “Problems and Stress”

## Lesson 2

### Bringing Down “Brain Overload”

*“A needle cannot hold two threads or a mind two thoughts”*  
--African proverb

The human mind is not a computer-- it cannot perform all the brain activities required to solve complicated and stressful problems at the same time!



At times, one brain activity can interfere with another. For example, when we try to remember important information about a problem, trying to remember can interfere with our ability to pay attention to other parts of the problem. As a result, we can't solve the problem effectively. This is called "brain overload." Everyone gets brain overload-- for instance, when we try to balance our work or studies with family needs. This can feel overwhelming.

**So, what can we do about it?**

### How to Help Reduce Brain Overload

This problem-solving lesson describes the use of three techniques or “tools.” You can use them to reduce “brain overload” whenever you feel overwhelmed about a difficult problem. In fact, it is a good idea to use them when you are not feeling overwhelmed to prevent brain overload from occurring.

## Techniques you will learn in this lesson:

- **Externalize**
- **Simplify**
- **Visualize**

**Externalizing** is getting information "out of your head." You can write ideas down, draw diagrams, or make lists. This tool relieves the pressure of trying to keep all the parts of a problem in your mind, allowing you to concentrate on trying to solve the problem itself.

Scientific research shows that writing about a stressful situation can help reduce brain overload. Personal journals are filled with blank pages for just that reason. Get a journal or notebook to practice "externalizing."



You can also "externalize" the information in your head simply by talking aloud to a friend, family member, teacher, or mentor. Some people externalize by praying to an ancestor or to God.

**Simplify** is the second technique, which involves "breaking down" or simplifying problems to make them more manageable. To use this tool, you should focus only on the most basic information, break down complicated goals into more manageable smaller steps, and use specific and straightforward language.

### Let's practice using these two tools:

First, write down a brief description of a problem that you are experiencing (by writing it down, you are actually practicing the **externalize** technique)

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**Now . . .**

- Read it over and ask yourself the question— “if a friend read this description, would she understand it?”
- If the answer is “no,” it means that you need to state your problem or goal more clearly.
- Therefore, go back and try to re-write the information using the **simplifying** technique.
- Remember-- write down what is needed to change this problem by breaking it down into steps or smaller goals.

**Visualization** is the third technique for reducing brain overload. It involves using your imagination. This means that you use all your senses to imagine seeing, smelling, touching, and hearing an experience that you have created in your mind. It’s like dreaming while you are awake!

### **How to Visualize to Bring Down “Brain Overload”**

Visualizing a problem situation can help to clearly describe the problem you are trying to explain. For example, suppose one of your goals is to improve your relationship with your friend. In that case, you can imagine your most recent argument and discover that learning to speak more calmly is your goal.

You can also visualize calming your mind. You can use your imagination to imagine a peaceful scene or a place where you feel safe and calm. When you use your imagination to calm your mind, it is important to use all your senses and try to picture yourself in a calming and safe place. This can make you feel peaceful in your mind and body, so thinking of a way to solve problems becomes more manageable.



### **Important Point About This Visualization Tool**

This program uses different types of visualization to strengthen your problem-solving skills. You will learn another type of visualization in the next lesson, "Using Visualization to Be More Hopeful."

**For more information about "brain overload," watch the YouTube video Lesson #2: "Bringing Down Brain Overload"**

## LESSON 3

### Using Imagination to be Hopeful

*“However long the night, the dawn will break.”*

--African Proverb

The above proverb is very wise, but sometimes, it’s hard to be hopeful when facing a difficult problem. Finding the courage to take the first few steps forward at times might require some help to get moving. With this tool, good problem solvers use their imagination to picture how they will feel after a problem is solved as a way to feel hopeful.

It’s like having a tired runner in a race visualize crossing the finish line, a struggling student visualize getting an A+ on a difficult test, or a person starting a business making money for their family. Sometimes, we have trouble “seeing” that our goal is even possible and feel that we can’t continue. This tool can help you to become more motivated to work toward your goal.



Remember what it felt like when you pictured yourself finishing an important job, getting a good grade, or winning a sport? These images kept you working harder. Picturing ourselves getting a high score on a test or getting a job we want can help us work harder to achieve the goal. It can give us hope!

#### **How Do I Use This Tool?**

Your teacher or mentor can help you to practice this technique by reading the instructions on the next page. This tool can help you to stay motivated to work

toward a goal.

### **Instructions to Practice (read these instructions slowly)**

Take a few deep breaths, close your eyes, and use your imagination to “travel to the future” at a specific time, that is, after successfully solving a difficult problem or having already reached an important goal.

Don't think about how you got there— just that you reached your goal. You need to “experience” overcoming a problem in your mind to build hope and to see it as being possible. Having hope helps you to continue working toward your goal.

Now, imagine that you did reach your goal. Choose a current problem— imagine being on the “other side of the problem and overcoming the things in your way.” Picture in your mind's eye a specific scene or image that might be taking place if your problem was resolved or if your goal was reached (not your whole life situation, but a brief scene or image).

Use all your senses to try and imagine where you are, whom you are with, what you are thinking, and what you are feeling. Remember— it doesn't matter how you were able to handle the problem or how you reached the goal.

When you have an image in your mind (remember to use all your senses to picture it), try to answer the following questions that you silently ask yourself:

- How is your life different with this problem solved?
- How are you feeling?
- How are you feeling now compared to before the problem was solved?
- What are you thinking?

Try to imagine all the positive things that happen when you reach your goal. After you get this image, you can feel what it will be like when you actually solve your problem and reach your goal. For example, imagining ourselves walking into a class and being less afraid of a scary situation, like facing a bully, will help us to work on finding solutions to this problem.

**For more information about visualization, watch the YouTube video #3: “Using Imagination to be Hopeful”**



## Lesson 4

### “Stop, Be Aware & Slow Down”

### Making a Peaceful Mind and Body

*“A roaring lion kills no game”*

*--African Proverb*

The technique described in this lesson can help your negative feelings work FOR you, rather than AGAINST you, when faced with a difficult situation, problem, or decision. If negative feelings are too “loud” or strong, they can prevent you from reaching your goals and solving problems.



Think about the above proverb that states “a roaring lion kills no prey.” In other words, sometimes strong feelings “control” our behavior. So, when we are very excited, angry, sad, or upset, we may do things that we are sorry about later (just like this hungry lion who doesn’t achieve its goal— dinner!). When strong feelings happen, they can prevent us from reaching our goals and solving problems.

For real-life problems, we must learn how to “use” our feelings to help us think about what to do. In a way, think of negative feelings as telling us that we need to “solve a problem!”

## AN IMPORTANT POINT TO REMEMBER ABOUT NEGATIVE FEELINGS

Think of negative feelings as being **important information** that can help you become an effective problem solver. This technique can help “**train your brain**” to use negative feelings, like sadness or worry, to improve your problem solving instead of having such emotions “control” your thoughts and actions. *It is important to have a balance between your brain and your heart!*



We know that emotions are human and precious. They are rich sources of information that allow us to know what makes life good (for example, joy, nurturing, love) or what makes life bad (for example, fear, anger, panic). When negative emotions are too strong or overwhelming, it can make us scared. There are ways people try to control their feelings, some bad, but some good!

### **Some *ineffective* (bad) ways to manage negative feelings:**

- Deny that you are having such feelings
- Avoid dealing with the problem
- Take your anger out on someone/something else
- Think about self-harm (for example, suicide)

### **Some *effective* (good) ways to manage negative feelings:**

- Choose those situations that do not set off negative feelings
- Change the situation so your “buttons” do not get pushed
- Distract yourself and focus your attention on something more positive
- Say to yourself: “this is NOT a catastrophe— it’s a problem to be solved”

- Change your physical stress reaction to calm your brain and body once negative emotions start to happen

## So, What Can I Do?

The *Stop, Be Aware & Slow Down* technique can help you “quiet” your brain and body so you can use the calm, thinking part of your brain to solve a problem.

The good news is that this tool can be learned! As humans, we can be *more aware* of our feelings, pay attention to what they are “telling” us, and then use calm, logical thinking to come up with ideas about how to get closer to reaching our goals.

When a woman uses her emotions and calm thinking together, it is called wisdom.

## LET’S GET STARTED!

### WHAT GETS YOUR FEELINGS GOING?

Take a moment to write down a few examples that are your emotional buttons or triggers. In other words, what situations set you off? Examples might include feeling “disrespected,” “lonely,” or frustrated with schoolwork.

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These are the situations where your brain might react with a “stress” response, such as a headache, or upsetting feelings, such as anger or sadness. The Learning Activity that follows below can provide you with the steps to practice how to train your brain to remain calm, but still be aware of the feelings that are giving you important information.

## **LEARNING ACTIVITY: PRACTICING THE STOP, BE AWARE & SLOW DOWN TECHNIQUE**

To begin, imagine a current situation in your life that can set off a strong negative feeling. Try to identify what you are experiencing— your thoughts, as well as any physical sensations. You may also be feeling sad, lonely, hopeless, tense, tired, scared, or frustrated.

As you imagine how you were feeling in this situation, use the following steps:

### **Step I. STOP & BE AWARE**

First, notice the negative feelings that you are experiencing. You may recognize physical sensations before you notice your feelings or mood. For example, some people might notice a dry mouth, sweaty palms, tears welling up, or the urge to yell or fight. Other people have headaches, feel hot, or sweaty when they are angry. What is your mood-related physical sensations? Where do you feel them in your body?

Now, notice your thoughts and feelings . . . what are you thinking? What are you feeling? These sensations, thoughts, and emotions are all “signals” that a problem exists— So, you first need to **STOP and Slow Down!** Stop and slow down so that the negative feelings do not continue or even get worse.

## Step 2. *SLOW DOWN*

Slowing down gives your brain a chance to think more logically. Here are a few ways to help you to “slow down”— choose one or two:



- **Count slowly from 1 to 10** (or from 10 down to 1)
- **Take 3 deep breaths**—Breathe in slowly to a count of 3; breathe out slowly to a count of 5
- **Visualize**— Use your mind’s eye to imagine a very calming and relaxing scene, such as a vacation you took in the past
- **Pray**— For someone who holds to a particular faith or spiritual beliefs, prayer can also be a wonderful way to “slow down”
- **Others**— Can you think of something that has helped you to “slow down” in the past? Maybe thinking of what one of your teachers or wise ancestors might say to help you calm your brain— maybe listening to music or going for a walk.

**Remember to practice the “*STOP & SLOW DOWN*” technique when you first notice certain signals. Use these feelings, thoughts, and physical reactions as a sign that a problem exists. Then-- “STOP, BE AWARE, & SLOW DOWN these reactions, SO YOU ARE ABLE TO PROBLEM SOLVE WITH A CALM MIND”**

**For more information about Slowing Down, watch the YouTube video Lesson #4: “Stop, Slow Down & Be Aware”**

# Lesson 5

## Planful Problem-Solving Skills

*A wise person will always find a way.*

--African proverb

**WHEN** you have a calm brain, you are better able to use a “planful problem-solving approach” to successfully deal with stressful problems. **Planful Problem Solving** includes several steps that serve as guides to help you solve problems in a calm and systematic way.



Planful problem-solving is a powerful way to help you overcome the obstacles that get in the way of reaching your goals. This skill needs to be used with a calm brain, so you may need to use the *Stop, Be Aware & Slow Down* tool from lesson 4 when you experience a stressful situation.

**Planful Problem Solving** includes the following 4 steps:

**Step 1. Define the problem**

**Step 2. Think of a variety of creative ideas to help reach your goal**

**Step 3. Decide which idea is the best match for this situation**

**Step 4. Carry out the solution and decide whether it worked**

To help you to better learn the **Planful Problem-Solving** steps, we have included a blank **MAKING LIFE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES Problem-Solving Worksheet** at the end of this book to use as you go through each step. Let's go through each **planful problem-solving** step and show you how the Worksheet can be used.

## Step I: Define the Problem

Defining a problem is like laying out a course or route to take a journey. We need to know our destination, what help we need to get there, and what barriers exist that might make the trip difficult or dangerous.



When defining a problem clearly, be sure to:

- Use only facts
- Describe these facts in clear language
- Set realistic goals; remember to “simplify”
- Be sure to identify barriers to your goal— these are the things you need to overcome to reach your goal

## Problems That Are Changeable and Problems That Cannot Be Changed

One thought about goals— it’s important to remember that we cannot always solve a problem by “fixing it.” Sometimes, the best solution for improving a problem is to accept that the problem exists. On a small scale, this means that we cannot change the weather to better suit our plans; we may just have to accept that it’s going to rain during the day we plan to be outside and think of ways we can keep some of our plans.

Therefore, it is important to try to change things that can be changed but accept things that cannot be changed and learn the wisdom to tell the difference.

To help with this lesson, we want to show you how to use a worksheet to write down your thoughts about solving a problem or reaching a difficult goal. Below is an example of how Njeri completed her worksheet concerning a problem she had with another student in her class.

Here is what she wrote for Step 1 of **Planful Problem Solving-- Defining the Problem**:

### **PROBLEM-SOLVING WORKSHEET: Step 1**

**Briefly describe the problem:** A girl in my class was teasing me about not being smart when I made a mistake on my schoolwork. She laughed at me, and I started to cry because I felt bad.

**State your problem-solving goal:** To stand up and not let this student make me feel bad about myself.

**Describe the major obstacles to achieving your goal at this time:**

1. We both are in the same class, and I see her often
2. I get angry easily and feel sorry for myself
3. I think that maybe she is smarter than me
4. I am afraid that I will fail in my exams

Notice how Njeri stated a specific goal, as well as the obstacles that were in the way of getting what she wanted.

Now let's go to the next step of **Planful Problem Solving**— thinking of creative solutions to reach your goals.

### **Step 2: Think of a Variety of Creative Ideas for Solutions**



The next step is to creatively think of many ideas about how to solve or cope with the problem. The more ideas you come up with, the better chance you have of finding the best idea to reach your goals.



Use the following three rules to help you think of many different ideas to solve the problem.

- “Quantity leads to quality”—think of as many ideas as you can— don’t just stop thinking
- “Don’t judge any idea in the beginning”— judging each idea, one at a time, limits your ability to be really creative; judging comes later when you are making a decision
- “Think of many different ideas”— try to think of many different kinds of ideas

As an example, here is how Njeri filled out this part of the worksheet:

### **PROBLEM-SOLVING WORKSHEET: Step 2**

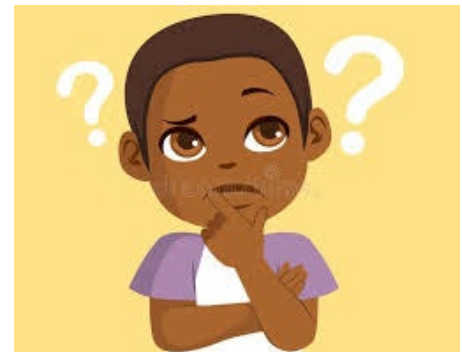
Think of alternative ways to achieve your goal. Be creative. List at least 3 solution ideas:

1. Talk with my teacher or mentor about how to handle the situation
2. Tell the girl to leave me alone
3. Ask my family to give me encouragement
4. Tell myself that I am smart – it doesn’t matter what she thinks
5. Make a plan to study for my exams with my teacher
6. Plan to study for exams with other students who are friendly

### **Step 3: Making Decisions (finding the idea that is best for you)**

In this next step, you need to decide which is the best solution to help with your problem. Here are several ideas to remember when making such decisions:

- Screen out any idea now that seems really ineffective



- Predict the positive and negative consequences that can occur if you carry out a particular solution idea
- Choose the idea that would have the best chance of good things happening— in other words, those ideas that lead to more positive consequences than negative ones
- Develop an action plan to carry out as your solution

When thinking about things that can happen— be sure to consider personal consequences, as well as the effects on others.

It is also important to think about what will happen right away, as well as in the future. For example, if you are worried about your school performance, the idea of quitting or dropping out of school might make you happy right away, but very sad in the future.

Let's look at the sample **Problem-Solving Worksheet** once again, this time trying to predict what the consequences might be for the different solutions. Notice that Njeri thought about the different consequences for several ideas, both positive and negative, and ultimately decided to develop an action plan that involved two of them. Note that this plan is unique to Njeri. If you have a similar problem, we are not saying that this is the best plan for everyone. Instead, we are saying that you should use the **Planful Problem-Solving** steps to develop a plan that is the best match for you.

Now go back to your own Worksheet and write down your answers to these 3 items— try to predict the good things that can happen and the bad things that can happen with each idea.

Rate each idea with a “+” or a “0” to show how many good or bad things may happen if you use the idea. Then choose the idea with the most “+” ratings and least “0” ratings. Then develop an action plan for your solution.

### **PROBLEM-SOLVING WORKSHEET: Step 3**

#### **What are the major “pros” or positive consequences of these ideas?**

My teacher is very wise and if I ask for her advice, I think she will have some good ideas about how to study for my exams. (Rating ++)

If I keep reminding myself that I am smart, I may start to have more confidence. (Rating +)

#### **What are some of the “cons” or negative consequences?**

If I just tell the girl to leave me alone it may start an argument, or she may get angry (Rating 0)

**Decide which alternatives are the best by choosing the ones with the best *positive* consequences and few *negative* consequences. Write down your action plan.**

Asking my mentor or teacher for help will give me support and maybe they can also talk to the girl about being mean or teasing. Tell myself everyday how smart I am.

### **Step 4: Carry Out the Action Plan & Evaluate its Success**

The next step is to carry out your plan. In this final problem-solving step, it's important to:

- **Carry out** your action plan as best you can
- **Observe** the actual outcome of your hard work
- **Reward yourself** for trying (you deserve it)

Let's go back to the **Problem-Solving Worksheet**. The last part of the Worksheet asks you to write down what happened after you carried out your action plan, as well as whether you were satisfied or not. If you were not happy with the outcome, think about what you can do differently.

Here is the example of how Njeri filled out this part of the worksheet:

### **PROBLEM-SOLVING WORKSHEET: Step 4**

**Carry out the plan & observe the consequences: Are you satisfied that your plan worked? If not, what do you need to change?**

My teacher came up with a great idea after I spoke to him – he gave a lesson to the whole class about respect and how important it is for girls to help each other succeed in their life goals. The mean girl seemed like she felt bad for the way she treated me and stopped her teasing. I also began to believe how smart I am by telling myself that every day.

For Njeri, the outcome of her plan was positive! However, if it was not, she would need to ask the following types of questions to improve the outcome:

- Did I define the problem correctly?
- Did I think of many different ideas to solve the problem?
- Did I consider both positive and negative things that could happen for each idea?
- Did I carry out my action plan as best as I could?

**For more information about Planful Problem Solving, watch the YouTube video Lesson 5: Planful Problem-Solving Skills**

**REMEMBER:** As you use the tools in this Workbook, the important idea is to keep trying—getting good at any skill takes practice! Ask for help if needed. You will get better and better with practice!

**GOOD LUCK IN MAKING LIFE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES!**

# MAKING LIFE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES: PROBLEM-SOLVING WORKSHEET

Briefly describe the problem:

State your problem-solving goal:

Describe the major obstacles (things in the way) to achieving your goal at this time:

Think of alternative ways to achieve your goal. Be creative. List at least 3 solution ideas:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

What are the major good things that may happen (“pro’s”) for these different ideas? Mark a “+” sign if good things can happen.

What are some bad things that can happen (“cons”) with this idea? Mark a “0” for each bad thing that can happen.

Decide which ideas are the best by choosing the ones with the most “+s” the least “0s”

Write down your action plan.

Carry out the plan & observe what happened: Are you satisfied that your plan worked? If not, what do you need to change?