

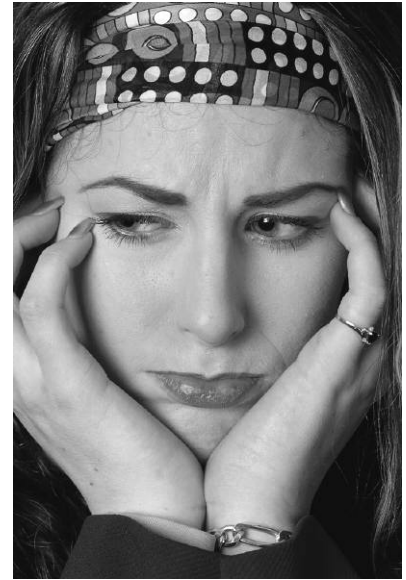
# C.O.P.E.ing With Problems

**"WE CANNOT SOLVE PROBLEMS AT THE SAME LEVEL AT WHICH WE CREATED THEM."**

~Albert Einstein

Problems are created when there is a mismatch between what you have and what you want. **Problem solving** is what we do to reduce the gap between these two factors. However, some problems can seem overwhelming or particularly difficult, challenging your problem-solving skills. Using a step-by-step process in these situations can enhance your ability to identify effective solutions.

The C.O.P.E. process that is presented in this Idea Sheet is just one way to approach solving problems. Use what works for you. Also, keep in mind that while you can solve many problems by yourself, there will be occasions when you need assistance. Don't hesitate to seek out this assistance. The Academic Resource Center is an excellent place to obtain information about the many campus and community resources available to you.



## LOCUS OF CONTROL: GETTING A HANDLE ON CAUSES OF PROBLEMS

Before using the C.O.P.E. process, it is important for you to be aware of how you define the sources of your problems. Your ability to solve problems, and thus your confidence and trust in the solutions you develop is affected by your **locus of control**. Locus of control refers to whom or to what you attribute your ability to manage your life.



Answer the following questions to help you assess your locus of control:

- |     |    |    |  |
|-----|----|----|--|
| Yes | No | 1. | I can get a good grade in any course no matter how good or bad the instructor is, because it depends on me doing the work. |
| Yes | No | 2. | If the teacher isn't a good speaker or doesn't keep me interested, I probably won't do well in the class.                  |
| Yes | No | 3. | I believe that I have the power to control what happens to me.   |
| Yes | No | 4. | I believe that I have very little control over what happens to me.   |
| Yes | No | 5. | When I make a mistake, it's usually my fault.  |
| Yes | No | 6. | When I make a mistake, it's usually because someone didn't make clear to me what I was supposed to do.                     |

If you checked mostly **even-numbered** statements, then you may tend to use an **external locus of control**. If you checked mostly **odd-numbered** statements, then you may tend to use an **internal locus of control**.

## EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL

An **external locus of control** results in an individual believing that it is up to someone else to solve a problem. Common behaviors caused by an external locus of control would include blaming, excessive anger or resentment, withdrawal ("I can't do/handle this"), or denial of a problem.

It is true that there are many problems caused by factors outside of your control, such as:

- The computer system "crashes" in Financial Aid, thus holding up your aid check;
- Your roommates hold a party, making too much noise for you to study;
- You are not able to register for a class because it is full or unavailable.



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Approaching these types of problems with an external locus of control can seriously limit your ability to solve them.

Examples of an external locus of control approach:

"That stupid Financial Aid! They never have their act together. They messed up my check, and now there's no way I can go to school this semester."

"I'm sick and tired of my roommates being so inconsiderate. Tomorrow, I'm going to invite a bunch of people over and give them a taste of their own medicine."

"Thanks to this stupid university, I can't get the classes I need to graduate. Now I'm going to have to graduate a semester later."

### INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL

An **internal locus of control** results in an individual believing that he/she can find effective solutions to a problem, even if it is caused by factors outside of his/her control. Common behaviors caused by an internal locus of control would include expressing frustration or anger appropriately to find a solution or talking with others for ideas about how to cope.

I am really upset about the computer system crashing in Financial Aid. Seems like they should be able to avoid things like that. But, I'll meet with my Financial Aid Counselor to figure out where I can get emergency funds until my check arrives.

You guys, I am really upset by what happened last night when you had a party while I was trying to study. I would like to sit down tonight and talk about it, so we can come up with new rules about party and study time.

I can't believe that class isn't going to be offered this semester. I am going to meet with my advisor to see what other alternatives I have so that I can still graduate on time. I also have some ideas about waiving the class. I can talk with the department head if my advisor isn't able to help me.

An internal locus of control allows you to be an effective problem solver, because it focuses on your role in the problem, including your attitudes and self-talk. Because these are things you have control over, you are able to expand your options and choices for solutions.

### C.O.P.E.

The letters in C.O.P.E. stand for Challenge, Options, Plan, and Evaluation – an effective method for solving personal problems.

**C**

**Challenge yourself** to clearly identify your problem, its causes, and the results that you want. This is the most important step. If you do not state the problem clearly and honestly, you will be misguided in finding solutions that will help you get what you want.

Read the following problem statements. The first statement is too general. The second is more specific and clearly states the problem, its causes, and the desired results.

**Example:**

1. My problem is that even though I study a lot, I still make poor grades on tests.
2. My problem is that even though I study three hours a day for MATH 1050, I still make poor grades on tests because I get nervous, my mind goes blank, and I am easily distracted by what other students are doing. I want to overcome my test anxiety and make a course grade of a "B".

**Exercise**

Answer the following questions to prepare you for writing out a clear statement of your problem:



- How do I contribute to my problem?

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- What parts of my problem can I control?

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- What parts of my problems can I not control?

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- In order to get my desired results, what do I need to change?

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- What can I change?

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**Statement of my problem:** 

- What is it about the present situation that is different from what I want?  


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- What causes this situation?  


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- What results do I want?  


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- Put it all together and write a clear statement about your problem that includes a definition, the causes, and the specific results you want:  


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**O** Create a list of **options** for solving your problem. Don't judge your options at this point, just try to generate as many as possible. For each option, there are two columns: advantages and disadvantages. Your assessment of advantages and disadvantages will guide you in determining the option(s) that will help you get the results you want. Remember to focus on solutions over which you have control.

**Example:** Options for improving poor grades:

- increase study time
  - attend time management workshop
  - take PSY 1730
  - attend Supplemental Instruction (SI) or tutoring
  - use a study partner.
- After identifying options, list the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

As you are identifying your options, ask yourself: "Do I need any special skills, abilities, or resources to use this option as a solution?" The answer can affect how you assess advantages and disadvantages of each option.

**Option 1:** 

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**Skills, abilities, and resources I will need:**

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<b>Advantages:</b>	<b>Disadvantages:</b>
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<hr/>	<hr/>
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Option 2:



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Skills, abilities, and resources I will need:

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Advantages:

Disadvantages:

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Option 3:



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Skills, abilities, and resources I will need:

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Advantages:

Disadvantages:

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Option 4:



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Skills, abilities, and resources I will need:

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Advantages:

Disadvantages:

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**P**

Make an action **plan** to implement your chosen solution(s) within a reasonable time period.


Ask yourself these questions:

What do I need to do to make my solution work? When do I need to do it?

Action step: _____	Date: _____	
Action step: _____	Date: _____	
Action step: _____	Date: _____	
Action step: _____	Date: _____	

**E**

Evaluate the progress you have made in solving your problem:

How has my problem or situation changed or improved?	
_____	
_____	
What about my action plan is helping me get the results I want?	
_____	
_____	
What about my action plan is keeping me from getting the results I want?	
_____	
_____	
Have I given my action plan sufficient time to work?	
_____	
_____	
Do I need to revise my action?	
_____	
_____	
Do I need to review C.O.P.E. and redefine my problem?	
_____	
_____	