

September 2023

Q: What is problem-solving therapy?

A: Problem-solving therapy (PST) is a cognitive-behavioral intervention that teaches adaptive problem-solving skills for effectively managing negative stressful events. The patient and therapist work collaboratively to identify specific problem areas and break them down into small tasks that can be managed with problem-solving and coping behaviors (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1982).

Q: What is the treatment model underlying PST for MDD?

A: PST is based on a model of stress which posits that the ability or inability to effectively manage difficulties plays an important role in the relationship between stressful events and well-being (Bell & D’Zurilla, 2009). One’s ability to engage in effective problem-solving is believed to reduce the negative impact of stressful life events on well-being.

Q: Is PST recommended as a treatment for MDD in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A: Yes. The 2022 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Major Depressive Disorder suggests PST as a treatment for uncomplicated mild to moderate MDD, with a “weak for” strength of recommendation.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. Recommendations for or against a treatment may be characterized as strong or weak based on a variety of factors (e.g., confidence in the quality of the evidence, weight of treatment benefits versus risks, feasibility). The CPGs also state if there is insufficient evidence to a recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q: Do other authoritative reviews recommend PST as a treatment for MDD?

A: No. Other authoritative reviews have not substantiated the use of PST for MDD.

Other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using grading systems similar to the VA/DoD CPGs. Notable among these is Cochrane, an international network that conducts high-quality reviews of healthcare interventions.

- Cochrane: A 2007 systematic review of psychosocial interventions by general practitioners found evidence supporting the effectiveness of problem-solving treatment by general practitioners for MDD but noted that more research is needed to establish the effectiveness of problem-solving treatment in routine practice (Huibers, Beurskens, Bleijenberg, & van Schayck, 2007).

Q: What conclusions can be drawn about the use of PST as a treatment for MDD in the MHS?

A: PST is suggested as a treatment for MDD. Clinicians should consider several factors when choosing an evidence-based treatment for their patients. Treatment decisions should incorporate clinical judgment and expertise, patient characteristics and treatment history, and patient preferences that might influence treatment engagement and retention. For additional guidance on selecting a treatment for MDD, please visit the PHCoE Clinician Resources section of the website and navigate to clinical support tools.

References

Bell, A. C., & D'Zurilla, T. J. (2009). Problem-solving therapy for depression: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29, 348–353.

Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense. (2022). VA/DoD clinical practice guideline for management of major depressive disorder. Version 4.0. Washington, DC: Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense.

D'Zurilla, T. J., & Nezu, A. (1982). Social problem solving in adults. In P.C. Kendall (Ed.), *Advances in cognitive-behavioral research and therapy*, vol. 1 (pp. 202–274). New York: Academic Press.

Huibers, M. J., Beurskens, A. J., Bleijenberg, G., & van Schayck, C. P. (2007). Psychosocial interventions by general practitioners. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 3, CD003494.