

Human Problem Solving

How do we proceed while repairing a broken cycle, or planning a summer tour, or patching up a broken friendship? In some cases the solution is reached quickly as in repair of a bicycle based on immediately available cues whereas others are more complex and require time and effort. Problem solving is thinking that is goal-directed. Almost all our day to day activities are directed towards a goal. Here it is important to know that problems are not always in the form

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form of obstacles or
barriers that one faces.
It could be any simple
activity that you perform
to reach a defined goal,
for example, preparing a
quick snack for your friend
who has just arrived
at your place. In problem
solving there is an initial
state (i.e. the problem) and
there is an end state (the
goal). These two anchors
are connected by means
of two general steps or
mental operations.

Obstacles to Solving Problems

Two major obstacles to solving a problem are mental set and lack of motivation.

Mental Set:

Mental set is a tendency of a person to solve problems

by following or already tried mental operations or steps. Prior success with a particular strategy would sometimes help us in solving a new problem. However, this tendency also creates a mental rigidity that obstructs the problem solver to think of any new rules or strategies. Thus, while in some situations mental set can enhance the quality and speed of problem solving, in other situations it hinders problem solving, you have experienced this while solving mathematical problems. After completing a couple of questions you form an idea of the steps that are required to solve these questions and subsequently you go on following the same steps, until, until a point where

you fail. At this point you may experience difficulty in avoiding the already used steps. These steps would interfere in your thought for new strategies. However, in day-to-day activities we often rely on past experiences with similar or related problems.

Like mental set, functional fixedness in problem solving occurs when people fail to solve a problem because they are fixed on a thing's usual function. If you have ever used a hardbound book to hammer a nail, then you have overcome functional fixedness.

Lack of Motivation

People might be great at solving problems, but all their skills and talents are of no use if they

are not motivated. Sometimes people give up easily when they encounter a problem or failure in implementing the first step. Therefore, there is a need to persist in their effort to find a solution.