

Audio Transcript

| | |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| Episode #: | 27 |
| Guest: | Shannon Sisco, PhD |
| Working title: | #27: Problem Solving Therapy |

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. In this series, we talk to experts about posttraumatic stress disorder and mental health, with a focus on free digital resources that can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport.

In this episode, we'll be talking about Problem-Solving Therapy. I'm joined today by Dr. Shannon Sisco, who is a Clinical Psychologist and Whole Health Clinical Director at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, Texas. She has also worked as a consultant, trainer, and subject matter expert on Problem-Solving Therapy with the National Evidence-Based Psychotherapy Training Program.

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

Hi Colleen. Thanks for having me here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

We're excited to have you. So, let's go ahead and start with the big picture. What is Problem-Solving Therapy?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

So, Problem-Solving Therapy first, is based on this understanding that problems and the stress that come with them, they're a normal part of life. The goal in life isn't to just not have any problems at all. We all deal with problems every day in our lives, big and small. And it's really about how we respond to and engage with those problems that makes the difference in our lives. So, Problem-Solving Therapy is really based on that understanding and then the goal is to equip you with these tools that can help you to be more effective at solving both the big and the small problems in your everyday life. And also to provide you with some tools to be more effective at coping with the stresses that come with those problems.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And I'm wondering who might benefit from Problem-Solving Therapy? Because it sounds like it could be helpful for pretty much anyone.

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

So the short answer to that is, yeah, everyone! In fact, I have a colleague that likes to say it would be better to call Problem-Solving Therapy, "Life 101", because it really teaches us this set of skills for dealing with life problems and stress that literally any of us can benefit from. I personally will say I use these skills in my own life all the time.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, I mean I think it's important to note that, right? That us as clinicians, we use these tools that we talk about in therapy all the time ourselves. So in your experience, what are some of the life stressors that motivate people to start Problem-Solving Therapy?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

You know, certainly we can get folks coming in to start Problem-Solving Therapy that are dealing with the general problems, the smaller stresses that we think of that come up in life. But I think more often some of the bigger things that motivate people to really seek out Problem-Solving Therapy are some of those bigger life stresses. So, coping with grief and figuring out how to reset your life or reimagine your role and identity after losing somebody you really love, that's one place where I often see folks finding Problem-Solving Therapy to be a good fit. Another example, and something to keep in mind is that, you know, it doesn't necessarily have to be a big negative life stressor that might motivate you to come in for Problem-Solving Therapy, but those positive life stressors too – bringing a new baby into the family, that's a wonderful thing, but it is also really stressful and these skills can be helpful for navigating those positive stresses as well.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Certainly we do see lots of people coming in for therapy when they've gone through positive changes because it's a transition. And so I love that you mentioned that it's not just about these negative problems. That leads me to my next question. So, what happens to our ability to solve problems when we're going through times of stress?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

Well, to put it briefly, it kind of tanks for all of us. When we're trying to figure out a really tough issue, we try to give it all of our attention instead of multitasking, for example. And it's also why none of us really wants to solve a problem when our emotions are riding high, right? The worst time to solve a relationship problem is in the middle of a fight. That stress really gets in the way of our ability to thoughtfully think through an issue and to solve it effectively. So, we all really do better at solving problems when both our minds and our hearts are in a clear, calm place. And that's what some of those Problem-Solving Therapy stress management skills are about, to help us get into that better place where we can be more effective problem solvers.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Can you say more about that? I'm wondering how Problem-Solving Therapy can help people get to a more clear, calm place.

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

Yeah. Well, let me tell you a little bit about some of those tools that we use in Problem-Solving Therapy. So, I said we have to have a clear mind. Well, there's a tool called Overcoming Brain Overload, and that's one that really gives us several different strategies that we can use to minimize that sense of mental or cognitive overwhelm that comes with stress. It helps us to organize our thoughts so they don't feel so overwhelming. And then I also said, not only our minds need to be clear to solve problems, but our hearts do as well. And for that we have a toolkit called Stop and Slow Down. And that one really helps us to recognize strong negative emotions when they come up. And the toolkit helps us to slow down that kind of emotional train before it can depart the station. And so if we can really get good at recognizing

our emotions when they start to get bigger, and to slow them down before they get out of control, that can be a really helpful way to manage emotional stress.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

That's so helpful to hear about some of the specific tools - what other kinds of things do people do as part of Problem-Solving Therapy?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

In Problem-Solving Therapy, we're really clear about the approaches that we value. It's really important for the therapist and patient relationship to be one that is really collaborative. The therapist's goal is really to spend a lot of time in therapy exploring how your life might look using these tools. What are the big problems that you are facing right now? You know, what's your problem-solving style? How has that played out for you in the past? How has it gone well? How has it been a challenge? And then another hallmark of Problem-Solving Therapy is that we recognize the value of experiencing and practicing new skills in session and in your own life versus just talking about them in session. So, you're going to have an opportunity to try out that new skill, or at least a part of it, in action and in session. And then likewise, at the end of the session, your therapist is going to work with you on making a plan for how can I practice this skill at home?

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Let's say that I'm someone who has a lot of experience solving problems at work or at school. What would I get out of Problem-Solving Therapy?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

One of the reactions that we often get from folks that are doing Problem-Solving Therapy is like, "Oh, well these skills make so much sense! Oh, this, this isn't rocket science." These skills that you'll learn in Problem-Solving Therapy are not, some complicated or secret mysterious thing that none of us has ever done before. Most of these skills are things that we do use in our own lives, but we don't use them maybe in an intentional way. And so, talking about problem-solving in a therapeutic framework really gives you a big picture for thinking about stress in your life and how you specifically manage it. It can also be really helpful to broaden our thinking about problem-solving. When we approach problems in our lives, we get so caught up in the problem and we feel like we have to fix that, but we don't necessarily think about things like emotion-based coping - that there are going to be some problems in our lives that we can't practically change or solve, but that doesn't mean we don't have power within us to be able to cope better with that situation or to change how it affects us in our lives.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And for people who aren't familiar, can you say more about what emotion-focused coping looks like?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

There are so many problems in our lives where there isn't necessarily a solution, or where we may not have a lot of control over the conditions that are going on to be able to make a change. And so sometimes problem-solving is more about looking at your emotional reaction to the problem, the way that you are coping with it and thinking about solutions that are going to help you cope with the problem in a way that doesn't magnify it.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And if someone is interested in trying Problem-Solving Therapy, where should they look?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

PST has been around for over 10 years as a VA evidence-based therapy program. And of course, it's been around even longer as a general therapy approach. And so that does mean we have quite a few clinicians who are using it. There have been VA specific Problem-Solving Therapy for groups, that have been introduced in primary care mental health and in Home-Based Primary Care. There are also often clinicians who outside of VA have been trained in Problem-Solving Therapy more generally, and they may offer it as a part of their practice in general mental health, for example.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And are there any tech-based tools to support Problem-Solving Therapy?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

Yes, actually this one is one of my favorites. There is an online program based on Problem-Solving Therapy called Moving Forward. Veterans can use this web course independently as a self-help resource. They can do it on their own time, on their own schedule. Or it can also be integrated into formal therapy using Problem-Solving Therapy. I've found it's a really helpful way to get that additional experiential practice that's so important in Problem-Solving Therapy. I'll also note that, a wonderful thing about this course is it's freely and publicly available so anybody can pull it up on the web and check it out. It is important to note though, that it doesn't save any personal information. So, Veterans can also feel confident about protecting their privacy.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

That's good to know. You said that Moving Forward is available to anyone, right? Not just Veterans?

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

Yeah, it is at www.veterantraining.va.gov/movingforward. Anybody out there, Veteran or not, this program is available to use and it's a great one.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

That's all we have time for today. Thank you so much Dr. Sisco for joining us to talk about Problem-Solving Therapy.

Dr. Shannon Sisco:

It is my pleasure. Thanks so much for having me here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

As a reminder, the Moving Forward Online program is available for free at www.veterantraining.va.gov/movingforward. We will link to this resource and more in our show notes.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.