



**PROBLEM SOLVING FOR
FAMILIES OF CHILDREN
WITH CANCER**



For more than 20 years, our* work with mothers of childhood cancer patients has shown that learning how to successfully solve the many kinds of problems faced by families of a child with cancer helps to decrease stress and anxiety. Our results have been so positive that we're now providing this training in several ways: through in-person visits with a trainer and on line. We are also inviting fathers, grandparents, other caregivers, and patients themselves to learn this skill.

Learning how to be a good problem solver is a skill that you can use throughout life not only to cope with cancer but also to cope with ANY problem—how to do your job better, how to run your household better, how to work with people in your family and community better. Many day-to-day life situations lend themselves to this careful, thoughtful problem solving strategy.

Good problem solving comes naturally to some people, but for most of us, it takes understanding the system and practice. Our program is designed to help you feel optimistic that you can solve the problems you face—this is the **Bright in Bright IDEAS**—and the first step toward success. Then we help you learn the basic steps of problem solving itself, which spell the word **IDEAS**. **I for Identify** the problem, **D for Define** your options, **E for Evaluate** your options and pick the best option or solution for you, **A for Act**, that is try out the solution you picked, and **S for See** if it worked. If the outcome was as good as you hoped, then it's time to move on to another problem. But, if the solution really wasn't good enough, the program helps you try another solution from your list or think up a new solution entirely. Sometimes you have to try out two, three, or more plans until you're satisfied that your problem has been solved.

Parents of children with cancer cannot avoid facing some challenging problems. However, effective problem-solving skills can help you feel that the problems are manageable and that you can find positive outcomes. These skills can also help give you a sense of being in control: a very important feeling to have when you are overwhelmed by your child's cancer.

Bright IDEAS was developed by childhood cancer specialists from some of the top childhood cancer centers

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Having a child with cancer puts a tremendous emotional, physical, and financial strain on families.

To help you cope with the many decisions and problems you are likely to face, we have developed a 5-step system called **Bright IDEAS**.

I D E A S

Identify the problem
Define your options
Evaluate your options
Act
See if it worked



Before we start the stages of problem solving, it is critical to adopt the attitude that you believe and understand that you CAN cope successfully. We call this **OPTIMISM**. It is the most important tool you will use to make the system work for you. It is so important that we have put it in the center of the **IDEAS** system and we use the word “**bright**” (intelligent, clever, can do, promising) to remind you of the positive outlook that is essential for good problem solving.

Step #1: Identify the Problem

Step #1 is to identify a problem. Almost any problem, no matter how major it may look at first, is solvable when you break it down into small parts.

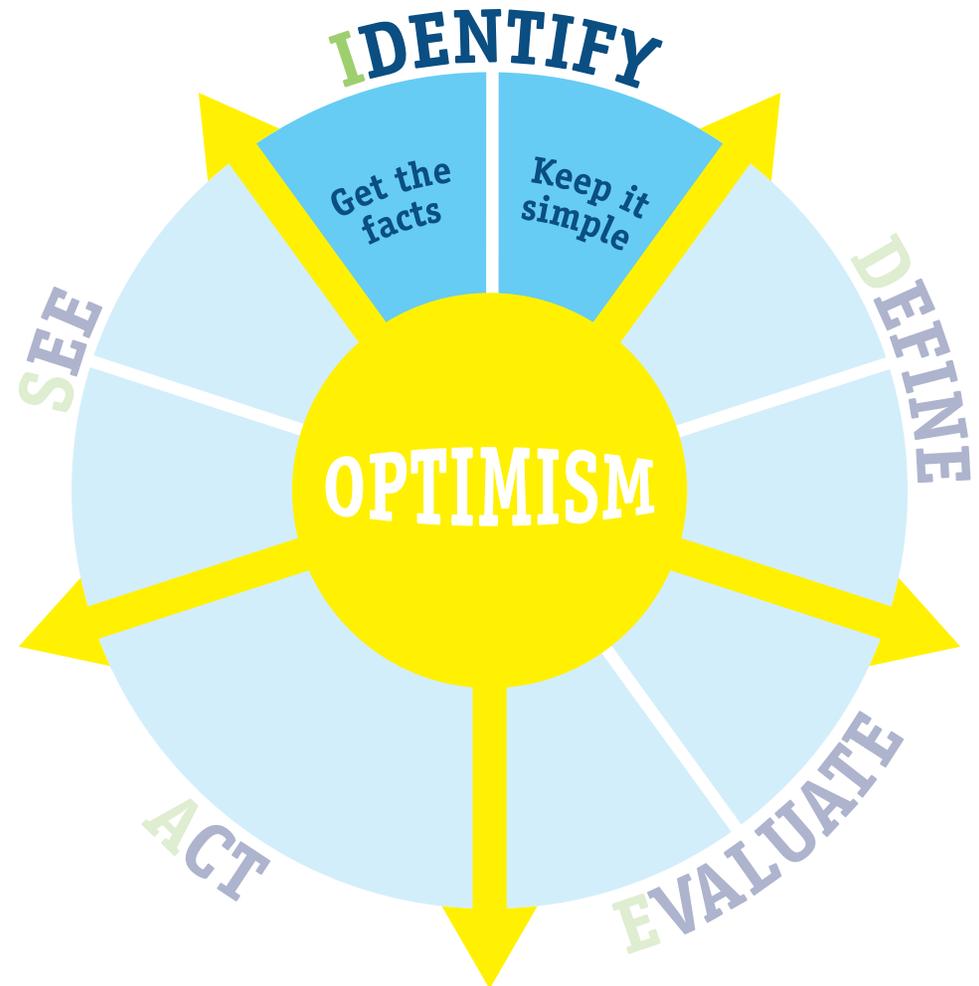
You then need to decide exactly what has to happen to make each small part work better. After you solve one small part, you begin to work on another part. After you have solved two or three parts, the overall problem usually is solved. Throughout this booklet, we are going to use the example of “*I don’t know enough about my child’s disease*” to show how a big problem can be solved by working step by step on smaller problems.

What does “*I don’t know enough about my child’s disease*” really mean?

Let’s say you are the mother of a daughter who has leukemia. You make the following list to explain what you mean by “*I don’t know enough about my child’s disease*”:

1. *What is leukemia? They keep saying ALL, but I don’t know what that means.*
2. *There are so many different drugs and it’s hard to remember what they’re for.*
3. *The doctors use long medical words and sometimes I just don’t understand.*
4. *When I’m at home with my child, I get worried every time she even coughs. How do I remember what to do and when?*

There may be lots of other smaller problems that you can think of, but let’s start with these four. Listing them separately helps you figure out what needs to happen and what you should do to help your child receive the best treatments.



Step #2: Define Your Options

Step #2 is to figure out what you need to do to make changes happen to solve the problem! That is, you need to define your options.

Now let's make a list about what you can do to solve the problem of "I don't know enough about my child's disease."

For example:

1. *Make an appointment with my child's doctor (oncologist) to learn more about her disease.*
2. *Go online and do a search.*
3. *Join a Cancer Parent Support Group and talk to other parents who have children with the same disease.*



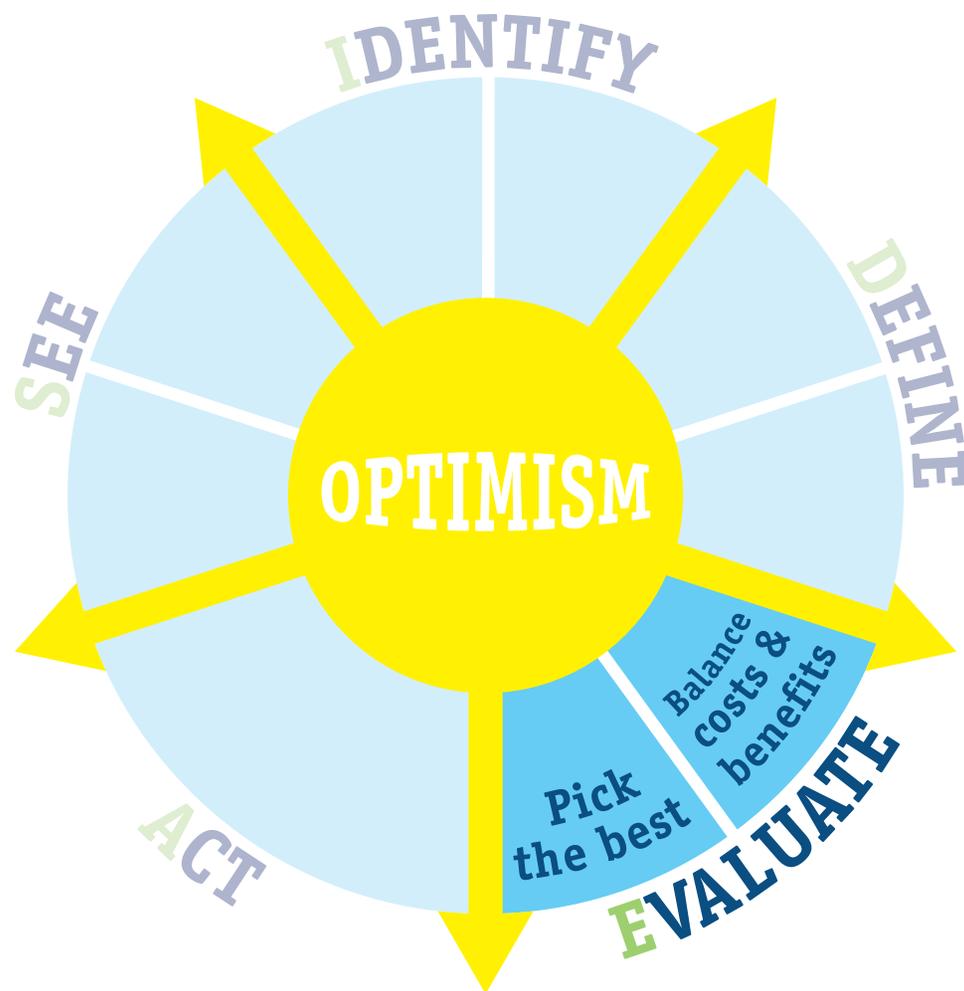
Step #3: Evaluate Your Options

Step #3 is evaluate the options you've listed and decide which is best for you.

Most importantly, you have to decide what the barriers are, that is, what things would stop you from doing 1), 2), or 3). This is a cost-benefit analysis. Is the cost (what you have to do) worth the benefit (learning more about ALL)?

- Let's start with #1, "*make an appointment with my child's oncologist.*" Let's say your barriers are that you don't like to ask for an extra appointment since the doctor is so busy. You don't want to be a pain in the neck. Plus, you doubt if you'll remember what you talk about.
- Let's go to option #2, "*do an online search.*" There are so many web sites and how can you be sure that the information you receive is correct? You don't even know what to search for on the Internet.
- Let's go to option #3, "*join a Parent Support Group and talk with other parents.*" How do you know which parents to believe? Also, it's hard for you to meet new people.

Of the three options, you decide that #1 would be best for you: *You feel you can ask for an additional meeting because other parents tell you that the doctors are happy to take the time to explain. You also decide to keep a small notepad in your pocket so you can write down questions you or other family members have. This way, you won't forget things to ask. You also think about buying a little digital tape recorder or using the recorder on your phone so you don't need to take the extra time to write down the doctor's answers.*



Step #4: Act

Step #4 is to act on your plan.

To accomplish Step #4, you start to act on your plan the next day. *It's hard to get a separate time to meet with your child's oncologist right away, so you set a time in two days. You ask your family to give you questions to ask and write them down. You try out the recorder on your phone and decide it will work fine for your meeting.*



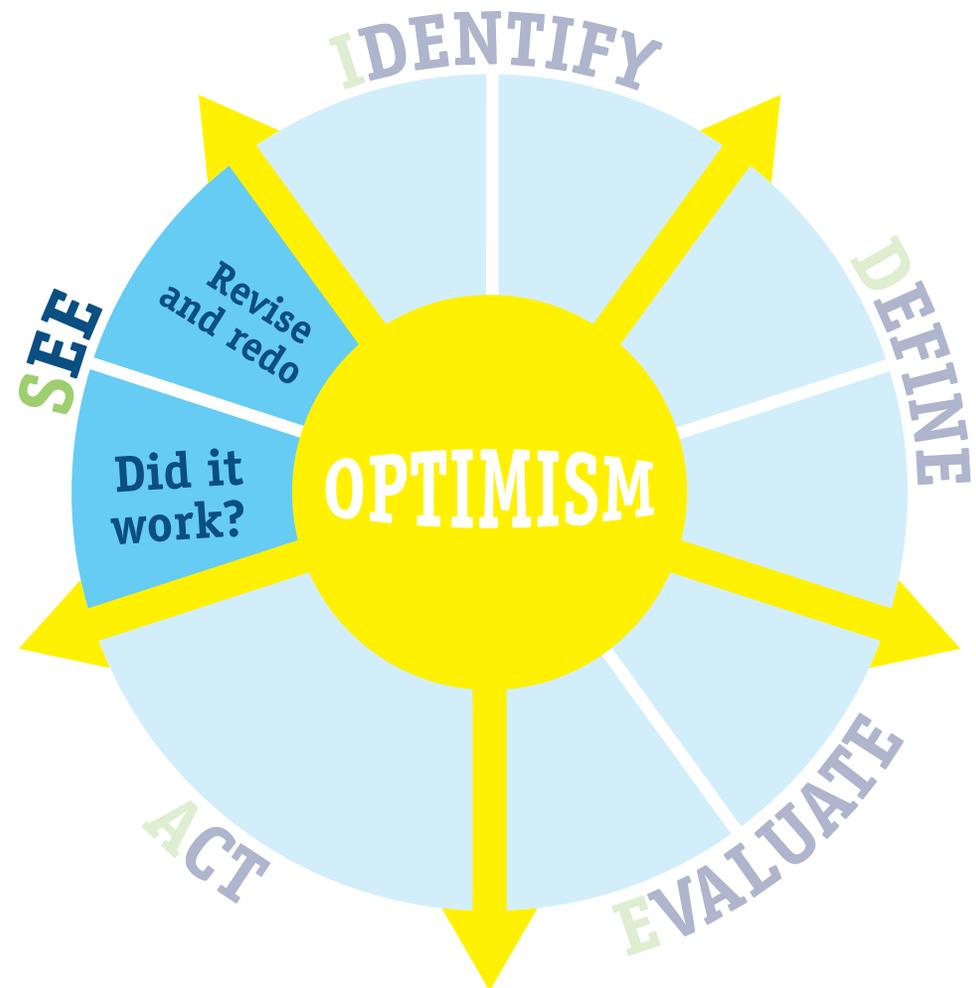
Step #5: See How It Worked

Step #5 helps you see whether the plan is working well or if you need to make some changes.

You can decide that one meeting was a great start, but you'll need more time. When you were meeting with your child's oncologist, the doctor explained that a "fellow" can help and also told you about an experienced nurse you could ask. Even with these extra resources, the doctor also told you that the two of you could meet again if you wanted. You were surprised that the doctor thought your recording the meeting was a terrific idea.

You decide that while this has been a great start, there are still many things you do not understand. You are pleased with your notebook and now understand the meaning of many of the medical terms. You also feel less nervous about what to do when your child is home and starts to not feel well. You share your recording with your family. As you have worked on this part of the plan, perhaps you have already asked about all of the medicines that are now in your home. Perhaps you have also realized there were lots of words you did not understand, but now you do. If you still have questions, what are your options? Which option is best? How are you and your child's care team going to carry it out?

The enclosed sample worksheet summarizes the problems discussed by the parent in this booklet. Use the blank worksheet in this booklet as a guide to **Identify** the problem, **Define** your options, **Evaluate** your options (and pick the best for you), **Act** on your plan, and **See** if it worked. Please feel free to make lots of copies of the worksheets to use yourself or share with members of your family.



First, a **BRIGHT** beginning: *The problem can be solved and I can do it!*

Step #1: Identify the Problem

A. Describe the overall problem: *I don't know enough about my child's disease.*

- *Specific Problem #1: What is leukemia? They keep saying ALL, but I do not know what that means.*
- *Specific Problem #2: There are so many different drugs and it's hard to remember what they're for.*
- *Specific Problem #3: The doctors use long medical words and sometimes I just don't understand.*
- *Specific Problem #4: When I'm at home with my child, I get worried every time she even coughs. How do I remember what to do and when?*

B. Choose a specific problem part and analyze it. #1 ("What is leukemia? They keep saying ALL, but I do not know what that means.")

Why did I choose this problem? *Family members ask me questions I can't answer and I'm worried we're not doing the right thing or making the right decisions. Sometimes I feel like I'm not being a good parent because I just don't understand what is happening to my daughter.*

Where does the problem occur? *At home; at the hospital; in clinic.*

Who else is involved as part of the problem? *My family and daughter's doctors.*

Why does the problem occur? *Cancer treatment is really complicated and doctors use long medical terms. I want to understand so I can help my daughter.*

How do I respond and feel when the problem occurs? *I get really nervous and then it's even harder for me to remember things.*

How optimistic am I about solving this problem?



Step #2: Define Options	Step #3: Evaluate Options and Choose Best	
DEFINE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS	EVALUATE POTENTIAL BARRIERS	CHOOSE BEST RANK CHOICES
<i>Solution #1: Appointment with my child's oncologist</i>	<i>Will doctor take extra time to meet me? Makes me nervous to ask for extra help.</i>	1
<i>Solution #2: Do a web search</i>	<i>How do I know what information is good? There are so many websites.</i>	3
<i>Solution #3: Join a parent support group.</i>	<i>Meeting new people; finding the extra time; do they really know what's best for my child?</i>	2

Step #4: Act (what you will do)

I will make an appointment with my child's oncologist. I will write down my questions and record our talk.

Step #5: See if it worked

Results: *It worked. I learned a lot about my child's cancer, but I still have more questions. I have started a notebook and feel more confident about asking questions. The recorder works really well and everyone in the family got to listen as much as they wanted.*

How satisfied am I with the result?



First, a **BRIGHT** beginning: *The problem can be solved and I can do it!*

Step #1: Identify the Problem

A. Describe the overall problem: _____

Problem Part 1: _____

Problem Part 2: _____

Problem Part 3: _____

B. Choose a specific problem part and analyze it: _____

Why did I choose this problem? _____

Where does the problem occur? _____

Who else is involved as part of the problem? _____

Why does the problem occur? _____

How do I respond and feel when the problem occurs? _____

How optimistic am I about solving this problem?

Not at all Very optimistic
1 2 3 4 5

Step #2: <u>Define</u> Options	Step #3: <u>Evaluate</u> Options and Choose Best	
DEFINE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS	EVALUATE POTENTIAL BARRIERS	CHOOSE BEST RANK CHOICES

Step #4: Act (what you will do)

Step #5: See if it worked

Results: _____

How satisfied am I with the result?

Not at all Very satisfied
1 2 3 4 5

Alternative solution if not satisfied with result: _____



Encouraging Words

Now that you have learned the Bright IDEAS approach to effectively solve your problems, don't forget to maintain your skills. Bright IDEAS is a skill like playing a musical instrument. It takes practice. Sharing your knowledge with family and friends helps them learn problem solving skills and keeps you Bright.

Remember to use this special talent when you're faced with a challenge-either small or large. In time, you may not need to write down the steps because the Bright IDEAS approach will become a natural way for you to solve problems.