

THE STOP BINGE EATING PODCAST

with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #338: Balancing Being Problem-Focused and Solution-Focused

Hello! Let's talk about being problem-focused and solution-focused.

When we have a problem, we can be problem-focused or solution-focused.

What this means is that we're either analyzing the problem we are facing, we're looking at what's wrong, we're understanding the problem or we're coming up with a solution, figuring out how to solve the problem, and are strategizing.

So basically you're thinking about the problem you're facing or you're thinking about a solution for the problem.

And both are useful. Both have a purpose.

But, when we spend too much time in either of them, we can create another problem.

So I'm going to talk about how each of them are useful and how too much time in either, instead of balancing the two, can stop you from solving the problem and possibly create another problem for you.

Starting with being problem-focused.

Being problem-focused can be helpful in two ways.

One, it can help you to just vent your thoughts and feelings, get them out, and be heard, even if it's only you hearing it.

There is for sure a time and place for venting, and it can feel good to vent, and it can feel good to just release your thoughts out of your brain either onto paper or verbally.

And two, it can help you to understand why you feel how you feel, understand what you're thinking, what your opinion is, what your perspective is, and understand why the problem exists.

When you're focusing on the problem, and you're really trying to understand the problem, you get clarity. And if you're going to solve the problem, if you're going to move on from it, you need to have clarity and understanding of the problem.

When I'm coaching, this is the first thing I do with my group members.

They share their thoughts and feelings with me, I ask them questions to dig a little deeper, and we get a clear picture of what their problem is and why it is a problem.

It is so important that you clearly understand the problem, why it's a problem, and what is really causing the problem before you can figure out a strategy that will actually solve the problem.

Because if you don't, and you just jump right into trying to solve the problem without really understanding the problem, your strategies and solutions might not work.

This was exactly what I did for all those years I was binge eating.

I just kept jumping to trying to figure out solutions.

I didn't spend much time understanding the problem. Those times when I would be Googling I bet I searched for how to stop binge eating a lot more than I searched for why I binge ate.

I just wanted to solve it. I just wanted to stop it. I wanted to know what to do.

But because I didn't have a clear understanding of why I binged, the strategies I came up with didn't help long-term.

I didn't really know what the problem was. And in my defense, and this is true for so many of you who have been bingeing for decades, back then there wasn't a lot of information about binge eating.

So it makes sense that I didn't understand it. And it makes sense that the strategies I tried didn't really work.

I just kept trying to control what I was eating by setting calorie goals and making foods off-limits and making food rules about what I would allow myself to eat and when.

But I wasn't doing the necessary work in my mind, which is where the work needs to be done.

But I didn't know that because I didn't understand that the problem was in what I was thinking about the food, about my body, about my emotions, and about myself.

And since I didn't know that the problem was really a thought problem, I didn't focus the work on my thoughts.

Like I said, I focused mostly on calorie goals and food rules.

Which usually exacerbated the problem.

So when I say that spending too much time in either being problem or solution focused can create a new problem, what I just talked about is the problem of being much more solution focused than problem focused.

Because I was spending more time on the solution without really understanding the problem, I kept implementing strategies that perpetuated the problem, which caused me to deal with it for longer, and it also caused so much frustration and at times hopelessness and the solutions I came up with weren't really working.

When I'm coaching people they sometimes fall into this too. They tell me what the problem is and then ask me for a solution. They just want to get to the "how."

But if we haven't gotten a clear understanding of the problem, I tell them that we'll get to the solution but we need to spend more time talking about the problem.

The once we do, it becomes so much more clear what the solution is.

That's really such a huge benefit from taking time to understand the problem, and dig into it, and explore your thoughts and feelings and get below the surface.

When you see the problem clearly, the solution is more clear.

For example, you might see yourself binge on the foods you usually binge on and think the problem is those foods. So your solution is to take away those foods and make those foods off-limits. But that is going to most likely put you into the restrict/binge cycle. You don't allow what you want, so you want them more, and your desire for them builds until you're urging for them and you end up going to forcing yourself to not eat them to letting go and eating excessive amounts not only because you've been holding yourself back for so long so you're like a slingshot but maybe also because you're not going to allow yourself again so you want to eat as much as you can while you can.

The solution may have made sense given the perceived problem but, the solution didn't work because the food isn't really the problem.

The problem is really your thoughts about that food, and possibly also your thoughts about your body and about yourself.

And when you can see that, then you can work on your thoughts which will be a much more effective solution.

So make sure you're spending enough time focusing on the problem so that you really understand it.

However, it's important that you don't spend too much time being problem-focused, which is another problem people fall into.

You know you're spending too much time there if you're ruminating, wallowing, or are experiencing negative emotions such as worry, anxiety, or stress for an extended period of time.

You just keep thinking about the problem, keep going over it in your mind, keep replaying it, and maybe you even keep beating yourself up about it.

This is of course not at all useful. It's of course not going to help you move forward and is going to keep you stuck in the problem.

You're just swirling and spiraling in the problem.

And it can lead you to feel hopeless, like there is no way out of it.

You only see what's wrong and you aren't seeing what you can do about it.

And part of the problem here is that if you do try to see what you can do about it, your immediate response is, "I don't know," or "nothing."

But, do not settle for those answers.

There is *something* you can do. You may not be able to control everything and everyone and every circumstance, and you may not be able to make big changes right here in this moment, but there is *something* you can do to help this problem.

And when you acknowledge that there is always something you can do help yourself with this problem, you are opening yourself up to the possibility that there is something.

Even if you don't know what it is right now, you're opening yourself up to exploring what it could be.

Open yourself up to ideas.

This is what I do with my group members when they have no idea what do to. We take a moment to examine the problem and brainstorm about what they *can* do, what they *could* do, what *might* help.

And when we shift from focusing on the problem to focusing on finding solutions, most of the time they come up with something that they didn't even think of when they were only focused on the problem. And if they really can't think of anything, they're at least open to hearing suggestions that I have. Sometimes when we're so problem-focused we just reject any suggestions. I know I've for sure been there, just thinking about why it won't work. But when I really open myself up to the possibility that it might, I can receive it and actually try it.

This happened recently with one of my group members who was feeling really defeated and hopeless and was focusing on all the reasons why she thinks she can't stop binge eating, why it's just not possible for her, and all the patterns she keeps repeating and not changing.

She and I spent some time understand why she keeps repeating the patterns without changing, and why she hasn't stopped binge eating yet, getting to the real reasons, not the reasons she kept dwelling on like that she's just a lost-cause.

And after doing that, we shifted into solution-focus, addressing the real problem she's been facing, and now she's making amazing progress and changes.

I helped her get out of just being problem-focused so she could actually make progress.

And when it comes to anxiety and worry, emotions that people can feel for extended periods of time when they're continuously catastrophizing and thinking about the worst case scenario, and then they might eat to relieve themselves of those emotions, they're thinking about and facing a problem that hasn't even happened yet.

They're just going around and around in their mind about a possible bad thing that they think will happen.

And when I'm coaching someone who is doing this, we problem solve before it ever happens.

They might think we can't solve it because it hasn't even happened, and might not even happen, but we can, in our minds.

If they're worried about something they think someone else will do or something that will happen that's outside of their control, they might feel helpless because they can't control it. But, what we work on is what they can do and will do if it does happen. We solve for how they will handle it and when we do, they can see that they'll be okay in the end. It might suck when it happens but, they have a strategy for how they will be okay.

For example, you might be staying at someone's house and you worry that they are going to have all the foods you are afraid of at their house. You can't control what they choose to have in their home. But, how do you want to handle it if they do? How do you want to prepare for this?

Instead of worrying about it, you can strategize for what you will do before and while you're there so that you will be okay.

And if they're worried about something they think they will do, we can work on what they can do to prevent it.

For example, you might be worried that you'll binge. But, why do you think that would happen and what can you do prevent it from happening? How can you prepare yourself? What can you practice ahead of time?

Instead of worrying about it, you can strategize for what you will do before and at the time you fear you'll binge so they you will be okay.

There is a solution if you look for it.

And when you balance your focus between being problem-focused and being solution-focused, you will find the right solution. The one that will work.

And then you can get to work on it.

And, if it doesn't work, you just repeat the process. You examine why it didn't work, so you understand the problem with either the solution you came up with or, the problem with your execution of the solution, and you come up with a new strategy for implementing or a new solution.

There is a solution for your problem.

And sometimes, it may not be the most comfortable solution, or the easiest solution, or the fastest solution but, if it's one that addresses the real problem you're facing, accept it as the solution and go all in with it.

Alright, make sure you're balancing your time in being problem-focused and being solution-focused so you can actually solve your problem and I'll talk to you next time. Bye bye.