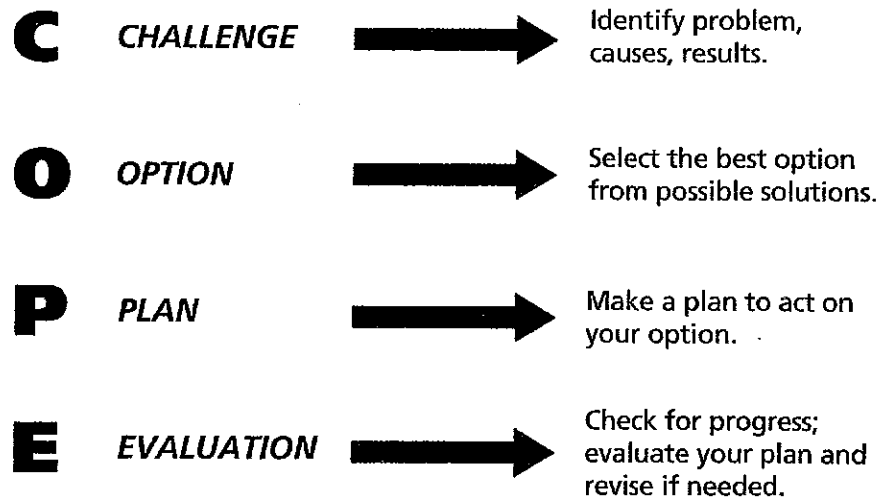


Figure 4.5 The COPE Method**STEP 1**

Clearly identify your **challenge, problem, or its causes**, and the **result you want or goal you hope to reach**.

This is the most important step. You have to identify your problem before you can solve it. Read the following two statements. The first is too general. The second is more specific because it clearly states a problem, its causes, and the desired result.

1. *My problem is that even though I study a lot, I still make poor grades on tests.*
2. *My problem is that even though I study a lot, I still make poor grades on tests because I get nervous, my mind goes blank, and I can't remember what I have studied until after the test is over. I want to overcome my nervousness so that I can take tests calmly and make better grades.*

To meet the challenge, ask yourself three questions. Then answer them. It may help to put your answers in writing.

- What is my problem?
- What causes my problem?
- What result do I want?

STEP 2

Choose the best **option** from the many possible solutions to your problem.

Rosalia says she cannot study at home because it is too noisy. The telephone rings frequently, her husband turns up the TV too loud, and her young children make noise playing and fighting with each other. After thinking about her problem and its causes, Rosalia came up with the following list of options.

1. Be assertive with family members about my need for some quiet time for studying. Enlist their cooperation and support so that they feel needed and involved.
2. Study in the bedroom with the door shut.
3. Find a study place away from home such as the library or an empty classroom.
4. Study during the day while my husband is at work, and my children are in school.

If you have trouble thinking of options for the solution to your problem, ask yourself this question: *What can I do to eliminate what is causing my problem?*

You might say, "If I knew how to solve my problem, I wouldn't have the problem!" Not necessarily. For example, smoking is a problem for many people. They may know of several options available that might help them quit smoking, yet they continue to have the problem because they do not act on their options. It may be that they don't really want to solve the problem, or they may want to but don't know how to get started. To act on your options, you need a plan.

STEP 3

Make a **plan** to solve your problem within a reasonable length of time and follow it.

To help create your plan, ask yourself this question: *What can I do to make my options work?* Then decide how you will act on one of your options. Set a time limit by which you expect to see some progress toward your goal or the elimination of the problem. For example, Rosalia, the student who had trouble studying at home because of the noise, had an algebra test coming up in two weeks. She decided to do all of her studying for algebra class in the library during the next two weeks. Her grade on the algebra test would tell her whether studying in a different place had paid off.

Suppose you want to quit smoking and know of several plans available such as the use of a patch that slowly releases small amounts of nicotine into the bloodstream to stop the craving. Or perhaps a nearby hospital offers a stop-smoking program that uses behavioral modification techniques without the use of drugs. You might want to try one of these methods. If you have tried to stop smoking in the past and failed, evaluate the plan that you followed. Why didn't it work? What distracted you from your goal? Make a new plan that allows you to try a different method so that you will be less likely to repeat your past unsuccessful behavior. Then set a reasonable time limit for breaking your habit, and try to stick to your plan.

STEP 4

Give your plan an honest **evaluation** to see what progress you are making.



To help evaluate your plan, ask these questions:

- Is my plan working?
- Have I given my plan sufficient time to work?
- Do I still have the problem?
- Is the problem situation improving?
- Should I make a new plan?

If you have solved your problem or if the situation is improving, continue what you are doing. If you still have the problem, and your situation has not improved, make a new plan.

Until the COPE method becomes second nature for you, try writing out the steps. Writing slows down the thinking process, enabling you to analyze your problem more carefully. Also, remember that when you put your plan into writing, you are making a commitment to yourself. Here is the commitment that Vernon, another student, made:

My problem is that I am a procrastinator. One cause of my problem is that I hate to study and will put it off until the last minute. I end up skimming over my notes and not absorbing anything. Another cause is that I'm easily distracted at home. I can think of a million other things to do. Also, I lack self-discipline. I want to overcome my procrastination and give myself plenty of time to study. I know this will make a difference in my grades. My plan is to do most of my assignments and studying for tests in the library. I have two hours between classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Also, I can study at home on Tuesday and Thursday mornings when no one is there to distract me. I am going to try to keep weekends free for fun unless I have work that I couldn't finish during the week or a big test on Monday. I'll try this plan for two weeks and see if I'm able to stick to it.

Notice that Vernon clearly describes his problem, its causes, and the results he wants. He also devises a plan and sets a time limit of two weeks. At the end of two weeks, he can evaluate his plan to see how he is doing. He can then either keep following the plan or revise it if necessary. Vernon's plan is one that can work.