

LESSON: ROOT CAUSES

Overview: In this lesson, students will use their research and their own expertise to dig to the root causes of their issue. Students learn to use a Root Cause Tree as a model for framing an issue's causes and symptoms.

Student Objectives:

- Analyze an issue in terms of its symptoms and causes
- Understand what root causes are and how to identify them

Assessment:

- Root cause tree

Materials:

- Butcher paper
- Root cause tree (on butcher paper)
- Markers/colored pencils
- Root Cause Tree worksheet

Vocabulary:

- symptom
- cause
- root cause

BELL-RINGER: Journal entry (5 minutes)

Have students respond in their journals: How do you know when someone has a cold?

BEFORE: Root cause model (15 minutes)

Explain to students that the signs or indications of a cold are the symptoms. We can tell that someone has a cold if she is sneezing a lot. Draw a large root cause tree on the board and solicit student responses to the bell-ringer. If they are in fact symptoms, put them in the top of the tree. If a student gives you a cause, don't write it down yet.

Explain that while a symptom indicates that someone might have a cold, it does not help us avoid getting a cold. To avoid getting a cold, we need to look at what causes a cold. Ask students to give you some causes of a cold and write those in the roots of the tree.



symptom: a sign or indication of something

cause: the producer of an effect

Explain that it is difficult to cut a tree down at the trunk (and to solve a problem completely or cure the common cold) but if we could choke out and kill a root (a cause), we can weaken the tree. If we can continue to kill roots, eventually the tree will die. Similarly, if we just focus on the symptoms, and not the causes, all we will do is trim branches but keep the integrity of the tree intact. When it comes to our issue, we need to look at the root causes, not the symptoms. We also need to break down the big issue into the many causes that make it such a problem. Each root cause, in turn, can be broken down into more causes and so on.



root cause: the fundamental, basic cause for why an issue happens

DURING: Diagramming root causes (10 minutes)

Have students complete a root cause tree for the class's issue. It might be easier for students to partner up on this activity so they can brainstorm ideas. The purpose here is to have them practice what you just modeled for them with the cold example on their own issue.

AFTER: Root cause forest (10 minutes)

Have students hang their trees around the room and conduct a Gallery Walk. Students should view the different root cause trees and note similarities and differences.

CLOSER: Check-in (5 minutes)

Solicit student responses to create a root cause tree on the board that compiles the main ideas from the various trees.

After class, create a document of all the students' roots and symptoms for distribution the following day of class for the Ecological Model exercise.



Enrichment/Extension: If you want to take this concept deeper or if your students are struggling with their root causes, you can try using the “Five Levels of Why” activity explained below.

Divide students into small groups and give each group a piece of butcher paper. Have them choose one root cause (or they can even choose their main issue if they are struggling with developing root causes) and write down a “why” question of the issue (e.g., Why is there violence at our school?). They should provide an answer below the question. They then take the answer and turn it into their next question. Use the models below to explain the process with your students.

Example 1:

Level 1 why question: Why is the rate of STDs rising in Chicago teens?

Answer: Because teens are having unprotected sex.

Level 2 why question: Why are teens having unprotected sex?

Answer: Because they believe they don’t have an STD.

Level 3 why question: Why don’t they know if they have an STD or not?

Answer: Because they don’t get tested.

Level 4 why question: Why don’t they get tested?

Answer: Because testing is not easily accessible.

Level 5 why question: Why isn’t testing easily accessible?

Answer: Because they usually have to travel outside of their neighborhood to get it.

Root Cause: STD testing is neither convenient nor easily accessible for students.

Solution: Have a testing day at school to make getting tested easier for teens.

Example 2:

Level 1 why question: Why is the rate of STDs rising in Chicago teens?

Answer: Because teens are having unprotected sex.

Level 2 why question: Why are teens having unprotected sex?

Answer: Because they believe they don’t have a STD.

Level 3 why question: Why don’t they know if they have a STD or not?

Answer: Because they don’t get tested.

Level 4 why question: Why don’t they get tested?

Answer: Because they don’t know where to go to get tested.

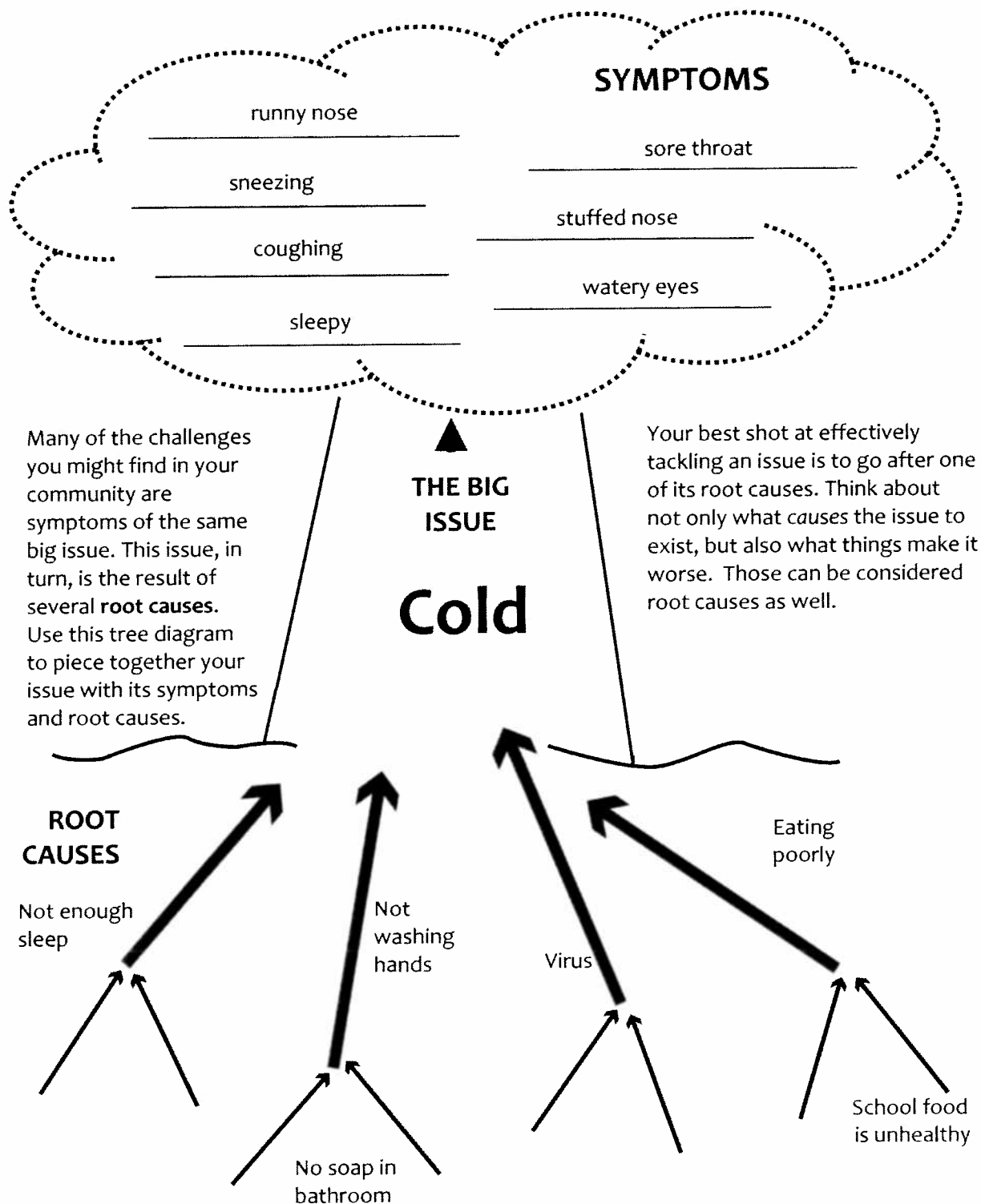
Level 5 why question: Why don’t they know where to go to get tested?

Answer: Because clinics are not well publicized and teens are embarrassed to ask.

Root Cause: Students don’t know where testing can be done, and are embarrassed to ask.

Solution: Have a testing day at school to make getting tested easier, and so that teens don’t have to ask where to go.

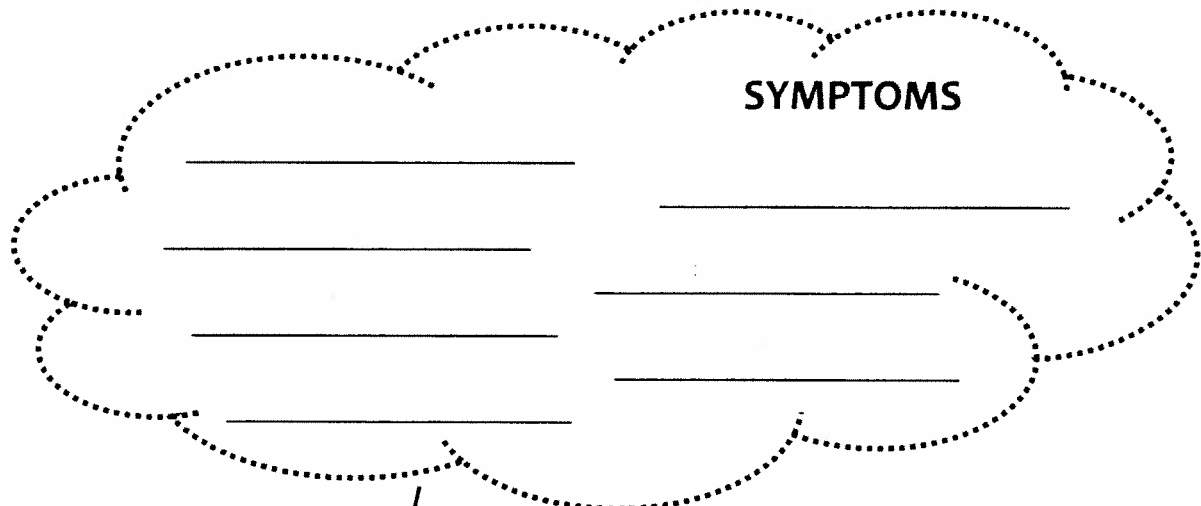
Root Cause Tree: Cold Example



Name: _____

Date: _____

Root Cause Tree



Many of the challenges you might find in your community are symptoms of the same big issue. This issue, in turn, is the result of several **root causes**. Use this tree diagram to piece together your issue with its symptoms and root causes.

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THE BIG ISSUE

Your best shot at effectively tackling an issue is to go after one of its root causes. Think about not only what *causes* the issue to exist, but also what things make it worse. Those can be considered root causes as well.

ROOT CAUSES

