

Origins

Solution Focused practice emerged from Solution Focused Brief Therapy and was developed primarily by Steve de Shazer and his team at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee, USA and later in Britain by members of BRIEF. In the early 1980s de Shazer and his team conducted a large research programme in an attempt to identify the ingredients of successful therapy. From this study emerged a therapeutic approach which concentrates first on eliciting a concrete description of what life will be like when the problem has gone, that is, a focus on the future, and second on finding out what the client is doing or has done in the past which might contribute towards this future being attainable. This approach represents a radical shift from most therapeutic models since it is not based on an understanding or analysis of the problem but simply on descriptions of a possible future and of steps already taken towards that future. Naturally like any good therapeutic model the practice is a lot more difficult than the theory.

What does the client want from our work with them?

Establishing realistic and concrete outcome criteria is no easy task yet the more we can help a client clarify his or her 'preferred future' the more likely it is to happen. The starting point for this exploration is to find out what the client wants from our work with them:

- What are your best hopes from our talking together?

Here we are attempting to determine what the *client* wants, establishing the contract for work on that basis. Since the Solution Focused approach is 'non-normative', having no way therefore of knowing what the client *should* want, the SF worker has to determine the direction of the work based on the client's own preferences. So without an answer to the 'best hopes' question the SF worker cannot know in what direction to proceed.

Describing the preferred future

Once a "contract" has been established, we can move on to describing what successful achievement would look like 'on the ground'. If the client has stated that her 'best hope' is to be more confident and to like herself more then the SF practitioner will ask the client to describe in detail what a more confident life when the client is liking herself more will be like. The task of the worker is to ask questions which invite the client to describe this future in positive, concrete and observable and detailed terms.

A key skill is developing a fluency in the language of the future so that descriptions are indeed detailed, achievable and rooted in the client's everyday life. How will getting up in the morning be different? How will waking the children up and getting them to school change? It is this sort of small detailed description that is most associated with rapid change.

Of course in statutory work life is a little more complex and this outcome-based contract needs also to take account of the legitimate requirements of the professionals involved in a child and a family's life: a parent might be asked, for example:

- How will you know that you are in charge of your child (if that is what the parent wants) in a way that is right for you and acceptable to the court?

A future that fits both the statutory services *and* the client will be more likely to last than one which is imposed by the statutory services.

Discovering instances of success

The starting point of solution focused practice was the realisation that one of the few universal truths, 'nobody's perfect' applies as much to problem behaviour as it does to other aspects of life. The 'exceptions' (imperfection) to problem behaviour are *potential* solutions already in place but as yet normally unnoticed. Uncovering these unnoticed and uncelebrated exceptions, these instances of success give important clues to the best way forward for each individual. They also serve as a record of achievement and as they build up they begin to provide an alternative, more hopeful view of the

past. The greater the problems a person has survived the more rich the hidden history of achievement and possibility is likely to be. How has the client survived in the face of such difficulty?

Scaling questions

Descriptions of possible futures and past achievements can be brought together with scaling questions through which small steps can be charted and progress measured. Solution focused scales focus on movement towards positive outcomes rather than movement away from problem behaviour and it is this that gives them both an inspirational as well as aspirational quality. Establishing where the client has already reached and the evidence for that progress highlights progress already made and increases the likelihood of further movement. Moving towards a goal is more motivating than moving away from a problem. 'How will you know that you have moved just one point up on your scale', thereby eliciting the first small signs of further progress, is almost invariably a useful focus for clients and often a tough question for people to answer.

Endings

Sessions are concluded with some feedback to the client about what they are doing that is helpful to them in moving forward. It might also be suggested that they pay careful attention to small signs of further progress and what they are doing that works at these times. As people shift their patterns of attention away from the problem towards what they are doing that is working the likelihood of change is increased.

Continuing work

The solution focused practitioner will treat each session as if it could be the last – and sometimes of course it is. But naturally other clients will elect to return for one or more additional sessions. Each follow-up meeting will start with the same question 'what has been better since we last spoke?' In SF work the task is to construct what de Shazer referred to as a 'progressive narrative', asking about any small signs of progress, what the client has done that has worked and what the next small signs might look like. Should setbacks occur there will be an interest in what has stopped things getting even worse, in which aspects of progress have been maintained and how the client will know that he is back on track. And so the worker will continue until the time comes when the client no longer sees the need to return, something that typically occurs between the third and fourth session.

Evidence base

An impressive and ever increasing body of evidence is growing as to the effectiveness of the solution focused approach. An up to date list is kept by the European Brief Therapy Association at www.ebta.eu. BRIEF have published outcome research and its effect on practice over 20 years in Franklin et al (2011) *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy: A Handbook of Evidence-Based Practice* OUP

BRIEF's books

George, Evan, Iveson, Chris, and Ratner, Harvey (1990, revised and expanded 1999) *Problem to Solution: Brief therapy with individuals and families*. London: BT Press.

Iveson, C., George, E., Ratner, H. (2012) *Brief Coaching: a solution focused approach*. London: Routledge

Ratner, H., George, E., Iveson, C. (2012) *Solution Focused Brief Therapy: 100 Key Points and Techniques*. London: Routledge

All these books are available discounted from the BRIEF website www.brief.org.uk

Solution Focused Training

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