

Solution-focused practice - an introduction

Solution-focused practice is an approach for effecting change through conversation. Originating in the world of psychotherapy, it has long since been applied in virtually every other type of human endeavour where people talk together to help change to happen. Conceptually simple though often deceptively difficult to use, its basics can be readily assimilated on a short training course and many professionals within the fields of health, social care and education are now using the approach to good effect.

There are a number of versions of solution-focused practice, all descended from the original blueprint as developed in Milwaukee by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues. Guy Shennan Associates follow in the tradition established at BRIEF in the UK over the past twenty years. The central activities of this version can be summarised as follows:

- A direction for the work is established with the client based on their 'best hopes' from the work
- The client is helped to describe in rich, concrete detail what the realisation of these hopes would look like
- The client is helped to catalogue and describe in detail the progress they are making towards the realisation of their hopes from the work.

A wide and growing range of research is telling us that these three activities are all that is required to help many clients make real and lasting changes, often after a very small number of contacts with a solution-focused worker.

Direction-setting

The essential characteristic of any piece of solution-focused work, whether it consists of a five minute conversation or five one-hour therapy sessions, is that it is aimed in a particular direction, which is towards the client's hoped-for outcome from the work. So the essential question to be asked at the beginning of a piece of work is 'What are your best hopes from our work together?' or one of the many variants thereof.

This is necessary in the same way that the taxi driver needs to ask you where you want to go once you've hailed his or her cab. Once asked 'Where to?' you have been put in charge of the destination of that taxi journey, as long as it is somewhere within the taxi driver's area of operation. When you answer 'The station please' and the driver says 'OK, in you get', there is now an implicit contract between you both, that the driver will take you to your desired destination. This contracting, or direction-setting, has taken just a few seconds, yet it has determined the whole of the journey, hence its importance.

In the same way, the solution-focused practitioner establishes the client's desired direction at the beginning of a piece of solution-focused work, which is set when the client has been able to articulate a hoped-for outcome that falls within the practitioner's legitimate remit.

There are numerous questions which the practitioner can ask to help the client to consider and articulate their hoped-for outcome from the work. 'What are your best hopes from our work together?' a question popularised by BRIEF, is only one of many. Others include:

- How would you know that this work had been useful?
- What are you hoping this will lead to you for you?
- What difference are you hoping this will make?
- What would you notice about yourself that would tell you that coming here had been worth your while?

Clients will vary in how quickly they will be able to think of and articulate a hoped-for outcome. Some will already be thinking in this way and will be able to answer straightaway. Others will respond in a number of other ways first:

- *Talking about their problems* - at the forefront of many clients' minds in their first meeting will be their problems and it is possible therefore that whatever they are asked they will respond first by talking about their problems. It is always important to go at the client's pace, to listen and to acknowledge how difficult things have been, *for as long as the client needs this* (though for no longer) and then to return to the question of what the client is hoping for from the work.
- *Process rather than outcome* - while the practitioner is asking about what the client is hoping for *from* the work, the client will sometimes respond about a possible process *of* the work. For example, the client might say that they are hoping for some advice, or to get things off their chest. In each case the solution-focused practitioner's initial response will follow the same pattern: 'And if you got things off your chest and that turned out to be useful to you, how would you know that this had been useful?' The movement is always from the process *of* the work to the hoped-for outcome *from* the work.
- *'I don't know'* - the solution-focused practitioner will hear this answer a lot, not least because solution-focused questions are often difficult questions to find an answer for. Perseverance is required and we will come back to this in more detail later.

Description (1) Preferred futures

Once a direction has been established, the work primarily consists of the worker eliciting descriptions by the client:

- Of a future in which the client's hopes have been realised
- Of progress being made towards this 'preferred future'.

The preferred future is defined as the future in which the client has achieved what they want from the work, rather than a future in which things have become somehow perfect. The solution-focused practitioner's intention now is to invite the client to step into this hypothetical future and to describe:

- How they would know their 'best hopes' from the work had been realised
- The differences that realising their best hopes would make.

Typically the client will be invited to begin this description from waking up the next morning: 'Suppose when you wake up tomorrow morning, you find that you are able to get on with your life in a way that is right for you...'

The practitioner will then endeavour to help the client's description:

- *Zoom in* on small signs - 'What's the first thing that you would notice about yourself?'
- *Be about what would be noticed* rather than what would not be noticed. Because problems are often at the forefront, clients will frequently answer questions such as the above by saying that a particular problem will have gone: 'I wouldn't be thinking about my worries all the time'. It is when they are able to imagine and articulate what would be happening instead - 'I'd be thinking about what I might do that evening' - that these preferred futures tend to become more possible.
- *Be concrete and tangible* - preferred futures will become more real and seem more achievable when they are described in concrete ways: 'How would you know that you had more energy? How might that show itself? What might you do differently?'
- *Include the perspectives of others* - concrete descriptions are aided by clients being asked to describe what someone else might notice about them, if their hopes from the work had been realised. For how could someone else know that you were feeling happy other than from the concrete signs which they can see and hear?

- *Become interactive* - as well as asking about the perspectives of other people it is useful to ask about others' responses: 'If he notices you being more like that, how might he respond?' One of the benefits of asking clients to describe signs of their preferred futures happening is that they then may become more likely to notice these signs actually happening. These chances will then increase if clients are looking for signs in others as well as in themselves.
- *Include lots of detail*, situated in specific time and place. The more detailed, the more real and hence more possible the preferred future will seem to the client. Ask what the client will notice, where, when, with whom?
- *Widen out* to encompass more possibilities and desired differences: 'What difference would that make?' is a frequently useful question, which helps clients to consider the beneficial effects of any particular changes, while 'What else might you notice different in your life?' helps to open up possibilities, rather than fixing narrowly on one particular 'goal'.

Future-focused questions are aimed at helping the client to describe what their preferred future might look like, rather than to work out how to get there. 'How are you going to get from A to B?' is a very different question to 'How would you know that you are at B?' The first type of question can contribute to a feeling of stuckness: 'I don't know how to get there!' and can put the solution-focused practitioner into the role of fixer: 'You tell me!' Trying to fix things there and then can put a lot of pressure onto the conversation, and the aim instead is to free up the client to create future possibilities. The chances that the client can turn at least some of these possibilities into realities are enhanced when the solution focused practitioner goes on to ask: 'And how did you get to A?'

Description (2) Instances

The origins of the solution focused approach lie in the observation by Steve de Shazer and his colleagues in Milwaukee that there are always 'exceptions' to problems. There are always times when the client is not 'doing the problem', but is doing something different. Their interest in exceptions led to the other main feature of the solution-focused approach, alongside its focus on the future - *the focus on what is working*.

In the version of the solution-focused approach being described here it makes more sense to talk about 'instances' rather than 'exceptions' - instances of the client's preferred future which are already happening or which have happened. Talking about exceptions takes you *back* to the problem, whereas the direction of the work here is *forwards* towards the client's hopes from the work and their preferred future, the future in which those hopes have been realised.

When a client is helped to talk about instances of their preferred future which are already in place, that client can experience themselves as a person who is able to make progress towards what they want. Talking about what is working fosters a sense of hope and possibility. There are several ways in which the solution focused practitioner can initiate conversations about instances:

- Listen with a constructive ear
- Ask about them directly
- Use scaling questions.

The idea of *listening with a constructive ear* comes from the American solution-focused brief therapist, Eve Lipchik, and is something that the solution-focused practitioner is doing all the time. While our client is talking we are listening out both for what they want, for what is working for them and for evidence of their strengths, skills and coping abilities. This is especially the case when the client is talking about their difficulties. When a client says: 'I've had such a difficult week, I've felt really low and have hardly talked to anyone. I've only got out of the house once', it is firstly important to show that you have heard the level of difficulty: 'That sounds like a tough week'. Then the solution-focused practitioner can also follow up what they heard with their 'constructive ear':

'Who have you talked to...?' and 'How did you manage to get out of the house the time that you did?'

If we listen with a constructive ear while a client is describing a preferred future, we will hear about times when parts of it are already happening: 'We would have breakfast together, and talk together ok, a bit like this morning actually, and I wouldn't feel so uptight, and I'd be able to leave the house on time and I wouldn't be worrying all the way to work.' We have the choice then to help the client to continue to describe their preferred future, storing the instance away till later: 'What *would* you be like on the way to work (instead of worrying)?' or to ask about it there and then: 'You had breakfast and talked together ok this morning? How did you manage to do that?'

As well as continuing to listen out for what is working, this can be asked about directly. Having helped a client to describe a detailed preferred future, the practitioner can simply ask something like: 'What bits of this have actually been happening most recently?'

One of the most useful ways to move a conversation from a future focus to a focus on progress being made towards a preferred future is to set up a 0 to 10 scale, where 10 is that the client has achieved their best hopes from the work, in other words that their preferred future is all in place, and 0 represents the worst point.

Scaling questions - a bridge between preferred futures and their instances

Scaling questions are among the most versatile and flexible of all the solution-focused techniques. They can be used in opening and follow-up structured sessions and in the more unstructured use of the approach that takes place outside the therapy context.

In an opening session, after the direction of the work has been set and the client has been helped to describe a preferred future, a scale will typically be defined as above. The client is then asked to name the point on the scale where they are now, in relation to achieving their 'best hopes' from the work. Assuming that this point is not 0, the practitioner will then be interested in the difference between that point and 0, by asking the client questions such as:

- What tells you that you are at that point on the scale and not 0?
- What have you done that has helped you to reach that point?
- What difference has that made? (is that making?)

The importance of detail

At some point, the practitioner will want to ask about points further up the scale, to help the client to focus on small signs of further progress. First though, a painstaking search for detail about the progress the client is already making will be carried out, in the same way that the worker will have helped the preferred future to have been described in the utmost detail. The question that the worker will come back to time and again is '*What else?*' The client is likely to be doing far more towards achieving their hopes than they have realised, especially if they are encouraged to think small. The approach is predicated on helping the client to build on their own ways of making progress, as opposed to ways coming from the worker. To continue to think of what one is doing that is helping is a real discipline that can require a lot of effort, so it is important that the worker does not short change the client by not asking sufficient questions. Newcomers to the solution-focused approach often wonder how many times you can ask the question 'What else?' and one answer is - as long as the client is able to answer it.

Allowing time and space to think

Often our questions cannot be answered straightaway. It would be odd if they were, since if clients had immediate answers then it is unlikely that they would have needed to seek help in the first place. This means that the solution-focused practitioner needs to be able to slow down, to give their client time to think, and to have confidence in the client that they will be able to respond. It was noted above that 'I don't know' is an answer often to be expected. What will often be most

helpful then will be for the practitioner to do nothing but to wait and allow the client to keep thinking. If we trust our clients to have the answers then the answers will frequently come.

Moving up the scale

Having sufficiently investigated with the client the progress already being made, the practitioner can use the scale to return to the future in a couple of different ways: the good enough point and one point higher up the scale.

10 on the scale is typically treated as an aspiration, especially when the idea of a 'good enough' point is introduced: 'I'm sure that you'd like to get all the way to 10, though I guess no one expects things to be as they would like all the time. Where would be a good point on this scale to reach at this time?' This question appears to add to the client's sense of the 'achievability' of their hopes and is most commonly answered with a 7 or 8.

Having established a good enough point, asking next about only one point up the scale can add further to making future progress seem achievable. Asking about *signs* of being one point higher, rather than the *steps* needed to move one point higher can avoid the difficulties inherent in trying to fix things there and then which were noted earlier.

'What would tell you that you were one point higher? Who else would notice and what would they notice? How else would you know that you'd moved up a point?' rather than: 'What do you need to do in order to move one point up the scale?'

Acknowledgement, possibility and coping questions

One of the most frequently asked questions on introductory training courses is what to do when the client says that they are at 0 on the scale. Most important is to hear that the client is telling you how bad things are for them. It is always important to go at the client's pace and for the client to feel heard. If the client tells you that they are at 0 and if they are telling you why then obviously you will need to *listen*. Then you will need to *acknowledge* what they are saying in some way to show that you are listening and have heard:

- 'Things sound really tough for you at the moment...'

Bill O'Hanlon, an American therapist, has written about the importance of acknowledging a client's difficulties, while at the same time leaving open the possibility of change, as the words 'at the moment' are intended to do in the acknowledgement above.

This sense of possibility can be added to when the acknowledgement is followed by a *coping question*:

- '...how are you managing to keep going?'

Coping questions can have a powerful effect in helping a client who is close to their lowest ebb see themselves and their possibilities differently. Even if a client cannot find an answer at the time it can be worthwhile gently pursuing questions of this type:

- How have you managed to hold on (to hope)?
- Where do you get the strength from to get up in the morning?
- What are you doing to get through at the moment?
- What are you doing each day that is getting you through?

Even where the client answers 'I don't know', these questions may create a shift in thinking, however small, in how the client is thinking about themselves.

Having listened, acknowledged and been curious about how a client has coped, the practitioner can also go back and ask about the most recent times when the client was above 0, and go forward and ask about what might tell them they were a tiny bit higher up the scale.

Putting it all together - session structure

An **opening session** is typically structured around the following activities:

- Direction setting
- Detailed description of preferred future
- Scale - to elicit instances of preferred future already in place.

At the beginning of the session the practitioner will pay attention to whatever they need to, given their agency context, which may include explaining about the referral, what their role is, rules of confidentiality etc. There may also be a social engagement phase where the practitioner asks the client about themselves, their day-to-day activities, interests and so on, but typically the practitioner will 'get down to business' by asking the client about their hoped-for outcome from the work near the beginning of the session.

The practitioner will typically end the session by summarising its main points - the client's hopes, future signs that these hopes are being realised, progress being made towards this already - before asking if the client wishes to meet again and, if so, arranging the next session.

There are no new techniques to employ in a **follow-up session**. The same types of question are asked, but put into a different structure. The simplest way to think about this is to remember that, once a direction has been established, there are only two activities in solution-focused practice:

- Helping the client describe their preferred future
- Helping the client describe progress being made towards this.

In opening sessions the starting point is the future, to be followed by progress. In follow-up sessions the order is the the other way around. The typical opening question of a follow-up session is '*What's better?*' Questions are then asked to help the client talk in concrete and specific detail about any progress they have noticed:

- What have you noticed that has told you that? Who else has noticed this and how have they noticed?
- What differences has that made? What difference is that making?
- How did you do that?

The question 'What else is better?' should continue to be asked until all progress since the last session has been elicited. The scale can then be revisited as a track of progress but more especially as a means of moving back to future-focused questions: 'How might you notice that you were moving further up the scale?'

The client's initial answer to the question, 'What's better?' may be 'Nothing', or 'It's worse'. As with the answer 0 on the scale, the solution-focused practitioner needs to listen and acknowledge for as long as the client needs this, while ensuring to also ask coping questions. While accepting all that the client says, the practitioner should also be mindful that this initial answer is unlikely to represent the whole of the client's experience since the preceding session. As long as the client feels that their difficulties have been heard, then they are likely to be receptive to the idea that there will have been some differences, even if these are times that were less bad than others. Another useful question is 'What have you done to stop things getting worse?' which can be followed by 'How would you know that things were getting back on track?'

Ending the work

Given that the work is moving towards the *client's* hopes from it, the client is the person who will usually decide when the work is done. Where clients can decide when the work ends, 3-5 sessions is a common average number of sessions. On the other hand, a course of work might take up to several months since where progress is being made, sessions tend to be spaced further apart. There are, of course, situations where the client cannot solely determine the endpoint of the work, for example where there is a statutory mandate for the client's involvement, and here the approach needs to be adapted accordingly.

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