

# The Art of Solution-Focused Questioning

Bristol CPHT  
Sunday 7 February 2021

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# A true and positive idea

- **People think better throughout the meeting if the very first thing they do is to say something true and positive about their work or about how the work of the group is going**

***Nancy Kline, Time To Think***

# Pleased to notice...

- **What have you been pleased to notice about how you've been working recently?**
- **What else have you been pleased to notice...?**
- **What else...?**
- **.... *Keep going!***

# Appreciation

- **One thing I discovered that makes me pleased to be spending this CPD day with you is...**

# Reflections

- **What did you find interesting about that exercise - in general?**
- **What did you find interesting about the *questions* you were asking each other, and their wording?**

# Very general overview (of SF...)

- **Ask questions**
- **Listen – *with a constructive ear***
- **Echo, appreciate, acknowledge, summarise...**

# Asking questions = listening?

- Questions are ways of listening to the extent that they are responses to what the client said and reflect curiosity about what more could be said
- From the client's experience, the questions can be experienced as signs of the consultant listening

*John Walter and Jane Peller, 2000*

# Developing conversations (1)

## - from headline to story

- Interviewer, interviewee, observer
- Interviewer, ask the interviewee:

*So, what's one thing you've been pleased to notice about your work recently?*

- Then, continue the interview, following this crucial rule:

*Every question has to connect with the previous answer*

*Observer - please offer the interviewer compliments on their interviewing skills & on how they followed the rule*



# Developing conversations (2)

- Looking back...

- **Change roles**
- **Think of a recent piece of work that's gone well, or where there's been some progress**
- **What was it that went well (or what's been the progress)? - DESCRIPTION**
- **What was *your* part in this? - AGENCY**

## *Interviewers*

- **Be curious!**
- **Be aware your interviewee might be modest**
- **Elicit *detail*, about *what they did & how they did it***

# Developing conversations (3)

## - Looking back & looking forward

- Think of a recent piece of work that's gone well, or where there's been some progress
- What was it that went well (or what's been the progress)?
- What was *your* part in this?
  - What did you do? - STRATEGY
  - What qualities of yours contributed? - IDENTITY
- Suppose these qualities were to become even stronger in your work
  - What would you notice about yourself, that would tell you this?
  - What else...? ...

# Frameworks for questions

*e.g. SFBT*

**The SF process as a framework for questions...**

**Other things to think about maybe...**

- *How can you tell I am listening to my client?*
- *What assumptions lie in the questions I am asking?*

# Simple SF(BT) framework

- **What does the person want/hope for from the work?**
- **How would they know that these hopes were being realised? - *preferred future***
- **What of this is already happening? - *instances & progress***

# Two questions

- **What were you pleased to notice about yourself this morning?**
- **How would you know you're at your best this afternoon?**

# ‘Listening with a constructive ear’

- **Listening for**
  - *Exceptions* to problems
  - **Coping**
  - **Hopes**
  - *Instances* of the preferred future
  - **Achievements**
  - **Progress**
  - **Strengths, skills, resources**



**Eve Lipchik**

‘Interviewing with a constructive ear’,  
*Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, Winter,  
1988, pp3–7.

# Some ways of asking a client what they want/hope for...

- **What are your best hopes from coming here?**
- **How will you know that this has been useful?**
- **If this is helpful, what will tell you?**
- **What will you notice about yourself, that will tell you that this has been helpful?**
- **What difference are you hoping that this will make, at some point later on?**

# Some common responses

- **Problem talk – what is *not* wanted**
- **About process rather than outcome**
- **“I don’t know”**



# Future-focused questioning

- ***Suppose a miracle happens/your problems are gone/your hopes have been realised/you move a point up the scale...***
- ***How would you know?***
- ***What differences would it make?***
- **Eliciting detailed descriptions**

# *Describing* a ‘preferred future’

- **Scene-setting** - Where, when, who, what...?
- **Zooming in** - first small signs
  - **Positive** - ‘...instead?’
  - **Concrete and observable**
    - ‘What would you do if ...?’
    - ‘How would that show?’
    - ‘How would you notice that?’
    - ‘How would you know you... ?’
  - **From others’ perspectives** –
    - ‘Who else would notice? What would they notice?’
    - **Interactive** – ‘How might they respond?’
- **Zooming out** – other differences? What next?

# Scaling your learning

0

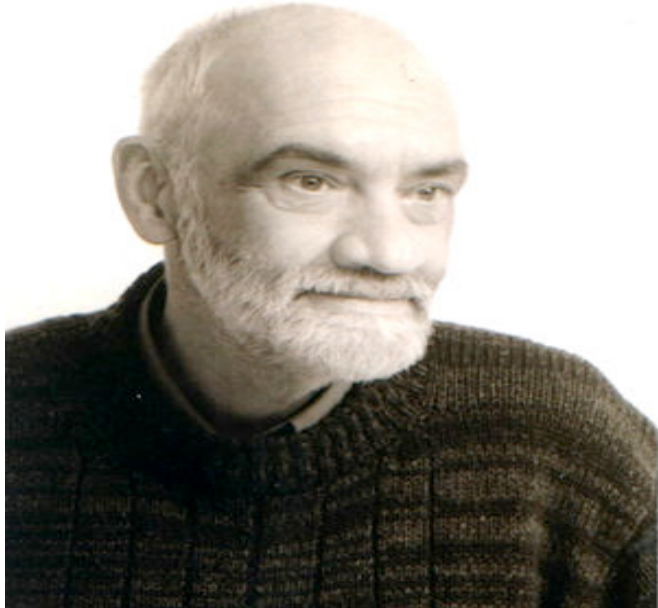
10am  
today

10

All the learning about  
the art of SF  
questioning you hope  
for from today

- **What points on the scale are you at now?**
- **10 things you've learned today about SF that put you up at those points and not 0?**
- **What have you done today that's helped you move up this scale?**
- **What else? ...**
- **What would tell you in the days to come that you were moving further up the scale?**

# The originators



**Steve de Shazer**  
**(1940 – 2005)**



**Insoo Kim Berg**  
**(1934 – 2007)**

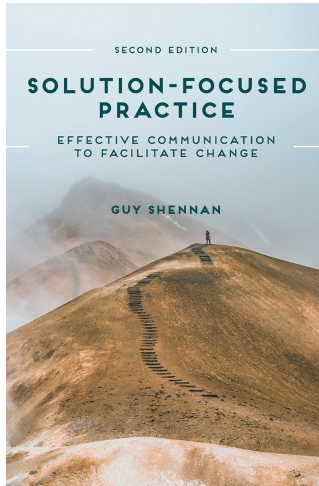
**Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee**

**Any (other) questions, about  
the art of asking solution-  
focused questions?**

***Do email them!***

# Resources + references

- [www.guyshennan.com/resources](http://www.guyshennan.com/resources)
- Journal of Solution-Focused Practices - [free and online](#)
- Shennan, G. (2019) *Solution-Focused Practice: Effective Communication to Facilitate Change*, 2nd edn. London: Red Globe Press.
- Cade, B. & O'Hanlon, B. (1993). *A Brief Guide to Brief Therapy*. New York: Norton.
- Steve de Shazer's four books published by Norton between 1985 and 1994 (*Keys, Clues, Putting Difference to Work, Words Were Originally Magic*) show how he and the Milwaukee team developed SFBT.
- Kline, N. (1999). *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*. London: Cassell.
- O'Hanlon, B. and Beadle, S. (1996). *A Field Guide to Possibility Land*. London: BT Press.
- Walter, J. & Peller, J. (2000). *Recreating Brief Therapy: Preferences and Possibilities*. New York: Norton.



9781352005998 | June 2019  
Paperback | eBook  
£22.99

**Guy Shennan** is a solution-focused practitioner, consultant and trainer.

# Solution-Focused Practice (2nd Edition)

Guy Shennan

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**Michael Durrant,**  
Psychologist/Director,  
Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney, Australia

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