

Using Solution Focussed Approaches when training

Participants come to training sessions with a range of problems that they will want to overcome. It is the job of trainers to help them find solutions for the future and to learn how to implement those solutions.

If we train materials using a language and approach which is solution focussed we will help them understand how change can take place and what they can do to achieve it

If we make training an active process with training exercises that include Solution Focused Approaches we will help participants to learn how to find solutions for themselves

We all need solution focused approaches to make progress in life because as T.S. Elliot wrote:

What we call the beginning is often the end,

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

T. S. Elliot The Four Quartets

The Origins of Solution Focused Approaches

Solution Focused Brief Therapy

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy is a form of psychiatric therapy which emerged in the 1980s from the family therapy tradition in the USA. It developed from the work of Steve de Shazer at his Brief Therapy Centre in Milwaukee.

Since the 1960's there have been many studies showing that Brief Therapy is as effective as long term therapy and that it is in fact preferred by a majority of people.

Studies also show that attempting to understand the cause of a psychological problem is not a necessary, or particularly useful, step towards resolving it. Indeed, discussing the problem can actively be unhelpful.

Problems do not represent underlying pathology. They are just things that the person wants to do without. In most cases therefore, it is the person who will be the best judge as to when the problem is resolved.

Sometimes, only the smallest of changes is necessary to set in motion a solution to the problem.

Although there are differences in opinion about what constitutes brief therapy, the main agreed features are:

- Each person is inherently competent and has all the resources necessary for change
- The role of therapy is not to create change but to discover where change is occurring and to amplify it.
- The view that self and others are essentially able
- The acceptance of the person's definition of the problem
- Crediting success to the person
- Therapist learning from the person
- Objectifying rather than personalising the person's behaviour

In summary - Generally, people prefer Solution Focused Brief Therapy to longer term psychotherapy because it is solution orientated and is aimed at making people feel better.

Outcomes of Solution Focused Brief Therapy which inform Solution Focused Approaches

The evidence shows that:

People were helped just as effectively by engaging in talk about the future as by talking about the problem laden past.

It seems important to have people describe what they want to have present in their lives (the solution).

The main aim of the therapy should be to discover what worked for the person.

The person should be encouraged to focus on what is changeable – rather than being daunted and being disempowered by the size of the problem.

An effective approach leaves aside labels and concentrates on:

- Non Problem Behaviour
- Client Competence
- Personal Strengths

People tend to behave well when treated well and act competently when they are treated as competent.

Solution Focused Therapy adopts the principle of minimum intervention, reducing the dependency of people.

In summary you could say **“If it is not broken do not fix it”**

Solution Focused Approaches

Based on the evidence from Solution Focused Brief Therapy, if we want to help improve a situation we can help people focus on the issue by posing questions that will lead us together towards finding solutions.

Some examples of Problem Focused and Solution Focused questions:

Problem Focused	Solution Focused
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can I help you?• Could you tell me about the problem?• Can you tell me more about the problem?• How are we to understand the problem in the light of the past?• What are the barriers to improvement?• How big is the problem?• What effects does it have on people?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How will you know that things are improving?• What would you like to change?• Have we clarified the central issue on which you want to concentrate?• Can we discover exceptions to the problem?• What will the future look like without the problem?• How can we use the skills and qualities of the person?• Have we achieved enough to be satisfied ?

Solution focused talking and writing

This is a way of talking with people and writing for training (in our case with participants and in the case of participants with children), which enables us to facilitate change. It

derives from a perspective which prefers to focus on the present and future situations rather than picking over the past. It is Solution Focused.

It involves a move from problem-dominated talking and writing, involving thinking and describing, to solution-dominated talking and writing, involving thought and description.

The idea is not to talk and write about the problem directly in the training session – rather to explore with the individual what the change will be when things are better and to help them achieve this.

We want to move on:

from problem to person:	Engaging with the person, not just with the problem.
from deficit to resource:	Focusing on what the person brings to the training session.
from what's wrong to what's right:	Finding out what the person is doing, or has done, that works.
from complaint to preferred future:	What are the goals for the training session and how will the person and the trainer know when they are being achieved.
from being stuck to movement:	Highlighting change in such a way that it becomes visible to the person.
from victim to survivor:	Inviting people to notice what helps them to survive in the face of difficulty.

In summary - You could say that we want to move from despondency to the expectation of change.

Solution Focused language

It is important to think of each person as a resource and help them think constructively when helping them find solutions.

Assume that you will resolve the problem by drawing on the resource

- So far, we have not managed tobut soon we will be able to....

- Although we have not done ... we have done
- Up to now, we have not talked much about..... but now we are ready to
- Refer to problems in the past tense – ‘were’ or ‘was’, rather than ‘is’ or ‘are’. ‘will’ or ‘when’ rather than ‘if’.
- Rephrase – “You are attempting to ...” to “So, you have been attempting to”.
“She is ...” to “she has been....”
- Re-label in a positive way – “not enough money” becomes “we can afford some things”. “some people are not willing “ becomes “some of the staff are really committed’ “ some of the administration is a mess” becomes “some things work well”
- Turn truth or reality into perception – for example “everything’s falling apart” to “so it seems to you that a lot of things are unstable”. “So you haven’t enough time to” becomes “sometimes it is difficult to fit it all in”.
- Try things as an experiment – for example “Let’s try this for one day a week, to see if it makes any difference”.

We are trying to help

- Define their problem in a solvable way
- Generate clear, simple attainable goals.

Training tip

It is a good idea to use “we” when referring to participants and writing materials that are solution focused.

“We can now look for.....”
or “ If we think about....”

Is more encouraging and friendly when for looking towards a preferred future than

“you should now.....”
or ” please will you think about....”

Effective Goals or Targets

Goals or targets

Goals or targets are the incentives, the motivators for change, which help us to persist in making the changes.

All training materials should have a clear purpose to help participants set and meet attainable goals or targets.

The goals and targets of the materials themselves are usually stated as the aims and objectives or as the learning outcomes of a training session.

McDonald (1994) found that if goals were specific and described positively then Solution-Focused Thinking was significantly more successful.

People can often be vague about what the problems are, and also vague about what would constitute a good outcome.

Goals or targets should be:

- Positive – what will you be doing instead?
- Relevant – how will they improve things?
- Measurable – how will you know you have achieved them?
- Involve some action – what will we see done differently?
- Realistic and achievable – how will we manage to make small improvements?
- Clearly conceptualised – have we all understood and agreed the way forward?

The same point is often made by saying that effective goals or targets should be **SMART**

Specific

Measurable

Attainable

Realistic

Time Limited

Training tip

Lists of goals can be a problem for Solution Focused approaches because they are usually ambitious and there will be many problems in reaching all of them.

It is good advice to tackle the most difficult goals first – they will have the most problems and so are the most appropriate for Solution Focused approaches – overcoming each problem makes the next easier to tackle.

Later goals will be easier to achieve and confidence will be higher because it will be easier to visualise what life will be like when the goal has been achieved.

Solution Focused Techniques

These techniques can be adapted and used as part of training exercises to help participants focus on solutions to problems and not on the problem itself

A The Miracle Question

The miracle question can be a useful tool to explore **The Preferred Future** - how things will be when the problem no longer exists. And also what will need to be changed to achieve that future.

“After you have gone to bed tonight, a miracle happens and the problem has been completely resolved, but you are asleep, so you will not know that the miracle has happened.

When you wake up tomorrow morning, what will be different that will tell you that the miracle has happened?”

What will you see yourself doing differently?

What will you see others doing differently?”

Components of the Miracle Question:

What will be different?

What might happen?

How will you know?

What small signs have you already seen?

What will be the first sign?

Who else will notice?

Who will notice first?

What else....what else?

Training tips:

It is a good idea to ask participants to:

- look for as much detail as possible;
- use video-speak – describe exactly what you see;
- slow the conversation down;
- think of the preferred future in positive terms.

In summary you could say that by visualising what we are doing in a future without the problem we are focusing on what we need to change in our behaviour to overcome the problem

B. Exception finding

There are exceptions – to even the most difficult problems

Exceptions often hold the first clue to finding the solution.

Exceptions provide the person with evidence that the problem does not always happen, and that he/she has some control over the behaviour occurring.

Questions that help identify exceptions:

- *What about the times it doesn't happen?*
- *What about the times it happens less?*
- *When are the times that it bothers you least?*
- *When do you resist the urge ... ?*
- *What was life like before?*
- *What are you doing differently at those times?*
- *Are there any people who treat you or manage the problem better than others?*
- *Is there one person who values what you do?*

Training tip

You should take a training exercise in exception finding on to **the next step**:

Ask: *"What are you doing differently and what is it that others are doing differently at those exceptional times?"*

If the problem happens at a particular times, look for exceptions at those times.

If it happens in particular places, look for exceptions in those places

In summary you could say that the best way to find solutions is to look at what is working well and apply the same process to what is not working so well. **If it works here it may work there.**

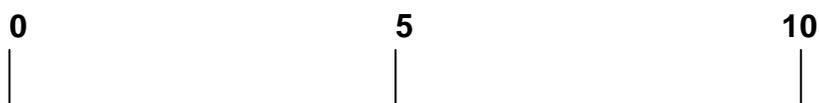
C. Scaling

Measuring change can be a key tool in encouraging more changes. The more sense of change there is, the more we know that we are moving forward and the more we will become aware of our ability to take control of the problem, and the more likely it is that we will do something about it.

Scaling questions are, perhaps the most flexible of the solution-focused worker's tools. They can be used in many ways.

The basic scaling question is:

“On a scale of 0-10, with 0 being the worst that things have ever been in your life and 10 representing how you want things to be, where are you today?”



Few people answer this question with 0. This immediately gives the counsellor the opportunity to ask:

“So, what is it that you are doing that means that you are at x and not at x-1?”

This question opens the way to identifying exceptions. However, in addition, it can represent a clear and approachable way of asking about goals:

“How will it look when you are at 8 or 9 or even 10?”

Also, it is a useful way of identifying the ‘first small evidence’ that change is taking place:

“So, if you are on x, what would you notice different if it moved to x+1?”

Different versions can be used in accordance to the context and purpose:

“On a scale of 0-10how confident are you that these things will happen?”

“On a scale of 0-10how much will other people want to help with the change?”

Training tip

It is a good idea, when you use this technique in a training exercise, to print a scale on the page underneath a scaling question such as “before you start this exercise think about where your skills are on a scale of 0-10”

In Summary you could say that by thinking about where we are on the scale in a positive way we can realise what has been achieved and what the next small step should be.

Some exercises using these 3 Solution Focused Approaches

Participants could:

- With individual children, define the behaviour which will increase their satisfaction (‘What will you be doing when you are happier at school?’).
- With parents, help them define what will be different at home when their child is happier at school.
- With teachers, help define a child’s likely potential, so that realistic goals can be set when working with the child or parent.

Define what the person is already doing to fulfil the potential defined by the above examples.

- Work with individual children or parents through Solution Focused Approaches:-
 - a. Use the miracle question to define potential
 - b. Use the exception questions to register current achievements
 - c. Use scaling questions to define each step towards the goal.
- Deal with the difficult classroom behaviour of an individual child through solution-focused consultation with teachers involved. (Use miracle question to define potential, exception questions to register current achievements and scaling questions to measure movement and to define each next step towards the goal).
- Deal with classroom management problems in a similar way and notice when a class is learning more effectively, what is happening then, what is the teacher doing, how does the class's improved learning affect the teachers' performance and how does this affect the class etc.
- In classroom work with children, individually or in groups, use miracle questions to describe desired behaviours and learning – “*How can we make a happy class?*” “*How can we enjoy learning together more?*”.

Some other Solution Focused Approaches

These approaches can be used in the wording and structure of training materials and to advise trainers about effective ways of talking with a group.

Problem-free talk

for example with a team

What do we do well?

What are our resources?

Since we last met has anything been different?

Goal-setting

for example for a programme

What do you want to get out of this programme?

How will our colleagues know that the programme is making a difference?

What will our colleagues see us doing if the programme is effective?

What will we be doing instead? (replacement behaviour)

What do we need do so that you'll be less worried about that?

Acknowledging hard work

for example during a workshop

*How will you know at the end of a workshop that it was worthwhile coming?
How will a colleague know that a workshop you attended was useful?
What will they see you doing that is different
How will your colleagues know that it is okay to stop worrying?*

A good day

for example with children

*How do you know if you're having a good day?
You are at your best having a good day – how do you know?
What would you be doing?
How would your teacher know?
What would you be saying?
How would your mother know that you'd had a good day?
How does your mother show that she is pleased?
What were the key issues that made our day good?
How do you prepare for a good night's sleep?
What would be happening on a day when the problem occurred but it did not bother you?
How would you know you were at your best?
Do you want to get on better at school?
What does someone need to do so that you'll be less worried about...?
Do you mind answering difficult questions?
(because if you can't answer a question, it's because I've asked you the wrong question).
Who'd like you to smile?
Would it be hard for you to do that?
Would you feel good?*

Building on Strengths

for example with a colleague

*When you faced this sort of problem in the past, how did you resolve it?
How could you do that again?
What needs to happen for you do that again?
What other tough situations have you handled?
What is your approach to finding solutions to tough situations?*

Commitment

for example with trainers

*What would be good enough for us to be satisfied?
How confident are you of moving to the next point?
What would you have to feel to be more confident to move on?*

Coping

for example with administrators

How do you cope?

*That situation sounds overwhelming, how did you get through it?
What do you do that helps you get through?
What are you doing to stop things getting worse?
What will you do if things do not change?
(If the person doesn't want to change, focus on) What will the future look like?*

Getting on the 'Right Track'

for example with trainers

*So, how did you stop the problem?
So, what did you do to turn things around?
So, how come you're still here today?
So, how come you're not still...?*

View of self

for example with yourself

*What does this teach me about myself?
What do I know about myself that I didn't know last week?
Was I surprised by myself?
What have I learned from this experience?
What will be useful in the future?
(If I do not want to change) What do I think is going to happen if I continue to do that?*

Other perceptions

for example with a friend

*What would your partner say you did that time to make it easier for yourself?
Where would your friend say you are today in terms of progress?
How confident would your friend be that you would get to 10 in the end?*

Finishing

for example with a counsellor

*Where will you have to reach for you to be confident that you can't get on with this on your own and with....friends, community, teachers, partners?
What will you need to keep doing to make sure the changes that you have made will continue?*

Useful Books

Title	Author	Publishers
Problem to Solution - Brief Therapy with Individual and Families	Evan George, Chris Iveson and Harvey Ratner	B T Press 17 Avenue Mansions Finchley Road London NW3 7AX

0171 794 4495

A Brief Guide to Brief
Therapy

Brian Cade and William
Huson-O'Hanlon

Norton Books
17 Avenue Mansions
Finchley Road
London NW3 7AX
0171 794 4495

Solution-Focused
Thinking in Schools

John Rhodes and
Yasmin Ajmal

B T Press
17 Avenue Mansions
Finchley Road
London NW3 7AX
0171 794 4495

A Field Guide to
Possibility Land

William Hudson-
O'Hanlon and Sandy
Beadle

B T Press
17 Avenue Mansions
Finchley Road
London NW3 7AX
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