A STRENGTHS-BASED GUIDE TO BRIEF THERAPY

Becoming a SOLUTION Detective
Second Edition

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Chapter 2

Investigating solutions
A step by step model

You see, I consider that a man’s brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skilful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work.

Sherlock Holmes

As Sherlock Holmes suggests above, a great detective should always approach a case with an uncluttered mind and make sure his or her “brain attic” is not “jumbled up” with excess items and is furnished with only the key tools necessary to solve the problem. In an analogous way, a key principle in solution-focused therapy is theoretical simplicity. In contrast, some traditional approaches to therapy have been overcomplicated with theory, whether it is developmental models or personality theory or elaborate models of problem causation and development. However useful these theories might be, they can have the side effect of preventing therapists from really listening to what their clients are saying and to miss some of the simple facts in front of them. As we shall see in later chapters, it is easy for therapists to become side-tracked with a “pet theory” and inadvertently stop being client-centered and flexible. Further, many therapists can become confused by having a plethora of theories to draw from, and this can cause their approach to be a little muddled.

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Many of the leading exponents within the solution-focused field have been very concerned with keeping theory to a minimum and keeping the practice concrete and concise (de Shazer, 1988; George, Iveson, & Ratner, 1990). This has been a similar concern for us as a practice team over the last 15 years. We have wondered as to the minimum structure we can bring to a session so as to be helpful to our clients. In training other practitioners, we have wondered what the best framework is to guide them to be solution-focused and collaborative in their work. While some solution-focused trainers have proposed a completely nonstructured approach, we have found that using a simple four-stage structure is very helpful. For us, the four stages represent a balance between keeping the therapeutic mind “uncluttered” and open and providing a helpful map or pathway towards finding solutions with clients. We first proposed this four-stage structure in the first edition of this book over 10 years ago, and since that time the simple model has proved to be a helpful structure in guiding our own practice with clients, as well as extremely useful in teaching the solution-focused model to novice and experienced therapists.

The four stages represent both a step-by-step approach to solution-focused problem solving and also a model to structure your work as a professional helper with clients. Let’s review the four stages before exploring them individually in detail in the next part of the book.

**STAGE 1: WHERE ARE YOU?/JOINING WITH YOUR CLIENTS**

In our solution-building model, this stage is about acceptance and understanding and making sure to start where you are at, rather than where you would like to be. As an approach to structuring therapy, this stage is about making sure you understand each of your client’s perspectives as well as forming a good working alliance with each of them. No progress is possible unless they feel that you are “on their side” and that you are working collaboratively together.

**STAGE 2: WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO?/ESTABLISHING A GOAL**

This stage is about discovering the goal that underpins any problem or difficulty, with the aim of bringing it alive in vivid and
compelling language. In working with clients, this stage is about making sure you understand clearly (and in their own words) how your clients want their lives to be different and specifically what they want from their work with you.

**STAGE 3: HOW FAR HAVE YOU COME?/ APPRECIATING PROGRESS**

In many ways this is the most powerful stage of the solution-focused approach. This is about taking time to painstakingly explore exceptions to the problem and times when you are able to cope and manage well. It is about identifying strategies that already work for you, and steps you have already taken to achieve your goal. In working with clients, this is about making sure you take time to understand your clients’ strengths, skills, and resources and to consider how these have already been (or potentially could be) used in the service of positive change.

**STAGE 4: WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP?/AGREETING ON A PLAN**

When tackling problems from a solution-focused perspective, it is key to have a clear picture of what the next step is and ideally to feel empowered to take that step. This can be a definite action plan or simply a commitment to reflect or think about an issue or to seek further support. In working with clients, you want them to leave the session with a clear sense of the next step for them, and the clients should hopefully feel this step is within their grasp and possible within their own resources.

**DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES**

The four stages provide a simple structure for organizing a session with a client that can be applied to a variety of contexts and situations, whether this is a formal counseling session or providing support on the telephone or even when providing a short 5-minute consultation with another professional about a case. Following the important “brief” principle in solution-focused therapy that the
therapist should plan an intervention bearing in mind that “every session is the first and every session is the last” (Walter & Peller, 1992), the aim is to ensure that each session is complete in its own right and helpful to the client without necessarily being dependent on future sessions.

Generally, the four stages are developmentally related to each other. You first make sure you have joined with your client, then you establish a goal, before moving on to appreciate the client’s progress and finally exploring a next step. Certainly, as we shall see in Part III of the book, difficulties can occur if you move too far ahead of the client. However, it is also the case that the stages may not occur in a linear fashion. Sometimes you might not start with “joining” (especially if you have an existing alliance) and instead go straight to goal setting, asking the clients what they want. Or rather than first exploring a goal with a client, you might initially review progress and what is working well in his or her life (especially if this comes up in the first session). In this way the four stages are best thought of as the “four pillars” to a solution-focused session. Though you can voyage back and forth through the different stages, they represent four pillars that hold the structure of the session together. The key is to make sure that you have spent time building up each of the four pillars within each session to ensure that the session is complete and contained.

**WORKING WITH MULTIPLE CLIENTS**

The four-stage model can be used in structuring sessions not only with individual clients, but also when meeting with multiple clients such as couples or families. Therapeutic work is often at its most challenging when dealing with multiple clients, as you have to find a way of joining with each client, which may be difficult when there are conflicts or very different perspectives. For example, when meeting a parent who is in conflict with his or her teenager for staying out late, you have to find a way to join with both the parent and the teenager that does not exclude one of them. It might be easy to join with the parent around his or her worries about the teenager, especially if you are a parent yourself, though it could be more challenging to join with the teenager, who feels he or she has been “sent” to therapy and has nothing in common with you. Whereas you might build a goal for therapy around the parental
concerns for the teenager’s safety, it will be harder to be success-
ful unless you build a goal that includes the teenager’s wishes and
desires as well.

**INVESTIGATING SOLUTIONS: FOUR QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

The four-stage model generates four reflective questions that allow
you to evaluate your practice to consider whether you are being
successful and creating the conditions for positive change.

For example, during a session break or in case supervision, it can
be useful to reflect as to whether you have covered the four stages
adequately and to specifically ask yourself these questions:

1. **JOINING**—Do my clients feel that I have understood their
   concerns and that we are working together?
2. **GOALING**—Do I have a clear sense of each of my clients’
goals for our work together, as explained in their own words
   and in their own way?
3. **APPRECIATING PROGRESS**—Have I taken time to appre-
   ciate my clients’ strengths and what they are already doing
   right in making progress towards their goals?
4. **MAKING THE NEXT STEPS**—Going forward, are my
   clients clear about what the useful next step might be for
   them to take? And do they feel empowered to take that step
   themselves?

**SUMMARY**

In this short chapter, we provided an overview of the four-stage
model for investigating solutions to problems, which can be used as
a guide to solution-focused problem solving and a means to build
solutions step by step. The four stage model also provides a simple
structure for a brief solution-focused therapy session or consulta-
tion with clients. In the next part of the book, we will look at each
of these stages in more detail and explore ways you can put them
into practice.