

A

Approach to

SOLUTION FOCUSED COUNSELLINGSTUDY NOTES FOR VIDEO

It is recommended that the tape be stopped at fifteen minute intervals for discussion, and in the latter part of the tape, the skills exercises.

DEFINITION

Solution Focused Counselling is a collaborative way of working in which the client and the worker construct an agreed solution and utilise the client's resources to achieve it.

The main distinguishing features of the model are :

- It builds on the competence , strengths and qualities of clients.
- It pays more attention to the future, than to the past or present.
- It aims to be brief i.e. it uses as few sessions as possible to help clients towards their goals.
- It operates on the basis that it is easier and more productive to work on activities around solutions than around problems.
- It seeks to establish co-operative relationships with clients.
- It negotiates a definition of the problem in such a way that change is possible.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 How do you respond to the idea that it is preferable to spend more time exploring solutions than understanding problems ?
- 2 How do you go about identifying the strengths and resources of the client ? What might make it easier for you ?
- 3 Research indicates that the main impact of counselling takes place in the first five sessions. Does this fit with your experience ? What are the implications of this finding for your practice ?

Roots of Solution Focused Counselling

The origins of solution focused work lie within the Family Therapy tradition and strategic family therapy in particular. The grandparents of the model could be said to be Milton Erickson, Gregory Bateson, John Weakland and Jay Haley. The co-founders are Steve de Shazer and Bill O'Hanlon (who now calls his modified version, Possibility Therapy). The model has been used extensively with many different client problems - substance abuse (S Miller and K I Berg), sexual abuse (Yvonne Dolan), children and families (J Lethem), violence in relationships (E Lipchick), couple work (Hudson P and O'Hanlon W). For a brief history of how this school of therapies developed, consult Cade B and O'Hanlon W (1993) A Brief Guide to Brief Therapy, W. W. Norton.

Underlying assumptions in Solution Focused Work

- It may be helpful, but it is not essential to understand the problem itself. The solution can be constructed without searching for a causal explanation of the problem. This focus on the future avoids the danger of wasting time on concerns which may prove marginal to the change process. When driving it is helpful to look in the rear mirror from time to time, however it is recommended that the driver spend most of the time looking through the windscreen at the road ahead!
- Problems are not fixed realities. Change is inevitable. Problems are social constructions, they are narratives the client creates through interactions with others, especially professionals. These problem narratives can become identity stories which pathologise and deskill clients. It is more productive to help the client construct stories which validate their experiences, affirm their competence and generate hope and optimism about the future.
- Small changes can lead to big changes. The individual needs to be viewed within an interactional framework in which change is a circular process. The task of the counsellor is to create a climate for change and help the client to build an impetus for change (the domino effect).
- Problems are not signs of weakness or pathology. Most problems in living are normal and part of being human. Problems are challenges for us to overcome, and in the doing become more human. People have problems but are not problems. There is always a lot more to a person than their problem. The task of the counsellor is to utilise the resources of the client.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 We tend to think of clients as having defined problems. What part do you

think you play in negotiating exactly what the problem is ? Is it possible to do that in such a way that the problem becomes insolvable ?

2 Do you believe that it is important to project optimism and hope in your work? Are there any dangers in this ?

THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP

The therapeutic alliance between helper and client has several distinguishing features .

- The counsellor adopts a 'one down' position in which clients teach the counsellor how to be effective . Underlying this attitude is a respect for the uniqueness of each client. The counsellor views the client as having expertise in living and having untapped resources. It is the task of the counsellor to find ways of establishing rapport which results in a co-operative partnership.
- The counsellor expresses genuine curiosity about how clients are handling their problems . The client is seen as being already on track towards solving the problem. On the video the speaker describes 'Pre-session Change', i.e. how the client has begun to deal with the problem prior to meeting the worker. Solution focused counselling operates on the principle that it is easier and quicker for clients to extend what they have already begun , than for them to do something quite new and unfamiliar. Solutions from the past may be transferable.
- The counsellor communicates an empathic respect for clients and their efforts to cope with the problem . Clients are given the benefit of the doubt ,and are assumed to be doing the best they can in the circumstances (although what they are doing might be exacerbating the problem and thus require changing). The counsellor expects change and tries to create a climate of change.
- 'Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being' (Goethe). The counsellor checks out with the client that s/he has understood the problem well enough for the client to trust her/him. There is a conviction that clients can and do change in surprising ways.
- In order to model possible solutions the counsellor may use appropriate self disclosure.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 How can a worker learn from a client how to be most effective ?

2 Is it ethical to share personal /professional experiences with clients ? Under what conditions might it be helpful or unhelpful ?

SKILLS OF SOLUTION FOCUSED WORK

PRE-SESSION CHANGE

Prior to the client meeting the worker s/he is asked to observe whether any changes take place in their situation between the time they make the appointment and they get to see the worker. During the first session the client would normally be asked whether they have noticed any changes and if so were these changes of the kind they would like to see continue. In this way the answers can be used as a springboard for developing what is already working for the client.

EXCEPTION SEEKING

The worker listens for those occasions when the client was not experiencing the problem or was managing to control or stop it in some way. Having identified significant exceptions, the worker tries to ascertain how the client might maintain or do more of these 'exceptions'.

THE MIRACLE QUESTION

Solution focused interviewing is an exploration of the future based on recognition and validation of the client's past and current feelings. The miracle question is used to help clients envisage a problem free life -out of which a clear and specific agenda for action will emerge.

The miracle question follows a standard formula :

Imagine when you go to sleep one night a miracle happens and the problems we've been talking about disappear. Since you were asleep ,you didn't know a miracle had happened. When you woke up, what would be the first signs for you that a miracle had happened ?

The worker needs to support and prompt the client in answering the question. This can be done by asking questions such as :

When you were feeling better what would you be doing or what would you have stopped doing ?

Who would notice a difference in you ?

What would be different at home , at work , with your friends ?
How would you know a miracle had happened in the morning, the afternoon, the evening ?
How would the miracle affect your health, your sense of fun, your interest in the things you used to like doing ?
What else would be happening for you when the miracle happens ?

Out of this data emerges a detailed description of ordinary life without the problem . Clients often realise they could make some of this happen without a miracle .

How could you make some of this happen tomorrow ?

EXERCISE

With a colleague try using and developing the answers to the miracle question . It is better to use your own material ,as in role plays it is difficult to answer the miracle question with any conviction.

SCALING

A scale of 0 to 10 is used with clients to measure progress, motivation and confidence.

PROGRESS

On a scale of 0 to 10, zero being the worst you've ever experienced this problem and 10 being the morning after the miracle, where would you put yourself to-day ?

How did you manage to get to that point or stop yourself going any lower ?

Which point on the scale would be good enough for you ?

What would be happening when you got there ?

What would need to happen for you to move up one point on the scale ?

CONFIDENCE

Using the same scale and following up with similar questions, the worker asks - On a scale of 0 to 10, ten representing you are supremely confident you can solve this problem, and 0 you have absolutely no confidence, where would you put yourself today ? Is that good enough ?

MOTIVATION

Using the same scale, how motivated are you to tackle this problem today ?
Is that enough motivation to get you started ? How much would you need ?
How could you move up one point on the scale ?

EXERCISE

Use these scales in relation to a minor problem your colleague is having .

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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