

Solution News

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All your questions about solution focused working answered... or not?



In the UK right now there seems to be an explosion of interest in solution focused working in all sorts of arenas, and I think you'll find this first issue in our second year reflects that. As well as an

example of solution focused mediation in a school, we have an article on applications of the SF approach in business, and a couple's perspectives on how solution focused conversations have helped them deal with cancer.

I am still regularly amazed by the number of countries where SF approaches are being adopted, and also where people are now reading our little journal. If anyone would like to write in and let us know how SF approaches are being used in Libya, South Korea or Peru, then we'd love to hear from you. I'm also still waiting for our first Antartican reader, so if you know anyone who might like a little SF reading whilst wintering at the pole, pass on our web address!

So *Solution News* has reached its first birthday. Since the last issue we've had some dedicated server space donated to us, for which we are extremely grateful. In practice this means that we now have the capacity to expand the podcasts available on the website, which we hope to do over the next few months. As you know we produce *Solution News* in our spare time, and all the articles it contains were written for free, which is why we can make it available for free to anyone who wants it. Thanks to all of you readers and our contributors who have given us such positive feedback and the motivation to keep going over the last year. If you are still finding our newsletter useful, do help us out by telling your colleagues about us, linking to our web-site, writing us a letter, review or article, or cajoling your colleagues into doing so!

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Solution Focused Mediation in Schools

Yasmin Ajmal tells of her experience of using solution focused ideas to help mediate between rival gangs in a school.

Introduction

It was October 2004, two days before the autumn half term when I received a call on my mobile.

The resulting piece of work helped me enormously (as tricky pieces of work sometimes can) in coming up with some useful ideas to two important questions I had been mulling over ever since I first became interested in solution focused brief therapy 15 years earlier:

- In what ways can solution focused ideas be useful in non therapeutic pieces of work?
- What are effective ways to develop a solution focused approach in organisations where therapy is not the main task?

"What? You'd like a mediation session with all nineteen girls together in one room?"

But back to the phone call. It was from a member of staff at a secondary school where I do some counselling work:

School: "Yasmin, there has been a major fight between some year ten students (girls) resulting in some exclusions. We really need a mediation session. We think it would be best to have it before the half term holidays so that when the students return after the holidays some of the issues will have been resolved rather

than festering and waiting for the return of school. We have set aside an hour and a half on Friday morning. Are you free?"

Yasmin: "Sounds serious. How many students are you talking about?"

School: "Nineteen, but three of them have been excluded as a result of the incident".

Yasmin: "Nineteen! What? You would like a session with all nineteen girls together in one room? Gosh".

School: "We are really desperate... [gives lots of sound reasons why it would be a really good idea to have the mediation session]".

Yasmin: [thinking lots of sound reasons why it would be a good

idea not to have the mediation session] "OK. Can a member of the senior management team work with me?"

Once I fully realised what I had just agreed to, I experienced an immediate and crippling terror which I had only ever felt once before (during my first driving test, which, for those of you who are interested, I failed miserably having reversed around a bend into the path of an oncoming car). Thank God for Evan George, my colleague, whose clear thinking formed the basis of many of the ideas I tried.

Yasmin Ajmal has worked for the Brief Therapy Practice since 1998. Prior to this she was a primary-school teacher and an Educational Psychologist. Yasmin's work currently involves running training courses, working at the Practice as a counsellor and working for half a day a week in a secondary school as a school counsellor. She co-wrote the book 'Solution Focused Thinking in Schools' with John Rhodes and co-edited 'Solutions in Schools' with Ioan Rees.

Openings

Friday morning arrived along with the students — including the three excluded students who were escorted onto the premises for the meeting and then escorted off the premises at the end of the meeting. I didn't see them being frisked. Although the chairs had been arranged in a horseshoe the students were having none of this geographical metaphor and sat on two sides of the room. The divide (and the tension) was further emphasised by one of the students who arrived late, kissed everyone on one half of the horseshoe and then turned her back on the rest of the students as she sat down. It wasn't the sort of detail that had emerged when Evan had asked me what a good start to the meeting would look like!

I began by thanking the students for coming. I acknowledged that although many of them were probably very sceptical about how useful they thought this session would be, they had turned up. I felt this at least showed their willingness to give it a go and that they were clearly taking their time at the school seriously. I also clarified my role as someone who was interested in what they had to say, would be asking a few questions and did not see it as her business to pass any point of view about anything. The deputy saw herself as being there in support and also reminded the girls that as she represented the school they would be advised not to say anything that they did not want the school to hear. The group were asked for their ideas about ground rules. It was also made very clear that this was not an exercise in forcing and it was completely up to the students themselves about whether they spoke or not.

The warm-up was an exercise in problem-free talk designed to get them talking together about something neutral and involved mixing the groups up to talk about their favourite music video, the most hideous outfit worn by a celebrity etc. Although many of the students did say something, to most the activity seemed to be experienced as a rather irritating prevarication ie the feedback

told me that as they were here for a reason why delay getting down to business?

This feedback having been duly taken on board, my starting point was to ask whether people were happy with the way things were or would they like them to change? I asked this as I needed to find a way of establishing a common project amongst all the students; a context and legitimacy for asking anything further. So I began with a 0 - 10 scale (drawn up on the board) and the question 'how important is it to you that things change' (10 = very important, 0 = not bothered) posed to each of the students individually. I took care to give each of the students my undivided attention when I was talking to them and ignored any other background behaviours such as loud teeth sucking and falling off chairs. And at that moment of talking with each student, that student listened attentively, thought carefully and answered seriously. The ratings, all between 2 and 8, indicated there was no-one in the room who wanted things to stay exactly as they were. This tenuous link between the students was strengthened when everyone was asked for their reason for their chosen rating. There were huge similarities in what the students had to say: wanting to concentrate on their work; not wanting their families to be worried, and it not being worth getting into serious trouble.

When I talk about this piece of work, I am sometimes asked what I would have done if someone had put themselves at a zero? If this had happened I would simply have assumed that that student had good reasons for being OK with the current status quo, and I would have been curious about what these good reasons were and worked with whatever came up. After all, this mediation was not about getting the students to say what others thought they should, but about being interested in what they had to say.

Preferred Future and Where to Next?

The students were then divided into small, mixed groups of 3-4 and asked to imagine "It is the first Monday after your half term break, you are back in school and things are good for you and good for others" (so that the picture would include all of them). Each group were asked what they would notice that would tell them this, what other students would notice and what teachers would notice. Their ideas included "not giving each other 'the look'", "being able to walk down the corridor on my own without being afraid", and "minding our own business". There was also one blissful moment of unity during the feedback when all the girls agreed the boys would notice things were different because "they would not be able to spread gossip and wind people up, then stand back and watch whilst we all have a go at each other". I would have loved to bottle that moment!

So far so good — and then not so good. You see, at this point I got it into my head that it would be important for each of the students individually to take responsibility for things changing and that a route to this might be for them to think about something specific they could do that would help. So, fuelled by this 'good idea', I asked them to imagine it was now the end of that first week back after their half term holiday and things had indeed been good for them and good for others. They were then invited to think what each of them would have noticed themselves doing during this week that would have helped this to happen. It took one student to sum up this exercise - "this is boring! We are just saying the same things we already said!" And she was right — the question didn't tap into any new ideas. Looking back I wish I had trusted the process more and simply got some more details at a descriptive level about some of the ideas they had already come up with from the preferred future description. For example, I could have asked "If you won't be giving each other 'the look', What will you be doing instead?", "What else would you be doing/notice others doing?", and

"What difference will that make?" Anyhow, I ended the meeting by complimenting the students on their hard work and honesty and wishing them luck in things at school getting to be how they would like them to be. I am heavily influenced in my feedback to students by something I once read that suggested adolescents only listen to the first seven words that you utter. Perhaps in such situations less is more.

Postscripts

1. The students

To my surprise and pleasure things did calm down in the following half term. After a few weeks I managed to talk to a couple of the students and asked them what had made the difference. They said that straight after the meeting they were united in making fun of what we had done. When one person said "oh, we have to smile at each other" (one of their ideas) a few of them offered each other an unconvincing and exaggerated grimace. This got a laugh and then "somehow it just got us talking". Talking so much, in fact, that they had a pretty settled year ten. Not without difficulties, but there had been no repetition of the large scale gang-warfare that had precipitated the mediation session.

The following year (the beginning of their year eleven), there was another fight involving maybe twelve students, some being the same students who had attended the previous mediation session as well as some 'new ones'. I was once again called in to help. This time I met with the two groups of students separately as a starting point. They had some interesting things to say about the mediation session of the previous year. They asked "Are we going to have that big meeting again?" I asked if they thought that might be helpful. The response was "Maybe — I'll come to the meeting - but I'm not going to work with others - I don't want to speak to them. The school say we have to say hello in the corridor even if we don't want to be friends, but I don't want to do that. Are we going to play those games at that meeting

again?" I asked them whether they had found this useful, and was told "Well no — except that it did get us talking".

Rather than try and persuade them to have a 'big' meeting, I asked them what they thought would be useful, given that all of them wanted to get their GCSE exams and not be excluded. They felt 'the meeting' was just too formal but could see a more relaxed setting (it ended up being a meal) as working better. Once they came up with this suggestion, my job was immediately easier - I could assume a stance of curiosity about how they saw this as being helpful, what would be their way of making it work and ideas they had about dealing with potential difficulties should they arise at the meeting. It reminded me again about the value of listening and negotiating. I had done some preparation and thinking with the school about what might be helpful and I was finding that this needed to be adapted in order to fit. I think the view we carry into a situation can to some extent determine who we find. I had met a group of students who did not want to be told what to do and were upfront in expressing their views. I had also found a group of students who had clear ideas about what they wanted and creative ideas about how this could be achieved, which was an opportunity not to be ignored.

2. Developing solution focused ideas in an organisation

I have found that an effective way to introduce solution focused ideas into organisations is to build curiosity around an actual specific piece of work — the tougher the task, the better. This allows the people in the organisation to see the framework in action in situ. From this experience, they may then have some ideas about ways that solution focused thinking might be useful in the context of the work they are already doing.

Prior to the initial mediation session described above, I had been invited into the school twice to do a presentation about solution focused ideas to the staff, once to the heads of year (I was given ten minutes) and once to

a group of thirty staff in a one-hour 'twilight session'. Although at both meetings the staff were very interested at the time, if I am honest I think it had very little bearing on their subsequent work. On the other hand, the meeting with the nineteen year-ten students was a high profile piece of work. It generated interest and curiosity. It was not 'something extra' that had to be taken on board and absorbed and reflected on and translated into the everyday tasks of the organisation — it was by definition embedded in the context of what the school did and was immediately useful. From this starting point, it seemed much easier and more relevant for the school to decide what was of interest in solution focused thinking and how it could be useful. The result was the establishment of a 'peer mediation programme' which involved training some of the students themselves to do mediation work with their peers.

This was a brave and ambitious idea from one of the deputy head teachers who wanted to include some of these students who were having difficulties in the school context. The actual training could form another article, but what has been notable is how the students have been developing the solution focused ideas in their own ways. At a recent evaluation session, the students talked about their pride in themselves in helping others, how it has made some of them look at their own behaviour "because if I am going to help others then they can't see me behaving badly around the school because then they won't take me seriously", how they have been eliciting the help of other students to support year seven students who don't have friends and have even been involving the lunch-time supervisors in helping out. At first these students were teased by their peers, but this has been changing as "they see us taking our job seriously and now many of them want to become a peer mediator too".

Working in a school setting it is not always appropriate and certainly not easy to do 'therapy'. It is, however, possible to use the framework in interesting and occasionally surprising ways.

ASSOCIATION NEWS

A round-up of the work of the UKASFP sub-systems

The general committee last met in February, and are due to meet again in May. Here's a summary of what they've been doing:

Solution News

Ian has drafted guidelines for authors and committee members have passed comment on this. The guidelines will be available for any prospective authors soon. Ian is also taking steps to implement a solution focused peer review system for articles submitted, to help give authors more useful feedback on their work.

Trainers

Following the meeting in December, the group of trainers have dubbed themselves the "UK Solution Focused Trainers' Network", and will be meeting again at the 2006 UKASFP conference. They will have a page on the UKASFP web-site.

Accreditation

The committee has collected together useful materials and links on the UKASFP web-site to help individuals with accreditation.

Web site

The company that won the tender to construct the new UKASFP web-site has now completed it. The new site

should be easier to use than the smartgroup, and can contain pages and other facilities for national and local interest groups who would like them. Get in touch with Barry for more information.

Committee membership

Dominic Bray (chair) and Carole Waskett (secretary) have said that they will not be standing for re-election to the committee at the 2006 AGM. The committee needs new blood, and we would like members to seriously consider standing for the committee this year. Outgoing committee members are happy to provide help and support to new post-holders over the first few months.

2007 conference

It has been agreed to invite bids from organisers in any part of the country who are interested in hosting next year's conference. There have already been expressions of interest from members in the south west of England and the north midlands.

The conference organising committee have cracked it for 2006! Janine Ross says:

The organising committee are delighted to say that

the programme and flyer for the 3rd annual UKASFP conference on June 16th are now complete. There will be workshops around 5 themes in the afternoon - education, health, spirituality, organisations & clients' perception. In the morning we are delighted to welcome our keynote speaker Jos Kienhuis who is from the Netherlands. We have been mindful of the UKASFP's aim to address the needs of all its member SF practitioners, not just those who work in health and therapy. Jos has a background in education and is currently employed in Fonty's University. He has extensive experience in research, management and coaching and is sure to bring a different and refreshing view of solution focused approaches to the conference. There will be two registration times on the day. Members who wish to attend the AGM will need to register between 9:00 and 9:25, as the AGM starts at 9:30 prompt. Other delegates will be able to register from 9:30 - 10:45. The conference 'proper' will start after the AGM at 11am prompt. We look forward to seeing you all then. To book your place - please see the flyer by linking from here or go to <http://www.ukasfp.co.uk/ukasfp/UKASFP-2006-Conference.pdf>

There's been so much activity around UKASFP web activities, with a whole new web-site having been launched. Barry White, our new webmaster, reports:

We have been pleased to be able to unveil the new look web-site over the last few weeks.

It incorporates all those facilities that we had previously to rely on external sources for — so once you

register as a member you will be able to be part of the mailing list (which will replace the smartgroup) search emails, upload files and list events. You can also search for practitioners in your area using our database. We have also made it easier for you to handle your subscriptions — you will be sent reminders automatically and all you will have to do is go to the site and make your payment online — and everything else

will follow. We hope then that the new web-site can be a focus for ongoing learning and sharing between those using a solution focused approach, and with all the resources in one place you shouldn't have to hunt around trying to find what you need! If you haven't already, please do go along and take a look at www.ukasfp.co.uk — and if not yet a member do register and join us!

BOOK REVIEW

Mahlberg K, Sjoblom M (2004) Solution-Focused Education. Cheltenham: Solution Books. 162pp. ISBN 91-631-2943-4 (Swedish edition 2002 published by Mareld, Stockholm.) Reviewed by: Dr Alasdair Macdonald. www.psychsft.freeserve.co.uk

Sweden is famous for the provision of social and welfare services. These are organised on a local authority basis, unlike the United Kingdom. FKC Mellansjo is a day school for children with behavioural difficulties in Stockholm. The associated treatment centre had been solution focused since 1993 and the school was incorporated with it in 1999. Kerstin Mahlberg is currently the head teacher of the school and Maud Sjoblom is on the senior staff; both also work as organisational consultants.

They have written an account of their application of solution focused work in day-to-day practice within the school. After an introduction to solution focused ideas, they describe how these have been used in the educational setting. The book includes examples of dialogue and numerous drawings to illustrate key points. The chapter on 'The importance of language' makes several points which can be applied to work with clients of any age. To Kerstin and Maud, language can create possibilities. So, talk of problems and you create problems; talk of possibilities and you create possibilities. Asking 'When...' instead of 'If...' enhances the

likelihood that something will happen. They recommend that 'Do not...' should be avoided in conversation because events described in words seem to happen even if we are talking about them not going to happen. Instead, phrase advice in terms of positives: not 'Don't be offensive' but 'Be respectful'; not 'Don't be late' but 'Be punctual'. I learned a lot from this chapter alone.

Progress Assessment Meetings with pupil and parents once a term are a requirement of the Swedish school system. The book describes how scaling headings can be used to measure progress and to build confidence through these meetings. The chapter on special needs includes useful ways of building confidence and working with externalisation as well as the idea that diagnoses such as ADHD are 'only temporary'. They describe the benefits to staff in becoming organised into small teams with the treatment personnel.

This book is well written and easy to follow. It is well worth reading if you work with children, if you work with organisations and if you want to improve your use of language in therapeutic situations.

The Solution Focused Approach in Management – Recent Developments

Mark McKergow explains how solution focused ideas are being put to good use in the business world.

Solution focused ideas are coming of age in the field of management and organisational change. In a review of 'business psychology' approaches, Management Today magazine (Butcher, 2005) included SF alongside more established methods such as transactional analysis, neuro-linguistic programming, gestalt and appreciative inquiry. Not only that, they also gave it a 'fashion factor' of 3 stars out of 5 (in joint second place with appreciative inquiry), and described it as 'Growing fast in areas such as performance management and strategic planning'.

When articles about SF ideas start appearing in popular management publications, we can safely say that some kind of barrier has been breached. This might be a good time to take a look at a few of the ways in which SF approaches are being used in the management field.

Coaching

Given the similarities between therapy and coaching (a helper and a helped), it is unsurprising that coaching is one of the areas where SF has taken off in recent years. Indeed, the fit between the desire for efficiency and effectiveness in management and the pragmatism and directness of SF makes this a welcome addition to the

executive coaching toolbox. Paul Z Jackson and I were heavily involved with our colleague Peter Hopkins in designing and rolling out an organisation-wide coaching programme with Walker's Snackfoods here in the UK some while ago. Paul has written about the feedback and impact of the programme based on discussions with managers involved (Jackson, 2005).

The organisation were keen to have a common approach for managers to use as coaches across their organisation. One the basis of 'find what works and do more of it', we suggested that we find out how people there were already using coaching ideas beneficially, and base something on that. Working with some of the more experienced coaches, we devised a simple and memorable five step coaching model – OSKAR.

- O - Outcome, life with the problem vanished, ten out of ten
- S - Scale, from 0 – 10, where are you now?
- K - Know-How, what know-how is helping to get things as high as they are already?
- A - Affirm and Action, what is most impressive about what's happening now, small steps
- R - Review, what's better?



Dr Mark McKergow is an international consultant, speaker and author. His book (written together with Paul Jackson), 'The Solutions Focus' was one of the Top 30 Business Books of 2002 in the USA. A scientist by training and nature, Mark consults to major corporations around the world and has a wealth of experience in working with senior managers and teams in business. He founded Solutions Books with Jenny Clarke in 2005. More information at www.thesolutionsfocus.com

We put together a two day workshop to teach this model, with plenty of time for practice and feedback. The organisation were keen to lead from the top, and the executive team not only attended one of the first workshops together, but also took a lead in introducing future workshops and acting as model coaches themselves. In the end we trained Walker's own internal trainers to run the programme, by which time over 400 managers had attended.

Walkers in their own turn worked very hard to make the programme a success. One particular aspect which worked well was the use of 'jogging aids' — hats, mousemats, cards and other items relating to the programme which were distributed around the buildings to remind people about what they had learned.

The things that the Walkers management particularly liked about the approach included the sharing of know-how being encouraged, and the idea that coaches help others to build their own solutions. The organisations 'internal health survey' also showed improvements related to coaching. The OSKAR model has now been used by a number of other organisations, including Greater Manchester Police and the London Borough of Merton.

Interest has grown, and the recent conference of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council in Zurich featured a number of sessions based around SF ideas. Insoo Kim Berg and Peter Szabo's new book Brief Coaching for Lasting Solutions was also launched there. The great majority of the contributors were still working from a very problem focused perspective, however, so there still is a lot of room for growth.

Leadership

Can training in SF ideas help leaders to lead? The evidence so far is that it can. Björn Johansson and Urban Norling undertook a programme of leadership training (six training days and three 2-hour coaching sessions) for shift team leaders in a Kraft

food factory in Norway. The behaviour of these managers was then evaluated by both qualitative (observations and interviews) and quantitative (questionnaires and productivity) means. The research project was led by Dr Günter Lueger and colleagues from the PEF Private University for Management in Vienna. What makes this study particularly interesting is that a second Kraft plant in Sweden, using the same manufacturing process, was used as a control group — it was subject to the same external factors as the Norwegian plant, but did not undertake the leadership training.

The training took the form of a combination of facilitated coaching — addressing the managers own key issues in an SF way — and training, in how to move to solution-building in conversations. This resulted in the learning being well connected with the work and everyday life of those involved.

The results from the qualitative measures showed consistent improvements in communication style, feedback and information flow. Task setting became more effective. The team leaders integrated their workers more into decision making processes and tended to implement more proposals for improvements, and overall were more comfortable in their role. Subordinates reported a significant increase in their leadership abilities.

Perhaps more surprisingly, there were also improvements to be seen in productivity. High effects were seen in improved (ie fewer) faults in production, as compared with the control plant, and returns from customers were also significantly reduced. This study (Lueger et al, to be published) is unusually rigorous and the many results are still under analysis. However, it undoubtedly shows the overall value of helping people to use solution focused interactions at work.

Performance Management

Anyone who has worked in a big organisation will be familiar with the annual appraisal, where last year's performance is reviewed and goals set for next year. In practice, this

customarily takes the form of an analysis of what went wrong last year, followed by assertions that things will have to change. This context provides fertile ground for the application of SF ideas. A couple of years ago I was asked to help the Nationwide building society, the UK's biggest mutual financial organisation, enhance their performance review process by adding some solution focused twists. We then formulated a new training programme for managers, helping them to focus discussions on strengths and successes — even in areas where performance had been less than satisfactory.

This idea fitted in well with the organisation's existing desire to work positively with people. Now they had a way to be positive and find a way forwards even if things had gone badly. This attitude seems to stand the organisation in good stead — they emerged as the number one 'Best Big Company To Work For' in the Sunday Times survey of 2005.

Multi-stakeholder Project Management

The spread of SF ideas continues into some of the biggest and most complex projects around the world. These are situations where there are multiple stakeholders — different parties with different goals and objective, at national or international level. Usually there's a lot a stake — reputation as well as money.

One interesting example comes from Australia, where the competing interests of fruit growers and conservationists threatened the Queensland economy. The issue — flying foxes, a protected species which fed on fruit. The problem — a media slanging match between farmers who want to shoot the flying foxes, and conservationists intent on preserving the species. Consultant Miles Shephard was brought in to facilitate, and led the various parties into a series of processes including a 'day after the miracle' type exercise, about what they all really wanted. Miles still smiles at what happened next. 'They had no trouble at all in working together to produce a detailed description of how things would be — cooperation started

to break out.' Everyone in the room was surprised at how much in common were their desires, and an important corner was turned.

Conclusion

The various examples I have given above, and many more like them, show two things. The first is the undoubted interest and success of applying SF ideas in management contexts. The second is the way in which the practitioners involved are sharing their ideas, their results, their tools and techniques. In an age where so many people seem to want to make their work exclusive, this seems a productive and honourable way to develop our field. Incidentally, it came to my attention recently that an attempt to trademark the phrase 'Solution Focused Thinking' was refused by the UK Patent Office — perhaps this because so many people are already using this kind of term openly?

It seems that SF has a growing future in the management world. We are currently gathering contributions for a solution focused casebook of organisational applications, and would be very pleased to hear from anyone with an interesting story to tell. Full details are on the SolutionsBooks website, www.solutionsbooks.com.

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UKASFP Chair: Dominic Bray

Following the success of the fully sold out 1st and 2nd National Conferences,
the UKASFP are pleased to announce:

The 3rd National Conference

‘Many Futures - Engaging Solutions’

Friday 16th June 2006

The Gujarat Hindu Centre, South Meadow Lane Preston Lancashire
01772 253901

Keynote Speaker: Jos Kienhuis

We are delighted to welcome our keynote speaker JOS KIENHUIS from the Netherlands - we have been mindful of the UKASFP'S aim to have as many differing factions to its membership other than (historically) health/therapy - Jos has extensive experience in education, research, management and coaching and is sure to bring a different and refreshing view of solution focused approaches to the conference

Conference Chair: Paul Hanton

Choice of 10 workshops exploring the creative use of
solution focused approaches in a variety of settings

COST (Including lunch and refreshments):
£30 TO UKASFP MEMBERS
£40 TO NON MEMBERS

**To book (1st come 1st served basis), please complete the form and send to:
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Preston PR2 9HT, 01772-523252 winifred.leach@lthtr.nhs.uk
Registration Forms can also be downloaded from www.ukasfp.co.uk**

ESTEEM: A Solution Focused Training Model (part two)

In the second of two parts (you'll find the first part in Solution News 1 (4)), Ian Johnsen shares his conceptual model materials he uses when training teachers in solution focused working. This issue: E, another E, and M.

ESTEEM: A Conceptual Model for Strengths Based and Solution Focused Question Techniques

A process involving:

Establishing the context for conversation

Scaling

Teasing out a description of what is already working

Exploring the development of skills & know-how

Exploring experience of greater success &

Moving to identify the next realistic step

Introductory Note:

This conceptual model, ESTEEM, is a rough guide to the process and the question types of strengths based and solution focused work as I understand it at this point in time. It is by no means thorough or all encompassing; there are many other sorts of ways to ask these types of questions and other question types that are not covered that are also part of working in a strengths and solution focused way.

While it makes sense to establish the context of your conversation and relationship early and to round up a conversation by moving to identify the next realistic step or task, in practice the type of question asked depends on the clients answers. It is common to move between the types of questions with the flow of the conversation and to repeat the parts of process sketched out below over and over.

The questions are numbered so that in discussion it is easier to identify the different examples and types - this is a training tool rather than a coherent introduction to the application and issues of working in strengths and solution focused ways.

The questions presented here are of course not original and in my understanding commonly used by the Brief Solution Focused practitioners everywhere.

I have been particularly influenced by Michael Durrant at the Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney, by many other Sydney-side therapists and by a visiting Harry Korman.



Ian is a Sydney based brief solution focused counselling psychologist, he works in a large boys high school, in child protection (as a family and adolescent caseworker), privately and with the Brief Therapy Institute of Sydney."

Exploring the development of skills and know-how: how experience has changed over time.

These questions ask people to reflect on just how they have actually achieved or managed as well as they have. They help to clarify the attitudes, habits, individual qualities and strengths that have been useful in moving along their scale.

Some examples of the types of questions are:

- Q18. 'Thinking now about when you first... (had children/ moved out/ meet our agency), where would you have put yourself on this 'doing well' scale? And where would you place yourself on this same scale now?'
- Q19. How did you do this? What has been important for you in moving forward in this area?
- Q20. How did you develop to this level of expertise/ learn all that/ know how to keep going?
- Q21. Tell me about the (thoughts, feelings or) actions that were a useful part of this?
- Q22. Tell me what sort of good things other people say about that/ you/ your kids/ your family? Where might X put you on this same scale?
- Q23. What else helped?
- Q24. Can you think about a time when you expected things were going to go badly, BUT in fact things actually went pretty well? ...So...
- Q25. How did you do that?
- Q26. So at times things slip a little lower.. I'm curious; how have you got things moving in the right direction again / moved back up to where you are now?
- Q27. What do you think are the most useful skills and strengths, qualities and attitudes that you used in this situation? (Obviously you will only choose one of the four to ask! Being context 'specific'/ a particular time or example is also useful)

Exploring greater or even a little more success.

These questions are designed to help us get a more detailed picture of what the solution will look like, or has looked at times (it is important to get as rich a description as possible; a real and concrete picture).

When any elements of the client's preferred future happen this can either be spontaneous, that is they happen by accident, or they can be intentional; both are worth exploring for difference.

The times of 'success' can be hypothetical, occurring in an imagined future (next week, tomorrow, 5 years on) or real (have actually already happened or still do happen)

It is important not to try to convince somebody that something is an indication of success if they do not see it that way. The client will be more convinced by his own ideas and discoveries. Listen carefully for what they say and affirm and explore their ideas and experience. (Quiet your own assumptions as much as possible).⁴

With 'problem' talk, be sensitive to the grip of difficulties and ask about the picture of future success by saying for example, 'So slowly... as things begin to change as you hope/ as you continue to cope as well or better... what will be happening instead'.

Some examples of the types of questions are:

- Q28. Tell me about some times when you would have placed yourself even a little higher on the scale. Where would you put yourself on your best day?
- Q29. What was happening that made this experience somewhat exceptional/ a little better?
- Q30. What else told you that you were doing a little better... how does/ did that make a difference?
- Q31. When, where and with whom did this happen? How did you do that?(questions that elicit the detail about context and interaction are often helpful, but can seem interrogative,

if not in fit or synchronised with the content and pace of a conversation)

Q32. Let's say that next week you are just a point or two higher on your scale, how will you know... what will you begin to notice that is different, what else?

Moving to identify the next realistic step or task.

In these future focused questions the aim is to encourage both speculation and clarification of the pathway to increased success.

These types of questions tend to fit toward the end of a conversation.

In these questions, you are specifically looking for the details about the next small steps forward.

Some of these sorts of questions are actually invitations for clients to observe something that your conversation has suggested will be a part of moving toward a preferred future.

Scaling even just a half to one point step will generally be useful. Most problems require a lot of hard work and patience and it is important not to minimise this.

Some examples of the types of questions are:

Q33. What will tell you, how will you know if you are just a point or a half point higher on your scale?

Q34. What will be the first thing you will (think, feel, or) do more of, or differently, that will tell you, you are coping at least as well or better?

Q35. How do you know that this step is readily achievable?

Q36. Who will be the first to notice that that this step is happening, when and where will this happen? How will it make a difference? What else?

Q37. What will you notice others doing in response to this difference?

(Note: questions again about the detail of context and interaction)

Q38. What else... do you suppose will be a

small part of things changing for you as you have described/ ... should I hear about/ ... might I do to help?

Q39. Will you continue to... notice... all the things you have spoken about that are useful/ whatever seems to make a difference/ just how that works... I guess I will (follow up... be interested to hear...)

Q40. What else can you think of/ needs to be said?

(A time for our next conversation...)

(Footnote)

4 Recently I had a client's family lecture him about his positive changes, he told them quite rightly, that for him these things were just a drop in the ocean, I affirmed that when just beginning to climb Everest it makes sense not to get so excited about one small step.

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A Solution Focused Intervention with a Nurse with Breast Cancer (part two)

In the second of a two-part article (the first part appeared in Solution News 1 (4) and was written by Dominic Bray), *Linda and Gary Schofield* describe their experience of being on the receiving end of a solution focused intervention, following Linda receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer.



Linda's Perspective

On receiving the diagnosis of breast cancer with secondary infection in my bones, I felt cocooned in a bubble of despair, panic, desperation and fear. These feelings were not short-lived. I felt sometimes alienated from the normality of life and unable or even sometimes unwilling to do the normal things such as conversing with friends.

During these early stages, my mobility was significantly restricted, making everyday things difficult or impossible to carry out.

In some way, these 'normal things' like driving and keeping up with the housework became a focus giving me something to aim for which would indicate my getting better again.

My early discussion sessions with Dominic [the therapist] made me realise I was not abnormal in my reactions. These feelings were in line with normal reactions to shocks such as this.

From the outset, I was encouraged me to share my

visions of where I would like to be and the things I would like to be doing. I was also encouraged me to talk of my fears about treatments and my general situation.

Each session, we would re-visit the previous discussions and jointly assess what targets I

had achieved and in what areas I had progressed towards my perception of 'normality'. Using this approach made me realise just how much progress I was making, both physically and emotionally, without having

to enter into the details of my medical situation. In doing so, I felt that the 'bubble' in which I had been trapped was gradually developing holes.

Whilst my cancer is the biggest nightmare situation I have had to face in my life, I was led to talk of other 'bad situations' I had experienced. One of these, a road traffic accident, had left me also feeling vulnerable and having to overcome mental and emotional barriers to get back to driving confidently.

"Through the discussions I came to realise that I had come through other situations, and could do so again"

Although on a different scale, I came to realise through these discussions that I had come through other situations and could do so again.

Perhaps unexpectedly, my next big emotional challenge resulted from the completion of my chemotherapy. My anxieties returned. For example, my hair was growing back and I wondered if the cancer was doing the same now that the treatment had finished. I felt very trapped again inside my 'bubble'. The comfort of aggressive treatment had gone and I had to try and adjust to the rest of my life. The solution focused sessions once again focused on the early stages of change, and reminded me of the level of progress I had made towards my vision of a normal life.

In summary, this [solution focused] approach focused on my view of normality and the progress I had made physically and emotionally towards that. It was achieved by a sequence of questioning and then reflecting my answers back to me.

Gary's Perspective

Linda's diagnosis was a phenomenal shock to both Linda and myself. We handled the situation in very different ways, reflecting our different characters and the fact that Linda was the one directly affected.

Sitting through the sessions, it was very evident that Linda's view of her own situation developed, through a series of reflective questions, to a more positive stance. This progressed over a number of meetings which highlighted her progress towards her desired situations (driving, housework, etc) she had defined at the outset.

Outside of the hospital environment, Linda was able to look at things in an increasingly positive way. During periods of self-doubt, we were able to reflect on these sessions. This helped me personally as I had previously been unsuccessful in trying to encourage Linda.

My approach was evidently not appropriate to her requirements which I found to be quite stressful. Using these sessions as a foundation, we were able to build on what progress Linda had already made.

Personally, I found this approach, quite separate from the detailed medical situation, to be extremely useful. Linda's professional knowledge (albeit limited in the area of cancer) from her nursing was evidently having a negative impact rather than a positive one. Consequently, the independent, common-sense approach on how we viewed our own situation defined in these meetings was extremely appropriate and beneficial. By structuring our conversations, we were able to identify levels of progress that neither Linda nor myself had realised she had made.

Linda's Perspective: One Year on From Diagnosis

I found the period after my chemotherapy difficult. Despite my hair returning which was important to me and doing more housework it took me some time before my confidence grew. However, despite never having driven on a motorway during the 20 years since my test, I now make regular visits to my sisters in the Lake District. This has only been as a result of the realisation that, having coped within

the cancer treatment, I could achieve yet another goal. Lunch and shopping in the Cumbrian countryside has been fantastic retail therapy. Most women would recommend it I'm sure!

It was only 12 months ago that I was struggling to walk and needed elbow crutches to help me get around. Yet now I have completed a 2km sponsored walk and managed to raise a lot more money than I expected for the cancer unit in which I was treated. My feeling of well-being has encouraged me to participate in gentle exercise. I have always enjoyed swimming and it was good to get back to it.

"By structuring our conversations, we were able to identify progress that neither Linda nor myself realised she had made"

Speaking to the Clinical Psychologist during my chemotherapy we discussed a car accident in which I was involved before cancer. The trauma that the accident caused lasted for some time. Recently, I was in a similar situation and those memories came flooding back, only this time I continued on my journey unharmed and realised I could cope with uncertainty. Because of this I then began to realise that this 'bubble' I once felt trapped in was slowly showing signs of weakening and that I was recovering.

I am planning to go back to work and pick up my nursing career. One of my long term aims was originally to be able to put on my uniform and resume my career where I left off. This, in my own mind, helped me to understand that one day I would eventually get better. I believe my experience over the last 12 months will help me to empathise more with my patients. The discussion sessions led me to appreciate the improvements that I was making in reaching my positive goals. This approach is something that I will certainly continue to use in my nursing practice.

It is often said that when going through very difficult periods in your life your spiritual side grows stronger, this was true in my case. My faith helped me to cope when I felt alone and desperate.

On reflection it is comforting to realise that my life is slowly returning to normality. Many of the targets we discussed are actually happening, one year on.

Gary's Perspective: One Year on From Diagnosis

Looking back over the last twelve months, I have recognised certain stages through which we, as a couple, have gone through. I have approached the 'coming to terms' with Linda's cancer in much more of a logical 'structured' way than Linda, tending to analyse the facts

and not focusing on the "what ifs and whys". It is easier for me to do this given the fact that I am one step remote from it, and not the one having been diagnosed.

This has meant that Linda has relied upon me an awful lot for support and being there to offer confidence. There is no doubt that in the early stages, I felt completely inadequate in this role, as nothing I said or did appeared to make any impact on her. Only after the initial [solution focused] meetings did we have a structure from which we could build on the progress being made. This I did find a tremendous help.

Latterly, I have been finding the situation once again becoming increasingly difficult. Linda has gone through many emotional peaks and troughs though the year, but the negative periods leading up to recent clinic

appointments, have been very difficult to handle. I find that Linda's confidence in her own situation is easily shaken by other people's situations. This has a knock-on effect on the family as a whole as it becomes very difficult to communicate without tempers "fraying".

There is no doubt that Linda has come a long way and has reached many of the targets she had dreamt of reaching. Going back to work will, I think, be a big achievement and, although most likely the role will be significantly different, will mark a return to "normality".

"This approach is something that I will certainly continue to use in my nursing practice"

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Let us know what you think of a book... Solution News has a number of books available for members to review. If you would like to review one of the books below, or another book, please contact books@solution-news.co.uk.

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UKASFP web-site and national email discussion group is at www.ukasfp.co.uk

European Brief Therapy Association web site is at www.ebta.nu

The SFT-L international discussion list is at

<http://www.lsoft.com/scripts/wl.exe?SL1=SFT-L&H=LISTSERV.ICORS.ORG>

SOLUTIONS-L is an international discussion list for those using a solution focused approach with organisations. It's at: <http://www.solworld.org/index.cfm?id=5>

The Brief Family Therapy Center (Milwaukee, US) website is at www.brief-therapy.org

CORRESPONDENCE

We welcome your views and comments on any article in Solution News, the UKASFP, or on any other solution focused topic. Send your correspondence to letters@solution-news.co.uk, indicating clearly whether you intend your correspondence for print or solely for consumption by the Solution News team.

MEMBER NEWS

This section is for members to let people know about what they've been up to or is happening for them, and for requests for help. If you have an announcement, please post it to: news@solution-news.co.uk.

Announcements this issue:

Carole Waskett says "While nothing has happened for the trainers group since the network's last meeting, those who were there know what a sparkling afternoon December 10th was, and how delicious it was to swap ideas around passing on this approach to others. Our next meeting is on conference day at Preston, and I'm hoping that even more people who do training, or would like to, will come and join us. This is very much a loose interest group, where those who want to can collaborate as much or as little as they like. The idea is to get to know each other and learn from each other. We'll soon be able to have our training details on the new website and we can start to think more about what else we'd like to do.

See you at the conference!"



Jim Monaghan wrote "Committee members of Yorkshire Solution Focused Brief Therapy Group (YSFBTG) followed up their very successful October 05 Insoo Kim Berg two day conference on "stuck" cases with two workshops for members based on their

requests at the November 05 AGM. These were "An introduction to SFBT for beginners", held in February, and a follow-up workshop, providing an opportunity to use, develop and share experiences of a solution focused approach. The meetings were well attended by over 25 members and committee members are optimistic they will have similar numbers at future events. Plans for the rest of the year at their bi-monthly meetings include advanced workshops looking at more complex aspects of SFBT. You can visit the group and keep pace with events etc at www.yorkshiresolutions.org.uk"



Our colleagues in the northeast of England also wanted to let us know about a forthcoming presentation by Bob Bertolino on 7 & 8 September 2006 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. John Wheeler said "After Bob's highly inspirational workshop in 2001, BTNE are delighted to be inviting him back to present again. Since Bob's last workshop, his first in the UK, he has gone on to present a workshop for the Brief group in London and other places around the

world. He has also published even more books. Bob will show how brief, collaborative, and strengths-based work can be adapted to work with adults, children, adolescents, or families, regardless of how desperate the situation is and how reluctant people are to engage. With an emphasis on the key elements of effective practice, Bob's workshop will cater for practitioners who work with any age group, so the material will be relevant to any practitioner who wants more ideas on how to engage effectively and promote change with the people they work with. The fee will be about £90 for members and £110 for non-members. Contact John Wheeler on John@Jwheeler.freemove.co.uk for more information.



Edwin Tan wanted to let us know that in Singapore there will be a conference on using the Solution Focused Approach on 17-18 August 2006. The keynote speaker will be Insoo Kim Berg, and there will be a host of international presenters including Dr Alasdair MacDonald from the UK. More information can be found at www.sf-academy.com



Steve Freeman also said "We have also been getting together the workshops and presenters for our inaugural SFA in North Staffordshire conference with Evan George and Roger Bloor as keynote speakers and workshops on coaching, organisations, social work, crisis resolution, philosophy, learning disability, refugees and much more.

The conference will be on 28th April at Keele University. Further information from Denise Nixon at Denise. Nixon@northstaffs.nhs.uk or on 01782 275111 x2111



The newly-formed south-east of England SF local interest group has been communicating with each

other via an email ring and have now managed to meet up twice in central London, with another meeting planned soon. If you would like to join in, email Clare Firth at clarelouise2@hotmail.com.



NEXT ISSUE:

Waiting lists, working with disabilities, and more...

DISTRIBUTION NEWS

***Solution News* is still spreading the SF word around the globe. As at 15.04.2006:**

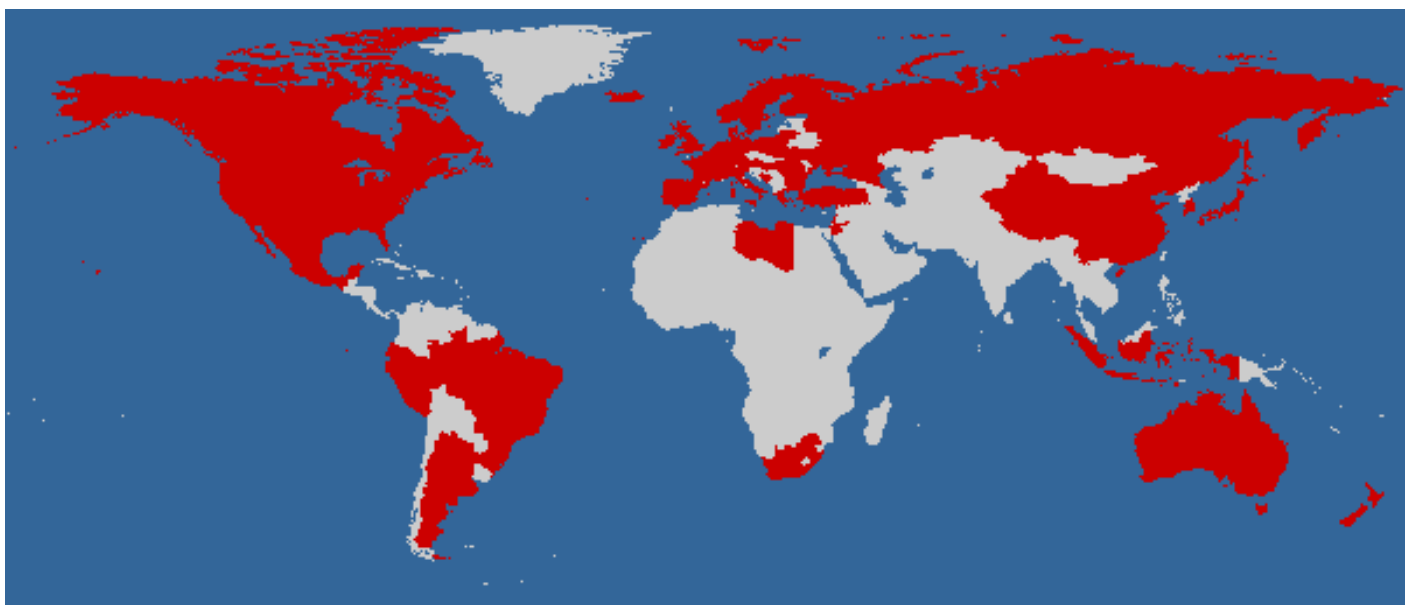
The total number of computers that had downloaded a copy of *Solution News* issue 4 was 990

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We also know that many of our readers get given *Solution News* in hard copy form by colleagues who have downloaded it, and these (obviously) aren't included in the above figures

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Where are the SOLUTION GNUS?



Those good-for-gnothing gnus have gone and left us in the lurch for this issue, having whisked themselves away as part of the annual wildebeest migration. Meantime the mail has been mounting and the questions just piling up in the Solution News offices, and with no helks to help with the answers, quite frankly, we're stumped. And then, some clever soul suggested giving the readers a chance to do it themselves. So folks, this month we present you with questions but no answers, and are inviting you to provide a reflection or answer (100 -200 words) to one of the questions below that takes your fancy, and send it to us at gnus@solution-news.co.uk. We will then pick out our favourite answer to each of the questions and publish it in the June '06 issue of Solution News. Hopefully by then the gnus will be back from the Savannah and raring to answer questions for our September issue.

Here are the puzzlers we received this month:

- 1. Is there any point in taking a break in solution focused sessions, and is there any advantage to NOT having a break?**
- 2. Why are there so many men in the solution focused world? Is it a 'masculine' approach?**
- 3. Is there really any difference between a 'miracle question' and any other 'preferred future question'? If so, what?**

We'll accept your thoughts half or fully formed, so get scribbling!

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