

SOLUTION-FOCUSED INTERVIEWING

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CHAPTER TWO EXCERPT*

FAST TRACK TO BEGINNING PRACTICE

THE POWER OF QUESTIONS

“Judge a man by his questions, rather than his answers.”
Voltaire

Too often we offer explanations or observations when we should be engaging in inquiry. It may be gratifying to display knowledge and expertise, but our explanations and observations rarely empower the people to whom we are speaking. Questions on the other hand, have the power and the potential to evoke and transform thought into an energized belief system which can become life altering. Questions can create new possibilities, new hope and new inspiration which can lead to transformation and higher levels of functioning and fulfillment.

Strength-based questions, when used in Solution-Focused Interviewing, are potent inquiries because they are grounded in our clients’ successes, capabilities and aspirations. Such inquiries lead to an increased experience of optimism and positive feelings. And most important, recent research findings (see chapter 3) demonstrate that positive emotions also increase psychological well-being, future health and longevity.

Solution-Focused Interviewing: Description

Solution-Focused Interviewing (SFI) is a non-clinical psychology adaptation of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. The solution-focused interviewer learns the skills to conduct interviews, and less formal discussions, where clients’ existing strengths and resources are utilized to help them define their goals and develop solutions to their problems¹. This interviewing approach addresses solutions rather than problems by emphasizing client strengths, competencies and possibilities rather than weaknesses, deficits and limitations. The solution-focused approach differs from the conventional problem-based paradigm in that it de-emphasizes the connection between the problem and its solution. It also emphasizes the importance of client perceptions and de-emphasizes role of the practitioner as the expert who makes assessments and prescribes interventions (DeJong & Berg, 2002).

Problem-Talk Compared to Solution-Talk: An Important Distinction

All client interactions, understandably, begin with a discussion of the problem or difficult situation. Questions directed at acquiring details to understand the problem promote problem discussion or more simply, “problem-talk”. One of the core skills of the solution-focused approach is to ask questions, early in the conversation which facilitate the client making the transition from problem-talk – talk about “what’s wrong” to solution-talk – talk about “what’s wanted”. All questions can be seen as either to promoting problem-talk or solution-talk. It is important to clearly understand the differences between these two approaches.

¹ This description applies equally to Solution-Focused Brief Therapy.

Problem Talk – “What’s Wrong” – The Traditional Helping Approach

Problem-talk is facilitated by questions which encourage discussion about “what’s wrong” including questions about the nature, frequency, intensity, duration and cause of the problem. Exploration of the problem is crucial, according to this paradigm, so that the client and professional can come to an understanding of the difficulty. The underlying assumption here is that resolution to problems only develops out of insight and/or knowledge gained from problem discussion. Some helping models (e.g., psychoanalysis) go further and maintain that it is of crucial importance to uncover and explore the “root” cause of the problem. The importance of finding the cause of the problem, for these models, is based on three presuppositions: that all psychosocial problems have a specific cause; that the cause can be identified, and that there is a connection between finding the cause and resolving the problem (Walter & Peller, 1992).

Solution-talk – “What’s Wanted” – A paradigm Shift

In contrast to exploring what’s wrong, the solution-focused approach explores what the client wants to do about the specific problem. The interviewer listens sympathetically to the client’s statement about the problem, but looks for opportunities to ask questions about what’s wanted – to begin solution-talk. Solution-talk is promoted by interviewer questions which focus on client successes, strengths, resources and goals. The interviewer and client explore together a more hopeful vision of the future when the problem is resolved. Or, in situations where the client is dealing with loss, the questions explore the future when the client is coping as well as possible. Before solution-talk can progress the interviewer must first establish good rapport and be perceived as understanding the client and problem.

The solution-building interview can also be differentiated from the conventional problem-focused interview by the positive ambience of the discussion. Underlying all inquiries directed to the client, is the presupposition that clients’ possess what they need to resolve their difficulties. Strength-based questions – all inquiries which are directed at and emphasize positive attributes – help clients become aware of their capabilities and create this positive atmosphere.

Operational Components of Solution-Focused Interviewing (SFI)

- The client’s and/or interviewer’s understanding of the problem is not considered a necessary condition for resolution of the difficulty
- The client’s unique personal strengths and resources are identified
- What the client wants to be different in his/her life – the goal – is explored
- Strengths are mobilized and goals are clarified to provide the foundation for the interviewer and client to co-construct a solution to the problem which initiated the interview

Example of Michael Who is Worried about a Job Promotion Interview

Michael: *Yesterday I was told that I had made it to the second round of interviews next Tuesday – but here is what throws me – Mr Jacobs, the senior manager, will be chairing the meeting! He has a reputation of being very critical and tough on employees and frankly many of us are intimidated by him. Last night I hardly slept at all worrying about this – I even had a nightmare of losing it during the interview!*

The following are examples of problem-focused questions which are likely to promote extended problem exploration and problem-talk.

Problem-Focused Questions: Examples

- *What is it about Mr Jacobs that intimidates you?*
- *Have you personally had a run in with him before?*
- *Does Mr Jacobs remind you of other people in your life who have been critical of you?*
- *What specifically were you thinking about last night that kept you awake and caused a nightmare?*

Now, let's look at strength-based questions which promote solution-talk and would help Michael to see the strengths and competencies he possesses which will enable him to do well in the up-coming interview.

Solution-Building Questions: Examples

- *So you had a first interview which was successful? Tell me about it?*
- *What do you think you said, or how did you handle yourself so that you convinced the committee to give you another interview?*
- *Based on that interview and also similar situations where you have been successful, what do you need to do to come across at your best?*
- *If Mr Jacobs asks you a tough question – one that you are not sure of, but you are at your best – how would you like to respond to him?*

Any of the above questions will likely begin the process of solution-building and goal clarification. These questions will not be very helpful to the client, however, until the Empathy Phase of the interview has been effectively undertaken. The phases of the solution-building interview are explained later in this chapter. But first let's examine the assumptions and principles of SFI.

4 Guiding Assumptions & Principles of Solution-Focused Interviewing

1. Accentuate the Positive

This principle is the foundation of the model. It is at the core of all strategies and questions. Focusing on the positive, what is wanted (rather than what is wrong) and emphasizing strengths and resources results in client change and empowerment. An important assumption here is that clients, regardless of their problems or situation, already possess sufficient strengths and resources to build solutions to their psychosocial problems. Problem analysis, exploring what is wrong, is considered counter productive in this strength-based approach. Our capacity to change is connected to our ability to see things differently (DeJong & Berg, 2002).

2. Construct Positive Goals

Goals, what the client wants, provide direction for the solution-focused approach. When goals are articulated by clients – goals that are based on what is most important to them – there is enhanced hopefulness and motivation to change. Goals need to be expressed in small, behavioural and positive terms. Negative goals – stopping or not doing something – are unproductive and need to be reframed. We do this by asking clients what they will be doing when the unwanted behaviour is no longer an issue. As long as clients can be helped to identify what they want, regardless of the nature of the problem or diagnosis, the solution-focused approach can be helpful (Sklare, 2005).

3. Assume a Not Knowing/Non Expert Posture

Clients are considered to be experts on their lives – on what will “work” for them and on what they want for their future. Adopting a not knowing posture, a posture of genuine curiosity toward clients' successes, strengths and aspirations instills motivation to change, hope and empowerment. All questions ought to be framed from this not knowing/non expert perspective – a perspective which could be described as one of complimentary curiosity.

4. Use a Solution-Building Process

The solution-focused practitioner is not an expert on client problems and their resolution, but rather has expertise in the solution-building process. The interviewer role in solution-building can be described as more of a coach asking questions which identify strengths, clarify goals and highlight values – what is most important to the client. This strength-based conversation instils hope in clients that they can take responsibility for making the desired positive changes in their lives. This approach is consistent with the notion that all psychological treatment facilitates naturally occurring self-healing processes (Bohert and Tallman, 1999).

The following describes the three phases of a solution-building process.

Tri-Phase Model of the Solution-Building Process

Introduction

During my first decade of teaching the solution-focused model, I emphasized the “drivers” – the five primary intervention questions. I noted that students and workshop participants experienced two major difficulties when using these powerful questions. First, there were often difficulties related to the fact that the interviewer did not display adequate understanding of the client’s situation – in other words, the interviewer was not sufficiently empathic. The second difficulty related to there being insufficient clarity about what the client wanted – client generated goals. As a result of these two difficulties, I began teaching the model using a tri-phase approach which conceptualized the interview as being comprised of three discrete, but interactive tasks or phases. So, before asking any of the five primary intervention questions (now referred to as Strategy Phase questions), novices are taught to address two pre-conditional phases – Empathy and Goals. This conceptualization provides a template on how to engage the client in a more systematic manner and has resulted in more rapid acquisition of solution-building skills by novices.

1. Empathy Phase: Establishing Rapport

The challenge of this phase is to demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the client’s world view in as brief a time as possible. This is accomplished by employing active listening and reflecting skills. It requires acknowledgment of the client’s circumstances and adequate validation of the client’s story. The interviewer identifies what and who is important to the client and pays close attention to and compliments clients on their strengths, successes and resources. Note: *Emotions and negative feelings are acknowledged and validated, but not explored or expanded upon by the interviewer.*

Let’s return to the example of Michael, who is worried about his job promotion interview. An Empathy phase response could be as simple, as: *That promotion is important to you – I can see why you are concerned.* To use another example – that of an open heart surgery patient who expresses apprehension about her upcoming surgery – an empathic response might be: *It is perfectly understandable to be apprehensive about major surgery.* Chapter 6 provides an in depth discussion of the Empathy phase of the interview. Once empathic responses have been given and ideally the interviewer has identified and commented on a client strength or resource, it is time to make the transition to the next phase.

2. Goal-Setting Phase: Providing Direction – What’s Wanted

In this phase, the interviewer and client define a goal – what the client wants to have happen. Goals are defined in behavioural, small and positive terms. As the discussion progresses, goals change frequently and the interviewer needs to regularly check with the client to clarify these changes. Asking clients what is it that “tells” them that they can achieve their goals often uncovers strengths, resources and values which result in enhanced determination and confidence. When goals are explored from a solution-building perspective by using the following three steps, clients often find their motivation increases and the experience is frequently transformative and empowering.

Forming Solution-Focused Goals

1. Ask “What’s Wanted?”:

Examples: *How can I help you? What would you like to do or change about this? What is it that you want to have happen here? How are you hoping I could help you with this?* With involuntary clients relationship questions can be very helpful; for example, *What would (judge, teacher, parent, etc.) say is the reason s/he sent you to see me? What would be helpful for us to talk about right now?*

2. Inquire About the Impact of Obtaining the Goal:

Examples: *What difference will reaching that goal make in your life? How will your relationship with your son be better when he improves his grades?*

3. Assess the Level of Motivation/Confidence:

Examples: *How important is that goal to you? On a scale of 1 to 10 where one is minimal – for now you can live with it – and 10 represents very important, you need to make changes now, what number would you be at? How did you get to that number? What would have to happen for you to move up ½ point on the scale?*

3. Strategy Phase: Pathways to Goals and a Solution

The attainment of this phase is facilitated by the ground work undertaken in the two previous phases. It requires that the client begin to think about the possibility that there are new and better ways to deal with the situation, and to take responsibility for making changes which will turn their vision of what's wanted into reality. The Strategy Phase involves the interviewer's skilful use of the following primary intervention questions. Using one or more of these questions challenges clients to begin thinking about how they are going to build a solution to their problem.

The Five Primary Intervention Questions

1. Exceptions to the problem:

Finding exceptions shrinks problems, demonstrates abilities and strengths, and focuses on what is possible. The interviewer inquires about the times when the client's problem/complaint is absent or minimal and what is different about those times.

2. Outcomes – preferred future:

Here we ask clients about their future when the problem is resolved, or when they are coping with the situation as well as possible. The interviewer gathers as many details as possible about how clients' lives/situations will be different when they are successful. The Miracle Question, the most powerful of all the outcome techniques, asks clients to imagine that the problem they are having is miraculously resolved while they are sleeping; and then asks them how they would know in the morning that a miracle had happened.

3. Scaling – goal assessment:

Clients are asked about goal progress or some other issue related to the presenting problem/complaint. A scale is employed where 1 represents the "worst things have been" and 10 represents when the goal is achieved. After clients mention a number, two further questions are asked – how did you get to that number, and what would "have to happen" for you to move up one half point on that scale?

4. Relationship – other opinions:

Clients are asked how someone else who knows them would answer a particular question. For example: *What would your partner say is different about you when you are handling stress better at the office?*

5. Coping – survival skills:

Here clients are asked about how they deal with setbacks. For example: *How have you managed to cope with this (problem/complaint) as well as you have? What has helped you even a little to get you through the day?*

See Appendix B for a brief summary of solution-building questions.

Overview of Tri-Phase Solution-Building Process

1. Empathy Phase: Establishing Rapport
Helping the client to feel understood

2. Goal Setting Phase:
Providing Direction
Discovering What's Wanted

3. Strategy (or Goal Striving Phase)
Pathways to Goals & Solution
The Five Primary Intervention Questions

Using our example of Michael, let's see how a Solution-Focused Interview progresses through the 3 Phases.

Michael: *Yesterday I was told that I had made it to the second round of interviews next Tuesday – but here is what throws me – Mr Jacobs, the senior manager will be chairing the meeting! He has a reputation of being very critical and tough and on employees, and frankly many of us are intimidated by him. Last night I hardly slept at all worrying about this – I even had a nightmare of losing it during the interview!*

Interviewer: *Sounds like this job promotion is pretty important to you and you are nervous about it going well.* (Empathy phase response)

Michael: *Yes it is important. I have been doing this job for 5 years now and really feel I am ready to move up. But, I'm really afraid of blowing this interview – I've done that before!*

Interviewer: *I hear you* (Empathy response), *but I am curious – you had a first interview which was successful? Is that right? Tell me about that?* (Empathy phase and highlights a success)

Michael: *Yes, that interview went very well. I just felt prepared and in control – it was the best interview I ever had!*

Interviewer: *So is that what you want – your goal is to be really prepared and at your best in the next interview?* (Important transition to the goal phase)

Michael: *Oh yes – I really want this job. I feel ready for the additional responsibilities and frankly my family could use the additional income.* (The goal is confirmed by the client)

Interviewer: *Sounds like you are ready and motivated to have this job.* (Re-iterates the goal and Michael strongly nods agreement) *So what do you have to do to prepare yourself for this interview?* (Strategy phase question)

Michael: *Well last time I was able to keep myself really positive – well most of the time – and I wonder if that is why I was able to feel on top in the interview?*

Interviewer: *Sounds right to me.* (Empathy response) – *So how were you able to do that – stay positive?* (Strategy phase question.)

Other questions might be: What else would help Michael stay positive; What is it like for Michael when he is in a positive mood; How did he learn to stay positive; and How would he like to handle the tough questions which Mr Jacobs might ask.

Four Questions for Learning & Reviewing Solution-Focused Interviewing

- 1) What are the differences between *problem-solving* and *solution-building* questions?
 - 2) What are the components of the *Tri-Phase Solution Building Process*?
 - 3) What are *negative goals* and how should they be reframed into *positive goals*?
 - 4) In what ways is the “*not knowing*” / “*non-expert*” posture central to the solution-focused approach?
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* Excerpted from Dr. Warner's book, ***Solution-Focused Interviewing: Applying Positive Psychology, A Manual for Practitioners***, available on Amazon at https://www.amazon.ca/Solution-Focused-Interviewing-Appling-Psychology-Practitioners/dp/1442615494/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1548626705&sr=8-1&keywords=solution+focused+interviewing