

IT IS MORE THAN THE MIRACLE QUESTION

DECONSTRUCTING SOLUTION FOCUSED THERAPY

BY MARK GILLEN WITH BLAKE MAYES

A VOLUME IN RESEARCH, THEORY, AND
PRACTICE WITHIN ACADEMIC AFFAIRS



It Is More Than the Miracle Question

Deconstructing Solution Focused Therapy

A Volume in
Research, Theory, and Practice Within Academic Affairs

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Deconstructing Solution Focused Therapy

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ABSTRACT

The impetus for this book is to help counselors, specifically school counselors, figure out how to utilize a theory, or mindset/belief system, in our everyday work with clients. Dr. Gillen's ideas on how to think like a solution focused counselor were born at the Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC) in Milwaukee Wisconsin.

This is not a strict academic text, instead this guide offers insights and ideas for utilizing Solution Focused Theory based on training at the Brief Family Therapy Center, years of supervised practice using Solution Focused Theory, readings, research, and decades of training others on how to utilize Solution Focused Therapy (SFT).

Keywords: Counseling, School Counseling, Solution Focused Theory, Clinical Counseling, Brief Family Therapy

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PROLOGUE

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

The impetus for this book is to help counselors, specifically school counselors, figure out how to utilize a theory, or mindset/belief system, in our everyday work with clients. My ideas on how to think like a solution focused counselor were born at the Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC) in Milwaukee Wisconsin. Beginning in 1978, Steve DeShazer, Insoo Berg, Eve Lipchik, Elam Nunnally, Jim Derks, and Marilyn Le Court built upon the work of the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto California. My training at the BFTC began in 1987 and I continue to consult with Eve Lipchik to this day. This is not an academic text, but rather an idea guide based on training at the Brief Family Therapy Center, years of supervised practice using Solution Focused Theory, readings, research, and decades of training others on how to utilize Solution Focused Therapy (SFT).

This book would not be possible without the support and assistance from Blake Mayes, one of my former students who is a current licensed and practicing school counselor in Minnesota. His stories and contributions kept the writing process going. Support and encouragement were also provided by Eve Lipchik who, after all of these years, continues to help me grow in my understanding of solution focused theory. Editing and helping me to focus my writing was thanks to Eve, Blake, Julie Holfetz, and my wife Kate Smith.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.—Ernest Hemingway

While this is not an academic textbook, everything you read in this book is based on research, learning, and training that supplements and enhances your understanding and use of Solution Focused Therapy (SFT) as a school counselor. I present on SFT to school counselors and when they take away something that's generally because they are ready to hear it. This book is a one-day professional development training that you can constantly review. It offers a self-paced version of that training. It provides you with the time you need to reflect on the foundation of your work with clients. The more you apply the concepts, the more the chapters and sections will connect. If you are interested in utilizing SFT beliefs and mindsets to better understand and guide your work, then this book is for you. The book also provides foundational guidance to work with your peers on peer-to-peer clinical supervision.

Each chapter includes sections that are brief, focused, and written for easy consumption on a vital SFT issue in your work with clients. I expand on these ideas with research-based practices explained through real-life examples. Each section wraps up with brief *sound bites* or things to remember from the chapter.

So, what will you find in this book?

The premise for learning about SFT is based on the underlying beliefs or mindsets that guide us in our work, not just the techniques. Unlike other

SFT books for school counselors, I first focus on the most important skills, creating relationships, and how relationship-building skills support SFT.

The second chapter is dedicated to reinforcing the skills and considerations necessary to form long-term working relationships with our clients. As you will discover, I consider everyone I work with as a client. That includes students, parents, teachers, staff, administrators, bus drivers, lunch people; in fact, everyone I interact with. This approach lets me use the counseling skills I'm best at with everyone. Also included in this section are reminders about some of the foundational skills because counselors use them every day. These include micro-skills, ethical, developmental, and cultural considerations, as well as basic reminders to stay focused on our clients and what they are looking for, not what we think they need.

Chapter 3 delves deeper into foundational ideas for SFT, outlining six basic concepts vital to using an SFT mindset with clients. This chapter explores the value of being curious while not allowing our assumptions and biases to get in the way of what our clients want to work on. Controversial topics are discussed—like not working harder than our clients, reframing a client's worldview, and the idea that there are no resistant clients, just inflexible counselors. Chapter 3 wraps up with six more foundational concepts to integrate into our daily work.

Looking for techniques? You'll find them in Chapter 4. Practically, any technique can be used once a counselor is comfortable with the underlying foundational beliefs.

Sound bites: Things to remember:

1. This book can be read chronologically or in whatever order strikes your fancy.
2. It is based on research, foundational information, training, and almost 40 years of practice with SFT.
3. Included are three chapters starting with foundational counseling skills, including SFT beliefs and finally potential techniques.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS AND SECTIONS

Chapter 2: Start at the Beginning

The sections in this chapter focus on the primary skills that all counselors use to form a relationship with their clients. Relationship building is the cornerstone of our work in schools and without the ability to listen, empathize, and connect with clients, the application of SFT beliefs is less effective.

Section 1: Building and Maintaining a Strong Foundation

Section 2: Micro-Skills Are Vital

Section 3: It's Just Dancing—Someone Must Lead

Section 4: Ethical, Developmental, and Cultural Issues

Section 5: Who Is Your Client? Everyone Is Your Client

Section 6: Failure

Section 7: Risk and Hope

Section 8: Be Humble

Chapter 3: Solution Focused Beliefs That Guide Our Practice

The sections in this chapter explore specific solution focused theoretical beliefs that guide how counselors interact with clients. The goal is to explore theoretical underpinnings using everyday terminology. Counselors who begin with a sound understanding of the theory can use that knowledge to lead naturally into application and technique.

Section 1: Why Worry About A Belief System at All?

Section 2: Six Basic Thoughts: Bridging Foundational Beliefs.

1. We are facilitators—not fixers.
2. The past is important but not defining.
3. Remember to recognize small successes.
4. There are often multiple clients.
5. Once a client knows we are on their side, make suggestions through common ground.
6. Look for the simplest answer that fits (for your client).

Section 3: Marinating

Section 4: Reframing Worldview

Section 5: This Seems Pretty Simplistic—But It Isn't

Section 6: Get Curious

Section 7: Assumptions

Section 8: Enhancing Client Choices: One Thing at a Time

Section 9: Resistant Clients

Section 10: Don't Work Harder Than Your Client

Section 11: Six More Beliefs to Help Keep You on Track

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1. Small change leads to bigger change.
2. Change in one part of the system leads to chaos.
3. Counselors do not have the power or knowledge to change clients.
4. No two situations are exactly alike.
5. No situation is all negative.
6. Success is negotiable.

Chapter 4: Now What? SFT Techniques

The sections in this chapter offer some specific solution focused techniques for school counselors as well as other techniques that may not be considered solution focused.

Slow down

Miracle Question

Positive blame

Flag the minefield

Scaling questions

Caring confrontation

CHAPTER 2

START AT THE BEGINNING

You can only help people if you yourself have a strong foundation to draw from.
—Richard Branson

SECTION 1: BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A STRONG FOUNDATION: MICRO-SKILLS ARE VITAL

What Is This Section About and How Does It Connect With SFT?

Working with clients requires creating a solid foundation. Before we begin to consider using any theory, micro-skills establish a relationship with a client. Some of the essential micro-skill competencies include non-verbal interactions, restatement of content, reflections of feelings, common ground techniques with clients, and continuity from opening to closing. Once you have a relationship established, you can then begin to consider how to utilize solution focused beliefs or mindsets with clients.

Discussion

When training counselors on the solution focused mindset, I often begin with a video interview with Eve Lipchik, one of the co-founders of SFT, on the most important things to remember when learning and using SFT. The first is to create a relationship with your client. It sounds simple enough,

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but remembering to use the basic skills is one of the cornerstones of a good working relationship. If you don't have good relationship-building skills, you will never progress to integrating a theory, like SFT, because you and your client are not on the same pathway.

Foundational skills begin with non-verbal listening skills. Open body positioning, also known as the SOLER position (sitting upright, open posture, lean in, eye contact, relax) and "yes sets" (nodding your head) lay the foundation and are skills you use every time you listen to clients. Other vital listening skills include restating content, reflecting feelings, and using short, focused questions to help you understand the client's goals. Restating content includes listening carefully to the client's story and then paraphrasing what you have heard. For example, I encourage counselors to use the phrase, "What I hear you saying is..." and then add the paraphrase. This restatement does three things, (1) allows the client to know that you are listening, (2) reflects back to the client their ideas through your lens, and (3) helps the client to determine if this is the story they want to use. Counselors do not need to get the paraphrase correct every time. Listening is hard work and sometimes you miss information, or clients don't share the whole story. However, when you miss something, it offers clients the ability to correct us. This is a beautiful moment because the counselor lets the client know that they are working hard to listen and understand, but are not infallible. Restatements of content can also encourage clients to broaden their story by providing more context.

When you reflect a client's feelings back to them, there can also be positive consequences. In this case, the opening line is, "Sounds like you are feeling..." and then you insert a feeling. Like the restatement of content, it does not have to be the correct feeling, just close, because if the feeling isn't right, clients will correct us. We are not the experts on what our clients are feeling. They are. While restating content broadens the conversation, reflecting a feeling deepens the conversation. Feelings can represent a lot of baggage for clients, so reflecting a feeling is vital, but should be used judiciously. I also encourage counselors to not combine a feeling and content into one response. It creates a dichotomy for clients. Are you asking them to expand their story or deepen their story?

Focused questions can also help a client to continue telling their story. A favorite response of mine is, "Tell me more," and I especially like it for two reasons. I am not interjecting myself into the client's conversation for very long and when I end the statement, it is not a question. By using the word "more" the client can go in any direction they choose. If, instead, I end the statement with "Tell me more about the interaction with your sister," then I drive the client to a topic I am interested in. While this may be the direction the client is going, it is not uncommon that clients will change directions to topics that have not yet come up, and that they truly want to talk about.

Another foundational skill is common ground. Creating common ground with a client is something I encourage counselors to use, especially when they hear a client talking about a topic as if they are the only person going through a particular issue. For example, I work with a lot of school-age children and often they say they are struggling to make friends. A common ground statement includes an opening statement and a type of paraphrase that provides support for their situation and lets them know that they are not the only ones dealing with this issue; in fact, others have dealt with it successfully. In the case of friendship, a common ground statement might be “I have worked with a lot of other third graders who have told me that making friends is hard work and sometimes doesn’t always go as they hoped or planned.” My third-grade clients are much more likely to listen to what other third-graders have told me and how they have dealt with the issue than what I think they ought to do. After all, what does some grown-up know about the world of a third-grader?

Foundational skills are used constantly and provide the framework to add the theoretical beliefs, in the case of this book, solution focused counseling.

Sound Bites: Things to Remember From This Section

1. Connecting with clients is vital to create a working relationship.
2. Clients know we are listening when we use foundational skills, including purposeful non-verbal communication, like open posture and “yes sets.”
3. We reinforce our relationship with clients when we use verbal communication skills like restating content, reflecting feelings, using minimal questions, and creating common ground. Each of these skills reinforces that the client is the primary focus, and the session depends upon them.

SECTION 2: IT’S JUST DANCING—SOMEONE MUST LEAD

Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow. Don’t worry about what you don’t know. Life is a dance; you learn as you go. —John Michael Montgomery

What Is This Section About and How Does It Connect With SFT?

Working with clients is like dancing. The client leads and the counselor must determine the client’s style and tempo of the dance. Then, like any good partner, the counselor changes the dance ever so slightly to shift or reframe the client’s view of the world. SFT is based upon the client being the expert on themselves.

Discussion

The dance analogy is especially germane because when two people are doing the same dance, it's easier to work together. The challenge is, who's leading? Adept and nimble counselors shift from their preferred dance to determine what dance the client is doing. They do this by utilizing foundational micro-skills to learn the dance steps, tempo, and music that the client hears. Counselors know that they are getting closer to the client's dance when the client engages and explores issues that are important to them.

The most important skill to help counselors learn their client's dance is to slow down. Counselors need to be purposeful as they quickly shuffle ideas, listen, and process information. In [Eve Lipchik's \(2002\)](#) book *Beyond Technique in Solution Focused Therapy* she called this parallel thinking. Parallel thinking includes multi-level processing; the ability to listen to the client while considering how to take the next steps to stay with the client.

As discussed in the previous section, a vital skill is to be well-versed in basic micro-skills. Restating what the client is saying, reflecting on what they might be feeling, listening, and hearing what clients are saying all leads to a more robust relationship with the client. This deeper relationship provides the client with an opportunity to explore their issues more fully.

Some moments require that you change the pace of the dance and cognitive dissonance can be key. A client may say something that conflicts with their actions, creating dissonance. At those moments, I stop the dance and confront the shift. I am curious about what the client has shared. I need to provide opportunities for clients to consider what I have said and respond. Then the dance continues, but with a slightly different tempo.

One of the most common counselor speed bumps is insisting that the client dance to your tune instead of taking the time and effort to learn the client's dance. Pushing ahead too quickly, making assumptions about clients, and not being in the moment with a client all lead to a diminished connection and relationship. A tip-off for counselors that they are relying too much on their dance is when they view the clients as resistant.

A Brief Story

A few years ago my wife and I took ballroom dance lessons. Each week, we would join about a dozen other people to go over basic dance steps and attempt to connect them with the music. My wife is a musician by training, so she quickly grasped the connection between step patterns and musical tempo. On the other hand, I found that while I could memorize the step patterns, I struggled to make the leap, connecting them with the tempo of the music. At one point near our final lesson, we were dancing together