Chapter Two

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 that can become life-altering. Questions can create new possibilities, new hope and new inspiration that 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

The solution-focused interviewer learns the skills to conduct interviews and discussions in which clients’ existing strengths and resources are utilized to help them define their goals and develop solutions
to their problems. 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 the role of the practitioner as the expert who makes assessments and prescribes interventions (De Jong & Berg, 2008).

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

All client interactions, understandably, begin with a discussion of the problem or difficult situation. However, questions directed at acquiring details to gain an understanding of 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 that 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 promoting either problem talk or solution talk. It is important to understand clearly the differences between these two approaches.

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

Problem talk is facilitated by questions that encourage expansion on “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 develops solely out of insight 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 con-

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1 This description applies equally to solution-focused brief therapy.
nection 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 of the problem, but looks for opportunities to ask questions about what’s wanted in order to begin solution talk. Solution talk is promoted by interviewer questions that focus on client successes, strengths, resources, and goals. The interviewer and client explore together a more hopeful vision of a future in which the problem is resolved. In situations where the client is dealing with irreparable loss, the questions explore a future in which 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 the 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 that 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)**

- We do not consider the client’s or interviewer’s understanding of the problem a necessary condition for the resolution of the difficulty.
- We identify the client’s unique personal strengths and resources.
- We explore what the client wants to be different in his or her life – the goal.
- We mobilize strengths and clarify goals to provide the foundation for the interviewer and client to co-construct a solution to the problem that initiated the interview.

**Example: Michael’s 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
Solution-Focused Interviewing

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 about losing it during the interview!

The following are examples of problem-focused questions that 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 that promote solution talk and would help Michael to see the strengths and competencies he possesses that will enable him to do well in the upcoming interview.

Solution-Building Questions: Examples

• So you had a first interview that was successful! Can you tell me more 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 similar situations in which you have been successful, what do you need to do to come across at your best in the upcoming interview?
• If Mr Jacobs asks you a tough question – one that you are not sure how to answer, 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.
Guiding Assumptions and Principles of Solution-Focused Interviewing

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 situations, already possess sufficient strengths and resources to build solutions to their psychosocial problems. Problem analysis, exploring what is wrong, is considered counterproductive in this strength-based approach. Our capacity to change is connected to our ability to see things differently (De Jong & Berg, 2008).

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).

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 towards 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 that could be described as one of complimentary curiosity.
Solution-Focused Interviewing

Use a Solution-Building Process

The solution-focused practitioner need not be an expert on client problems and their resolution, but must have acquired expertise in the solution-building process. The interviewer’s role in solution building can be described as that of a coach asking questions that identify strengths, clarify goals, and highlight values – things that are most important to the client. The 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 (Bohart & Tallman, 1999).

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

Tri-Phase Model of the Solution-Building Process

During my first decade of teaching the solution-focused model, I emphasized the “drivers” – the five primary intervention questions presented later in this chapter. I noted, however, 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 that conceptualized the interview as being composed of three discrete, but interactive, tasks or phases. I now emphasize the importance of demonstrating empathy to the client before moving into the Goal-Setting (e.g., “What do you want?”) and Goal-Striving Phase (“What are your ideas of how to get there?”) phases and asking any of the five primary intervention questions. This conceptualization provides a template for engaging the client in a more systematic manner and its adoption has resulted in more rapid acquisition of solution-building skills by novices.

Empathy Phase (1): 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 the client on perceived strengths, successes, and resources. Note: Emotions and negative feelings are acknowledged and validated, but not explored or expanded upon by the interviewer.

In the case of Michael, who is worried about his job promotion interview, an empathy-phase response could be as simple as “This 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 5 provides an in-depth discussion of the empathy phase of the interview. Once the interviewer has given empathic responses and identified and commented on client strengths or resources, it is time to make the transition to the next phase.

**Goal-Setting Phase (2): 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 small, behavioural, 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 that 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 can help you with this?” With involuntary clients, relationship questions can be very helpful. For example, “What would (the judge, teacher, parent, etc.) say is the reason she sent you
to see me?” “What would she think it 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:

Examples: “How important is that goal to you? On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 represents minimal importance (for now you can live with the status quo) and 10 represents great importance (you need to make significant progress towards achieving the goal now), what number would you assign that goal?” “How did you get to that number?” “Can you think of anything that would increase your motivation to achieve that goal by one half-point on the scale?”

Goal-Striving Phase\(^2\) (3): Determining How to Attain the Goal

The attainment of this phase is facilitated by the groundwork 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 that will turn his or her vision of what’s wanted into reality. The goal-striving (and often goal-setting) 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 Primary Intervention Questions**

1. Exceptions – exceptions to the problem:

Finding exceptions shrinks problems, demonstrates abilities and strengths, and focuses on what is possible. The interviewer inquires

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\(^2\) This third phase was initially called Strategy.
about the times when the client’s problem or 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 or 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:

We ask clients about their progress towards achieving the goal or their motivation to achieve the goal. We can employ a scale where 1 represents the worst things have been, and 10 represents when the goal is achieved, or where 1 represents very low motivation to reach the goal and 10 represents maximum motivation to reach it. After clients mention a number, we ask two further questions: “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:

Here we ask clients 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 we ask clients about how they deal with setbacks. For example, “How have you managed to cope with this (problem or complaint) as well as you have?” or “What has helped you even a little to get through the day?”

Overview

*Empathy Phase (1)*

Helping the client to feel understood
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Goal-Setting Phase (2)
Providing direction

Goal-Striving Phase (3)
Beginning with client’s ideas

Using our client Michael, let’s see how a solution-focused interview progresses through the three 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 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 about losing it during the interview!

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

MICHAEL: Yes it is important. I’ve been doing this job for five years now and really feel I’m 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’m curious – you had a first interview that was successful. Is that right? Can you tell me about that? *(Empathy phase and highlighting 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 in control in the next interview? *(Important transition to the goal-setting 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 client confirms the goal.)*

INTERVIEWER: Sounds like you’re both ready and motivated to have this job. *(Reiterates the goal and Michael strongly nods agreement.)* So what do you have to do to prepare yourself for this interview? *(Goal-striving 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? *(Goal-striving phase question)*
Other questions might be “What would help you stay positive?” “What is it like for you when you are in a positive mood?” “How did you learn to stay positive?” or “How would you like to handle the tough questions that Mr Jacobs might ask?”

This completes our brief introduction to SFI. The remainder of the manual may be read sequentially, or readers may pick and choose from the following chapters according to what is most relevant to their needs. Part Two of the manual provides detailed information about how to use the tri-phase model in solution-focused interviewing.