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## An Overview of Solution-Focused Therapy

*“Man’s mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.”*

—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

Working with couples in solution-focused therapy (SFT) is little different from working with individuals on the same basis. The process is the same—namely, an emphasis on the client’s preferred future as opposed to the problem that led to therapy. What differs is the construction of the conversation. Conducting conversations based on client desires, strengths, and resources with two people involved in a romantic relationship can sometimes be challenging. How can you have a conversation about desires, strengths, and resources if one of the two parties feels hurt or has no interest in participating? Addressing this challenge is one of the reasons for writing this book. SFT with couples requires the therapist to keep the discussion targeted squarely on solutions—and to avoid any distractions related to the couple’s problem story.

The information in this chapter includes a brief review of the guiding tenets of SFT. Whether you are new to solution-focused (SF) ideas or an expert in this field, reviewing the basics before exploring applications in couple’s therapy is appropriate.

## **SOLUTION-FOCUSED TENETS**

SFT was developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (de Shazer et al., 2007). Their approach built on the work of the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California, which in turn drew on Wittgensteinian philosophy and Buddhist principles (de Shazer et al., 2007). As outlined in the book, *More than Miracles: The State of the Art of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*, an SF practice adheres to the key tenets that follow.

### **If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It**

If the client does not report something to be a problem, or if they describe a problem they've solved, no further intervention is required. This may seem basic, even obvious, but there are therapeutic approaches that don't follow this principle. When I was new to SFT, I was working at a community mental health center providing in-home family therapy. One of the requirements of the job was participating in weekly clinical supervision meetings with the team of practitioners and supervisors. My colleagues in the group practiced traditional, problem-focused approaches to therapy, and often questioned my SF methods. A frequent topic in our staff meetings was the idea of seeing clients for "maintenance," or developing strategies that would facilitate the client "growth." Although these are appropriate ideas from a problem-focused perspective, the thought that clients need to continue therapy for maintenance and growth is totally incongruent with SFT.

### **If It Works, Do More of It**

One of the ideas that most appeals to me about SFT is the presumption that everyone is doing something well in their lives. This simple belief communicates hope, respect, and optimism to the client. It is rooted in the idea that no matter how serious a problem may be or how long the client has struggled with it, there must be something that person is doing well in their lives, some inherent trait that can be brought to bear to accomplish a positive change. Some years ago, I was conducting a group for parents of children involved in the local county's drug program. On the first night of the program, the group members introduced

themselves, offering information about their occupations and details of their family. One mother identified herself as a local high school teacher who worked with the school's most difficult children. She said that she was in the group because her own children did not follow her rules at home, and she was clearly upset by it. When another parent asked how a mother was able to get the kids in her classroom to listen to her, the mother's demeanor changed immediately. She explained the system that she used in her classroom and how effective it was for her. Several of the other parents began taking notes, believing clearly that this woman was the one who knew how to motivate teens, but she simply forgot to take those skills home with her. By the end of the meeting, the mother had created a plan to use her classroom skills at home with her own kids. She'd come to the group stressed and frustrated, but she'd also come carrying the solution. She just didn't realize it. In identifying for herself the things she does well and giving herself permission to do more of those things, she was able to develop an effective solution to a problem she'd been struggling with for sometime.

### **If It's Not Working, Do Something Different**

Please note the word *different*, not *better*. This is an important distinction to understand this tenet of SFT. A common misconception of this approach is that it is *problem solving*. On the contrary, it is *solution building*, and a solution is only a solution if it works (de Shazer et al., 2007). This may seem obvious, but many people repeat the behaviors that don't work simply because it's the way they were taught or the way they've always done things. This tenet asks the therapist to consider efficacy. If a task is not effective then there's no reason to continue with it. Other options should be explored.

This idea is very different from the thinking of practitioners who operate from other theoretical perspectives. For example, in my clinical staff meetings at the community center, one of the regular procedures was reviewing interventions that had been developed by the therapists for their clients' families. Each therapist would present a case summary and outline tasks developed in the previous sessions. It was common that the group would offer feedback to the presenting therapist without considering the most important question: Did the intervention work? There

seemed to be more concern into how “creative” the intervention was or how “right” it seemed. But from the SF perspective, if the intervention is not effective then it should be discontinued. It’s just that simple.

### **Small Steps Can Lead to Big Changes**

It is widely accepted that problems can snowball, that is, they can start off small and grow bigger with time. Solutions can behave in the same way, although that fact is not as widely accepted. This is what makes practicing SFT so rewarding for me. More often than not, people come into therapy with a problem they’ve been wrestling with for a long time. They come with a hope—but not often with the belief—that the problem will be overcome. If at the end of the session, often the first session, a simple task is given to make things slightly better then the confidence can be built. An emphasis on moving slowly in simple steps makes a future resolution seem more achievable. The growth of hope is a common result.

### **Solution Is Not Necessarily Directly Related to the Problem**

While working at the community center, one of my supervisors insisted that for a therapist’s intervention to be effective, it must be directly related to the problem, and therefore, a thorough examination of the problem is required. SFT takes a different view—and very little or no time is spent exploring the problem (de Shazer et al., 2007). SFT tosses the traditional problem/solution approach out the window and begins by identifying how the clients’ lives would look without the problem (de Shazer et al., 2007). Once this has been established, a plan to create a life without the problem can be developed using the client’s own skills and resources. More often than not, the solutions developed aren’t directly related to the problem.

Once I worked with a business woman who was experiencing tremendous stress at work. She was a high-ranking executive who had previously enjoyed her job, but was now dealing with a new boss and having a hard time with new demands that were suddenly being placed on her. Thinking about her situation from the perspective of my former supervisor, a solution might have been developed that was related directly to her work or her relationship with the new boss. Instead, after



a careful examination of how her life would look without a problem, a potential solution became clear.

She used her own skills and past successes to develop a strategy that proved to be quite effective for her, yet was not directly related to her job situation. Instead of focusing on somehow fixing the relationship she had with her boss she decided to focus on her family. She began to take time each night to spend time with her kids and husband. Often times as few as 15 minutes, and make sure she shared a few moments of what she called, “smiles.” Almost immediately this simple strategy allowed her to enjoy her job.

### **The Language of Solution Development Is Different From the Language of Problem Description**

SF practice differs from other therapeutic approaches in its use of solution building rather than problem solving. The language of solution building is positive and forward-looking, whereas the language of problem solving is negative and backward-looking (George, Iveson, & Ratner, 2006). Rather than delving into the past problem, SFT asks that the clients look ahead to what their lives will be like when the problem is behind them—instead of sitting in traffic cursing the roadblock ahead, visualize the open road that lays beyond it.

## **SOLUTION BUILDING WITH COUPLES**

Understanding what it means to build solutions and how to use the solution-building language is crucial in using SFT with couples. The differences between solution building and problem solving can be subtle, but they have a significant impact on the therapeutic conversation. Keeping conversations centered on solutions is challenging with couples, but it is the clinician’s responsibility to ask questions that keep the conversation from dissolving into problem talk. Problem talk leads to sessions spent arguing, debating, and yelling—all of the negatives that led the couple to seek help in the first place. By spending time building solutions, the therapist can both keep the conversation moving in a productive manner and avoid time spent defusing arguments.

In the book *Interviewing for Solutions*, Peter Dejong and Insoo Kim Berg (2002) define the over-arching ideas of solution building. Here, I'd like to focus on solution building as a conversation, and on the tools required to have such a conversation with couples. SF questions are designed to help couples do just three things: (1) identify a preferred future; (2) shift from a problem orientation to a solution orientation; and (3) identify the steps that are required to create the identified preferred future. That's the simplicity of SFT.

The solution-building process is about creating what is most desired by the couple, and not about problem solving. Repeatedly, couples come into therapy not agreeing on the origins of the problem that led them there. This makes problem solving difficult—the first task becomes getting both of them on the same page about the problem. Even if a couple can agree that they are coming to therapy because, for example, one of the partners has been discovered to be having an affair, they may never agree on the origins of the problem that led to the affair. Such debate can go on and on and lead nowhere. In contrast, I've noticed that when you ask a couple about their desires for the relationship, the conversation goes in a much different direction.

Couples often come to my office with the assumption that I'm going to be interested in the origins of their problem, and that my understanding of the origins will be essential in helping them. This may lead one or both of the partners to want to explain the problem from their individual perspective. As I write this, I cannot think of a single instance of a couple recounting their problem story to me with any unanimity. In fact, the perspectives are so drastically divergent that I find myself wondering whether the two parties are in the same relationship. Couples who assume that I will be interested in their problem story are often surprised to learn that I'm interested in something entirely different—I ask questions about the things they want to happen in their relationship in the future without the problem they're facing now. Interestingly, the answers I hear always fall into one of two categories. The first is an answer that's exactly the same for both parties. Although they may have been in complete disagreement about the origin of their problem, they are in complete agreement about their hopes for the future: both express the desire for a loving relationship, more intimacy, and so on. The second kind of

answer involves hopes for the future that are expressed differently by the partners, but are agreeable to both. For example, one person might say, “I wish there could be more intimacy and better communication in our future relationship.” Although this may not be exactly what the other partner is hoping for, he or she will nonetheless express a willingness to work toward it. At times, both the partners will list things they are hoping for, which are also agreeable to the other partner. The process of discovering what the couple collectively wants allows solution building to begin. That’s all solution building is—using the client’s language to identify the “details of a preferred future, and building a world that includes those details.” Although it is simple to express, the process is hard to execute. It requires a special set of skills to prevent the problem talk from interrupting solution building, and it requires the practitioners to be courageous enough to ask questions they are curious about, but wise enough to know the difference between what is their business and what is not.

### **First Principles**

As we’ve seen, the SF process is simple. However, there is difficulty in understanding the difference between information that is our business, which requires the therapist to be curious, and information that is not our business, which requires the therapist to remain silent. That takes discipline and focus. What follows are the principles a therapist can keep in mind to increase discipline and focus.

### ***Every Couple Comes From a Successful Past***

For a couple to be seeking therapy together, there has to have been a time in the past when the relationship was working better for both the parties. Yet, many couples come to therapy unaware that they’ve had a successful past and are unprepared to discuss it. It’s common for new clients to think, “We’ve always had this problem” or “He or she has always been this way,” but that’s not the whole truth. For a relationship to have lasted any length of time, it cannot be the whole truth. There simply must be more to the story. The successful part of the relationship must be lying dormant. An important goal of SFT with couples is to awaken dormant successes so that they can play a role in the current relationship.

### ***Connect With the Couple, Not Just the Individuals Within the Couple***

This simple step can be accomplished in a number of ways. As in individual therapy, it is important that rapport be built between the therapist and the clients, but accomplishing this with two people requires the therapist to have a different set of skills and to ask different questions. By focusing on the relationship and the skills that each partner uses to contribute to the relationship, the therapist conveys a level of hope to the couple. This can be accomplished by simply getting to know the couple *as a couple*—by asking questions about lives, dreams, and accomplishments *together*.

### ***Direct Each Question to Both Members of the Couple***

I think of this rule as SF tennis. One day, while watching myself conduct a therapy session with a couple on a video tape, I noticed my head was moving back and forth as if I was watching a tennis match. That's because each question I asked about the details of the desired future was posed, in turn, to each partner. It is important that both members of the couple be allowed to express their ideas and thoughts throughout the session and to contribute equally to the building of the solution. To be clear, when I say both partners should contribute equally, I don't mean that each person needs to get equal time in the conversation. SF tennis simply means each person gets to take an equal number of turns in the conversation. Whether the turn lasts only a matter of seconds or goes on for several minutes, the fact that each partner took a turn allows each partner to contribute.

### ***The Beauty Is in the Details So Focus on Them***

Many years ago, when taking a driver's education course in high school, I learned an important lesson about details and perspective. I was taught to drive in a car equipped with a second set of brakes on the passenger side for the instructor to use in emergencies. My instructor had a habit of aggressively applying those brakes anytime she noticed that my eyes were not looking straight ahead. I found this quite annoying and eventually I got up my nerve to complain. The instructor explained that she hit the brakes whenever my eyes were not looking forward because a car

tends to drift in the direction of the driver's eyes. According to her, that's because the hands also tend to follow the direction of the eyes. Something similar happens in SF therapy. When partners of a couple have a detailed conversation about their past successes or their desires for the future, their lives tend to steer toward the details.

Early in my career, I got a call from a young woman who was looking to get into therapy with her husband. She didn't mention the reason for her seeking help, but I knew the issue was serious because she asked for a session as soon as possible, and because I could hear her husband yelling at her in the background throughout the call. When they arrived for their first session a few days later, it was clear that the two were upset with each other. Similar to the very first couple I worked with, I found these partners sitting on separate couches in my lobby. When I invited them into my office, I saw them exchanging dirty looks as they got up. I knew I was in for a long hour. Without a smile or any other show of affection, they sat down in my office—again on separate couches. We spent the first few minutes trying to establish best hopes for the therapy (George, Iveson, & Ratner, 2006), but I could sense the conversation growing more and more tense. Then I remembered to ask the questions that had been so effective with my first couple, "How did you two meet?" It worked like a charm. The couple recalled how they'd met at a business party, and as each additional detail of their meeting and early relationship came out, the couple grew closer and closer right there in front of me. Throughout the conversation, they treated each other with respect and kindness, and at the end of the session, they walked out holding hands.

They weren't the same couple I'd met in my lobby, and when they returned for the second session, it was clear the changes had been sustained. I began by asking what had been better for them, and they spent almost the entire hour detailing their progress over the past week. Toward the end of the session, I asked them how they were able to make these changes. The couple said they didn't recall many details of our first session. The part they did remember—which they gave full credit for all the changes—was the beginning, when they recalled the details of their meeting and early relationship. At least in part, my ego was damaged. I felt I had conducted a good session, but all the couple remembered was what they had done for themselves. It's a lesson I carry with

me to this day. A detailed discussion about a couple's success may be all it takes to build the solution. This couple taught me that the more you can concentrate the conversation on the details of a couple's successes (past, present, or future), the more likely the couple will be to steer their lives in the direction of those details, just as a car steers in the direction of the driver's eyes.

***Carefully Choose What Parts of the Couple's Story to Be Curious About***

An important skill in learning to work with couples, and perhaps with individuals, as well, is being disciplined enough to know the difference between data the couple presents that should be attended to by the therapist and information that should not. This skill has taken me several years of conducting sessions to develop, and even now I wish I were better at. I wish I could clearly explain do what you need to do to be able to identify information that should be attended to and information that shouldn't, but it's not always clear and it varies from session to session. I can say it requires listening for facts that are related to the couple's best hopes and not getting sucked into the problem story. The way I explain it in workshops is to say that therapists are like taxi drivers. The first task is to ask where they are going and to elicit a detailed description of that destination. It requires discipline not to suggest other destinations and not get distracted by the side roads that become available along the way. The whole of the work needs to be related to the chosen destination and nothing else. With time and practice, the therapist's ability to listen only for relevant information and to build questions using the client's own language will steer the taxi toward the couple's desired destination—and nowhere else.

***Co-Construction Requires Using the Couple's Language***

I first studied SFT with Evan George, Chris Iveson, and Harvey Ratner at BRIEF in London, and much of the training was about developing questions when working with couples. They taught that a therapist should use the same language the client uses in their answer to ask the next question. It is a profound idea, and I immediately began applying it in my work with couples. The process of co-construction requires that each person's

language be attended to in great detail and used to build all the questions that follow. For example:

Therapist: What are your best hopes for therapy?

Husband: We just don't want to be fighting anymore.

Wife: Yeah, the fighting is ruining our relationship, and I am not sure how much longer I can take it.

Therapist: If sometime in the near future the two of you figure out a way to stop the fighting, what do you suppose you would be doing rather than fighting that will work much better for you?

Husband: I suppose I would rather be getting along, like we used to.

Wife: It would be so nice to love again.

Therapist: So getting along and being more loving would work better for you. What would that look like in your relationship?

The above sequence was transcribed from a recent session and outlines the idea of co-constructing conversations with couples. Notice that a bit of each partner's response was used by the therapist to formulate the next question. By that means, each member of the couple contributes to the direction of the therapy, thereby increasing the therapeutic alliance.

### **HOW SFT IS DIFFERENT?**

From my earliest exposure to SFT, I was curious about what makes this approach, and those who practice it, different. In fact, that was the subject of my first book, *The Art of Solution-Focused Therapy* (Connie & Metcalf, 2009). In that book, several practitioners reported on applying SF methods in different settings such as counseling, psychiatry, marriage, family therapy, and so on. The more I spend time attending trainings, working with clients, and reading about SFT, the more I have come to believe that there are several additional keys that are effective in using this approach with couples.

### **It Is So Simple, It Is Almost Complicated**

This phrase may seem like an oxymoron, but the SF approach to counseling is so simple and basic that sticking to it can be a challenge. Steve de Shazer (1985) explained that the process of developing interventions should follow a principle known as Occam's Razor, which holds that, all other things being equal, the simplest solutions are best. This idea applies equally well to the other steps of solution building. Solution building is a process of minimalism and simplicity. Although many of us may have spent years in graduate school learning how to identify and assess problems, and how to solve them using various counseling techniques, the only skill the SF therapist needs to build solutions is the ability to ask the next question.

### **Solution Building Is Based on Turn-Taking**

Solution-building conversations must be co-constructed with input from all participants. To ensure that the conversation is *equally* co-constructed, each person involved must contribute to it equally. This can be a challenge with couples since it means that three people will be taking turns. To visualize this idea in a couple's therapy session, imagine that each partner has a paint brush that's been dipped into a color, red for one partner and blue for the other. Each time a partner answers a question, they put a stroke of paint on a canvas—the longer the response, the longer the stroke. At the end of the session, there should be an equal number of red and blue strokes. The strokes will be of unequal length, and it's possible that one color will dominate, but the number of red and blue strokes should be the same. That can happen only if each partner gets a turn to answer every question posed by the therapist.

### **Every Couple Is Motivated by Something**

Motivation should never be in doubt, even if one member of the couple claims that he or she is only there because the other partner "made" them come to therapy. The idea of resistance to therapy has simply never made



sense to me. How can I consider anyone who has sought out therapy (even if mandated), scheduled an appointment, and followed through by attending the session, to be resistant? I once heard Chris Iveson say that one of the things that he enjoys most about practicing SFT is that all of his clients are motivated. In watching Iveson's practice, it was clear to me that he treats each of his clients as if their motivation was not a question—no matter what it is. Making this presumption is crucial in conducting solution-building conversations with couples. The simple fact that the couple makes it into your office suggests that they were driven to do so by a desire for some form of change or a hope for some preferred outcome. When the therapist is able to make that change or preferred outcome part of the conversation, the couple's motivation becomes quite apparent—and grows as the conversation progresses.

### SUMMARY

Working with couples from the SF perspective requires a shift from the idea that *problems must be solved* to *solutions must be built*. This shift is what this book is all about. Making this shift is difficult, because it requires therapists to adhere closely to a simple process that, at times, goes against their nature or even their training as clinicians. For me, learning the SF approach meant I had to unlearn processes associated with other approaches. I found it a challenging but worthwhile process. The truth is that when I was first exposed to SFT and subsequently began applying it in couple's therapy, I had some doubts. The ideas made perfect sense to me but I couldn't help thinking, "It can't be that easy." I truly did not believe psychotherapy could be so simple. But my clients over the years have taught me that, although the work can be hard at times, the approach is indeed simple—and quite helpful for couples.

