



Brief Counseling That **Works**

Brief Counseling That Works

Third
Edition

A Solution-Focused Therapy Approach
for School Counselors and Other
Mental Health Professionals

A Joint Publication



AMERICAN
SCHOOL
COUNSELOR
ASSOCIATION

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Preface

This book provides step-by-step instruction in how to use solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC) with youth. School counselors certainly will be able to relate to the typical client concerns presented. Teachers will also benefit, because each component of this approach can be used independently in a variety of situations and school settings. Other professionals—psychologists, social workers, marriage and family counselors, pastoral counselors, licensed professional counselors, and drug counselors who work with youth—also will find the methods and case studies relevant.

SFBC is ideally suited for schools and mental health facilities. With large caseloads, school counselors and other mental health practitioners often have too little time to provide clients with longer-term, traditional counseling. Today more than ever, mental health professionals need a brief but effective approach suitable for a wide range of problems.

The book is intentionally short. Theory and research are discussed briefly; however, implementation is the main thrust. My approach is to lead you through the material one step at a time, including practice exercises at the end of the first four chapters and in Appendices A and B. I seek to provide the knowledge necessary to apply SFBC with children and youth.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

The book is based on the work of Steve de Shazer (1985), who developed the SFBC approach. He discovered that by focusing on solutions rather than problems, clients were getting better faster

than with traditional counseling modalities. Implicit in the model is the belief that clients are not always overcome by their problems. In fact, solutions are present even though they may be unrecognized. By rediscovering their resources, clients are encouraged to repeat past successes. As simple as this sounds, it represents a powerful, empowering dynamic that enables clients to quickly resolve the difficulties that brought them to counseling.

Chapter 1 presents background, research, rationale, and principles for SFBC. The chapter also highlights the reasons SFBC techniques work well with clients from various cultural backgrounds. The exercise at the end of the chapter guides you to experience firsthand the effects of problem-oriented questions versus solution-oriented questions.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how to introduce clients to solution-focused counseling and how to facilitate the initial goal-setting phase of the model. Step-by-step procedures prepare you to help clients identify, behaviorally, what they will be doing to achieve their goal. In the section on the “miracle question,” you learn how to help clients explore their goal by painting a mental picture of what their lives would look like if they were problem free. The exercises at the end of the chapter provide practice with goal setting and an opportunity for you to experience how the miracle question can help you with a problem you’d like to overcome.

Chapter 3 describes how you can equip clients to identify instances of unrecognized success and exceptions to their difficulties. You learn how to encourage clients through “cheerleading” that reinforces even slightly successful steps clients have used to improve their situation. This chapter also covers scaling techniques clients can use to assess their current status as well as progress toward their goal. The chapter concludes with detailed instructions for constructing a message—composed of compliments, a bridging statement, and task—that clients receive at the end of each interview. A practice exercise gives you a chance to apply these steps in addressing a personal situation of your own.

Chapter 4 reviews the components of the initial SFBC session and provides a transcript of one of my actual client cases so that you can see the entire process unfold as described in Chapters 2 and 3. The chapter also provides a flow chart and note sheet to help keep you on track as you implement the SFBC process. The chapter concludes with an opportunity to practice writing a message to the client whose case is presented in the

chapter and an opportunity to practice SFBC interventions for an entire session found in Appendix B.

Chapter 5 describes how to conduct an abbreviated SFBC counseling session and provides a flow chart and note sheet to help you implement the process. This short format is ideal when counselors and mental health practitioners may only have time for a 20- to 25-minute session with a client.

Chapter 6 covers the interventions you use in second and subsequent sessions to address the successes and challenges clients have experienced since the previous meeting. The chapter also discusses the scaling interventions used during second and subsequent sessions to determine clients' progress, and the use of a message to reinforce behaviors that keep clients on track for reaching their goal.

Chapter 7 addresses ways you can help reluctant and mandated clients become cooperative "customers" for counseling. The chapter also provides suggestions for dealing with particularly challenging situations and details techniques for turning difficult situations into workable goals.

Chapter 8 describes eight other applications of the solution-focused approach. It discusses 10-second "counseling," the use of a solution-focused referral form, and how to implement the solution-focused approach using puppets and using sand trays. The chapter also details how solution-focused concepts and techniques have been applied with small groups, entire classes, parent-teacher conferences, and guided imagery for groups.

Appendix A provides answers for a practice exercise on detailing a nonspecific goal. Appendix B contains a complete counseling session with prompts that give you an opportunity to practice SFBC interventions and then compare your interventions to the ones I used in the session. Appendix C contains detailed instructions as well as pages that can be enlarged and duplicated to create the booklet participants use in the solution-focused guided imagery group activity.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION

Since the second edition of this book in 2005, many exciting developments have made even clearer the value of staying focused on solutions. In particular, this new edition cites recent research

on the effectiveness of solution-focused counseling and therapy, highlights more applications and new adaptations of SFBC, and provides new tools to help the practitioner.

The SFBC model presented in this book is not a static process. In the years since the previous edition, through my own practice and the experiences that other practitioners have so generously shared, new strategies and tips have come to light. This edition incorporates these new tips and techniques in ways that I believe have made the model even more effective. Also, the range of case examples has expanded to include a case study from a mental health agency setting. As I have trained more mental health professionals outside school settings, several have contacted me about their experiences using the SFBC model. The book has been enriched by the successes they have shared.

Creating well-defined goals is key to success in SFBC. Goals clarify the specifics of what clients want to accomplish—what success will look like. In the simplest terms, you have to know where you are going if you are to have a likelihood of getting there. In light of the critical importance of goals, this edition has expanded Chapter 2 on goal setting to incorporate more tips for handling the types of responses clients may give when you ask, “What are your best hopes from our meeting?” or “How can I help you?” Knowing in advance the range of responses that clients may give and being prepared to address them reduces the chance you will get “stuck” in determining what intervention to use.

Because of time constraints, school counselors have asked for ways to implement SFBC in shorter sessions. A new Chapter 5 describes in greater detail an abbreviated SFBC session. This short format is particularly useful for school counselors with large case-loads who may have only 20 to 25 minutes to counsel a student. For clients in settings in which they are paying for counseling “out of pocket,” the short format may provide a more affordable alternative to the traditional 50- to 60-minute session. This chapter also features new tools—a flow chart and note sheet—specially designed for the abbreviated SFBC session. Reproducible copies of the new flow chart and note sheet are presented in Chapter 5. Used in tandem, these tools help keep you organized and on track with the process for the abbreviated SFBC session.

In recognition of the many times clients who are sent to you arrive there unwillingly, this edition expands suggestions for how

to use SFBC principles to work with reluctant clients. For school counselors, this edition also includes special recommendations for working with students who were mandated to see you in lieu of suspension or other major disciplinary actions because of their disruptive behavior or violations of school rules.

Over the years, I have corresponded with many of the practitioners who participated in workshops I've conducted as well as other colleagues in the field of solution-focused counseling. It has been especially exciting to see ways they have adapted solution-focused techniques with different settings and modalities. Chapter 8 features several of these new applications, including the use of sand trays and the use of solution-focused parent–teacher conferences. Incorporating sand trays within a solution-focused session provides another tool for working with children in mental health facilities and schools. Applying SFBC methods in parent–teacher conferences creates a positive, goal-oriented format that helps both parents and teachers be more effective in helping students. The chapter also features an example of a different approach to using SFBC with small groups.

WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK

This book is designed for school counselors, mental health professionals, and university faculty who teach in mental health programs. The intent of this book is to present step-by-step instructions coupled with case examples to enable you to gain the skills needed to use the SFBC approach. The book also can serve as a quick reference guide if you feel you are “stuck” and need to refresh your knowledge of the SFBC process.

The fact that clients can see positive results in a short time provides a particularly important advantage to those of you with large caseloads, especially in schools. Because this model focuses on solutions—rather than problems and their history—counseling becomes brief and success tends to come quickly.

Mental health counselors, psychologists, and social workers, especially those of you working in agency settings, can benefit from this book. It provides a framework for counseling clients—children, adolescents, and adults—in a way that is efficient, effective, and positive. By staying focused on clients' successes, rather

than their problems, practitioners have reported that they leave at the end of the day feeling energized and hopeful.

Counselor educators in universities report that they have found the previous two editions of this book to be effective in teaching SFBC as well as popular with their students. As of November 2013, 148 higher education institutions have used the second edition of this book. Several professors have commented that their students really appreciate the book. In particular, one professor told me that his school counseling students found this book to be a practical aid in preparing for the challenges that lie ahead for them as school counselors. His students also indicated that they especially appreciated the book because, compared to most of the required texts in mental health theory, it highlighted applications and case examples.

My hope is that this third edition will be even more useful in helping school counselors and other mental health professionals effectively serve their clients in a variety of settings.

Acknowledgments

Although my name appears on the cover, the completion of this book would not have been possible without the excellent training I received in SFBC from Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, John Walter, and Scott Miller. Also, I cannot express enough gratitude for the significant contributions of Anne Domeck, who spent endless hours editing the pages and chapters of the manuscript for conciseness and clarity. She has made the content of this book easy to understand, but more important she has been a partner in contributing insights about the SFBC model that have led to some of the revisions reflected in this edition. She has attended workshops I have conducted and has a firm understanding of the solution-focused brief counseling approach that will be apparent as you read this book.

Mona Cattan Lewis's interest in SFBC and dedication in transcribing case studies from videos were greatly appreciated. To the many participants in the workshops I have conducted, I am thankful for your enthusiasm and willingness to learn something new, especially Margaret Cavitt, Jed Turner, and Diane Nichols, whose creative applications of solution-focused counseling to groups have been included in this book. I am grateful to Don Nims and Letitia Holland-Cundiff for contributing their application of puppetry with SFBC. Holly McBrayer's and Julia Chibbaro's unique application of integrating solution-focused methods with sand trays has been a welcome addition to this edition of the book. I greatly appreciate Russ Sabella's contribution to this edition of his innovative application of SFBC techniques in parent-teacher conferences.

I am also thankful to the many students I have counseled using this approach. Their stories fill these pages with hope.

They have made me a better counselor and educator, and my life has been inspired by their successes.

I dedicate this book to my children, Brad, Courtney, and Seth. To my wife, Anne, I am indebted most of all to you. Your unconditional encouragement, empathy, and understanding made this edition of this book possible and, most of all, I dedicate this book to you.

About the Author



Gerald B. Sklare, EdD, LPCC (Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor), was a professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the University of Louisville in Kentucky for more than 30 years. His bachelor's degree in education, master's degree in counseling, and doctorate in counselor education are from Wayne

State University in Detroit, Michigan. He taught in an elementary school in inner-city Detroit, in a junior high school in Warren, Michigan, and in a high school in Itazuke, Japan; and he served for 7 years as a high school counselor in Farmington Hills, Michigan. He received training in SFBC from the founders of the solution-focused approach, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, as well as from John Walter and Scott Miller. Dr. Sklare has conducted more than 150 workshops on solution-focused brief counseling in the United States and abroad, and he has practiced in school settings and in private practice using this approach.