

Solution-focused techniques

Introduction

You need many years of practice and usually a qualification to become an accomplished counsellor. However, anyone, regardless of qualifications and training can become a more effective helper by learning to apply the basic techniques of counselling.

Solution-focused questions are designed to help people explore their strengths and resources rather than concentrate on their problems and deficits. The questions can help a young person identify what their goals or preferred future will look like when they have overcome their problems or challenges. They help the young person notice things in their lives that are going well or parts of their goals that are already happening. The techniques are very appropriate to older children and adolescents and can be easily learned and are usually safe to practice.

Problem free talk

It is often helpful to engage the young person in problem free talk at the beginning and throughout the helping conversation. This means talking to the young person about things in their life that are not immediately connected with the problem or challenge they are facing. Listening actively to this can tell you a lot about the young person's potential, resources and competencies and shows them that you are interested in them as a person,

e.g. "I know a little about your problem but before we discuss it further I would like to find out a bit more about you as a person. What are your interests, hobbies, tell me about your family, etc".

By listening very carefully you will be able to identify the things that are going well or times in the past when things have gone better. Try not to concentrate your listening too much at this point on the problem. Think about strengths and successes and remember these for later use.

e.g. "Tell me about a time in the past before the problem existed? What was life like then?"

Goals/preferred future

Helping a young person to identify clear goals or a clear description of their preferred future without the problem can be very helpful. This involves questions that concentrate on what life will be like without the problem or challenge. It is important to concentrate on the detail. For example:

- "What will you notice when the problem is better?"
- "How will things be different when the problem is better?"
- "What will you be doing differently when things are better?"
- "What will you be doing instead?"
- "How will your parents/friends tell that things are going better?"
- "How will others tell when the problem is better? Tell me more about that".

Always ask for detail and remember to ask "what else?"

Well-described goals will be:

- Positive
- What is wanted rather than what is not wanted
- Broken down into small, achievable steps
- Specific and observable
- Realistic.

It is useful to use language which implies a positive outcome, for example:

- *"How will you do that", rather than "Why will you do that?"*
- *"When this happens", rather than "If this happens..."*
- *"What will you be doing", rather than "What would you be doing?"*
- *"What will be happening", rather than "What won't be happening?"*

Identifying exceptions to the problem and how they are already coping

Very few problems are present all the time. In fact, most problems are only happening occasionally. There are usually a lot of times when the problem is not happening at all or is happening to a lesser degree. Helping the young person to notice these times can help reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed by the problem or challenge and can help identify things they or others are already doing to solve the problem. For example:

- *"Tell me about times when the problem is less troubling or when it is not happening"*
- *"Tell me about the times when you cope better with the problem"*
- *"What is different about the times when the problem is better?"*
- *"When things are tough, how do you cope?"*
- *"Tell me what has worked in the past even if only for a short time"*

Remember to ask for detail, *"What else?"* and *"Tell me more"*.

Scales

The use of scales is a flexible technique that can be used to help a young person identify movement in their problem or challenge. It is especially helpful when the person is struggling to identify goals or exceptions to their problem.

- *"Imagine a scale from 0 to 10. 10 represents how you want things to be when the problem is solved and 0 is the opposite".*
- *"What number are you on the scale right now?"*
- *"What number were you at when the problem was at its worst?"*
- *"What will you notice if you moved up one or two numbers towards your goal?"*

If the young person describes themselves at a very low number you can ask questions like:

- *"How do you cope when things are so difficult?"*
- *"Who is helping you to cope?"*
- *"What is stopping you from moving down one number?"*
- *"Describe the different changes you will notice as you move up each number on the scale?"*

As you can see questions like these encourage the young person to imagine change and to focus on their strengths and coping skills. With younger children it is useful to use more

playful and imaginative scales involving pictures. You can be as imaginative as you like with the scales and adapt them to the young person, their age and their interests. For example you could draw a set of steps or a mountain to climb.

Feedback

Giving feedback, i.e. summarising what the person has said and feeding it back to them, is a very useful technique. It informs the young person that you are listening to them and allows them to correct you if you have picked up the wrong end of the stick. It can also be used to remind the young person of their strengths and resources. Whenever possible, the feedback should be specific. It should always be affirming, reassuring and, wherever possible, complimentary.

- *"That sounded very impressive the way you managed to get yourself to school when the problem was so difficult"*
- *"You are obviously a young person with a lot of resilience to have managed so well in the circumstances"*

How to make it work

- Make sure you don't ignore the problem completely. This can lead to the young person feeling that they are not being listened to or that you think their problems are trivial.
- It is important to get a balance between listening to their 'problem talk' and being aware of their strengths and resourcefulness.
- Don't rely on solution-focused techniques completely. If you are too solution-focused in your approach you can sometimes miss important information about distressing events in the young person's life, for example, situations that they are not in control of like bullying or abuse.
- It is always important to mix solution-focused approaches with general counselling techniques.