

# Let's talk about solutions!

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores the effectiveness of using Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) in an adult learning environment. Within this discourse, special attention is given to show how SFBT can be used effectively to support the increasing number of adults who find themselves out of work who are now returning to education. Key ideas within SFBT will be outlined for the reader as well as the application of these ideas within the context of adult education. A summary background to SFBT will be given to show its origin and research findings on using SFBT within employment counselling will be shared. The intention in this article is to suggest that this approach has much to offer adult education practitioners, working in a supportive role, in developing the skills needed to do this work.*

## **The impact of unemployment on the individual**

“It’s a recession when your neighbour loses his job; it’s a depression when you lose your own”. Harry S. Truman.

Feelings of anxiety and depression, negative self-esteem, and hopelessness regarding the future are heightened among those who are unemployed (Fryer, 1995; Linn, M.W, Sandifer, R. and Stein, S, 1985). Many feel helpless in their situation and believe that being in the older age bracket weighs against them in seeking work. They may come to realise how much their self-identity was tied up in their previous employment status and this can lead to them avoiding certain social settings where they no longer feel comfortable (Deprez, 2009). Newly unemployed people can experience a deep sense of loss: loss of purpose, loss of identity and loss of income. This can indeed be a lonely place to be as an individual.

Returning to education is an option many recently unemployed begin to consider. For those working in adult education, this presents particular challenges as to how best to support these learners and meet their needs. Through an exploration of SFBT, it will be suggested that SFBT offers a constructive positive approach to working with adult learners in general, and, in particular, it is effective in supporting adult learners who are unemployed.

### **Applying SFBT to an adult education setting**

There is much within SFBT that recommends itself to being suitable to use within an adult education setting. Part of the appeal of SFBT which may seem obvious is its focus on solutions rather than problems. For an adult education co-ordinator or tutor this brings a refreshing and hopeful dimension to the process of supporting adult learners, as the emphasis is placed on the positive aspects of the learner and his/her resources and strengths, rather than past problems and obstacles to progress. The negative impact that unemployment can have on a person's self-esteem and confidence makes this strengths-based approach particularly suited to building confidence and self-belief when working with this learner group. The fact that SFBT was developed as a brief therapy also means it lends itself well to the adult education environment where the learner experience within adult education happens within a limited timeframe and with limited resources. Goal setting is a main feature of SFBT and this fits well with the objective of working with adults in becoming more focused about what they want for the future. For adults who are unemployed they can typically feel stuck within their present circumstances and this can affect their ability to visualise a hopeful future and explore possibilities for change. SFBT is particular good at freeing people in their thinking and introducing means of discovering a way forward.

### **Key principles of SFBT when working with adult learners**

#### *Changing patterns of behaviour*

Key principles that underline SFBT thinking are: (i) If it ain't broke, don't fix it! (ii) Once you know what works, do more of it! (iii) If it doesn't work, then don't do it again, do something different! Learners can become conditioned by the familiar to expecting predictable outcomes. As a result, they can easily find themselves locked into fixed patterns of behaviour that may not be working well for them. An example of this, perhaps, could be using one approach only to finding work, e.g. distributing CVs on mass to all employers within a geographical area or, perhaps, a pattern of spending a lot of time with people who think negatively or who are unsupportive. It may be useful to look closely at behav-

our patterns with a learner, challenge behaviours that may not be working well for the person and explore with them possibilities for making changes. By introducing change, the learner is more open to expecting something different may happen, and, in trying something different, there is the possibility of a different outcome (Reiter, 2007). It is therefore important to try to break set patterns that are not serving a learner well as allowing these behaviours to continue will reinforce negative thinking and can further erode the self-belief and confidence of the person. In contrast, by breaking these patterns of behaviour that are adding to the problem, the learner is now freed up to explore new alternatives and new patterns which will hopefully offer better ways of living (Reiter, 2007).

### **Focusing on the future**

Solution-focused approaches are based on the premise that understanding the cause of a problem is not a necessary step in resolving it (Lethem, 2002). For example, in the case of someone who previously dropped out of a course of study due to a negative experience, it is not considered necessary in SFBT to focus on that previous experience and factors that contributed to the person leaving the course as a prerequisite to deciding on a future course of study. SFBT does not look to the past as a means to determining good choices for the future. So, in this instance, solution-focused thinking would recommend eliciting information that builds a picture with regard to the kind of course he/she might enjoy and what would contribute to him/her being happy on any future course of study. What kind of things might be happening on the course? Questions that encourage the person to talk about a preferred learning environment, perhaps teaching methods used and questions relating to the person's expectations in beginning a course could also be useful.

The person may steer the conversation towards the experience of the last course due to an expectation that the listener will want to discuss what went wrong and difficulties the person encountered previously. While acknowledging past experiences, SFBT is, however, more interested in shifting the focus to the future. The supportive role of the Solution Focused Practitioner is about helping learners find answers for themselves as opposed to directing them as to what to do (Walsh et al., 2006). The primary role of someone working from a Solution Focused perspective is to working with the learner in finding solutions. Walsh et al. (2006) suggest it is helpful to think of this process as similar to solving a puzzle. Solving puzzles require people to work in more co-operative and creative ways. In solving a puzzle nobody asks, 'Whose puzzle is it anyway?' or 'Who caused the puzzle in the first place?' In this example the task is to work with the

learner in piecing together the important components that would need to be present for him/her to be content in any future course of study based on new information and greater self-awareness.

By focusing on the positive, on possible solutions and on a future without problems, the negative feelings regarding the problems are more likely to lessen and the learner can begin to see a way forward (Burwell & Chen, 2006). As SFBT has developed, the 'problem' has become less important in SF therapy to the point that is no longer necessary to know what the problem is (George et al, 1999). When applied to working with adult learners, this means that the best way to be supportive is to affirm learner's strengths and resources, be aware of the importance of language in conveying optimism regarding the future and focus on supporting learners move forwards in achieving personal goals for change.

### **Goal setting**

When working with learners on goal setting it is worth keeping in mind that a well-formed goal has seven qualities (Berg and Miller, 1992; de Jong and Miller, 1995): (i) the goal must be important to the person; (ii) keep goals small and achievable; (iii) make goals concrete, specific and behavioural; (iv) goals express the presence of something or of a behaviour, rather than an absence; (v) goals are expressed as beginnings rather than endings (vi) the goals are realistic and achievable within the context of the person's life; (vii) the learner sees the goal as involving 'hard work'. Learners often present a number of problems that are intertwined. It is important that there is clarity around the goal in order to increase chances of success (Quick, 1998). While a goal for the learner might be 'to get more involved in the community', a more focused goal might be 'to work voluntarily with youths aged 10-14 years in a sports related area in the local community this summer'. For a goal to be realistic and have best chance of success, the person supporting the adult learner needs to work with the learner on the detail. A detailed action plan will take into account the resources the learner has to draw on, a clear plan towards achieving the goal and strategies to overcoming obstacles the learner may encounter. It will also explore ways of helping the learner to stay motivated and keep on track and should incorporate a means to measuring progress to show the learner that they are moving closer towards reaching the target.

### **The miracle question – what is it?**

The value of the miracle question or miracle concept, which is a key element of SFBT, is that it orients the client away from the past and the problem and

towards the future and a solution (Berg and Miller, 1992). In the case of an adult learner who is unhappy in his/her present situation of being unemployed and who wishes to discuss employment options, presenting the miracle question could be helpful in gaining information about what might be a suitable career path. In keeping with how the miracle question would have originally been phrased, the question posed would be, 'I want you to imagine that, when you go to sleep tonight a miracle happens while you are sleeping, so that, when you wake up tomorrow morning, you find yourself in a career that you love. It's exactly what you want to do and you are happy at work. What would be the first thing you notice about yourself that is different when you wake up?' 'How would you feel as you go to work?' 'In what kinds of activities would you be involved?' 'How would you describe your experience of being in the workplace?' The way the miracle question is worded needs to fit comfortably with the person posing the question and the receiver so the question can be modified to use language that fits with the person's own conversational style and still achieve the same effect. An alternative version of the miracle question might be, 'Imagine you are in a career that you absolutely love, what is the first thing do you think I'd notice that would be different about you? The miracle question involves getting learners to visualise or imagine life without the problem and to notice the differences. It shifts the focus away from present difficulties and it shows the person that it is possible to realise future ambitions (Perkins III, 1999). By spending time talking about a future where the person is free of the problem, it can impact positively in motivating the learner to push forward for change and focus on a preferred future.

### **Scaling questions as a useful tool**

Use of scaling questions can build on the work of the miracle question. Scaling questions provide a framework (from 0-10) to work with the learner, where 10 equals the achievement of all goals and zero is the worst possible scenario (Iveson, 2002). Following on from the miracle question as presented above, which related to an ideal career path, a scaling question could be, 'You have talked about your ideal career as being a journalist. On a scale of 0-10, 0 being there is no possibility I could ever work as a journalist and 10 being I know for certain I could work as a journalist, where would you place yourself on that scale? From the answer given, an exploration can then follow regarding reasons the person has placed him/herself at that position. What has been achieved so far to get to that point? What would need to happen for the person to move up one place on the scale? What would be the first step towards making progress?

In addition to this, scaling questions can also be used to measure levels of progress or motivation. For example, ‘On a scale of 0-10, where zero means you are not prepared to put in any effort towards finding a suitable career path and 10 means you will do whatever it takes to do so, where would you scale yourself?’ Follow on questions can then be used to explore ways to increase motivation levels to move further up the scale. For example, ‘You have placed yourself at number four, what things are you doing that make it a four?’ ‘What would need to happen for you to move to a five on the scale?’ ‘Is there someone who will support you in making this happen?’ ‘When do you expect to reach a five on the scale?’

Using scaling questions can be a good starting point to introduce SFBT into your work as the concept is easy to grasp and the benefits of scaling as a tool can be quickly realised. With practice, use of scaling can work much more effectively and directly as a gauge to finding out where a learner is at in relation to an issue in comparison to what can be gained through the usual patterns of questioning. It can also serve as a useful method of measuring progress, both for the learner and for the tutor.

### **Language of expectancy**

There is a connection between use of language and expectation. In SFBT, the therapist tries to use language in such a way as to create a context in which the client expects that something positive will happen. O’Hanlon (1999) describes this idea as ‘positive expectancy’ talk. This can be created by using such words as “so far”, “yet”, “up until now”, “when” and “will” in the course of conversation and clients will be encouraged regarding the future in a more hopeful expectant way (Reiter, 2007). Taking the example of someone considering returning to education, language used should make reference to ‘when you start a course’, ‘you will find on the course that ...’, ‘while you haven’t visited the centre yet...’ as this encourages the learner to think about the possibilities in moving forward, where they start to visualise themselves on a course. While making what might seem tiny changes in the way we communicate may seem somewhat trivial, yet when combined with the other elements of SFBT, it works together towards creating a more solution-focused approach to working with learners.

### **Feedback on the use of SFBT**

In evaluating the effectiveness of SFBT, a study conducted in Sweden by Knutsson et al. (1998) involved a series of interviews with clients whose cases had been closed for at least a year. Arising from the interviews the researchers made interesting discoveries about clients’ experiences of SFBT. With regard to

the use of questioning, clients stated they were forced to think and, in this way, realise what they themselves wanted. Questions helped orient them towards a preferred future and they also found it helpful in working out solutions. Most clients stated they found the use of scales a helpful tool where they “got a check on the situation” and they began to see how far they had come towards reaching their goal. The miracle question was met with mixed reaction; some did not remember it or stated it had not made any great impression, one client said she found it helpful in visioning the future and several clients reported they found the question difficult to answer.

### **Core ideas that define Solution Focused Brief Therapy**

SFBT originated in the 1980s as an enquiry into what differences make a difference in therapy (de Shazer & Berg, 1997). Its roots are found in the Brief Family Therapy tradition and it was within this context that Steve de Shazer and the Milwaukee Team first began their work in developing SFBT. SFBT was radical in its approach in moving away from the traditional psychotherapy focus on problems towards placing an emphasis on client strengths and resources in finding solutions (Trepper et al., 2006). The focus on exploring solutions rather than problems is one of its main defining features. While SFBT work originally based itself within a therapeutic setting, dealing with a range of client issues, the development of SFBT resulted in some core ideas that have been applied to a variety of settings, including some sectors within education.

The Solution Focused model understands life to be contingent, changing, discontinuous, and socially constructed (Miller & de Shazer, 1998). It is based on the premise that change is constant in people’s lives. In addition to this is the understanding that problems are not constant; there are always times when the problem does not exist for an individual (Miller & de Shazer, 1998). There is a connection made in SFBT between problems and solutions and the way language is used to interpret reality. The role of the therapist within SFBT is to use solution-focused language to bring awareness to the fact that change is already happening and that the client can effect further changes in creating a better future (Miller & de Shazer, 1998). Central importance is given to relationships and there is an understanding that humans are fundamentally social beings. It is by interacting with other people that individuals grow and the process of making sense of the world is seen as socially constructed (Dallos & Draper, 2005). This underlying philosophy informs the work of SFBT and influences the therapeutic process.

Miller and De Shazer referred to SFBT as an interactional event comprising of ordinary activities such as asking and answering questions, commenting on others' statements, and evaluating possible solutions to clients' problems (Miller & de Shazer, 1998). Therapists use questions as a means of getting clients to visualise and talk about their lives in different ways (Miller & de Shazer, 1998). Within the therapeutic relationship the focus is on dialogue as opposed to individuals or problems (McNamee, 2004). The constructivist viewpoint focuses on looking for ways of being helpful to the client by engaging in conversations about a future where new realities are formed (McNamee, 2004).

The underlying ideas that inform SFBT appeal to many sectors where people are working in supportive roles: (1) focus on individual strengths and resources in finding solutions (2) understand and acknowledge that there are times when the client is unaware of their problem, and that the problem is not constantly there (3) use solution-focused language to bring awareness to the fact that change is already happening and that the client can effect further changes in creating a better future.

### **Research to support the benefits of using SFBT in employment counselling**

While SFBT has now become an established therapeutic intervention, it has, to date, been applied mainly within mental health services, social work and school settings. Only a small body of research has been carried out using solution focused techniques within employment counselling, which is perhaps the most closely aligned area of research to supporting adults who are making the transition from unemployment to adult education. The findings are that many of the approaches used in solution focused work relate well to the process involved in supporting those who are unemployed. The key stages involved include mapping the problem, followed by developing well-formed goals, exploring for exceptions, and evaluating progress (Bezanson, 2004).

Bezanson (2004) discusses how solution focused questions can be adapted to an employment counselling context. The importance of formulating a clear goal is emphasised in employment counselling, a goal that reflects the client's skills, knowledge and needs, while taking account of environmental factors that might influence career decisions (Bezanson, 2004). The task is then to break down the goal into a specific action plan or series of action plans. Another attractive aspect of SFBT which Bezanson identifies is the fact that solution focused therapy works from a postmodern constructivist perspective. The counselling, therefore, does not attempt to assign particular values to work or career, where-



by the therapist imposes a particular viewpoint regarding specific job types or career paths, but rather works collaboratively with the client in helping him/her move forwards towards a preferred future (Bezanson, 2004).

Within employment counselling services client referrals are sometimes mandatory. While adults who are unemployed are not forced to return to education, they may feel pressurised to do so in order to maintain social welfare benefits. The Brief Family Therapy Centre was experienced in working with mandated clients as fifty percent of their clients were referred by public agencies, i.e. courts, schools, and social services (De Jong & Hopwood, 1996). A central aspect to their work was allowing clients to take the role as expert in the conversation and seeing clients as being most knowledgeable about their own lives and experiences (De Jong & Berg, 2001). By doing so, the therapist is giving back control to the client. This goes against the assumption of mandated clients that they are going to be told what they have to do to resolve the situation they are in. Rather than trying to influence the client and steer him/her in a particular direction the solution-focused therapist does not concern him/herself with achieving a particular outcome (De Jong and Berg, 2001).

Another valuable contribution SFBT makes is that, it deliberately moves away from the language of deficit which can often permeate the culture of helping agencies and services. Sousa et al (2007) discuss the value of moving away from the language of deficit towards a strengths-focused model. In their study they examine the damaging effects as a result of using the language of deficit when working with multi-problem poor families. Their findings showed that an established pattern can develop which leads to an emphasis on what is wrong, absent or insufficient in working with this client group. Combined with the language of deficit is a system where specialists and agencies are seen as having “the expertise” to sort out client problems resulting in a situation where families become “agency families” (Minuchin et al., 1967). The same can be said with regard to services and professionals who are working with unemployed, low-skilled adults, where terms such as ‘non-achievers’ and ‘unemployable’ reflect a type of culture that supports a language of deficit. SFBT contrasts with this approach as it is concerned with strengths rather than deficits and uses language that reflects this strengths-based perspective.

### **Summary**

Beginning with the emergence of Solution Focused Brief Therapy in the 1980s as an enquiry into what differences make a difference in therapy (de Shazer &

Berg, 1997), SFBT has now found a much wider application. In this article the application of SFBT within an adult education setting has been explored. Positive aspects of SFBT include the move away from the language of deficit towards a language that reflects a strengths-based perspective and the focus on solutions rather than problems. An emphasis is placed on the more positive aspects of the individual, their resources and strengths, rather than past problems and obstacles to progress. SFBT incorporates ideas such as goal-setting, scaling and the miracle question. It looks for exceptions to the problem and uses a language of expectancy which creates a context for the adult learner to expect that something positive will happen. The fact that the intervention is brief also makes it suitable to use in learning environments where there are limitations on the length of time that can be afforded to individual learners and group work. It offers a perspective that respects and acknowledges individual strengths and resources in the process of finding solutions to problems. It also provides practical tools which can be used to work in more effective ways when supporting adult learners. And with regard to supporting adults who are unemployed, focusing on the problem of being unemployed should not be the starting point to finding solutions – SFBT recommends that a different approach is necessary.

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