

How Solution-Focused Therapy Developed

Bill O'Connell

Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT) is an outcome-oriented, competence-based approach. Solution-Focused therapists help clients to achieve their preferred outcomes by facilitating the evocation of solutions. A team of family therapists who worked at the Brief Therapy Centre in Milwaukee U.S.A founded Solution Focused Therapy in the 1980's. The team leaders were a married couple, Steve De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. According to De Shazer, Berg's contribution was her skilled and innovative work with clients, while his was to articulate the theory behind it. De Shazer's writing and master classes were immensely influential. He died in 2005.

Families came to the Centre in Milwaukee with multiple, chronic and complex problems. Family members often argued about what the nature of the problem and who was to blame. Parents and children became defensive in this conflict arena and were unwilling to consider their need to change. After a time the team began to stop asking families about their problems and asked instead about what 'their solutions' would look like. They asked each family member how they would know the situation had improved – what would they notice that was different? Taking this as a starting point, the team found that families spent less time arguing over their problems. The therapists discovered that the more they encouraged family members to notice times when things went better, the more the family seemed to change. When families focused more on their 'solutions,' they talked less about their problems.

Since the 1980's Solution-Focused Therapy has built an international following of professionals across the disciplines. It has moved beyond the boundaries of therapy to apply its techniques in a wide variety of fields such as:

- Business-coaching, project management, appraisal, team building
- Education - tutoring, pastoral care, mentoring and teaching
- Mediation, advice and guidance
- Psychology
- Social work, including child protection
- Health – physical and mental settings
- Substance misuse.

SFT is used extensively with groups/ teams/ couples/families/ young people and children. Some practitioners use the approach in a purist form, while others integrate it with other models.

In 1993 the European Brief Therapy Association, with its largely Solution-Focused membership, began to organise annual conferences which attracted practitioners from all over Europe and beyond. These conferences continue to be run annually in different European cities.

Development in Britain

Three social workers and family therapists - Harvey Ratner, Evan George and Chris Iveson were the pioneers of Solution-Focused Therapy in the U.K. In 1987, when they were working and teaching together in London they discovered a mutual interest in Brief Therapy. They first explored the Mental Research Institute model of Brief Therapy but were soon persuaded by the work of Steve de Shazer and began to experiment with his Solution-Focused model. Their success in using the model attracted the interest of other professionals who, in turn, sought training in the approach. To meet this need the team established the Brief Therapy Practice, later to be renamed as BRIEF.

Many of the leading figures in the field – Bill O’Hanlon, Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, Yvonne Dolan, Michael Hoyt, Scott Miller, Linda Metcalf and Ben Furman, Michael Durrant and others, began to visit the U.K. and lead seminars and workshops.

In 2000 Birmingham University became the first academic institution to offer a Masters degree in Solution-Focused Therapy, designed and led by the author. Until then training had taken place mainly through short courses, delivered by practitioner-trainers, or private organisations.

In 2002 a small group of practitioners met in Birmingham to explore the need for a National Association. They agreed that the purpose of such an association would be to:

- Enable practitioners to share good practice.
- Raise the national profile of solution-focused practice.
- Provide to the general public information about the approach and facilitate their access to solution-focused practitioners.
- Explore professional issues such as Accreditation.

In 2003 this founding group established the United Kingdom Association for Solution Focused Practice (UKASFP). It very quickly recruited a membership of almost two hundred practitioners. It publishes an online newsletter, has established a successful annual conference now in its third year, stimulated regional groups and launched a website (www.ukasfp.co.uk). The energy, enthusiasm and commitment behind the Association reflects the dynamism which drives the solution-focused movement in the U.K.

In the early days, the solution-focused literature was almost entirely American. De Shazer was a prolific writer who contributed a stream of articles and published several books. He was, to a large extent, the intellectual figure head of SFT, although he always credited his partner Insoo Kim Berg for being the innovative practitioner behind the development of the therapy. His books were seminal texts – Keys to Solutions in Brief Therapy (1985) Clues- Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy (1988) Putting Difference to Work (1991) Words were Originally Magic (1994).

The first UK authored solution-focused book was 'Problems to Solutions' (1990) by Evan George, Chris Iveson and Harvey Ratner. Jane Lethem's work 'Moved to Tears, Moved to Action (1994) was followed by Hawkes, Marsh and Wilgosh's book (1998) describing how the approach could be used in a mental health setting. O'Connell's book 'Solution-Focused Therapy' in (1998/ 2005) located the approach within the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

The history of Solution-Focused Therapy in the U.K. is one of rapid growth and increasing maturity. It has progressed from a small number of pioneers into a major player in the therapeutic field. Its ideas have fired the imagination of many. It has won academic credibility and front line popularity. To some extent it fitted the zeitgeist of the time. SFT offered a time-limited, goal-oriented way of working which suited the needs of a busy society. It clearly focused on finding solutions rather than introspection or history. It appealed to clients as more practical than traditional therapies. Within a relatively short period of time it has made its mark and joined its relatives in the therapy family tree.

This excerpt from The Handbook of Individual Therapy 5th edition edited by Windy Dryden, published by Sage 2007, is reproduced with permission. Sadly, since this chapter was published, Insoo Kim Berg has died. We would like to acknowledge the huge debt we owe to these two pioneers of the Solution-Focused approach.