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A solution-focused approach to school counseling

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Abstract

Solution-focused brief therapy has only recently been discovered as an effective counseling strategy in a school setting based on its time-limited, positive approach to work with students. Though this approach has not been researched in depth, there have been several studies documenting its effectiveness with school age children. This paper will provide an overall view of solution-focused brief therapy as well as some specific techniques for all levels of school counseling.

A SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH TO SCHOOL COUNSELING

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Abstract

Solution-focused brief therapy has only recently been discovered as an effective counseling strategy in a school setting based on its time-limited, positive approach to work with students. Though this approach has not been researched in depth, there have been several studies documenting its effectiveness with school age children. This paper will provide an overall view of solution-focused brief therapy as well as some specific techniques for all levels of school counseling.

A Solution-Focused Approach to School Counseling

The solution-focused brief counseling approach to school counseling has recently gained popularity in many schools due to the focus on solutions rather than problems (Gingerich, 2000). This theory was developed through the clinical practice of Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and their colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin starting in the early 1980's (Gingerich, 2000). The main goal of solution-focused brief counseling is to help clients realize how they would like things to be different, then coming up with ways to make this happen. There is little to no focus on a diagnosis or an in-depth look at the problem. Rather, the counselor assumes the client is willing to change, has the capacity to know what needs to be changed, and is probably already working on making change happen (Gingerich, 2000).

This approach is particularly applicable in the school setting for several reasons: first, it is time-limited; second, it is a positive approach; and third, it takes into account the personal relationships of the student (Littrell & Zinck, 2004). For example, brief counseling sessions are designed to work in as little as one 10-minute session or up to five sessions (Gingerich & Wabeke, 2001). This has proved especially helpful to school counselors as they are expected to meet the demands of many students at once. This approach also allows school counselors to focus only on solutions to a problem, which creates hope in clients while helping them utilize resources they already have (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000).

Solution-focused brief therapy also takes into account the importance of societal relationships to students and allows school counselors to utilize these societal relationships to help formulate solutions to a problem. This approach requires the client to make use of all positive social supports in order to facilitate change (Littrell & Zinck, 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to show that solution-focused brief therapy is an effective approach to counseling in a school setting. In this paper, the author will describe how this short-term, positive approach has proven to be effective with many student issues and how it can have a positive impact on the entire school climate.

Research on the Effectiveness of the Solution-Focused Approach

Statistically, solution-focused brief therapy has provided significant positive results when used in a school setting. In one study by Newsome (2005), the usefulness of solution-focused brief therapy for improving the negative attitudes and behaviors and lowering antisocial tendencies of at-risk adolescents was studied. Newsome (2005) performed this study to answer the question, "Will SFBT enhance the social skills of at-risk youths as measured by the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (p. 84)?" The at-risk students participating in this study were between the ages of 11 and 14. Students were identified as at-risk if they were below average for academic performance, exhibited continuous or frequent absences, and were not already participating in an individual education plan

(IEP).

The study was made up of 28 students who were split into four similar groups. Each group received 8 sessions using solution-focused counseling methods. All four groups received the same treatment and were facilitated by counselors trained in solution-focused techniques. Each of the 8 sessions consisted of one introductory session in which the goals of increased academic achievement, classroom behavior, homework, and attendance were discussed.

The seven remaining topics focused on setting personal goals, assessing achievement, knowing the signs of success, finding exceptions to the problem, utilizing the EARS (elicit, amplify, reinforce, and start over) technique, past/future letters to themselves, and how to deal with setbacks. The results of this study, based on pre and post testing with the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), indicated that the students overall increased their social skills rating through the use of solution-focused brief therapy (Newsome, 2005).

In another study described by Gingerich and Wabeke (2001), six 10-14 year old boys diagnosed with a behavior disorder formed a treatment group. Their typical behaviors ranged from extreme antisocial and aggressive tendencies to depression. All six boys were assigned 16 weeks of solution-focused brief therapy. The study also included a control group of six 10-14 year old boys with similar behavior issues. The control group received no treatment. After this 16-week period, the boys' negative behaviors in the experimental group had

decreased by 65.5% as compared to only a 10% decrease in the control group (Gingerich & Wabeke, 2001).

Solution-focused brief therapy has also been used to treat academic and social problems not serious enough for an actual diagnosis. Single-session solution focused brief therapy was used to help students cope with academic, personal issues, and goal setting. According to Gingerich and Wabeke (2001), counselors used two solution-focused techniques in the single session: goal setting tasks and homework tasks. These tasks consisted of observing family, friends, relationships, and school for things students wanted to see continue to happen. Another task was to engage in an activity that was different from the norm (Gingerich & Wabeke, 2001).

The purpose of these homework tasks was to encourage students to look for positives and to focus on what is going well for them. The students in this single-session brief therapy group were then compared to a group of similar students who were not exposed to the solution-focused brief therapy approach. The solution-focused group showed statistically significant improvement over the group with no treatment in both two-week and six-week follow-ups (Gingerich & Wabeke, 2001).

Further research by Gingerich (2000) with elementary, middle, and high school students in 8 weekly solution-focused group sessions based on a standard outcome measure showed an increase in students feelings of self-worth and their

ability to cope with difficult situations. Counselors leading these groups followed a treatment manual in which solution focused techniques were outlined. The results of these 8 week groups indicated an increase in self-esteem in social settings, more positive feelings and attitudes regarding themselves, and more appropriate coping strategies through the use of post testing (Gingerich, 2001).

Characteristics of Solution-Focused Counseling

There are eight main characteristics of the solution-focused approach to counseling (Littrell & Zinck, 2004): time-limited, solution-focused, action-based, socially interactive, detail-oriented, humor-eliciting, developmentally attentive, and relationship based. According to Watts and Pietrzak (2000), these characteristics are unique to solution-focused brief counseling in that they are positive and work toward emphasizing students' strengths rather than their weaknesses.

Time Limited

This approach is designed to work in as little as a single 10-minute session up to five sessions. This has proved especially helpful to school counselors as they are expected to meet the demands of many students at once (Littrell & Zinck, 2004). Time-limited counseling is also helpful for students at all grade levels as their issues and concerns may change frequently and school counselors must be prepared to move just as quickly through each problem (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002).

Solution-Focused

The second characteristic, solution-focused, is accomplished by focusing only on the solution to a problem. This is meant to create hope in clients, while at the same time helping them to utilize resources they already have. This is accomplished by working on three areas: exceptions, resources and goals (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004).

Action-Based

The third characteristic, action-based, requires the student to actively look for exceptions to the problem. Rather than merely talking about what the client is to do, the client is given tasks to encourage new possibilities for future change and growth (Littrell & Zinck, 2004). For example, students are asked to actively participate in the counseling process by searching for and discovering their own solutions and exceptions rather than being told how to solve their problems (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002). This is often done by asking students to find exceptions, or times when they are not experiencing the problem.

Socially Interactive

This fourth characteristic calls for clients to zealously utilize all appropriate supports and resources within their community, because change occurs more quickly when relationships exist that support the client (Gingerich & Wabeke, 2001). Students are asked to think of resources they currently have available to them, such as athletic groups, church, family, friends, school staff and so on until

they have established a list of people who would be willing to provide support.

Detail-Oriented

The fifth characteristic, detail-oriented, focuses on the details of what is working for the client rather than what is not working. This helps the counselor maintain a positive session and encourages students to develop a more positive attitude toward their situation (Amatea, Smith-Adcock & Villares, 2006).

Students are also asked to explore their goals for counseling, school and personal development (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004).

Humor-Eliciting

The sixth characteristic, humor-eliciting, encourages laughter and humor in the counseling session as clients are asked to express themselves in a more lighthearted way as the counselor seeks out information about what is going well (Littrell & Zinck). Brief counseling allows for the focus to remain more on the positive aspects of life rather than on the pain often associated with a client's reasons for coming to counseling. This positive focus allows clients' strengths to emerge, often in the form of humor (Littrell & Zinck).

Developmentally Attentive

The seventh characteristic, developmentally attentive, is important as this approach takes into consideration the developmental transitions that occur in life. Solution-focused counselors must base their techniques on the developmental level of the student. For example, for younger students, there would be more

explanation on learning how to solve problems on their own. With older students the focus would be on helping students become more independent thinkers.

Solution-focused counseling allows students to develop their own plan for solving problems (Amatea, Smith-Adcock & Villares, 2006).

Relationship Based

The eighth characteristic is very important to this approach because the relationship between counselor and client is seen to be the foundation for effective brief counseling (Littrell & Zinck, 2004). One of the ways counselors are able to establish a relationship with students is by remaining positive in order to encourage change in students. According to Littrell and Zinck (2004), the relationship established between the counselor and the client is even more important than the actual techniques used. Solution-focused brief counselors spend much of their time really getting to know clients and working on forming a connection.

All of these characteristics are designed to establish a caring atmosphere for clients, while helping them learn to solve their own problems (Gingerich & Wabeke, 2001). These eight characteristics are helpful in facilitating client change and growth in a positive way. Through the use of solution-focused brief therapy with these eight characteristics, school counselors can help empower students to remain positive and to seek out change.

Assumptions of Solution-Focused Counseling

When using solution-focused brief therapy in schools, counselors must make certain assumptions regarding the process of counseling. One assumption is that the presenting problem is the problem. Instead of searching for hidden meanings or deeper issues, the counselor will focus on the presenting problem (Littrell, 1995).

The counselor must also assume that clients already have all the necessary resources to solve the problem, though they may not be aware of these resources. For example, most students have access to at least one adult that would be accessible to them, as well as different organizations they may belong to that are being under-utilized (Gingerich & Wabeke, 2001).

Lastly, the counselor must assume that even small change can lead to healing and a decrease in repetitive patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. According to Gingerich and Wabeke (2001), counselors also assume that clients know change is needed and that they are already working to make this change happen.

Solution-Focused Techniques

There are several techniques used in solution-focused brief counseling that aid school counselors in their work with students. One of the most important techniques is to learn to be a good interviewer (Young & Holdorf, 2002), which includes focusing on the exceptions to a problem rather than on the problem itself.

For example, asking students to think of times when the problem doesn't occur enables students to concentrate on positives rather than on negatives. Other important techniques include the miracle question and focusing on the positive (Young & Holdorf, 2002). Through the use of these techniques and others, school counselors can work toward helping students discover positive solutions.

The Interviewer

To be a successful interviewer, the counselor must explore in depth what could happen differently. The more details the counselor can uncover, the more likely it is that change will occur (Young & Holdorf, 2002). A good interviewer also looks for exceptions. For example, an exception would be asking students to think about times when they don't have a problem and what is different about these times. The counselor can ask, "When you are happier in school what is happening?" or "When things are ok, how are you different?" (Young & Holdorf, 2002, p. 275). This often calls for the counselor to take the position of "not knowing" (Young & Holdorf, 2002, p. 275) so that the student can explore in detail how these times occurred and what part he or she played in them.

Miracle Question

The most well known technique in solution-focused brief therapy would be the miracle question. This question is a very powerful way in which clients can verbalize their preferred future without the presenting problem. As Young and Holdorf (2002) described:

“Do you know what a miracle is? Or

Do you have a good imagination? I am going to ask a strange question!

Right....so you go to bed tonight, after just a normal evening, and you go

to sleep....and during the night a miracle happens...but you don't know

because you are asleep....and you wake up tomorrow morning....and

everything is fine. How will you know this miracle has happened?

What is the first thing that you notice is different about you?

What will you do different?

Who will be the first person to see you in the morning? What will they

notice is different about you?” (p. 275)

The miracle question gives the student the opportunity to explore what life would be like without the problem. As with the previous techniques, the more detail the counselor can elicit, the more likely it is that students will learn from their own answers and discover their own solutions for change (Young & Holdorf, 2002).

Focus on the Positive

With the focus being what is more positive in the student's life, the counselor is able to select areas in which the student is more confident and successful. This is helpful at the end of the session when the counselor can highlight these areas for the student. One way to do this is by stating, “I am impressed by...” (Young & Holdorf, 2002, p. 276). This type of question encourages students to feel their

past efforts have been noticed and validated, helps increase feelings of self-control, and will likely lead to their willingness to experiment with additional suggestions. These suggestions need to be associated with the compliments to enable students' to feel confident about their ability to try something new (Bozic, 2004).

Applications of Solution-Focused Brief Counseling in Elementary Schools

Solution-focused counseling has become a very popular approach for elementary school counselors. This is due to the fact that it works well to resolve issues teachers report as being particularly important, such as off-task behavior and increasing the self-esteem and internal control of young children (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002).

Reducing Off-Task Behavior

Solution-focused brief therapy has become a well-known intervention associated with off-task behavior, as it focuses on the presenting problem and current behavior. This is important during the middle childhood stage of development as students at this stage are still concrete thinkers and require a more straightforward approach to problems (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002).

According to Yarbrough and Thompson (2002), the first step to resolving this issue, would be to develop a set of specific goals relating to classroom behavior and the completion of assignments with both the students and the teachers. It is important to remember that throughout the process the main focus is on solutions

rather than the presenting issue.

Scaling questions can then be used to determine if any part of the problem has been resolved. For example, the school counselor can ask, “On a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is completely solved and 1 is completely not solved, which number is your problem today?” (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002, p. 312). After the student answers, ask, “what keeps it from being a one?” (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002, P. 312). The point of this line of questioning is to help the student do more of what is going well, according to Yarbrough & Thompson.

Many counselors will then ask the miracle question (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002) at this point to determine what the students’ behavior would look like if the problem were suddenly solved overnight. For example, “If you woke up in the morning and your problem was gone, what would your behavior look like?”(p. 312). The counselor can then focus on exceptions for when the miracle happened some of the time. Another technique of this therapy is to use positive blame, for example, “How in the world did you make that happen?” (p. 312).

For each session, the school counselor would aim for a 10% improvement (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002). This can be calculated by asking, “What would have to happen to have you go from a 5 to 6 on a 10 point scale, where 10 is what it would be like if the miracle happened?” (p. 312). The counselor would then need to help the student formulate ideas on how to deal with setbacks. For example, the counselor would ask, “ What are the things that could stop you from

going from 5 to 6 this week?” or “ What things could blow up your plan?”

(Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002, p. 312).

It is important to continue to reinforce the things the student is already doing correctly to make the miracle happen and to ascertain the student's motivation to work on a solution. This can also be done by asking, “On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 represents not willing to do anything to solve the problem to 10 which represents doing whatever it takes to solve the problem, what number are you today?” (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002, p. 312). Each session can be closed with the counselor taking note of the student’s strengths and assets that will be needed to accomplish the tasks for the next week. This can be done verbally or through a written note to the student (Yarbrough & Thompson, 2002).

Increasing Self-Esteem and Internal Controls

Solution-focused brief therapy has been used to increase students’ sense of self-esteem and their internal locus of control. In schools, self-esteem has often been linked with reading ability. One goal of solution-focused brief therapy is to develop autonomous students who can learn and think for themselves. In order for this goal to be achieved, the school must provide the structures needed to develop appropriate skills such as reading and internal controls (Galbraith & Alexander, 2005).

Galbraith and Alexander (2005) established a solution-focused approach to help schools provide opportunities for all types of learners to succeed as well as

increase their feelings of autonomy or control over themselves and their environment. For example, as this approach searches for the positive aspects of students' lives, schools must create an environment conducive to all types of learners, specifically providing interventions for those students with poor reading skills.

The solution-focused approach also increases self-esteem by focusing on positives. One way this has been done in schools is through circle time. Circle time, or working as a group to discover thoughts and feelings, works as an effective way to enhance self-esteem. By making circle time a normal part of the classroom, improved self-esteem becomes a fundamental part of the class (Galbraith & Alexander, 2005).

A solution-focused approach to school counseling also encourages students to take a more active role in solving their problems, while consequently increasing their internal feelings of control. For example, students are asked to develop their own solutions to problems and are taught to utilize already existing support systems. By using a solution-focused approach in schools in combination with interactive teaching methods, students are provided with opportunities to gain more feelings of control over their learning, which will increase their internal locus of control. Lastly, providing opportunities for students to share their thoughts and feelings with their teachers can increase self-esteem and their own self-concept (Galbraith & Alexander, 2005).

After making the changes the students feel are needed, ask only that the students attend school and do their best. It is typically difficult for students to disagree with this request after their requests have been granted. Next, monitor the students daily. A time-limit may have to be set for the stress pass eventually, but not at the beginning. Once the student begins to feel more comfortable and in control of their problem, the pass can be phased out (Schopen, 1997).

In order for this type of intervention to succeed, there are several preconditions. For example, students must feel the counselor cares about the problem and is truly willing to help. Students must also believe that the counselor will insist on them keeping their bargain to come to school and to do their best. Finally, it is absolutely essential to gain the parents' cooperation with this intervention. If the parents continue to allow their children to stay home the problem will escalate. By developing a relationship with the parents, counselors can increase the parents' willingness to trust in the intervention (Schopen, 1997).

At-Risk Middle School Students

There are several brief therapy techniques that can be used with at-risk students. For example, the shift from hopelessness and inadequacy to hope and achievement can be gained by maintaining a non-judgmental demeanor that allows the student to feel comfortable expressing ideas (Newsome, 2005).

Through the use of solution-focused language that points out exceptions and possible solutions, such as the miracle question, the at-risk student is able to

picture a future without the problem. Scaling questions are also a useful tool to help students keep track of their goals. The counselor also has the opportunity to encourage change through the use of language that focuses on the students' strengths and resources (Newsome, 2005).

These solution-focused techniques can contribute to the at-risk students' relationships with other school officials and social workers. Together, they may be able to focus on the students' future successes in school. They can also work together to formulate common goals necessary for this success. This change in thinking will help the students gain a sense of responsibility and control over their own behaviors and experiences. According to Newsome (2005), solution-focused brief therapy can empower at-risk middle school students and may contribute to the development of a more positive view of the future (Newsome, 2005).

The use of solution-focused brief counseling in middle schools allows counselors to focus on changing future behavior by developing age appropriate tasks that lead to quick solutions for students. These solutions are achieved when the students' focus shifts from hopelessness and inadequacy to hope and achievement (Newsome, 2005).

Solution-Focused Brief Counseling in Secondary Schools

Solution-focused brief counseling has been used successfully in secondary schools to reduce bullying behaviors, student alcoholism, academic issues, and interpersonal issues. This was done through the use of several different

techniques, such as non-problem talk, scaling, exceptions, miracle question, compliments, and suggestions (Young & Holdorf, 2002).

Reducing Bullying Behavior

Young and Holdorf (2002) discovered they were more effective when they focused only on the solutions rather than the problem of bullying. They were able to do this by focusing on the three main principles of solution-focused brief therapy, such as “past successes and exceptions to the problem, existing skills and positive personal qualities, and the preferred future” (p. 273).

Several solution-focused techniques can be used during the counseling process to reduce bullying in secondary schools. For example, the initial session would begin with non-problem talk (Young & Holdorf, 2002) in order to let the students know they are not seen as just a problem to be solved, but rather as a person with thoughts and feelings. After several minutes of talking about something other than the problem, the counselor would begin the actual session with questions about the student's abilities. These questions imply that the student is good at something and validates the student's competence. Next, the counselor would continue with more complimentary questions.

After exploring the student's feelings of competence, scaling questions can be used to discover three areas: past success, present skills, and preferred future. This provides a concrete method of determining progress. Scaling questions can be done on paper, where the counselor draws a line with a happy face on one end

and an unhappy face on the other end. Students are then asked scaling questions to determine where they are now. When using the scaling question it is important to try to keep the lowest point below their present position, and the highest point above it. This allows the student to fall somewhere in the middle. At this point the counselor can make the assumption that the student is in fact managing better than anticipated (Young & Holdorf, 2002).

A good follow up question to this would be to ascertain how the student managed to get to this point. This provides the student with a feeling of empowerment and at least some control over his or her environment. According to Young and Holdorf (2002), this type of question is essential as it explores the positive ways students are already dealing with their problems. Regardless of the answer, the counselor will follow up with a question that again implies students already have some skills. These skills can be directly complimented in later sessions.

At this point the counselor continues to elicit even more strategies the student has tried. It is important to note that the counselor is not asking have they tried, but what they have tried in the past. By phrasing the question with a what, the counselor is suggesting to the student that he or she has already tried strategies in the past. Without the what inserted in the sentence, it is far more likely students will say they have tried nothing in the past. This is a more positive approach and gets the student to start thinking about what strategies they really have already

been doing.

After this line of questioning has been explored, the counselor will move on to what the student would like the future to look like. This question implies that things will improve and this will focus the students' on what can happen rather than what will not happen. In this instance where bullying is involved, the solution is generally seen as the absence of something (Young & Holdorf, 2002).

Additional Applications for Secondary Schools

Solution-focused brief therapy has also been widely used to help students with alcoholic parents (Walker & Lee, 1998) and with students who suffer from drug and alcohol abuse in secondary school (Royce & Schratzley, 1996). The focus has been to uncover students' strengths rather than their weaknesses.

Walker and Lee (1998) found that children with alcoholic parents are often labeled and diagnosed as COA's or children of alcoholics. Many counselors mistakenly look at all COA's from a model based on mental illness (Walker & Lee, 1998) rather than looking for resiliency through a solution-focused, strength-based approach. Should a student with alcoholic parents seek out or be required to see the counselor, the therapeutic power of the counseling session will be increased by looking at the students' strengths (Walker & Lee, 1998).

Additional Applications for School Counselors at all Levels

Family Resiliency & Maintaining a Positive Attitude

One way to help establish family resiliency is to encourage school staff to feel

more positive about the role that families play in their children's learning by recognizing the strengths families have versus the weaknesses. It is often the case that school officials look first at socioeconomic status and whether or not the child comes from a single or two-parent household rather than looking at how the family solves problems and resolves conflict from a solution-focused perspective.

Establishing contact with parents prior to any problems at school is a good way to empower the family and develop a successful working relationship. By moving from a framework of family deficits to family strengths (Walsh, 1996), school counselors can generate more positive change in students.

It is equally important to maintain a positive attitude toward all students and to welcome them into the school community. Schools have a responsibility to establish a bias-free safe environment in which all students are empowered to achieve their academic, personal, and social potential (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). As Steenbarger (1993) stated, "By actively creating experiences of inclusion, value, empowerment, and trust, brief therapy may represent a desirable and needed addition to counseling repertoires"(p. 10).

Conclusion

In conclusion, solution-focused brief therapy has been shown to have value in all levels of school counseling. School counselors have historically practiced brief forms of counseling by integrating different aspects of long-term theories (Bonnington, 1993). Finally, with the emergence of solution-focused brief

therapy, school counselors have a short-term, positive approach that works with many different student issues (Allison, Roeger, Dadds, & Martin, 2000).

The major requirements of the solution-focused approach calls for “eliciting news of difference,” “amplifying the differences,” and “ helping changes to continue” (Bonnington, 1993 p. 126). When this approach is used in conjunction with other counseling skills such as the family resilience view and maintaining a positive attitude, new opportunities for success are created.

The rationale for using the solution-focused brief therapy approach in school counseling is that it allows the counselor the opportunity to work with more students in the limited time available. This approach also encourages school counselors to move away from a “pathology-based model” of the “mentally ill” student (Saleebey, 1997, p. 296) and focus instead on students' strengths and desire to change (De Jong & Miller, 1997). When using this approach, school counselors are able to utilize students' families and social supports in the therapeutic process. As the family is the system in which the client must live, change must be able to happen within the family structure. By bringing social supports into the process, the client's chance to make significant change is greatly increased (Kraus, 1998).

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