

Solution-focused training

There is something different about solution-focused training. The first course I attended, back in 1995, changed my career and life virtually overnight. I was a social worker at the time, immersed in the world of hard decisions and tough actions of child protection work, but always looking out for opportunities to engage in the therapeutic side of the job, always crucial yet often lost amid the myriad tasks involved in safeguarding children's welfare. I had paid for myself to do a four-day introductory course in solution-focused brief therapy, and when it came to an end on the Friday afternoon I could not wait for the weekend to pass so that I could return to work on Monday and put the skills that I had learned into practice. And on the Monday morning, in the duty workers' meeting that started each day, when the team manager asked who could visit a family in which breakdown seemed imminent, my hand shot up. My first solution-focused session took place later that day and, dramatic though it may sound, I have never looked back.

I now value and enjoy being a solution-focused trainer just as much as I did being a trainee. What is it about solution-focused training that provides the difference that makes a difference, to use Gregory Bateson's celebrated phrase? I have been reflecting a little on this and I think that the following factors are involved – features of solution-focused training that I found refreshing as a trainee, and that I now enjoy putting into practice as a trainer.

Getting straight on with it – in common with solution-focused therapy itself, a solution-focused training course tends to get down to business with no fuss. A couple of minutes into my first course and I found myself interviewing a fellow trainee in what I was to learn was, at least in part, a solution-focused fashion.

The assumption of competence – solution-focused practice is a conversational approach and all trainees come onto courses bringing competence in facilitating conversations with them. The task is then essentially one of introducing trainees to solution-focused techniques which they can weave into the interviewing and conversational skills they already have.

Learning by doing – solution-focused training is light on presentations of theory and heavy on practice. You don't learn to drive in the passenger's seat and, as with all skills from knitting to speaking a foreign language to brain surgery, learning requires lots of practice.

Appreciative feedback – learning a new skill by doing can be dispiriting as the difficulty level involved can be high. It is therefore crucial to build in plenty of appreciation along the way and the attention that solution-focused practice gives to what works rather than what doesn't means that in solution-focused training, focusing on what the trainees are doing well comes naturally.

Tracking progress – solution-focused training also draws on the tenets of the approach itself by attending to the progress trainees are making throughout the course and beyond. Once again, useful assumptions are made, that trainees will be developing their skills and that it will be helpful for them to pay attention to this development during a course. And activities using scaling questions can serve both to foster skill development and track progress simultaneously.

Assuming successful application – and finally, on follow-up solution-focused training courses, the assumption is always made that learners will have made good use of the skills developed in an introductory course. The starting point then is to encourage trainees to talk in detail about how they have applied the skills, and people tend to find the realisation that they can apply new skills both exciting and motivating, just as I did on that Monday morning back in 1995!

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