

# What Is Solution-Focused Therapy and How Does It Work?

Most types of psychotherapy involve exploring feelings, being validated, finding explanations, exploring wishes and dreams, setting goals, and gaining clarity. Every therapist has unique ways of working with clients, based on his or her personality, training, and views of how people change.

A solution-focused therapist is likely to do the following:

1. Instead of going over past events and focusing on problems, the therapist helps you envision your future *without* today's problems.
2. During the course of therapy (often as few as 3 to 6 sessions), the therapist helps you discover solutions.
3. The therapist encourages you to identify and do *more* of what is already working.
4. The therapist guides you to identify what *doesn't* work and to focus on doing *less* of it.
5. The emphasis is on the future, not the past.
6. SFBT therapists believe that *the client* is the best expert about what it takes to change his or her life.
7. The therapist's role is to help you identify solutions that will remove the barriers to having the life you want.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is a process that helps people change by constructing solutions rather than dwelling on problems. This type of therapy tends to be shorter-term than traditional psychotherapy. Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg of the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee are the originators of this form of therapy.

The SFBT therapist helps the client identify elements of the desired solution, which are usually already present in the client's life. The client learns to build on these elements, which form the basis for ongoing change. Rather than searching for the causes of the problem, the focus is on defining the changes and making them a reality. The two key therapeutic issues are: (1) how the client wants his or her life to be different, and (2) what it will take to make it happen.

Creating a detailed picture of what it will be like when life is better creates a feeling of hope, and this makes the solution seem possible. The therapist helps the client focus on the future and how it will be better when things change. It is important to develop a set of specific, detailed goals. These goals drive the therapy process and keep it focused and efficient.

## Why SFBT Is Usually Short-Term

SFBT therapists don't set out to artificially limit the number of sessions. A good brief therapist will not focus on limiting sessions or time, but rather on helping clients set goals and develop strategies to reach those goals.

Focusing on the client's goals and the concrete steps needed to achieve them usually takes less time than traditional therapy, in which the client typically spends many sessions talking about the past and explores reasons and feelings. SFBT therapists aim to provide clients with the most effective treatment in the most efficient way possible so that clients can achieve their goals and get on with their lives. As a result of this focus, the counseling process often requires as few as six sessions.

## **Types of Problems That SFBT Addresses**

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy is an effective way of helping people solve many kinds of problems, including depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, relationship problems, and many other kinds of issues. Since it focuses on the *process* of change rather than on dissecting the problem, more serious issues do not necessarily require different treatment. The SFBT therapist's job is to help clients transform troubling issues into specific goals and an action plan for achieving them.

In *The Miracle Method*, authors Scott D. Miller and Insoo Kim Berg describe how to create solutions with these steps:

1. State your desire for something in your life to be different.
2. Envision that a miracle happens and your life *is* different.
3. Make sure the miracle is important to you.
4. Keep the miracle small.
5. Define the change with language that is positive, specific, concrete, and behavioral.
6. State how you will start your journey rather than how you will end it.
7. Be clear about whom, where, and when, but not why.

## **Signs That You Should Consider Seeing a Therapist**

There are several ways to know when you would be doing yourself a favor by finding a licensed, professional therapist to work with.

1. You've tried several things on your own, but you still have the problem.
2. You want to find a solution sooner rather than later.
3. You have thoughts of harming yourself or others.
4. You have symptoms of depression, anxiety, or another disorder that significantly interfere with your daily functioning and the quality of your life. For example, you have lost time from work, your relationships have been harmed, or your health is suffering. These are signs that you need the help of a trained, licensed professional.

Scott D. Miller and Insoo Kim Berg, *The Miracle Method*. New York, W.W. North & Company, Inc., 1995.

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