Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools

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Dedication

To Debbie, Tom, Erin, and Maura, thank you for loving me.

To my mother, Mary Murphy, thank you for being solution-focused before there was a word for it.
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Preface

This is a book about helping people change school problems in respectful ways that honor their strengths, wisdom, and dignity. Thanks to researchers, we know more than ever about what works in helping people change. Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools translates the latest research into practical strategies for resolving problems from preschool through high school. Every strategy is based on an abiding faith in people’s resilience and resourcefulness, even in the most difficult circumstances. This is not your typical counseling approach, which is precisely its strength.

The purpose of the book is to illustrate solution-focused counseling in action with a variety of clients and problems. Given that most people learn best through real-life examples, there are many dialogues from actual counseling sessions that I have conducted with students and others. The dialogues are often accompanied by commentary to provide an up-close and personal experience of solution-focused counseling.

Because schools are not set up for counseling, we need to adapt to schools. This may mean conducting counseling sessions whenever and wherever we can—on the playground, in the lunchroom, on the phone with a parent, while walking alongside a student or teacher in the hallway, and so forth. In solution-focused counseling, every contact is viewed as an opportunity for change.

While retaining the practical emphasis and conversational style of the first edition, Solution-Focused Counseling in Middle and High Schools, this book includes the following new features:

• A broader focus that covers preschool through high school students
• New examples and dialogues involving different clients and different problems
• Stronger emphasis on the client–counselor relationship, along with practical strategies for building cooperative relationships
• Client-based accountability methods for obtaining feedback on the usefulness of counseling services
• Additional practice exercises at the end of each chapter
• An expanded appendix section with user-friendly handouts, protocols, and other practical tools
Preface

This book was written primarily for school counselors, psychologists, social workers, graduate students, and others involved in serving preschool through high school students. Teachers, administrators, and parents have also found this approach to be useful in their work.

For the sake of clarity, the term client is used to describe anyone with whom you work to change a school problem, such as a student, parent, or teacher. Counseling refers to anything you do with clients to resolve school problems. This includes conducting individual and group sessions with students as well as working with parents and teachers. The term solution refers to a noticeable improvement in the problem, not necessarily its total resolution or elimination.

In teaching this approach throughout the world, I have discovered that school practitioners find it appealing for various reasons. For many, the simple and pragmatic emphasis on doing what works is a refreshing change from more cumbersome approaches that are impractical for schools. The positive focus on strengths, goals, and hope is also appealing. Most of us entered this profession to lift people up by helping them help themselves. The client-driven philosophy of solution-focused counseling is very compatible with this goal. The fact that solution-focused counseling accommodates diverse opinions is another attractive feature in an ever-changing and multicultural world. Last but not least, practitioners often report that it is energizing and enjoyable to work with people in this way. These are just a few of the reasons why this approach appeals to helping professionals and holds great promise for schools of the 21st century. But don’t take my word for it. Read on, and decide for yourself.
Acknowledgments

A big thanks goes to Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg for their development of solution-focused therapy. They will be greatly missed, but their ideas live on in this book and many other places. I am also grateful to Barry Duncan, a friend and colleague with whom I have collaborated on several projects over the years. Barry directed my postdoctoral training in family therapy and continues to inspire me by his passion for putting clients first and honoring their ideas and resources.

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To workshop participants and readers of the original edition, thank you for the feedback over the past several years. Finally, I owe a tremendous debt to the students, parents, and teachers with whom I have been privileged to work. They have been my greatest teachers, and their lessons are woven into every page of this book.
About the Author

John J. Murphy, PhD, is a professor of psychology and counseling at the University of Central Arkansas. He also works as a mental health consultant with Conway (Arkansas) public schools and consults with other school districts and agencies in the United States and overseas. Dr. Murphy taught high school before receiving his doctorate in school psychology from the University of Cincinnati. He completed postdoctoral training in family therapy and has written several books, chapters, and articles on positive approaches with children, adolescents, and school problems. He received the American School Counselor Association’s Best Book of the Year award in 1998 for *Solution-Focused Counseling in Middle and High Schools* (American Counseling Association), was named one of the top five school psychologists in the United States by the National Association of School Psychologists, and is featured in the videotape training series *Child Therapy With the Experts* (www.psychotherapy.net). Dr. Murphy is a popular workshop presenter who has trained thousands of helping professionals throughout the world.

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