Solution-Focused COUNSELING in Schools

Third Edition

John J. Murphy
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To Deb, Maura, Erin, Tom, and Helen—thanks for everything. It just keeps getting better.

To my late parents, Bob and Mary Murphy, thank you for your steady example and for being solution focused before there was a word for it.

To the students, parents, and teachers I have been privileged to serve, thank you for continuing to teach me how to be useful.

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I spent the first 13 years of my career in one of the most economically depressed school districts in the United States. Students faced multiple challenges inside and outside of school. In the face of overwhelming obstacles, the students and families of this community taught me lessons about courage and resilience that I will never forget. There was Mary, the single mother of three teenagers who worked two extra jobs to pay for her kids’ tutoring because, in her words, “I’ll do whatever it takes to give my kids a better chance than I had to make something of themselves.” And William, who walked his younger sister to and from school every day for 2 years to make sure she was safe. Then there was Lisa, a 20-year-old student with developmental disabilities, who tearfully described a litany of failures and frustrations dating back to kindergarten. Yet there she sat, bent but not broken, determined to graduate from high school in 2 months. These are just three of the many people I have been privileged to serve and learn from. Their stories and lessons are woven into every page of this book.

What’s New in This Edition?

It doesn’t seem like that long ago since the book’s first edition was published almost 20 years ago. Although the goal remains the same—to offer practical and respectful ways to help students resolve problems—the methods continue to evolve based on new research, theoretical developments, and clinical practice. One thing that hasn’t changed is the fact that schools are not set up to accommodate counseling, which means that we as counselors need to adapt our approach to the school setting. This requires flexibility and improvisation on our part, which may involve conducting
counseling sessions on the fly whenever and wherever we can—in the lunchroom, on the playground, talking with a parent by phone, or walking alongside a student or teacher in the hallway. It also means approaching every contact as a solution opportunity.

In addition to covering standard solution-focused techniques, such as developing specific goals and building on exceptions, this edition expands the approach even more with new chapters and information in the following areas:

- The restrictive influence of problems on people’s thinking, hope, and self-identity
- Relationship-building strategies
- The collection of systematic client feedback to monitor and improve services
- The coconstruction of solvable problems and practical goals
- Other applications of solution-focused practice in schools
- Discussion and practice exercises at the end of each chapter
- New and expanded appendixes

**Organization**

The book is divided into three parts. Part One begins with a new chapter on the problem with problems, along with a brief example of solution-focused counseling in schools. Chapters 2 and 3 address the empirical, conceptual, and therapeutic foundations of solution-focused counseling. Part Two provides the nuts and bolts of implementing solution-focused counseling in schools—involveing students and caregivers by developing collaborative relationships (Chapter 4) and practical goals (Chapter 5), investing in what’s right by building on exceptions (Chapter 6) and building on other student resources (Chapter 7), and inviting something different by changing the viewing (Chapter 8) and doing (Chapter 9). Part Two concludes with a chapter on how and when to end counseling. Part Three rounds out the book with chapters on troubleshooting when things don’t go as planned (Chapter 11), other applications of solution-focused practice in schools (Chapter 12), and putting solution-focused practice into immediate action (Chapter 13).

**Style and Terminology**

The book’s conversational style is intended to present ideas as clearly as possible. The term clients is used to describe anyone with whom you work to change a school problem, such as students, teachers, parents, school administrators, or others. The word care-
givers includes parents, teachers, and others who supervise or care for students. Counseling refers to any interaction aimed at resolving a problem—individual meetings with students, consultations with teachers and parents, and so on. The word solution generally refers to a desirable change in the problem situation, not necessarily its complete resolution.

**Real-World Examples**

People seem to learn best through examples, so the book is full of real-life examples and dialogue from counseling sessions involving a wide range of school problems and preschool through secondary students, along with several teachers and parents. Commentary is often included in the dialogues to provide a vivid, first-hand experience of solution-focused counseling from the counselor’s perspective. Unless otherwise noted, the examples and dialogues come from notes and tape recordings of my work with students and caregivers. Confidentiality has been maintained by disguising certain aspects of the situation so that individual students and caregivers are not identifiable. The term counselor is used in the dialogues for the sake of consistency.

**Audience and Appeal**

The book was written primarily for school counselors, psychologists, social workers, graduate students, and other mental health practitioners who work with young people and school problems. Teachers, parents, and school administrators have also commented on the usefulness of the book in their work. The book has been widely adopted as a text for graduate training programs in school psychology, school counseling, child counseling, social work, and allied professions.

In teaching classes and workshops all over the world, I have met a growing number of school practitioners, students in training, and laypersons who have successfully applied the book’s ideas and techniques. The idea of doing what works as simply and efficiently as possible is a refreshing change from time-consuming counseling approaches that are more cumbersome and impractical for schools. Building solutions from what is right with students—their strengths, resources, wisdom, and feedback—also appeals to people’s desire to empower, energize, and encourage struggling students instead of focusing exclusively on their deficits and weaknesses. The fact that solution-focused counseling accommodates a variety of cultural backgrounds and life experiences is another ap-
pealing feature in today’s increasingly diverse world. These are just a few of the reasons why solution-focused counseling is being implemented by a growing number of school practitioners throughout the world. Of course, the only way to know if it has anything to offer you and your clients is to read on and decide for yourself.
I remain thankful to the late Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer, originators of solution-focused brief therapy, who taught me to see the best in clients without denying their pain and problems. The book also bears the influence of my friend and colleague Barry Duncan. What started out as a 1-year postdoctoral experience with Barry in Dayton, Ohio, has grown into many collaborations and a deeply valued friendship. Barry’s passion for putting clients first is an ongoing source of inspiration.

I appreciate the support of the University of Central Arkansas (UCA), the UCA Psychology and Counseling Department, and the ideas and friendship of my colleagues and students. My students, too many to name, have provided valuable proofreading and feedback. Special thanks go to David Young, Diedre Henley, and Deb Murphy for their extensive help with this edition. I am grateful to Carolyn Baker, American Counseling Association associate publisher, for her unwavering support, competence, and friendship over the course of 20 years and three editions of this book. Words cannot express my gratitude for my family—Deb, Erin, Maura, Tom, and Helen. To students and workshop participants throughout the world—and readers of previous editions—thank you for your enthusiastic response to the work. Finally, I am indebted to the students and caregivers I have been privileged to serve, as they continue to teach me what works in helping people change.
John J. Murphy, PhD, is a licensed psychologist and professor of psychology and counseling at the University of Central Arkansas. He continues to work with students and caregivers in schools and private practice and conducts training and consultation with state associations, school districts, and other agencies throughout the United States and overseas. Dr. Murphy was a public school teacher and full-time school psychologist before receiving his PhD in school psychology from the University of Cincinnati. He completed postdoctoral training in family therapy with Barry Duncan and has published widely on the topic of collaborative, solution-focused approaches with children, adolescents, and school problems. Dr. Murphy received the American School Counselor Association’s Best Book of the Year award for the 1997 edition of *Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools* (American Counseling Association) and was named one of the top five school psychologists in the United States by the National Association of School Psychologists. His work has been featured in counseling textbooks, the *New York Times* bestseller *Switch, Fast Company* magazine, and the DVD training series *Child Therapy With the Experts*. Dr. Murphy is a sought-after keynote and workshop speaker who has presented to thousands of mental health professionals, teachers, and parents throughout the world. His workshops are known for their passion, practicality, and commitment to helping people change with dignity.

To invite Dr. Murphy to speak to your group or to offer feedback on the book, contact him at jmurphy@uca.edu. Visit his website (www.drjohnmurphy.com) to learn more about workshop offerings and other aspects of his work.