



American Counseling Association

School Counselor Connection

Brief Counseling Techniques for School Counselors

Due to time constraints and large caseloads, school counselors are in need of techniques that are both efficient and effective when working with individual students. Solution-focused brief counseling (Sklare, 2014) and motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) are two techniques that school counselors can use to help students quickly identify issues and potential solutions. While these techniques work well for many situations, it is important to recognize that they may not be effective for every problem, and to have more appropriate techniques at the ready. Here are key features of these two brief counseling techniques.

Solution-Focused Brief Counseling

- **Scaling:** Have students rate their issue on a scale of 1 to 10, where “1” represents the worst desirable situation or outcome and “10” represents the best. It is often useful to have students define these situations. The student then identifies where they are on the scale and what steps can move them up the scale.
- **Finding Exceptions:** Have students identify times when the situation was not happening, or the issue was not as troubling as it currently is. Then have them notice what was different during the exception and how to make that happen more.
- **Miracle Question:** Have students imagine what life would be like if the issue did not exist or the situation were resolved. They should then examine what others would notice, or how things would be different. Finally, help students explore ways to take small steps toward that solution.

Motivational Interviewing

- **Open-ended questions:** Ask questions that require students to go into more detail about their issue or situation than just a simple yes or no. Encourage them to expound on the information that they are sharing with you.
- **Affirmations:** Reflect both meaning and feeling of the information the student is

sharing with you. This builds empathy and trust and allows students to recognize that you are truly listening to what they are saying.

- **Roll with resistance:** Acknowledge that change is hard and that it may not always be easy for the student. When resistance to change occurs, be aware of it, and then shift focus to another part of the issue and return to open-ended questions and affirmations.
- **Support self-efficacy:** When small changes begin to occur, support and praise the student. Help them to realize that they have the capacity to change. It may be useful to examine similar situations from the student’s past and how they were able to move beyond it.

Resources

- Erford, B. T. (2020). *45 techniques that every counselor should know* (3rd Ed.). Pearson Education Inc.
- Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change* (3rd Ed.). The Guilford Press.
- North, R. A. (2017). *Motivational interviewing for school counselors*.
- Sklare, G. B. (2014). *Brief counseling that works* (3rd Ed.). Corwin.

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