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Brief Solution-Focused Counseling With Young People and School Problems

John Murphy

Introduction

Truancy, violence, depression, and a host of other child and adolescent problems are on the rise. Counselors who work within and outside of schools are frequently asked to address such problems. This article offers hope and encouragement to counselors and other practitioners in the form of brief solution-focused counseling (BSFC), an efficient, research-based approach that is responsive to the practical realities of schools and managed care.

Research Support for BSFC

Brief solution-focused counseling is grounded in four decades of psychotherapy outcome research on the essential ingredients of therapeutic change (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). A cumulative body of psychotherapy research encompassing a diverse range of practitioners, clients, and problems suggests that desired outcomes result largely from the influence of common factors (Asay & Lambert, 1999). Common factors are the essential ingredients of change that operate across different clients, problems, settings, and theoretical models. These elements are also referred to as "nonspecific factors" because they operate across all theoretical approaches and are not specific to any one particular model. Successful therapeutic outcomes appear to result primarily from the operation of four interrelated factors. These factors are listed below along with their percentage

contribution to successful outcomes:

- client factors (40%; values, personal strengths, resources, social supports);
- relationship factors (30%; collaboration, cooperation, acceptance, warmth);
- hope factors (15%; positive expectancy and anticipation of change); and
- model/technique factors (15%; theoretical model and intervention techniques).

These four components of positive change are interactive in that the enhancement of any one factor strengthens the others. For example, students may become more optimistic and hopeful (hope factor) when they are encouraged to apply their own strengths and resources to the problem (client factor). The success of a specific intervention strategy (model/technique factor) is enhanced when the student perceives the practitioner as accepting and caring (relationship factor). The BSFC approach is designed to jump-start the change process by activating these factors from the opening moments of counseling with young people and others.

With a simple focus on "what works" in helping people change, BSFC provides a user-friendly approach to school problems and other challenges faced by today's children and youth. Change is the essence of counseling and therapy. The usefulness of counselors and other practitioners rests largely on their ability to interact with people in ways that encourage change and solutions. Brief solution-focused counseling is responsive to the simple reality that *change is the name of the game*.

These findings can be translated into specific techniques that enhance outcomes including (a) defining changeable problems; (b) developing highly meaningful and specific goals; (c) asking respectful questions that promote solutions; (d) establishing cooperative relationships by accommodating people's language, beliefs, and preferences; (e) using change-focused questions and language in interviews with students, parents, and teachers; (f) building on

exceptions to the problem; (g) reframing the problem; (h) applying paradoxical strategies; (i) presenting ideas and interventions as "suggestions" and "experiments" instead of directives; and (j) empowering and maintaining desired changes. The next section provides four major strategies for implementing BSFC in schools and other settings.

Four Key Strategies of BSFC

Strategy 1: Be a Good Ambassador

The "ambassador perspective" can be a useful metaphor in describing effective counseling relationships (Murphy, 1997). When foreign ambassadors arrive in a new country, they do not start telling people what to do. They look, listen, and learn. They ask questions like the following: What do you value most? What does an average day look like for you? How should I go about learning as much as I can about you and your country? If you were me, what advice would you offer to the people of your country?

Good ambassadors are eager and humble learners who approach the country's inhabitants as essential teachers of key cultural beliefs and practices. The ambassador's ultimate effectiveness rests largely on an ability to match advice and recommendations to the unique challenges, interests, and capabilities of the country's population. Likewise, effective interventions for school problems are tailored to the distinctive aspects of the problem and the people involved in it. Approaching students, teachers, and parents with humility and curiosity helps to build collaborative relationships. Collaboration enhances change by fostering people's ownership of intervention strategies (Murphy & Duncan, 1997). Like good ambassadors, effective practitioners fit their approach to the people instead of trying to fit the people to their approach.

Strategy 2: Use Words Wisely

Counseling is a language-based activity. Words can either help or hinder. The effectiveness of counseling improves when practitioners listen carefully to the words of others and choose their own words

wisely. The words people use to discuss school problems provide important clues about how they view the problem and its potential solution. Consider the difference between the following two descriptions of the same problem involving a fifth-grade student referred for disruptive classroom behavior.

> *Teacher:* He's very manipulative and likes to have the upper hand. When he's not in control, he'll do something to direct attention to himself so he can have an audience. Meanwhile, I lose control of class. That's my big concern. I feel like I'm losing control of the class, and he's gaining all the control.
>
> *Student:* She's always on my case [referring to the teacher]. I can't do anything right. Everything I do in her class is wrong. I breathe and she says, "Now Stephanie, stop breathing."
>
> *[Note the practitioner's response in each of these cases.]*
>
> *Practitioner (to the teacher):* I'm wondering what you could do differently to regain some control in the classroom.
>
> *Practitioner (to the student):* I'm wondering what you could do differently to get the teacher off your case.

In both cases, the practitioner provides some needed "R and R" by *respecting* and *reflecting* the person's language and incorporating it into a follow-up comment ("gaining control" for the teacher, getting the teacher "off your case" for the student). This takes practice, but it is well worth the effort. I have been amazed at how useful this strategy is in engaging the most reluctant or so-called resistant students. The term *resistance* is addressed next.

Strategy 3: Resist the Urge to See Resistance

Mary was a high school student referred for defiant school behavior. Here is what Mary said as she entered this author's office for the first time before there was even time to say hello: "This school sucks. The teachers are stupid and the principal is an idiot. And now

I have to come here to see you. I know you're gonna try to make me mind the teachers, but I'm not doing it, and you can't make me. Nobody can make me. This whole counseling thing sucks just like the school. I'm not crazy. I don't care what you say."

Mary fits most definitions of resistant. The big question is this: Does viewing Mary as resistant help to work with her in a way that enhances change? In my experience, and according to the psychotherapy outcome research discussed above, the answer is a resounding "No!" Viewing people as resistant hinders the change process. Consider the following two common responses to so-called resistant students like Mary: (a) the *Rational Persuasion Approach* of trying to talk her out of her opinion by providing facts that challenge her view of herself and others and (b) the *Fatalistic Future Approach* of informing her how miserable her future life will be if she does not heed Santana's advice and "change her evil ways" pronto. Even though these resistance-countering responses are applied with the best of intentions, they usually backfire and make matters worse.

Students who demonstrate serious and ongoing school problems often feel misunderstood, a change-deterring impression that is reinforced when practitioners view them as resistant (including statements or implications that the student is "not trying"). It is more efficient to cooperate with the student's position instead of trying to change it. Returning to Mary, I cooperated with her position by asking what she needed to do to get out of coming to counseling. Mary was intrigued by this unexpected question. She became much more cooperative as we talked about specific behaviors that would advance her goal of not coming to counseling. Change is enhanced by replacing the resistance label with creative efforts to cooperate with students, parents, and teachers.

Strategy 4: Focus on What Works for People

The field of psychology has been described as being obsessed with people's shortcomings and limitations. Renowned educational psychologist Seymour Sarason called traditional psychological assessment "a search for pathology." Seeing students and others as deficient or competent is a matter of choice versus truth. Strategy 4

invites practitioners to "search for competency" by including assessment and interviewing strategies aimed at identifying people's strengths and resources (Murphy, in press). Psychotherapy outcome research indicates that building on people's strengths and resources is one of the most powerful and efficient means of changing problems.

One way of implementing this strategy is to search for exceptions to the problem. Exceptions refer to times in which a school problem is absent or less intense. Asking a disruptive student about the one class in which they do not get into trouble, instead of focusing only on the problematic classes, provides helpful clues about what works for the student in regard to class format, teacher–student interaction, and so forth. This information can be used to design interventions that encourage the student and others to do more of what is already working. In addition to providing a practical path to solutions, this strategy is more successful in engaging young people who have experienced chronic problems and have become somewhat immune to problem-based conversations.

Summary and Conclusion

Brief solution-focused counseling (BSFC) offers great promise to practitioners seeking an efficient and research-supported approach to school problems and the young people who experience them. The BSFC approach presented in this article is derived from four decades of psychotherapy outcome research on the essential ingredients or "common factors" of therapeutic change—client, relationship, hope, and model-technique factors. Outcome research can be translated into practical strategies for resolving problems including the "ambassador approach" to client–practitioner relationships, the strategic use of language, and the emphasis on client strengths and resources. Although this approach is derived from established research findings, there is a strong need for future research on its specific application to young people and school problems. Additional guidelines and strategies for implementing BSFC can be found in Murphy (1997) and Murphy and Duncan (1997).

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