SF practise note

▶ This presentation covers one practitioner’s approach to incorporating solution-focused techniques into couples counselling.

▶ The techniques described here represent a transition from problem-focused work with clients to solution-focused work by this practitioner.

▶ Other practitioners choose to use (or not use) various SF tools that have been developed over the past 40 years.

▶ Use what works best for you with your clients. Doing the Outcome Rating Scale can help you to track client outcomes.
Best hopes

► Take you on a journey: stumbling into SF
► Say why I think SF is very effective in comparison with other modalities for couples.
► Share my favourite SF tips for working with couples.
► Give a case example*
► Answer any questions

* Case example is completely de-identified and based on composites of similar presentations.

About me …

► **Ross Langford.** Born in Dubbo, NSW; lived Tokyo, then Sydney and Melbourne for the past 23 years with my gorgeous wife Kate and amazing daughters Anna and Sarah.
► **Certified Bogan & a Dubbo.**
  “Dubbo” is defined by *Urban Dictionary* as “a) A place of no growth, vision or future, that holds back class, happiness and excitement ... often filled with bogans and other forms of trash.” Bonus points: my mum was actually born on the Bogan River in 1932.
► Many jobs before counselling.
SF observation …

- SF practitioners often come from diverse non-psychomedical backgrounds. Many end up as social workers.
- Steve de Shazer was a saxophonist.
- Insoo Kim Berg was trained in pharmacy.
- The UK-based SF trauma specialist Steve Flatt was an engineer and worked with race horses.
- Eve Lipchik was an aspiring playwright, Jim Derks was a pig farmer, Marilyn LaCourt was a school teacher, Guy Shennan has a maths degree from Oxford. You get the picture.
- I think SF attracts people who like simple, practical, effective approaches.

My work

- AASW mental health social worker; AASFBT member; Co-ordinate an SF-focused Mental Health Professionals Network practice group in Melbourne, linked to an SF Meetup group.
- Counsellor at Benestar, a national employee assistance program provider; private practice.
- Diverse presentations: mental health, workplace issues, relationship distress, adolescents, addictions, and trauma.
- Fun fact: my EAP clinical manager, Evy Gomo, is SF friendly. In the 1980s she attended workshops by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg.
An eclectic mess

- As a new counsellor in 2006, I was “eclectic”.
- SF intro in my Social Work degree. No practise, no training.
- First started to see couples by accident: client booked a session for herself and then brought her husband.
- Felt out of my depth; sessions often sidetracked into old arguments; read heaps but little seemed to help me or the clients.

I need knowledge!

- 24 students in the class, many experienced counsellors.
- Most coursework, readings, and teaching time on psychodynamic and family systems theories; some EFT and anger management.
- Lack of clarity about various systems theory and psychodynamic terms: how to “diagnose” or what effective “treatment” might be.
Coming to SF

- Only 1 of 200+ articles on the reading list was on solution-focused therapy; not a recommended “must read”.
- That SF article made sense to me as a practical, effective approach.
- Occam’s Razor moment: the simplest therapeutic hypothesis – that people just want to do their lives better – points to the simplest technique to get there.
- Famous US systems therapist on a teaching tape from the 1980s; as the couples therapy session became tangled, he asked … the Miracle Question!

William of Occam

Theory-laden therapy

- Theory-based therapy is inherently expert-directed rather than centred on client hopes.
- If a therapeutic model requires “challenging” your clients’ “resistance” to therapy or how they are doing their lives, or if it needs structured “closure” to end the “therapeutic relationship”, there is an implication of dependence on the therapist rather than of enabling client autonomy and strength.
- I see myself as more of a mechanic who works alongside clients – helping them to figure out how to get their engine running more smoothly – rather than as a doctor with a diagnosis and a cure for their life cancer.

“Find out what works … and do more of that.”
- Steve de Shazer
The presenting couple

- Couples come expecting to talk about all their problems, especially those who have tried other non-SF counsellors.
- Anxious, hopeful, fearful, uncertain, defensive.
- Last-chance mood; implicit sense of failure. Why else would they have to see someone?
- Underlying hope that the wise therapist will fix their relationship and stop their suffering.

Stuck, stuck, stuck

In line with this conference’s theme, couples who come to therapy are often experiencing trauma-like symptoms:

- Fear that the problem can’t be fixed, or stays the same or gets worse.
- Triggered into fight or flight by the slightest reminders of the underlying anxiety.
- Loss of agency (that’s why they are seeing you).
- Consuming focus and rumination on the problem.
- Existential threat: end of marriage, financial disaster, potential loss or prolonged separation from kids.
- Feelings of being trapped, stuck, hopeless, helpless.
- Associated feelings of depression and anxiety.
Problem-focused work

- Begins with the problem/s: “Why are you here?”
- Explores problematic couple and/or FOO history e.g. attachment issues, bad triads, whatever …
- Explores feelings and dysfunction associated with the problem. Attempts emotional reconciliation.
- Might label or diagnose client/s.
- Provides insight about why this is a problem and/or “challenges” the client/s misperceptions.
- “Works through” problem for indefinite period of time. Sets homework that may be “resisted”.

My pre-SF couples work

- Time spent getting a detailed history and genogram (often problem focused).
- “Worked through” recent arguments, explored or tried create understanding about hurtful episodes, mapped complex FOO dynamics.
- Frequent in-session tension or disagreements. Expected to act as an argument magistrate.
- Lacked focus, direction or clear goals apart from “emotion focus” or “insight” or overcoming resistance to coaching. Often felt the hopelessness of the clients.
Useful SF assumptions 1

- **Naïve enquirer:** I am interested in your lives and goals and hopes and dreams. But you are the experts in your lives.

- **Assume the couple are doing at least ONE thing well sometimes:** child care, sex, problem solving, holiday planning, managing fights in front of children, house care, shopping, shared values.

- **Assume the couple have at least ONE exception to their present pain** e.g., when they first met, last holiday, cooking together, joy in kids, things they rely on the other.

Useful SF assumptions 2

- **Assume both partners can imagine a positive alternative** to at least ONE present problem.

- **Accept that a better relationship for THIS couple at THIS time may have nothing to do with what I think is an ideal relationship.**

- **Assume that change or a movement towards improving the relationship has started before coming to counselling** e.g., the decision to both attend … and then attending.
Starting SF session 1

- Elicit ANY joint functionality while clients are settling with an open-ended yes answer: “So you two found this place OK …”. Establish a Q&A that is familiar and focused on function.

- Do the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS): Fill out pre-session in the Reception or run through it after introductions. You have to know if what you are doing is working. Also, useful scaling information.

- Begin with client hopes for counselling: “What do you hope to improve in your relationship with this counselling?” Or the simple: “What are you best hopes for our session today?”

- Explore how the couple decided to come to therapy and what pre-session change may have occurred already.

Building on a good start

- BUT asking about best hopes still often immediately leads to problem talk. Couples expect to begin with problems because that is how therapy is done, right?

- Notice problems, validate pain and frustration e.g: “You felt really hurt by [this issue]”). Bracket in time and issue specificity. Ask how they have managed to cope.

- Explore what full 10/10 functioning would look like. “What would your ideal 10/10 relationship with [partner] would look like?” Go into deep detail: activities, intimacy, feeling states, recognition, argument resolution …

- List out individual goals of the couple: what would be different, better, a return to past function, or doing instead of current behaviours.

- Explore the start of the relationship: how met, initial attractions, what activities did they do then?
In-session actions

- Intervene ANY time there is escalation. Channel Insoo Kim Berg whenever problems surface: “Let me come back to that …” [and then don’t].

- Always, always, always notice something positive or affirmative about the couple and specifically comment on it, especially at the end of the session. Finish on a positive.

- Reframe negatives into questions about desired changes: “So if you didn’t feel ignored when he got home, what would I see happening?”

- Probe the specifics of desired changes right down to a granular level: “If he came and hugged you when he got home, how would you be feeling inside?” “How soon after he arrived home, would the hug happen?” “How would he hug you?”

Exploring deeper with SF

- Search for any exceptions in any aspect of the relationship and explore how that is being achieved.

- Ask how clients will know when things are better: e.g., what will they stop, start or do more of?

- Notice positives about the couple’s history, current function, goals, care of children, ability to get to therapy, communication with each other, hopefulness.

- Provide some psycho-ed about how small changes can create a positive upwards spiral; just as recurrent negative interactions produce negative spirals.

- Review all improvements stated by each partner; ask which would be the easiest to achieve next and how that would be done. The couple set their own homework!
The aim of the session …

► The aim is to NOT to get caught up in the pain and dysfunction of home.

► They are here to escape that.

► The “therapy” IS focusing on hope, change and a way forward.

Off-ramp phrases 1

► Rebooting the session: Up to 20 minutes into the session if clients have been venting: “Before we start counselling, what would make this session useful?”

► Admiration: Comment on function at ANY time e.g., “I’m really impressed that you both …”

► In response to accusations, contempt, counter-blaming, refighting the argument they just had in the car: “I’ll come back to that …” [and don’t].

► When a fight has broken out: “I can see why you both are here … to stop doing this, right?”

► If fight continues to escalate: Get their attention: “Bob! Sue! I need to stop you both here. Is this what is happening at home?” [YES]. “How do you eventually break off from this sort of fight at home?”
Off-ramp phrases 2

- In response to ANY exception to a problem: “How did you do that?”
- When an SF question elicits a problem response (“He wouldn’t …” or “She always …”), ask: “If you weren’t doing X, what would you be doing instead?” or “What would feel better than that?”
- When a client begins to cry: “It’s been really painful for you [pause for a while]. What would make this feel better?”
- If a partner keeps answering positive outcomes to me, look at their partner and – if they still don’t get the hint – ask them to “discuss that” with [partner]. Then shut up.

Sessions 2+

- Do the ORS: Track change and effectiveness; are you the best counsellor for this couple?
- “What’s been better with you two?” This will often (but not always) produce blank stares. Pause for a while …
- You MUST probe deeper here. 80% of the time, they have tried something different and felt a little better until they relapsed. Sometimes “nothing” was eventually followed by 3, 4, 5 changes or attempts to change. Explore how.
- Normalise setbacks and ask “If that happened again, what could you do instead to get a better outcome?”
- Re-explore 10/10 relationship; ask them each to pick one item and describe in rich detail what would be happening.
Case study in “failure”

- The couple separated about 1 month ago after Sue checked Bill’s phone and found that he had been sexting another woman.
- “Bill”: 27yo salesman; 8yo son from a previous relationship who is with them 50:50. “Sue”: 30yo accountant. They have a 5yo son. Bill’s ex, Jen, used to hate Sue and not like her son going there; better now.
- Fighting and arguing, sometimes in front of their children; sometimes by text. Sue is teary at the start of the session and tells me what Bill did when I ask about “best hopes”; Bill says nothing.

Instead of this …

- I acknowledge Sue’s emotion and hurt. Bill is looking anxiously at her, saying nothing. He says to me: “I fucked up”. Sue, crying, says “Yeah, you really fucked up!” I notice Bill’s comment, reframing it as “You don’t want to hurt Sue like this?” He says nothing but nods.
- I reboot the session 10 minutes in: “Before we start today, what would be different if we had a really useful session?”
- Bill says that they wouldn’t fight in front of their kids when he visits (Bill brings his first son to see his little brother, who he really loves). Sue agrees and recalls a distressing fight a week ago. She says it would be better if Bill would say what he feels to her instead of responding later in angry ALL CAPS texts.
- I reframe this as an “instead” question: “So if you weren’t fighting in front of the kids, what would you be doing instead?” They say playing, feeding, bathing, putting to bed, reading …
Noticing function

- I ask about a range of different couple skills that have been alluded to already:
- How did they learn to parent so well?
- How did they manage to gain the trust of Bill’s ex Jen in having “her” son with them?
- Who is best at what aspect in the care of their children?
- Have there been times when Bill visited since the breakup when they didn’t fight? When was that? What did they do differently that enabled that?

Note: Details of the client cases amalgamated here have been completely anonymised.

What else?

- I explore what they do as parents. Surprisingly, this question elicits strongly positive comments from them both. Sue believes Bill is a very good, loving father; he sees her as an “excellent” mother.
- I ask how they agreed to come along together today even though their feelings are strong at the moment. Sue wants to have a good separation because she saw how awful things were with Bill and his ex-partner Jen. Bill agrees.
- I ask more about what “a good separation” would look like to them both. They discuss numerous topics such as how they would introduce any new future partners to the children.

Note: Details of the client cases amalgamated here have been completely anonymised.
Admiring, praising

- I congratulate them for being special parents who are able to parent well together despite what has happened.
- I admire their goal of having a good, supportive post-separation relationship in the interests of their children.
- I compare them very favourably with those parents who can’t do this.
- I am impressed by how often they have managed NOT to fight and be there for their kids since separation.

Other hopes

- It begins to emerge that this relationship may not be over. Bill has turned towards Sue on the sofa; she has recrossed her legs towards him.
- Sue talks about loss of trust again. I ask what a trustful relationship would look like. Various trust solutions are raised e.g., Bill leaving his phone open for Sue to check at any time.
- The couple begin to explore with each other how they might reconcile. I just sit and watch for about 5 minutes. Easy counselling $$ when the clients take over the solution-finding.
Session 2

- Sue says she felt very positive after the last session even though the girls at work said “No” to going back. She stayed over at Bill’s house one night.
- She says there has been a “setback”. He slept with another woman (not the sexting one); she is reconciled to not getting back together. Her trust has been finally broken.
- I ask how they managed to come into the session today despite this. They return to the original themes of being a “good” separated couple and we explore this in detail.
- At session end, they ask if they can come back in about a month to check-in on how they are doing. I say that if that would be useful, they are very welcome; we book a time.
- I say that if things are going really well, they can always cancel. How would they know that they didn’t need a follow-up?

Observations - 1

- SF helped to surface what was important to this couple: not fighting in front of their children and instead co-operating well together post-separation.
- I didn’t try to understand why Bill or Sue thought the betrayals happened. Typically people have completely different views on the causes of problems.
- The only time I spent on their FOOS was when they raised it (both come from angry, separated families). **History is not destiny.** Relationships are dynamic and change frequently for better or worse based on current life stressors.
- I validated hurt feelings when they emerged but didn’t spend 5 sessions trying to emotionally focus them on each other’s emotional history and deficits since childhood.

*Note: Details of the client cases amalgamated here have been completely anonymised.*
Observations - 2

- The solutions to problems may have nothing to do with their causes. If you have turned down a wrong road, figuring how that happened or who caused that may be less useful than working together to get back in direction you both really wanted to go.

- Achieving change requires client visualisation of what change would look and feel like. If you want to fix a broken item, you need to know what its full and proper functioning actually looks like.

- Is SF work manipulative? If a couple come in flooded with problems that keep surfacing in session, shouldn’t we counsellors let the couple have that as their agenda?

- No. SF validates current problems but focuses on clients’ current function and preferred futures. This shift in focus minimises in-session distress and disagreements, creates hope, and establishes pathways to desired change.

Where is your focal point?

- “When I focus on what's good today, I have a good day, and when I focus on what's bad, I have a bad day.

- “If I focus on a problem, the problem increases; if I focus on the answer, the answer increases.

- “When I focus on people's bad qualities, they multiply; when I focus on people's good qualities, they seem to grow and grow.”

- Doctor, Addict, Alcoholic by Dr Paul O.