

# Chapter 7

## Solution–Focused Brief Counseling in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Problem– Solving and Counseling

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### ABSTRACT

*Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) has become a popular methodology used in business, counseling, and other fields to help individuals problem-solve. In education, this approach is known as solution-focus brief counseling (SFBC). This chapter will review the origins of the solution-focused approach to counseling and problem-solving, present the major tenants, and discuss challenges. The chapter will also present interview data from current school counselors to examine how school counselors use SFBC in schools and provide strategies for implementation.*

### INTRODUCTION

*You cannot solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that created it. – Albert Einstein*

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) has become a popular approach used in business, social policy, education, criminal justice services, child welfare, and counseling (Institute for Solution-Focused Therapy, 2017). Originally used in therapeutic settings, Solution-Focus Brief Counseling (SFBC) has become common practice in education, particularly as a tool school counselors use when working with students to solve problems. To provide a foundation in the development and use of SFBC, this chapter will review the solution-focused approach to counseling and problem-solving, present the major tenants

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of solution-focused brief counseling. Additionally, focus group data will be presented to examine how school counselors use solution-focused brief therapy in schools to guide students toward solutions, and several strategies for incorporating the tenets of SFBC into the school counselor's year are shared.

## **BACKGROUND**

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy has evolved from brief psychotherapy which typically is focused on a specific problem and the development of a direct intervention to address the problem in a short period of time. The solution-focused approach further expanded the belief from brief therapy that clients can achieve successful results in a short period of time if clients could identify their strengths and apply them to the current problem (Henderson & Thompson, 2016). This approach assumes that people are willing and able to change their behaviors to obtain a desired outcome or solution. It also assumes that even when people are not doing well, pieces of the solution are present at times; thus, counseling sessions often begin by highlighting what is going well in the client's life in order to discover exceptions to the problem, what is working, what they plan to continue doing, and what goals they would like to achieve.

De Shazer et al. (2007) built upon the brief therapy framework and further expanded the theory by testing new techniques at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the 1980's and 90's. The appeal of this technique is that it was developed by therapists in a clinical setting. Unlike many other theoretical models that are oriented around a hypothesis or theory, the solution-focused framework evolved from a series of discoveries when researchers evaluated the effects of different interventions on client outcomes (Murphy, 2015). De Shazer noticed that when he shifted the focus of his counseling sessions from discussions about the problem that client was trying to solve to highlighting successes, noticing what improvements occurred in their lives, and identifying exceptions or times that the problem was less severe or absent, two-thirds of his clients reported significant improvements by the next session (Sklare, 2014). Shifting the philosophy of counseling from an exploration of problems to a focus on solutions appeared to effectively improve client outcomes while reducing the number of sessions needed to achieve positive results.

The solution-focused approach to problem-solving differs from the traditional problem-solving method in several ways. The traditional problem-solving process can be conceptualized as the act of defining a problem and determining the cause of the problem; then, identifying, prioritizing, and selecting alternatives for a solution, and finally, implementing a solution. Traditional approaches, even the current restorative justice approach or restorative practice, tend to be problem-focused in that they highlight the problem, discuss what is not working, and identify solutions to the problem. A problem-focused approach has been found to narrow thinking, hinder solutions, limit creativity, and trigger emotional responses (Murphy, 2015). The solution-focused counseling approach, on the other hand, takes a strengths-based approach that presumes the individual is able to identify and implement actions toward solving the problem; thus, keeps the conversation on the solution(s) rather than an analysis of the problem. The major tenets of a solution-focused approach include:

- Future-focused; emphasizes future possibilities rather than discussing past problems or problem roots
- Highlights "exceptions", or times when the problem does not occur

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