

Western Australian Solution Focused Interest Group (WASFIG) Meeting 10



WASFIG Best Hopes: Share, Connect, Grow, Learn, Develop

1. Share SF knowledge and update our SF knowledge since original training;
2. Connect and network with like-minded SF practitioners to enhance community and reduce isolation;
3. Grow interest in the SFBT approach in Perth and WA to do our bit to change the world one SF step at a time;
4. Learn where and with whom SF might be best applied in our practices;
5. Develop our clinical effectiveness and efficiency (we may only have a set number of sessions so how do we do the very best with each session as though it may be the only one or the last).

When: Saturday 29 October 2022 9:30am-11:30am (WA time) (VIC/NSW/QLD = 11:30am-1:30pm, SA = 11am-1pm)

Where: Zoom

Attendees: Brent Dagleish, Felicite Gunther, Fiona Skahill, Janet Lim, Johanna Saltis, Katy Hunt, Kym Madden, Lisa Cregan, Magdaline Wendot, Michael Bazeley, Mika Bazeley, Nadia Kidgell, Penny Jak, Ruth Leveson, Sara Tovska, Shona Scallan, Theresa Acutt, Yvette Strawbridge; Steve Runciman and Kerry Drummond (Co-coordinators).

Apologies: Abhi Velani, Amy O'Brien, Andrea Yeo, Jennifer Wolff, Kris Giesen. Lauren Daniel, Michele Thomas, Sandra Lhotellier, and Theresa Hewlett.

Group Facilitator: Steve Runciman

Group Presenter: Kerry Drummond and Theresa Acutt

Topic: *Linda Metcalf's Solution Focused Narrative Therapy (SFNT): Do we lean towards externalising the problem or amplifying possibility despite or beyond the problem?*

In a WA SFBT Interest Group first for our October 2022 meeting, we had two speakers lead a discussion on Linda Metcalf's Solution Focused Narrative Therapy. Kerry Drummond was joined by Theresa Acutt to explore the question *"Does the externalisation component from SFNT improve the reach of SFBT as Linda Metcalf suggests, or would keeping true to SFBT and tapping into exception questions from SFBT 1.0 help us find another way of working closer to the problem that does not water down the power of SFBT?"*. Thank you very much Theresa for your time and effort in sharing your thoughts and experience with SFNT with the group.

We briefly explored key points from Linda Metcalf's workshop and book on Solution Focused Narrative Therapy:

SFNT concentrates on the preferred future context and the effects the problem story have had on the client's life. This allows the client to recognize the intrusion of the problem and its effects, and then presents an opportunity to choose to create a new landscape of a preferred future based more strongly on his or her true identity. This coming together of values and client, which often have been distanced by the intrusion of a problem, allows personal satisfaction and confidence to be reclaimed. (Metcalf, 2017, p. 29)

Linda Metcalf's Guiding ideas of SFNT:

- Invite clients to see the events in their lives as chapters. Some chapters are successful, and others are not as successful. Those successful chapters are 'gaps' in the problem story, or exceptions.
- Enquire about descriptions that the client or others has ascribed to themselves and seek new descriptions to create new beliefs and actions.
- See complaints, trauma or dangerous habits as situations that interfere in a client's preferred life, rather than diagnosing the client. Align with the client against the complaint, externalising it.
- Externalising allows clients to separate themselves from the dominant stories that have been shaping of their lives and relationships. By doing so, new unique redescriptions of themselves are created and opportunities to begin living those redescriptions becomes exciting.
- When client talks about what they do not want, ask what they would prefer.
- Adopt a not-knowing stance, gather little history of the problem in order to meet the client not the problem.
- Hear every goal as one that will make a difference to them no matter how unrealistic.
- Our role is to keep track of exceptions, meanings and values in session - listen for what matters to our client.
- Ask the Miracle Question to move the client into the preferred future story and get enough specific actions so the client walks out with a blueprint for new actions.
- End session noting how you look forward to hearing about the small changes client achieves between sessions.

Linda Metcalf's 3 Lists to Externalise a Problem

Linda Metcalf has suggested for some clients who find it too hard to identify a Best Hopes due to problem saturation, it can move the process forward by first amplifying the problem to externalise this by exploring the negative impact of the problem on the client's life. Linda has suggested problem amplification can build a client's motivation to stand up to the problem.

To externalise a problem, Linda has suggested creating 3 lists with the client:

List 1: Mapping effects of the problem - identify negative impact of problem on client's life.

List 2: Be curious and invite the client to seek actions that might lead to their standing up to the problem, enabling them to reauthor their future. How have you already been standing up to the problem?

List 3: Ask the Miracle Question: Suppose tomorrow you wake up and the problem that has intruded into your lives is occurring less. Tell me what you might be doing so the problem is not as big. What will be going on when you are freeing yourself from the problem – what you want instead of the problem.

Read back the three Lists for client. Provide copy of lists to client, say these are some good ideas and I look forward to hearing what you try out – let the successes be the client's – let them decide what to do differently.

We then considered some ideas on what contributes to the power of SFBT. Elliott Connie from the Solution Focused Universe in the US spoke about the power of SFBT and how SF practitioners can talk with clients about problems:

- Listening to the problem such as childhood trauma does not mean you are not doing SF well - **the tragedy story and hero story are the same story it just depends how you listen** – listen for the hero in the story, find evidence of their success today regardless of their past struggles – Eg. how did you graduate high school and attend TAFE given your challenges as a child?
- If you train yourself to hear heros when you hear tragedy you are now doing high level of SFBT.

This is the video link to hear more from Elliott on how to talk with clients about problems from the SFBT approach:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WckdHcoxnN8>

SFBT questions invite the client to identify and describe their Best Hopes/Desired Outcome in detail showing up in the past, present and future. This enables the client to:

- Rehearse the positive change they want in their life (mind stretching/world stretching - Mark McKergow) through a description of their successful past, resources or preferred future (Supposeland) which is a 'dress rehearsal' for change and can leave a client feeling like they have already experienced their Best Hopes during the session and have been transformed into and leave as their best version of self.
- Connect to the version of themselves that could create this change – Elliott Connie.
- Experience positive emotions and clarity of mind which opens up additional future possibilities/options
- Experience emergence of hopefulness - client realises that they already know what they need to do and at times they have already started doing this. "The version of the client that they wished to be was already there." Evan George.

The SF Practitioner:

- is a Resilientologist – listen for the hero in the trauma story.
- adopts a mindset/attitude/stance of validating curiosity - has one foot in acknowledgement and one foot in possibility while speaking with our clients – Evan George.
- recognises our client comes to session with both the problem and parts of the solution in place.
- believes in our client, rather than believes our client.
- has patience when our client struggles on the way to believing in themselves again.
- believes in our client as the expert and that they can achieve their Best Hopes/Desired Outcome particularly when they do not, maintains our confidence to invite the client to persist long enough to find within themselves what they are looking for. – Elliott Connie
- is a world stretcher, like a physiotherapist working the muscles that the client would like to strengthen – Mark McKergow.

Discussion Question 1:

Does problem amplification through externalisation/problem mapping in SFNT build motivation for a client to stand up to a problem? Can motivation be tapped into another way without the risk of creating a sense of helplessness/despair for some clients?

Does SFNT 'water down the power' of SFBT?

Linda's List 1 identifies the negative impact of the problem and asks for more and more detail about this and then scales the negative problem impact on client's life. SFNT believes this will build motivation to move away from the problem. SFNT believes the more the details of problem are raised, the more perturbed client may become that the problem is taking over, which builds their motivation to take action.

Or could too many problem-impact details be building hopelessness for some clients who have already been overthinking the problem? List 1 'stretches the problem' instead of stretching the client's best version of self/strengths to identify possibilities/opportunities to better cope with the problem. This directly conflicts with SFBT's intention to focus on building what a client wants instead of the problem.

SFBT taps into the motivation the client brought to session by: asking their Best Hopes/Desired Outcome – what the client wanted to be happening instead of the problem, identifying exceptions to the problem – when it happened less or not at all, identifying how the client has kept going despite the problem or what they have done to stop it becoming worse. What we focus on we magnify. This can shrink the problem and plant the seed of possibility.

Instead of mapping the problem, Jacqui von Cziffra-Bergs suggests we create a *pattern interruption to interrupt the problem rut* by acknowledging/validating the problem impact on their life and evoke curiosity by using 'hope catching language' in a warm/respectful compassionate way: *at the moment* you are feeling overwhelmed by X

problem, you are looking for a way forward from X problem and have not found this yet, *I am interested to discover/learn how you have found a way to get through each day so far.* John Henden UK SF expert calls this ‘deep empathy’ ‘I can really see this is causing you deep pain and despair at the moment.’

Discussion Question 2:

Is externalisation necessary when clients struggle to answer SF questions, or does the attitude of validating curiosity provide another way to respond to a client’s problem-saturated language that maintains focus on possibility beyond the problem?

The SFBT Power of Validating Curiosity to Amplify Hope/Resilience Instead of Externalising the Problem

Is externalisation necessary or is there another way to use the problem-saturated language that the client has already presented? As Steve Runciman reminded us, the process of SFBT involves “..feeling for but not aggravating distress”. Sharry (2007) has suggested that SFBT adds a fourth attitude to Carl Rogers’ three core attitudes to facilitate change (of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard), which he called ‘respectful curiosity’. Mark McKergow has spoken of ‘validating curiosity’ which can be used to invite clients to consider other possibilities despite the problem they are currently facing. By acknowledging and validating the client’s struggle with a curiosity and compassion SF practitioners can tap into the client’s hope that despite this problem they might work towards something better happening. Elliott spoke about listening for the hero in the trauma story.

Sharry (2007) reiterates the importance of going at the client’s pace to validate the client, rather than being ‘solution-forced’ and rushing to the solution before the client is ready. SF practitioners should take the client’s problems seriously and listen carefully to their perspective. Clients will only take the practitioner’s lead to solution talk when they feel respected. *Going slow means not necessarily having a solution or way forward at the end of each session. It can be sufficient for the client to have some new ideas or questions to consider or simply leave feeling supported and that the therapist stands with them against their problems.* (Sharry, 2007, p.155) Going the client’s pace requires a return to problem-talk for a brief period. Drawing on reflective listening and support to let the client know the practitioner has heard the seriousness of the problem. Coping questions can be useful for clients stuck in the problem narrative to help clients uncover how they are coping daily with the problem – aiming to give voice to their struggles and their resistance to the influence of the problem and to uncover their strengths and resources they have in spite of its effects.

It is important to remember the Solution Focused Diamond Approach (Connie and Froerer, 2023) is a roadmap for the session but we cannot necessarily get through the whole roadmap in one session – sometimes we can only throw in a few coping questions while the client talks about the problem and it can take 3 sessions to get to a Best Hopes. Don’t feel pressured to rush through to cover the whole Diamond in the one session.

Discussion Question 3:

Do we believe a client when they say they ‘don’t know’ in answer to a SF question, and think they are struggling to answer because they keep going back to problem language so we externalise the problem first? Or do we continue to believe in the client anyway, know they are learning to create language for their Desired Outcome which takes time so adopt patience and gentle persistence and show up as a ‘heart healer’ to give our client the time they need to describe their way through Supposeland?

The Gently Persistent and Compassionate Pathway Through Supposeland

Underling the power of validating curiosity is patience and gentle persistence when clients struggle to build the language for what they want in their lives instead of the problem. Elliott Connie reminds us that a client responding to a SF question with “I don’t know”, does not necessarily mean they don’t know just that they have not thought of it

before and creativity takes time to develop words and language to describe what they want when they have been so focused on the problem.

Gentle persistence is having belief in the client's capacity (being a Resilientologist – Jacqui von Cziffra-bergs) to bring about their Best Hopes more into their lives and learning how to ask the question again in a more useful or meaningful way for the client to answer. Elliott suggests we can do this by listening to the client's words and picking up on their language that is most likely to move them towards their Best Hope to use in the next question and choosing where to focus our questions (on either the past, present or future) depending on where the client indicates their Best Hopes is most likely to be found. Elliott reminds us of the importance for the client to feel safe and that they trust us to answer our questions – that we need to show up and connect with our client with compassion, as a human and as a 'heart healer' before any work can be done. *Be a human first and a therapist second. This is heart work. – Elliott Connie*

The power of SFBT is maintained through being patient and compassionate while inviting the client into a description of their successful past, resources or preferred future (Supposeland) as this is a 'dress rehearsal' for change and can leave a client feeling like they have already experienced their Best Hopes during the session and have been transformed into and leave as their best version of self.

Discussion Question 4:

As an alternative to externalisation, can we be creative to work to fit the questions more closely to the problem (as SFBT 1.0 does) using exception and coping questions to invite the client into as much possibility as they can manage, and in this way, to support the client on their transitional journey to solution talk and plant seeds of possibility to reflect on even after the session?

The Transitional Journey into Solution Talk: Fitting SF questions to Meet the Client Where They Are

Chris Iveson, Evan George and Harvey Ratner (2012) noted that when a client feels overwhelmed or despairing, focusing on Instances may be too big a leap from problem saturation and the smaller shift to looking for exceptions to the problem (SFBT 1.0) can be an easier starting point as a transitional journey into solution talk. SF questions can be asked closer to the problem to fit in with the client's context to be meaningful and accepted and still invite the client into as much possibility that they can manage at the time. SF questions can step progressively closer to the problem without the need to externalise/amplify it by moving through instance questions, exception questions, coping questions and 'how did you stop the situation from becoming worse' questions or 'other people may have given up at this point, how come you didn't?' questions. Another option is to assume the client has a very good reason for engaging in problem behaviour and acknowledging this by asking how this problem helps the client. These questions sitting progressively closer to the problem may still be rebuffed by the despondent client but a SF question and a problem response is still more helpful to plant a seed of hope/possibility than a problem focused question and problem response and conveys to the client the most critical message, that we believe in them.

One of our members Yvette shared the work of Allan Wade who speaks about the importance of honouring the client's resistance – how the client was able to stand up against the problem or trauma. I have attached a chapter written by Allan Wade called *Despair, Resistance, Hope: Response-Based Therapy with Victims of Violence*. Yvette has also kindly shared a powerful article by Angel Yuen called *Less pain, more gain: Explorations of responses versus effects when working with the consequences of trauma*. Yuen describes the importance and benefit of inviting our client who has experienced trauma into exploring their acts of resistance to the trauma, rather than just exploring the effects of trauma. This is known as 'double listening' in Narrative Therapy – similar to Elliott Connie describing how the tragedy/trauma story and the hero story is the same story, it just depends on how you listen.

Here is a powerful must-see video of Allan Wade sharing his work with his client Charlene:
<https://youtu.be/e2LFB4fINrM>

Discussion Question 5: What Solution Focused questions do you use often? Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities? Or is it possible to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?

Elliott Connie stated that *“Instead is the most powerful word in Solution Focused Brief Therapy, in my opinion. And that question is the most powerful question, because for so many of us, we focus so much on problems that actually, it’s hard for us to answer questions related to what we’d like to achieve, unless they’re in the context of what we would like to have instead of the problem. So if I ask you, what would you like to achieve? as I asked to this person, she couldn’t even answer me without first describing the problem she had and the symptoms connected to that problem. So what would you like to achieve in therapy? She just starts rattling off all of the things bothering her, and they were really, really significant. And the Therapy actually starts, her brain actually starts working and the process of change actually starts when I say, how would you like to feel instead of all of those things? Like if somehow all of those things went away, what would you like to be there in its place? And the lady said, I don’t know. So what do you think? And she said, I’d like to be confident and I’d like to be strong. And I would like to be the best me I could be. Well, now she’s giving me language to ask her about the preferred future. Now she’s giving me language to say, so suppose you woke up tomorrow and you were confident and strong and the best version of you, you could be, what’s the first thing you would notice? And then we went about doing a description and there’s no way I could have done that without asking her, what would you like to feel instead?”*

The word 'Suppose' can be used as 'Instead' questions - just another way to word a solution focused question (as Steve had mentioned). Suppose that instead of this difficulty, something better was happening? What would you be hoping for instead? Suppose that happened? What else might be happening?

Discussion Question 6: Is it easier to focus on the problem story VS using SF questions?

Is this okay to do, to take one SF question at a time, if not able to steer away from the problem talk and thereby keep moving forward? Validating the problem should not be underestimated though - one can spend time on this, really take time to use what client tells you. Instead of mapping the problem, you still are very much listening to the client and their concerns and really validating where they are at and listening out for a small step to start the SF conversation when the client is ready. (Question to ask yourself may be, why did you go into counselling as a career?)

Discussion Question 7: Asking a client, “What do you hope to get out of this counselling session?” (if you do not feel comfortable asking Best Hopes question)

Elliott Connie has clarified the aim of the Best Hopes question is to identify what version of self the client would like to transform into. We are asking the client, in what ways would you like your life to be different? This is a hard question as we are inviting the client to articulate what they may have not spoken about before. By persisting in asking follow up questions, we help the client find answers that live outside of the problem pattern.

During the meeting, Steve mentioned Arnoud Huibers’ Circle Technique which invites the client to map what they have already achieved in the inner circle and what their hopes or deepest desires are in the outer circle. Steve recommended a useful video that Theresa has shared of Arnoud Huibers’ discussing this: <https://youtu.be/40Oklsz6BLI>

Discussion Question 8: Listening for the language - what is going right for someone. By asking solution-focused questions, you switch your mind into a more resourceful state. Your brain suddenly starts drawing on all your resources internally and around you to solve the problem. Do we want clients to start asking themselves more solution-focused questions so they realise what is going right for them?

Theresa would like to share this great audio/book Retelling the Stories of our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience by David Denborough:

Concluding Statement:

One Important Lesson from Linda Metcalf: Whatever approach you use and however you use it, be the practitioner that you aspire to be in a way that is right for you!

No matter which approach we adopt, our priority is that our clients achieve the positive outcomes they are looking for from accessing counselling support. Each of us will choose an approach or a mixture of approaches that resonates and makes sense to us.

Linda has provided us a good example by adapting SFBT to suit her by building in Narrative Therapy in a place she felt SFBT was lacking so in this way made it work for her and her clients. We strive to be our own best version of our practitioner selves and find an approach that works and resonates for us. This can be using SFBT in a pure form or parts of it or not at all. It is important to work in a way that you believe in as then this is more likely to be of benefit to our clients. What works for us might not work for others, what works for one client might not work for another client. Like Linda, each of us must find a way to work that resonates with the person we are.

References

Connie, E. and Froerer, A. (2023), *The Solution Focused Brief Therapy Diamond Approach*, Hay House: California

Iveson, C., George, E. and Ratner, H. (2012), *Brief Coaching: A Solution Focused Approach*, Routledge: London

Metcalf, L. (2017), *Solution Focused Narrative Therapy*, Springer Publishing Company: New York

Sharry, J., (2007), *Solution-Focused Groupwork, Second Edition*, Sage Publications: London

Information for our Upcoming WASFIG Zoom Meeting 11 in February 2023

WASFIG Zoom Meeting 11: Saturday 25 February 2023 9:30am-11:30am WA Time

When: Saturday 25 February 2023 9:30am-11:30am WA Time (VIC/NSW = 12:30pm-2:30pm, QLD = 11:30am-1:30pm, SA = 12pm-2pm, NT = 11am-12pm)

Topic: Solution Focused Toolbox

Our next WA SFBT Interest Group Meeting in February 2023 gives you an opportunity to share with us your favourite Solution Focused technique, or some key ideas from a Solution Focused training workshop you attended or throw in a title of an interesting Solution Focused book or article you read and what you got out of it, or perhaps share a sparkling moment of some good Solution Focused work you did with your clients and what you did that contributed to the good outcomes. We can have up to 3 minutes each 'presenting' to the group and invite the group into discussion for 10 minutes on your topic. This will be a great way to learn more about SFBT, connect with and get to know each other and cheer each other on with any wins in our practice of SFBT.

Please let Steve and Kerry know if you would like to join us and we will send the Zoom link to you closer to the time.

FIND US ON FACEBOOK: WA SFBT Interest Group Facebook Group

Please join our WASFIG Facebook Group to keep connecting and building our network between meetings, see up to date news and information for our group, share great SFBT resources and get support in working with clients. If you have any more thoughts to add on this October Summary it would be great to start a discussion in the Facebook group so we can all join in: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3103428583276551>

Remember to join the ***Australasian Solution Focused Association*** to access free training during the year, articles from the Journal of Solution Focused Practices, online group supervision and the members only Facebook group. <https://www.solutionfocused.org.au/>

We have decided to continue with meetings via Zoom as this has enabled flexibility for many to access these sessions that would not be otherwise able to due to distance or other commitments. Hope to see you all again for our February 2023 Zoom meeting.

As 2022 draws to a close Steve and Kerry would like to thank you all for being part of our WA SFBT journey over the past two years and for sharing your experiences and insights into working with SFBT with us. We wish you all a very Merry Christmas and all our Best Hopes for you and your family for a Happy New Year.

Yvonne Dolan – “Build out of life’s own materials a place where hope can nest.”

Clients come with despair and hope, SFBT chooses to build on hope despite despair.