

Western Australian Solution Focused Interest Group (WASFIG) Meeting 9



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 27 August 2022 9:30am-11:30am (WA time) (VIC/NSW/QLD = 11:30am-1:30pm, SA = 11am-1pm)

Where: Zoom

Attendees: Yvette Strawbridge, Amy O'Brien, Ruth Leveson, Brent Dalgleish, Sara Tovska, Theresa Acutt, Michele Thomas, Kym Madden, Fiona Skahill, Lisa Jooste; Steve Runciman and Kerry Drummond (Co-coordinators).

Apologies: Michael Bazeley, Shona Scallan, Kris Giesen. Violeta Groza, Johanna Saltis, and Andrea Yeo

Group Facilitator: Steve Runciman and Kerry Drummond

Group Presenter: Mark McKergow (interviewed by Steve Runciman and Kerry Drummond)

Topic: Exploration and Reflection on Key Points from Mark McKergow's new book *The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice: Stretching the world for new opportunities and progress*

We stretch the limits of the world of the client which creates change.

- Mark McKergow (2022 Masterclass Workshop)

We welcomed Mark McKergow as our special guest presenter to our August 2022 meeting. In his new book *The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice*, Mark McKergow hoped to answer the question how does SFBT create change for our clients? Steve and Kerry enjoyed Mark's book and hoped to learn more from Mark who kindly agreed to an interview in September 2021. Our August group meeting viewed parts of this interview with Mark, who shared his thoughts on the evolution of SFBT over the years from the 1980's SFBT 1.0 to now SFBT 2.0 and his ideas on how SFBT 'works' to create change by 'stretching the world' of our client. Clients can then notice possibilities and opportunities that were already there and can choose to take action that is more in line with these to bring about the change they would like to see in their life.

As SFBT evolved over the years, practitioners seem to have discovered that this description of a better life was more than simply preparation; it served a significant therapeutic purpose in its own right. At the end of such a conversation, the client is often already coming to new realisations, new understandings and new framings of apparently insignificant everyday events. This is part of 'stretching the world' of the client, where the detailed descriptions and new possibilities come hand-in-hand. In next generation SFBT, this is not a preparation for an intervention, it is a key element of the process. (McKergow, 2021, p. 133)

So how does SFBT 'stretch' the client's world? Mark has referred to the process of stretching the client's world as 'mind stretching' or 'world stretching' which we referred to briefly during our February 2022 WASFIG group. Elliott Connie, Adam Froerer, Evan George, Chris Iveson and other SF experts have spoken about the importance of inviting a detailed description of the client's Best Hopes/Desired Outcome either in the past, present or preferred future.

The coach's ability to persist in teasing out small seemingly inconsequential details, sometimes with a relentlessness that challenges all social convention is one of the keys to success with what many might be tempted to see as intractable problems. Helping clients move beyond the more obvious answers, 'headline' answers into the small print of their future story is at the very heart of solution focused coaching (Iveson, George, Ratner, 2012: 49).

It is this detailed description, Mark agrees, that stretches the client's world and or mind, invites the client to consider new possibilities, and creates change. Details provide opportunities for the client to discover something they had not thought of previously, to notice something they had not seen happening in their life before. Once they are more aware of more options or possibilities in their world, they can then choose to move forward into their 'stretched' world in a way that is right for them. As one of Kerry's clients said, she needed the details to build a language to more clearly hear the voice of the version of self she wanted to be more of.

Mind Stretching: How does SFBT stretch the client's world?

- SFBT invites the client into 'suppose-land' by asking the Miracle Question or Tomorrow Question. Eg. Suppose you wake up tomorrow and it's just one of those days where you are at your best, what might be the first sign that would let you know this had happened?
- Suppose-land is a parallel universe of the client's Best Hopes/Desired Outcome, for client to explore how they are different (their desired transformation) when their Best Hopes/Desired Outcome is present. SF questions help our client explore Suppose-land with 3 levels of description - how the client notices that they are different, how others notice the client is different, and the impact being different has on their interactions with others.
- A detailed description expands possibilities open to the client. The details in the client's description are what creates change and transformation for the client – details build language for the version of self the client wants to be.
- The SF practitioner is a 'world stretcher' – like a physiotherapist exercising muscles that were always there but not noticed/used for a while – SF questions help the client notice parts of their world they would want to expand/stretch and in answering these questions the client can build their muscles/preferred future.

Mind Stretching: Returning From Suppose-land

- When visiting 'suppose-land' and after reflecting on their session, clients may notice things about themselves or others that they had not previously noticed which can change how they experience and engage with their world – it is these opportunities, new possibilities that stretch their world.
- Importance of one foot in acknowledgement, one foot in possibility – never lose contact with either foot, just shift your weight – Mark suggests adopting the mindset of 'validating curiosity' when asking SF questions.
- Client returns from 'suppose-land' with their own 'solutions' – 'so what might be helpful to take away from our conversation today?' – client is then free to decide what to do with these discoveries - language creates reality.

- Scaling – how much of ‘suppose-land’ is happening already? X+1?
- Follow up sessions – what’s been better – asking the client in what ways has your stretched world shown up already? Elicit, amplify and reinforce change by asking how they client did this, difference this make to the client and others, how others responded, how client responded to others, what this says about the client at their best, what did they draw on, how they would know this quality is continuing to grow in future?

Change is created in SFBT when we invite the client to stretch the limits of their world and notice the possibilities and opportunities that are available to them despite the current challenge they are experiencing. As Evan George reminds us:

The person that the client wished to be was already there, present albeit in the shadows of the client’s life, unnoticed, and very often all that we were doing was asking questions which invited that version of the client into the lime-light, to take front-stage.

References

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

McKergow, M. (2021), *The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice: Stretching the world for new opportunities and progress*, Routledge: London

When might SFBT not be helpful for a client?

During our group meeting the question was asked about when SFBT may not be helpful for a client. Evan George (BRIEF London) shares his thoughts on this:

Route and destination: a footnote

Last week we focused on the route-destination distinction and how important it is for Solution Focused practitioners to bear the distinction in mind when negotiating a ‘focus’, a ‘starting point’ for our conversations with clients. However there is one further point which is interesting, important and deserves mention.

On training courses a question that is not infrequently asked is ‘when can Solution Focus not be used’ or ‘when does Solution Focus not work’ and a part of my answer to this question relates to route and destination. I remember meeting with a client and when I asked her ‘what are your best hopes from our talking together?’, she answered that she needed to develop an ‘understanding’ of what had gone on, and implicitly what had gone wrong in her life. I responded on the following lines ‘and if you had that understanding, an understanding that made sense to you and which turned out to be useful to you, what difference are you hoping that ‘understanding’ would make?’. In responding the client, said that if she had that ‘understanding’ she would feel ‘more confident moving forward in her life’. At this point I thought that we had a destination, the client wants ‘more confidence for moving forward in her life’ and the understanding could be thought of as just one possible route towards that confidence.

Being aware that the Solution Focused process cannot guarantee ‘understanding’ and wishing to be open and transparent I responded by asking ‘so if we did some talking together and you found yourself more confident moving forward in your life, perhaps you have understood, perhaps you haven’t, would that be good enough, would that be useful’. This led to a discussion. The client wasn’t sure. She had assumed that understanding was necessary and had not considered the possibility that ‘confidence for moving forward’ could be achieved without ‘understanding’.

In the end I said ‘well since you are here what about we give Solution Focus a go and then you can decide whether or not you choose to have another session – it may be useful for you, it may even be enough’. The client thought that that was a good idea. I thought that the session worked well and the client appeared interested – a detailed description of the client’s life transformed by the presence of ‘more confidence moving forward’, a ‘best

hopes/progress scale' and an ending sequence. So we finished and I asked the client whether she wanted to make another time and she said that she did.

When the client returned I started, as ever, by asking 'so what has been better since we last spoke?' and there was a lot that was better that was the central focus for the session. The client seemed engaged in the conversation and pleased with the changes. The first two thirds of the session were spent amplifying her description of change, and then we returned to the 'best hopes/progress scale' (she had moved up) and then again an ending sequence.

Given the conversation, when the client at the end of the session said that despite her progress towards the life that contained 'more confidence moving forward' she still wanted to understand, I suppose that I was a little surprised. I truly thought that the 'route to destination' negotiation had been useful and that in focusing on 'confidence' we were indeed focusing on what the client wanted and yet I was wrong. In the session I returned to my thought that the Solution Focused approach could not guarantee 'understanding' and offered to help her to find a therapy service that could offer her what she was looking for. The client accepted my offer and, I hope, we parted on good terms.

So what happened here? It may be of course that in moving from route to destination that the words that I selected from what she had said and chose to offer back as a focus for the preferred future description 'more confidence for moving forward' did not sufficiently encapsulate what the client wanted and thus that the talking that we did 'missed out' something crucial to the client. And that is possible. Perhaps I should just have asked 'OK confidence moving forward, what else are you hoping will flow from that understanding?' Or it may be that in this particular situation the 'route' was for the client a vital element of the 'destination'. Most people, in my view, do not want 'understanding' for its own sake. They want understanding for the difference that they assume will flow from it. And then sometimes that is wrong. The difference, the destination, without the understanding, was not good enough for the client. In our language the route was, for this client, a part of the destination. Even if she ended up feeling more of the 'confidence for moving forward' that she wanted this would not be enough. What a useful reminder that nothing works all of the time. If the only acceptable 'route' is pre-determined by the client and we cannot find any flexibility then Solution Focus may not be the most appropriate approach.

*Evan George
Trieste/London
24th July 2022*

Working with Clients Experiencing Acute Loss and Grief and Acute Trauma

Discussion in the group then turned to how to work with client's experiencing acute loss and grief and acute trauma from a SFBT approach and whether this is appropriate.

Steve Runciman has kindly shared his thoughts after reflecting on this discussion in the group:

I remember being at a SF workshop a few years when the presenter told a story of a client who wept throughout the session and the therapist may have only said a few words to the client in that time, with maybe a few consoling sounds here and there. And that's all most of us need sometimes, not therapy but empathic silence, a feeling for us in our grief. In the book of Job in the Bible we have a story told of Job having lost his children and his wealth and he is sitting on the rubbish tip with a terrible skin affliction. His friends come and it says "Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was". In fact, that was the best thing they did in the whole story because when they finally did speak they basically blamed him for his misfortune, hence the phrase 'Job's comforter' a 'person who aggravates distress under the guise of giving comfort' (Oxford Dictionary). So I am conscious of the need for that necessary quiet, stillness and solidarity with the suffering of others, where we wait for the client to make the next move and then walk with them to that new place.

On the other hand, I have sometimes wondered whether, in not asking a SF question sooner for someone, I have not in fact actually prolonged the client distress. I remember working many years ago with a lady who wept non-stop for several sessions while I sat quietly until I asked a question something like 'was this helpful for her' to which she responded it wasn't and we did something different. Another therapist I recall tells a story of asking a grieving lady at the hospital bedside of her young son who would die soon what her best hopes were from talking with him. He then set out with her to build a picture of her preferred future of humour and joy in those last few hours. A colleague working with survivors of torture and other trauma told me about their preference for not talking about trauma but building a better life now.

It is such a fine dance isn't it – empathising, waiting, and then when the moment is there inviting a possibility of something hopeful into the situation, not being over-optimistic but a hope bearer, feeling with others but not prolonging distress.

Elliott Connie (Online Webinar, June 2022) has also described working with clients experiencing trauma in a solution focused way that builds their resilience to endure pain:

*This is not about solving problems, this is healing/creating a brighter future. Practitioners cannot undo damage of trauma, but we can invite our client to transform into a version of self to endure pain and keep going. Trauma work is hard when you get distracted by the problem, become fearful that you won't be able to help them, we lose confidence when the problem seems overwhelming. **SFBT does not solve the problem, SF questions create healing from the problem by inviting the client to focus on who they want to become despite the trauma they endured.** It is not true to think of SFBT as a 'band aid approach' or not for serious problems. Some problems cannot be solved or talked away but they can be healed from. SF questions cause clients to heal.*

It all starts with belief in your clients and yourself. Be confident as you have the skill and be so stubborn and refuse to give up on client's ability to accomplish their dream. The key to working with trauma is to stubbornly believe that in spite of trauma our client is still capable of achieving greatness. Look around for evidence of greatness being achieved in their life despite trauma to create confidence in yourself to have confidence in your client. If you look around there is evidence of people accomplishing great things in spite of trauma happening to them. Focus on the outcome of what the client wants to achieve – the outcome is more important than the origin – what is important is that the client wants to climb the mountain. When client has someone believing in them they can take another step. The higher up the mountain they climb, the more beautiful the view. Our job is to help the client climb the mountain.

Each question has to be about the presence of their Desired Outcome and connected to the resources that could make their outcome a reality. Just ask the next question not the right question. Don't overthink. SF questions have to be about the version of the client that is congruent with what the client wants to accomplish. In this way the trauma/problem is not relevant to change. Clients don't believe in their greatness – the more you keep asking about that version of them the more they will believe it. When you ask about their great future the client believes in themselves more. Eventually the client will answer a question in a way that changes their life.

Regardless of their trauma experience, ask the client their outcome even when it is hard for them to articulate this, assume they have the resources to create their preferred future, and that even in the valley the client has greatness within them.

"How Do You Find MEANINGFUL Change in Your Life? | Possibilities with Dr. Adam Froerer & Cecil Walker":

<https://youtu.be/VdrQwUEdpm8>

Adam Froerer and Cecil Walker from the Solution Focused University (SFU) in the USA discuss creating meaningful change for clients even in seemingly impossible situations like working with clients experiencing chronic pain. By

inviting clients to describe how they would like their life to be instead, their preferred future, creates hopefulness and positive emotions which give rise to creativity to explore other options. The experience of describing their preferred future is like a 'dress rehearsal for change' which for the client can feel like this has already happened. We can then end sessions by inviting clients to look out for signs of their preferred future happening in their life and they can choose to build on this.

Information for our Upcoming WASFIG Zoom Meeting 10 in October 2022

WASFIG Zoom Meeting 10: Saturday 29 October 2022 9:30am-11:30am WA Time

When: Saturday 29 August 2022 9:30am-11:30am WA Time (VIC/NSW = 12:30pm-2:30pm, QLD = 11:30am-1:30pm, SA = 12pm-2pm)

Topic: Linda Metcalf's Solution Focused Narrative Therapy (SFNT).

Linda Metcalf has suggested the benefits of using Narrative Therapy when a client seems very problem saturated and struggling with SF questions. In her book *Solution Focused Narrative Therapy* (2017), Linda has noted SFNT harnesses the power of both models – the strengths-based, problem-solving approach of SFT and the value-honouring and re-description approach of Narrative Therapy – to offer brief, effective help to clients that builds on their strengths and abilities to envision and craft preferred outcomes.

Mark McKergow draws attention to the evolution of SFBT 1.0 from the 1990's and Next Generation SFBT 2.0. However this does not mean SFBT 1.0 is obsolete, in fact it can be more helpful to draw from when clients are more 'problem saturated' and 'stuck in problem rut' as this version of SFBT works closer to the problem. Evan George has pointed out that exception questions sit closer to the problem, while instance questions sit closer to the client's Best Hopes. The client has a smaller jump to make when answering an exception question which can pave the way to instance questions that sit closer to their Best Hopes later on when the client is ready for this. As always, it is important to meet and validate our client where they are at, not be 'solution forced'. Experts in the SFBT field have suggested that Narrative Therapy can 'water down' the power of SFBT and there are already exception/coping questions within SFBT to meet the client who is feeling distressed/overwhelmed/stuck without the need to move outside the SFBT approach.

For our October 2022 WA SFBT Interest Group meeting Kerry Drummond and Theresa Acutt will explore key points from Linda Metcalf's workshop and book on *Solution Focused Narrative Therapy*. Kerry and Theresa will lead a discussion to explore whether there are benefits of Narrative Therapy to the SFBT approach and whether SFNT strategies like externalisation (exploring the impact of the problem on the client's life) and problem mapping (scaling intensity of the problem) can be used without 'watering down' the power of SFBT. The October interest group will ask 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?"

If you are interested to get a copy of Linda's book, it is another fantastic read:

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

Introducing Theresa Acutt:

I am a Registered Counsellor, with the Australian Counselling Association. I currently work at a school in pre-primary where I have done for the past 10 years. Previous to that I was in child care and previous to that, many organisations as a Personal Assistant/secretary. I am currently working on advertising my Private Practice (have 2 clients but have not officially advertised as yet.... watch this space) and my hope is that next year I can do less days at the school and more in Private Practice.

I discovered SFBT whilst qualifying as a counsellor and Elliot Connie was the name that came up and so I decided to see what it was all about. Just listening to SFBT sessions/information really sparked something in me. I generally and always have seen the brighter side of a situation and I found myself with tears every time I learnt a bit more about SFBT as it resonated so much with me.

I am constantly using my skills in my place of work as much as I can. I am so encouraged when I see the children respond to the questioning - problem solving is a big one. I am so inspired with the result of taking the 'why' out of conversations. I am certainly on an exciting journey and one, I hope does me justice as well as those I come in contact with. My best hopes for everyone is that they are able to tap into discoveries they did not even know they had within them and to be able to change the way they deal with future problems.

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 August 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 October 2022 Zoom meeting. Please reply by email to let us know you would like to attend and then keep your eye on your email for the link and more information.