

Initial Session Solution-Focused Questions

Virtually all psychotherapists use the first session of therapy to begin creating a “therapeutic alliance,” the beginning of a positive bond with a client. Therapists create this alliance by being attuned to the client’s presenting needs, being open and curious, and setting a positive and realistic framework for what will happen during the therapeutic process. However, many therapists feel that the first session can go far beyond this initial positive connection. With the current emphasis on short-term therapy, many therapists are also using the first session as a way to “jump start” the therapeutic process. Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SBFT), developed by Stephen deShazer and Inzoo Kim Berg at the Milwaukee Brief Therapy Center, has specific guiding questions to address a client’s presenting problem in the first sessions.

Solution Focused Therapy has a very specific format for asking the client questions which keeps the client focused on the present and future. Questions about the past are primarily a means of gathering information about the client and showing the therapist’s empathy. Solution Focused questions are intended to: help clients define their problems; help clients identify strategies that have worked in the past for the same or similar problems; rate different aspects of the client’s experience on a 1 to 10 scale; look for exceptions to problems (for example, times when the client might have expected the problem to occur, but something else happened instead); encourage clients to do more of what is working; provide coping questions which remind clients about the positive ways they are dealing with problems.

The most well-known Solution Focused technique is the Miracle Question. Although there are various nuances of the Miracle Question, the general idea is to ask the client: “How will your life be different if a miracle occurs, and the problem that brought you into therapy no longer exists.” The Miracle Question is a way of generating ideas for small realistic steps the client can take as soon as the next day.

This form is designed to be used only as a guide. Solution Focused Therapy, like any form of psychotherapy, relies on a deep understanding and connection with the client, and the timing and wording of the questions is more important than the questions themselves. While this form is a guide for the first therapy session, the questions may be asked over a number of sessions or even over the entire course of therapy. For more information about Solution Focused Brief Therapy, see: The Institute for Solution Focused Therapy (<http://www.solutionfocused.net/home.html>).

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Use these questions as a guide only.

Defining the Presenting Problem

Note: It is important to get an idea of the problem in behavioral terms.

What do you want to get out of being here today?

What changes have you made prior to coming to therapy?

How would you define the problem for which you are seeking help?

How often does this problem affect you?

How long has it been going on?

How have you dealt with it in the past?

What is said or done when this problem occurs?

What happens next?

And then what?

Note: If these questions don't give you a clear idea of the problem, you can ask something like: "If you made a video of ... happening, what would I see on the tape?"

Helping Clients To Begin Seeing Solutions

How have you tried to address this problem?

What has worked, even a little bit?

Have there been changes for better or worse since you decided to take action?

Who else noticed this?

What will it be like when the problem is solved?

What will you be doing instead?

When that happens, what difference will it make?

How will other people know that things are better?

Who will notice first?

And then who?

What else will be different?

Helping Clients See Exceptions to the Problem

Tell me about times when the problem is not occurring or when it is not really affecting you very much.

Is there something that makes the problem better at certain times?

What are you doing differently at these times?

What else is better at these times?

Note: Focus on what the client is doing, rather than what they are not doing.

Scaling (Rating) Questions

On a scale from 0–10 with 10 being the best, tell me how you felt when things were at their worst.

Where are you on that scale right now?

Tell me what was going on with you when you felt like a 10.

Therapy can help you with your problem, but maybe a “10” is too big a goal. What number will be acceptable for you?

How will you recognize when you are one point further up the scale?

What else will be different when you are one point further up?

Who will notice?

How long will it take to get one point up the scale?

Coping Questions

How will you get through the rest of today?

How have you kept going so far?

What else helps?

Is there anyone else who helps you with this problem?

Anyone else?
