

Solution-Focused Advising with the Undecided Student

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Solution-focused advising integrates solution-focused therapy with academic advising. Solution-focused therapy is a psychotherapeutic method that emphasizes the importance of strengths and goal achievement over pathology. The model is based on the positive presuppositions that change is always occurring and that clients can promote change through small steps from a perceived problem toward a goal. Academic advisors can apply solution-focused therapy to students who are undecided about a career major. A definition of an undecided student is presented as well as case samples that demonstrate solution-focused techniques in advising.

KEY WORDS: advising approaches, alternatives advising, decision making, majors, tools for advisors, undecided students

With today's numerous career options, deciding on a major field of study in preparation for a life-long career can be an anxiety-filled endeavor. Undecided students can be overwhelmed with the decision-making process. To enhance the already established career guidance models, we introduce solution-focused therapy to offer encouragement and a plan of action to the undecided student. Solution-focused therapy adds a holistic dimension to the career decision process because the student considers internal and external variables when choosing a major.

Solution-focused therapy is a constructivistic and collaborative model of change that is goal-oriented. Originally developed by de Shazer (1985, 1990), it is considered a brief method of psychotherapy, requiring a limited number of sessions to produce change. Instead of focusing on pathology, this model is strength-based and encourages facilitators to focus on exceptions to the presenting problem. The advisor builds on these exceptions to create change in the here-and-now context of the student's life.

Because the model encourages students to change present thinking and behavior, solution-focused therapy is extremely adaptable. It has been used with a wide variety of issues including school

counseling (Davis & Osborn, 2000; Sklare & Kottler, 1997), group therapy (Metcalf, 1998), substance abuse (Berg & Miller, 1992; Berg & Reuss, 1997; Miller & Berg, 1996), child abuse (Dolan, 1991; O'Hanlon & Bertolino, 2002), child and adolescent issues (Selekman, 1993, 1997, 2002), and eating disorders (McFarland, 1995). This adaptability also stems from the concrete, concise, and short-term nature of model implementation. Building on this strength, Tolman (1990) described how solution-focused therapy is uniquely qualified for situations in which counselors only have a single session with the student, which is often the case in academic advising.

The Ideal College Experience

Tommy, a healthy 18-years-old, had always known he wanted to be an engineer, just like his dad. Tommy had earned average to above-average grades in a public high school and planned to attend one of the finest engineering schools. He did not need to apply for financial aid, nor even obtain a part-time job while on campus, unless he wanted to take a vehicle to school. After 4 years, Tommy graduated with a bachelor of science in engineering and immediately accepted a high-paying position with terrific benefits in a company that employed him for life.

No doubt, Tommy's story is a fairy tale. How many parents plan long-term for their children's college tuition and then actually save the money? How many students do not need to work while attending college? How many students evolve from a stable home environment? How many young adults are not dealing with health issues, chemical imbalances, or mental health issues? Is the option of attending a traditional 4-year institution always feasible? How many youngsters have unwavering and long-standing career plans? Those who do not know (or are unsure) of the major they wish to pursue are labeled "undecided."

The Undecided Student

Three definitions are associated with the term "undecided" as it refers to a student who has not made a major or career choice. The most common use of the term refers to a student who has not declared a

major upon entering a college. Another type of undecided student is one who has declared a major but is not sure of his or her choice. The third class of undecided student is defined as someone who chooses a major, is certain of her or his decision, and then decides to change it (Boyd 1988).

The latter two definitions of an undecided student fulfill a category called "major-changers" (Steele, 1994, p. 86). The need to conduct self-exploration and learn about career options in the world of work is common among the undecided. Their academic record distinguishes major-changers from entry-level undecided students (Steele, 1994). The existing grade-point average (GPA) of a major changer may be too low and prohibit the student from entering a competitive field of study. Unwise course selections may also make a major changer academically ineligible for a program of choice. Compounding these potential problems, time and money restrictions are constant variables that the student must negotiate: How much longer can the student afford to attend college? Most students should begin the decision-making process toward a major as soon as he or she is ready.

Some compare the positive aspects of being an entry-level undecided student to window shopping. New to the college experience, the student has a vast array of courses from which to learn. However, the title "undecided" many times carries negative connotations that can stem from impatience. Parents are eager for their children to decide a major so they know that the money they are spending is correlating to a specific goal. Unlike students with a declared major, undecided students are not given a mandatory list of courses that fulfill graduation requirements. Students feel this lack of direction, lack of belonging, and sometimes perceived parental disappointment. It is to the uncomfortable undecided student that solution-focused therapy can be applied.

Students bring issues to career counseling appointments that are far different from the concerns of students 30 years ago. "To get a complete description of today's college student, advisors need to draw a composite developmental picture and consider identity formation and the psycho-social, cognitive, and moral-reasoning development of the individual" (Beck, 1999, p. 48). The student population continues to diversify with growing percentages of returning adults and minorities. As society has experienced an increase of mental health concerns (e.g., depression, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder), so have college campuses. Advising and career counselors should keep in mind all the internal and external forces that affect

students, look for themes and patterns in the undecided student, and consider their lives as a whole while helping them make decisions regarding majors (Beck, 1999).

Components of a Postsecondary Career-Structured Program

The components of a career decision program can be illustrated with the description of the pyramid of information processing (Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, & Peterson, 2000). The base of the pyramid is comprised of two domains: self-knowledge and occupational knowledge. The second level contains the domain decision-making skills. The top of the pyramid is the executive processing domain, which evaluates actions to be taken based on the second level of the pyramid.

Career counseling should bring about self-understanding and action. Knowledge of self and its subsequent relationship to the world of work, education, or training are the aims of career counseling. Action suggests that the clearest criterion of counseling success is outcome, that is, decision making behavior of appropriate nature (Herr & Cramer, 1996, p. 593).

How Solution-Focused Therapy Applies to Career Indecisiveness

Solution-focused therapy is applicable to the self-knowledge domain and the executive processing domain of the pyramid of information processing. By encouraging students to explore past experiences in which they felt accomplishment, advisors use solution-focused therapy to assist students in evaluating interests, identifying strengths in character, and discovering abilities. At the executive-processing level, through solution-focused therapy, advisors encourage students to take a small step toward a goal made at the decision-making level.

Although this information-pyramid process appears straightforward students' backgrounds, immediate circumstances, misguided perceptions, and anxieties can all form impenetrable barriers between indecisiveness and a chosen major. Students with self-doubts about their capabilities may appreciate the meta-messages, associated with a solution-focused approach. Meta-messages are communications that are exchanged through verbal and nonverbal, conscious and nonconscious avenues to convey trust, enthusiasm, and positive reinforcement. Solution-focused interventions emphasize positive affirmation more consistently than

do the meta-messages that accompany traditional problem-focused counseling (Baker & Steiner, 1995).

Solution-focused therapy is a resourceful counseling tool in helping students recognize their potential. In its positive form, solution-focused therapy allows advisees to approach career indecision in a simple way, taking small incremental steps. Advisors can initiate the first small step by simply supplying the student a contact through which to explore community involvement and subsequent career options or by encouraging an individual to investigate a newly found strength. Adding solution-focused therapy to the established career programs allows the advisor to assist the student in raising self-esteem, overcoming perception barriers, defining a goal, and taking action.

The flow of solution-focused therapy is quite straightforward; it begins with a search for a specific and clear goal (Walter & Peller, 1992). In the case of the undecided student, the need to make decisions on a career or at least a path toward finding a career, often initiates the therapy. The primary method for moving toward a chosen goal is through "exceptions" (de Shazer, 1985, 1990). Exceptions are defined as those past or present experiences in which the problem was (is) not manifested, but they may also be expressed as fantasies of the future in which the problem no longer exists. Exceptions demonstrate that the student has control over the issue and has overcome the obstacles in the past. In the final step of solution-focused therapy, the advisor encourages the student to exercise behavior consistent with the exception and then build on the subsequent success of this change. While the model itself is very simple, the application may be complex. Many techniques are associated with solution-focused therapy, but we introduce five that are particularly important in advising: scaling questions; the "miracle question;" presuppositional questions; cheerleading; and the task (or homework).

Through scaling questions student define beliefs about their current enjoyment level of a favored activity. When an advisor asks the student the effort necessary to make the activity even more enjoyable, he or she "moves the scale" and focuses the discussion on taking action. For example, a student rates her or his interest in an activity on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 indicating the highest interest. If the student reports the interest in an activity at level 5, the advisor then inquires what the student needs to do to increase the level of interest to a score of 5.5. The advisee can see how a series of small

steps, instead of an all-or-nothing solution, can generate positive decision making (Murphy, 1997). Through the scale-questions technique, students begin to feel that they have the ability to promote change in their lives (Santa Rita, 1996).

The advisor can ask a "miracle question" to focus students on a future when the problem no longer exists (Furman & Ahola, 1992; Santa Rita, 1996). A typical format for the miracle question is "I would like you to imagine for a moment that when you go to sleep tonight a miracle happens, and the problem of choosing a major no longer exists." *[pause.]* "When you wake up in the morning, you don't know that a miracle has happened, but you are aware that something is different. What will you notice that will tell you that something is different today?" Through the miracle question, the advisor has presupposed that the student will declare a major at some point, and the advisee is pushed to fantasize about that time and to be aware of the positive facets of this future time. The difference between the undecided present and the decided future becomes a potential "exception" for the student to explore.

Presuppositional questions are similar to leading questions: Part of the answer is assumed in the question. For example, consider the following two questions: "Have you ever felt confident making a decision in the past?" and "At what times in the past have you felt confident making a decision?" The first question easily allows a person with low confidence to say "no" without much thought. However, the second question presupposes that confidence once existed and forces the student to reflect on those times. While the student may still reply that he or she has never been confident, the framing of the question invites the possibility of confident times and may increase the chances for finding an exception to the current situation (Walter & Peller, 1992).

Academic advisors may also use a technique termed "cheerleading," which emphasizes support for the positive aspects of the student's current efforts toward deciding on a career or major (Walter & Peller, 1992). By highlighting a student's strengths and the strengths she or he has yet to recognize, advisors help emphasize virtuous behavior upon which the advisee has already learned to build. This positive feedback, even in small doses, can be the beginning of larger change. Cheerleading can be as simple as, "Wow, that's great!" to more elaborate reinforcers of success, such as asking how others (i.e., friends, parents) perceive the student's positive change.

Task or homework assignments are used to

engage the student in activity that will lead to a decision rather than brooding on the issue (Walter & Peller, 1992). Tasks may be simple directives, such as "talk to other students" or "read materials about various majors." The advisor may also ask the student to pay attention to his or her own behaviors, such as when the individual makes decisions with which he or she is uncomfortable. To set up or provide a rationale for a homework assignment, advisors may use a bridging statement, which is a summary of the knowledge shared between the advisor and student; it supports the development of a contract for action. For instance, an advisor and student may discover the student is fascinated by fashion trends. To bridge this interest to other activities, the advisor encourages the student to explore other areas related to fashion, which may lead to a major in fashion merchandising, retail management, or design.

The positive style and focus on the here-and-how make solution-focused therapy an ideal method for major or career decision making. By being present-oriented, the advisor can focus attention on the situation at hand and help create the desired change. The identification of exceptions to a perceived problem also is a positive means of addressing an often stressful situation. Once the student recognizes exceptions, such as an interest in fashion, she or he can continue the positive actions that strengthen efforts toward the decision-making goal, such as looking at careers related to fashion.

Solution-Focused Therapy with an Undecided Student

Through Tommy, one can see an example of how a predetermined career choice led to the direct pursuit of an education. While Tommy, who now prefers to be called "Tom," is entering the world of work, his younger brother, Ted, is just beginning his college experience. Unlike Tom, Ted has no idea what he wants to study in college.

Ted was not as studious as Tom and only achieved average grades in high school. However, Ted was much more socially involved than Tom. His parents urged him to go to college, and he knew that a college education might allow him to earn a better salary than he could command with only a high school degree.

Because he was so anxious about his inability to choose a major that Tim decided to attend the local community college. During the registration process, Ted learned of a class specifically designed to assist undecided students in determining a career choice. Ted signed up, Self-awareness and interest

inventories were administered as well as assignments to discover the world of work. Although this fact-finding adventure was interesting, Ted still felt unsure about which major to pursue.

Ted made an appointment with his advisor, who was also a career counselor. The meeting proceeded as follows:

Career Counselor (CC): "Hi, Ted. What can I do for you today?"

Ted: "I am still really confused about what to choose as my major."

CC (defining the goal): "If you weren't confused about this decision, what would you be doing instead?"

Ted: "I would be certain about what to study... what my career goal would be."

CC (applying presuppositional question): "When you are certain about your career goal, what will you be doing differently?"

Ted: "I would know what classes to take and I would have a goal to look forward to."

CC (giving positive feedback): "Your grades are good in class. From some of the testing we have done, and the time you have spent using the DISCOVER program, (presuppositional question) what conclusions are you coming up with about your idea of a major?"

Ted: "I'm just not sure."

CC (applying presuppositional question): "What career choices did you find from taking the Strong Interest Inventory?"

Ted: "There were about a dozen choices. I guess the two I liked the most were human relations manager and cruise ship director."

CC: "I see. This matches well with your Myers-Briggs results of ENFJ (Extraverting Intuiting Feeling Judging). Both of these are managing people and activities. What majors do you think provide the education needed to become a human resource manager or cruise ship director?"

Ted: "Well, for the Cruise Ship Director, there is a bachelor's degree for tourism offered here,

at Purdue, and at Michigan State. I'm not sure what I would major in to get a degree that would prepare me to be a human resource manager."

CC: "A degree in organizational leadership supervision offers the courses to learn how to organize work groups and manage people. Tina Topper is the advisor in the OLS department. Would you be interested in meeting with her?"

Ted: "Sure."

CC (giving Ms. Topper's written phone number to Ted): "When you meet with her, you will find out what classes are required to earn the bachelor's degree in OLS. With the research you have done about your interests, skills, and abilities, it sounds like you found some majors that are good matches for you. What are your reservations?"

Ted: "Well, I'm just not sure."

CC: "Remember Ted, making a career choice is more of a process than the perfect end-all. It is okay to not be totally sure right now. (Asking Tim to search for strengths) "Tell me about something you do well outside of school."

Ted: "I enjoy dealing with people."

CC (asking for specificity): "What is it about dealing with people that you like?"

Ted: "I don't know. I guess I like planning fun things to do. In high school, I was in charge of the homecoming float and my track coach chose me as the captain of the track team. So maybe I am good at leading people."

CC (using cheerleading): "Wow! You were active! Do you like it when you can organize people to accomplish a task?"

Ted: "Yeah. It makes me feel good because people have fun."

CC (scaling the question): "That is a valuable skill. On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest, how would you rate yourself capable of leading people?"

Ted: "I guess a 6."

CC (cheerleading): "A 6! That is impressive. What do you think you could do to go from a 6 to a 7 in how confident you feel at leading people?"

Ted: "I suppose I would get some experience."

CC: "Have you looked into campus activities where you might be able to use this gift?"

Ted: "Not really. I just don't know anyone here. College is not the same as high school."

CC: "Since you enjoyed student organizations in high school, do you think you might enjoy the campus government activities here?"

Ted: "I'm not sure. Where would I go to find out more about it?"

CC: "Tony Tripper is the Student Government President and is always looking for new participants. His office is located in the student union, and you are welcome to tell him that I referred you to his office."

Ted: "Thanks. That sounds like a good idea."

CC (applying a bridging statement): "You have told me about the results of your test taking and that you have an interest in working with people. (Giving a task assignment) Checking out the OLS program will give you the facts you need to decide about pursuing that option as a major. When you visit the student government office, you will be able to learn about different activities where you can get involved. Following up on both of these actions may help you to make some decisions. Does this sound like a good idea?"

Ted: "Yeah. Thanks for your help."

CC: "Feel free to contact me if you need further assistance."

How Solution-Focused Advising Was Used With Ted

In the Ted example, the advisor initiated solution-focused advising by defining a clear picture of Ted's goal. Ted wanted to make a decision about a career, and therefore a major, so that he knew in which

classes to enroll. The advisor used presuppositional questions to direct Ted toward particular answers and to introduce a positive approach to taking action as espoused by Walter and Pellar (1992). In other indicators of solution-focused advising, the advisor encouraged Ted to state his strengths and experiences.

Through solution-focused advising, the session gently moved through goal establishment, exception identification, and generation of homework tasks. Successive sessions would mimic this same format but the advisor would likely emphasize exceptions and homework. As Walter and Pellar (1992) noted, every session is essentially like the first session, and every session is conducted as if it were the last session.

Summary

When a student leaves an advising appointment in which solution-focused therapy has been applied, he or she is encouraged to move forward, sometimes in small steps, in the maze of career and major options. The encouraging aspect of solution-focused therapy extends the career assessment program by helping students overcome self-esteem issues and perception barriers. By searching for small past exceptions to the current indecisiveness situation and then building on them, the student finds a pathway toward a specific field of study.

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