The Advisor's Toolbox

Techniques and Interventions of Solution-Focused Advising

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Solution-focused advising is a novel method for engaging students in the advising process. In NACADA Journal 22(1)*, we discussed a conceptual framework for understanding the integration of solution-focused therapy into academic advising of undecided students (Mayhall & Burg, 2002). In this article we expand on the introduction by providing specific information on the skills used in solution-focused advising. The techniques of goal setting, scaling questions, presuppositional questions, the miracle question, positive feedback, and homework assignments are discussed, and an illustration is provided for each intervention as it applies to various advising situations.*

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

Techniques and Interventions of Solution-Focused Advising

Solution-focused advising is the integration of the psychotherapeutic method of solution-focused therapy and academic advising (Mayhall & Burg, 2002). Through this model, advisors emphasize the importance of a student's strengths. The model is a short-term, goal-focused method of creating change. By providing detailed descriptions and examples of six techniques and interventions associated with solution-focused advising, we build on the conceptual model we have previously presented (Mayhall & Burg, 2002). In this article, we detail why solution-focused advising is an effective method for working with students in a variety of advising situations. Solution-focused therapy is a flexible and easily adaptable method of assisting clients in finding exceptions to their problems. Originally developed by de Shazer (1982, 1985, 1988), it has been used with a wide variety of life problems such as addictions (Berg & Miller, 1992; Berg & Reuss, 1997; Miller & Berg, 1996); eating disorders (McFarland, 1995); child and adolescent issues (Selekman, 1993, 1997, 2002); and child abuse (Dolan, 1991; O'Hanlon, O'Hanlon, & Bertolino, 2002). It also bridges various contexts outside of traditional therapy such as school counseling (Davis & Osborn, 2000; Sklare & Kottler, 1997); group therapy (Metcalf, 1998); and academic advising (Mayhall & Burg, 2002).

Solution-focused therapy is rooted in systems theory in which change is posited as one part of a system that will create a ripple effect of change throughout the entire system (de Shazer, 1982). From this perspective, change and growth are viewed as an inevitable and ongoing phenomenon; one just needs to be aware of the mechanisms that prevent it from occurring (de Shazer, 1988). In addition, solution-focused therapy is strongly linked to constructivistic thinking; that is, each person has self-created realities (Walter & Peller, 1992). Change happens as one redefines his or her perspective. Instead of seeing problems, one sees exceptions to the problems, such as past times when she or he has overcome a hurdle similar to that currently presenting itself.

While both systems theory and constructivism provide a conceptual framework for understanding how the model works, solution-focused therapy is not a theory of human existence (in contrast to theory-driven models like the psychoanalytic, Adlerian, or Bowenian theories). In essence, solution-focused therapy is not a theoretical model of how or why dysfunction occurs but a framework for creating change (Walter & Peller, 1992). Because it is not theoretical, solution-focused therapy is very flexible. As a framework, it is easily adaptable to multiple contexts and issues. By using the model, a person participates in a predictable flow in which he or she establishes a clear and specific goal. Subsequently, the individual looks for exceptions to the predictable events and undertakes tasks related to a small part of the solution (Mayhall & Burg, 2002).

While one should understand the process and flow of solution-focused therapy, the model is heavily driven by its interventions. Because a discussion of the process of solution-focused therapy is beyond the scope of an article, we recommend Walter and Peller (1992) as an excellent primer on the process of solution-focused therapy. The techniques of solution-focused therapy are open-ended and generic, so they fit a wide variety of situations, including

academic advising. As a whole, the techniques are straightforward and simple to deliver. In the following sections, we describe and provide examples of the techniques of goal setting, scaling questions, presuppositional questions, the miracle question, positive feedback, and homework assignments in a variety of advising situations.

Goal Setting

Goal setting in solution-focused advising is of primary importance. Many models of change allow for abstract or vague goals, but in solution-focused therapy the goals must be concrete and measurable to be useful. Often at the beginning of advising, a specific goal may seem absurd, especially with a student who is uncertain about the choice of resources available to assist with difficult classes. In solution-focused advising the advisor does not provide the goal but can facilitate a semi-structured conversation that leads the student toward a goal. Advisors might presume that the student's goal is to choose classes based on a major, but only through an open-ended conversation can one be sure that the student is committed to pursuing classes in a particular program. Advisors who have found themselves trying to convince a student that a particular class would be ideal for her or him, only to hear continually, "yes, but," might appreciate an approach that puts the student in charge of creating change.

A goal is judged by whether it meets certain standards. The standards presented are adapted from Walter and Peller (1992). First, the goal must be framed positively. Rather than focusing on the activities the student will not be doing, such as worrying about difficult classes, the advisor focuses on the exercises the student will be doing, such as obtaining assistance to understand a difficult subject. A key word advisors should remember when helping students create a positive goal is "instead." For example, the advisor may ask the student, "I understand how frustrating it has been for you. What will you be doing *instead* of worrying about failing a class?"

Second, the advisors should also place the goal in process form. They should use interrogative words, such as "how," and participles, such as "doing": "*How* will you be *doing* this?" is an example of a goal statement in the process form.

Third, the advisor must put goals in the present tense. One way to reinforce the changes made during the current interaction is to ask: "When you leave here today and you are on track, what will you be doing or thinking differently?" In this case the phrase "on track" is the key to keeping the goal in here-and-now verbiage.

Fourth, the goal should be as specific as possible. Specific goals need not entail a specific decision (such as exactly which support services to utilize), but the student should leave the office with a plan for making the decision. "How specifically do you plan on gaining information to make a decision about using tutoring or study groups?"

Fifth, successful completion of goals should not be out of the student's control. While goal completion depends on the student's performance and sometimes on the behavior of others, such as an instructor, it should not be based on expectations from parents or significant others. The student's choice of assistance with classes should be based on his or her interests and abilities. Therefore, the advisor should refer to the second person when asking a question: "What will *you* be doing when you find the right resource to assist with the class subject?"

Sixth, a student-centered goal is stated in the student's own words. An advisor can help by listening to the student, picking her or his language, and using it to help the advisee frame the goal. However, advisors need to be careful lest they frame their goals in the student's words. They need to assist in defining the goal in a way that is meaningful to the advisee.

The following case illustrates an example in which these six criteria of goal setting were used to generate a well-formed goal. In this case, a student has struggled with passing a required math class. The advisor guides the student to decide to take the required math class using campus support services to assist with the understanding of the class.

Advisor: "Tell me about the grade you earned in Math 110."

Student: "I totally didn't get that class…and I have to pass 110 to get into the accounting program."

Advisor: "You seem frustrated about not understanding the material in Math 110."

Student: "I just don't get math!"

Advisor: "How will your life be different when you 'get math'"?

Student (positive and in process form): "Then I will be able to take the biology classes I want."

Advisor: "As you leave this appointment, what can you do to improve your math abilities?"

Student (here and now): "A friend of mine told me something about tutoring. I've never had to have a tutor before. She said it helped her. Maybe I will check that out. The class also has a study group, but I just haven't gone to it."

Advisor: "Can you tell me more specifically about the information you are seeking about tutoring and study groups, and what you will do to improve your math skills?"

Student: (specific and with a plan):"I want to find out when tutoring is offered for Math 110, get the tutor's name, and set up a meeting time. I also want to find out when the study group meets."

Advisor: "So, clarify for me again your goal about taking Math 110?"

Student: (in the student's words): "It is required that I pass Math 110 in order to study biology. My abilities in math are not great, so I need to get some help to understand math. Getting tutoring or joining the study group are ways that may help me to pass math."

Scaling Questions

Solution-focused advising uses the technique of scaling for dealing with vague or difficult to define issues, such as motivation or confidence (de Shazer, 1988). Scaling questions may be used at any stage of advising but are particularly helpful during goal setting. In its most basic form, scaling is a process of asking the student to rate something on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 usually representing the most positive perspective (Walter & Peller, 1992). For example, to scale a student's level of confidence in finding a major, the scale would start with 1 being no confidence and 10 would be total confidence.

The benefit to scaling questions is not only in creating specificity but also in creating a method for discussing small steps toward change. The technique of scale is not based solely on the specific scaled question but is comprised of a conversation around the scale. If a student were to scale her or his confidence in finding a major at a 4 (with 10 being total confidence), she or he has probably had moments of both more and less confidence. The conversation following the scaling can be used to identify the situations in which the advisee had experienced more or less confidence. If a student cannot think of a time when she or he was more confident than a 4, the advisor can create an exception by comparing how the student improved her or his confidence from a score of 3 up to 4. The advisor can use the scale to address future orientation, such during an inquiry about student activities that will differ when her or his confidence reaches 5 on the scale. The following conversation portrays scaling:

Advisor: "How may I help you today?"

Student: "I'm feeling down because I'm not doing so well in my classes."

Advisor: "Tell me about your grades."

Student: "I'm getting a C in math, a D in English, an F in economics, a C in sociology, and we are just past the midterm point of the semester! I am just not motivated this term."

Advisor: "It seems like your lack of motivation prevents you from achieving higher scores in your classes. What if we used a scale with 1 being totally no motivation and 10 being really charged to work on your studies? How would you say you have been this past week?"

Student: "About a 3."

Advisor: "Have there been times that your motivation has been less than 3?"

Student: "Yeah, especially when I found out my test grades after I had really studied for my econ test."

Advisor: "That can be discouraging after you have tried really hard. How about some times when your motivation was above a 3? Tell me about those times."

Student: "When I received the homework assignment in math last week, I was so disgusted with my grade that I decided to look at it as a challenge to do better. I went to the tutoring center for help and earned a better grade on this week's homework assignment."

Advisor: "It sounds like how you decided to make a challenge out of a disappointment worked for you in your math class. How would you be able to apply the same thinking to your economics class?"

Student: "That might work. I'll have to see if there is tutoring in econ."

Presuppositional Questions

Presuppositional questions are simple in form and concept, but advisors can easily forget to use them (unless they grew up in a family of lawyers!). Much like leading lawyer questions, presuppositional questions are offered under the presumption that a particular answer exists. In solution-focused advising, the advisor capitalizes on the difference between "Have you ever felt confident?" and "Tell me about other times in the past when you have felt confident." Obviously, the second question presupposes that the student has felt confident in the past. The presuppositional question also invites an affirmative answer rather than an easily rendered and dismissive "no." When searching for exceptions to a presenting issue (e.g., indecision about a major), the student may have difficulty changing his or her thinking. By presupposing that a strength, exception, or alternative exists, the advisor encourages the student to focus on positive past experiences rather than the litany of past defeats. The following interaction is an example of an advisor effectively using presuppositional questions:

Student: "I'm really unsure about choosing a major. I feel like I'm so lost in college. I am a sophomore, and I still don't have a major. I don't want to major in something I don't like."

Advisor: "What classes have you enjoyed the most?"

Student: "I liked my psychology class and thought about majoring in psych. It scares me to make this decision."

The Miracle Question

The "miracle question" is probably the signature intervention in solution-focused therapy, yet it is often poorly delivered and frequently short-circuited by a lack of follow-through from the advisor. This intervention is not comprised of a single question but a conversational sequence in which the student explores the outcomes of a miracle. While often a standard component of a first session, advisors primarily use this intervention to assist the student in thinking of an exception to the presenting issue (de Shazer, 1988). When the student can identify the exception, the advisor encourages the student to apply the experience from the past into a hypothetical situation (Walter & Peller, 1992). The miracle question is simply a formatted method for leading a student through a daydream of possibilities. When a student enters this land of miraculous hypothetical reality, she or he is invited to consider possibilities outside of the person's normal reality. The standard form for the miracle question is as follows:

> Suppose that one night, while you were asleep, there was a miracle and this problem was solved. How would you know? What would be different? How would your husband know without your saying a word to him about it? (de Shazer, 1988, p. 5)

The miracle question elicits descriptions of specific and concrete behaviors. While addressing the miracle question, the student feels as if he or she is viewing him or herself in a movie and is describing each frame. After the initial question, advisors should follow up with questions that highlight the ways in which the student is behaving differently in the hypothetical situation than she or he is acting in the real world. Getting the most out of this miracle question can take time: anywhere from a few minutes to an hour to detail the specifics of the novel situation. Once the differences between the current problem and the miracle solution are discussed, the next step is to try to find times when these differences are occurring in the here-and-now, at least in a small way. Presuppositional questions can play a key role in the transition from the hypothetical to the real history of the student. The following example highlights the multiple steps to a miracle question sequence:

Student: "I'm currently a business major, and my classes are so boring. My father owns local restaurant businesses and is expecting me to become a manager of one of his restaurants. While I know I am fortunate to have a business basically handed to me, I want to be a graphic designer."

Advisor: "It sounds like you feel you have some loyalties to your father."

Student: "That is what makes my desire to pursue a career as a graphic designer such a tough decision."

Advisor: "Suppose tonight, while you are asleep, there is a miracle that happens and you are able to pursue a fine arts degree with your father's approval. How would your life seem different?"

Student: "Well, I would certainly change the classes I need to take next semester. Maybe then I would look forward to coming to school. I would also like to look into a graphic designer internship instead of working in my dad's restaurants. Maybe it is time I tell my dad what I am thinking because this is something I really want to do."

Advisor: "How do you think you might be able to combine graphic arts and the restaurant business?"

Student: "Hmm. Restaurants do use graphic arts for menus, advertising, and the themes for interior decorating. Maybe once I learn the techniques I could provide graphics for my dad's restaurants . . . maybe other restaurants too . . . maybe even start my own business!"

Advisor: "You certainly are looking outside of the box now."

Positive Feedback

With a focus on success and creating change in small steps, advisors using solution-focused techniques apply a generous portion of positive reinforcement through cheerleading and compliments (Walter & Peller, 1992). Many people in Western society do not readily accept compliments, so advisors should monitor students' reactions to these interventions and adjust the method accordingly. In addition, the worst possible outcome is to appear insincere or patronizing instead of genuine. Therefore, the comments must be effectively congruent and the supportive statements must be sincere.

Cheerleading is used to provide support for positive behaviors the advisee currently displays or for changes she or he uses to meet the goal. Advisors must remember to cheerlead the exceptions, no matter how small. If a student's goal was to spend 1 hour every day researching potential careers but only spends ½ hour on the Internet looking up dream employers, then the advisor should cheerlead the effort to spend the 30 minutes in research rather than joining the student in his or her self-flagellation. In focusing on the positive aspects of the effort, the advisor conveys the message that the student took responsibility and had control over the situation. Walter and Peller (1992, p. 108) suggested two possible questions and a statement of praise to assist in the process:

1. "How did you decide to do that?"
2. "How do you explain that?"
3. "That is really great!"

By using the questions, the advisor asks the student to reflect on her or his actions in a purposeful light and suggests that the brief Internet research was not without purpose but was an attempt at creating change. The supportive statement may seem a bit hokey, but one should remember that the delivery must be sincere. In addition, the advisor must use discretion: One should not risk overinflating the praise on a small amount of change.

The compliment is a companion to cheerleading. It is a statement of praise or support focused on the student's solution or goal. While everyone gives compliments on a regular basis, the compliments in solution-focused advising serve several purposes in the process of change. Walter and Peller (1992) noted that compliments provide a positive climate, highlight the actions the student has already undertaken to reach a solution, alleviate student fears that the advisor will pass judgment on them, and diffuse concerns about change. Through compliments, advisors give support, normalize events and feelings, and frame the responsibility and credit for change as the student's accomplishment. In a supportive climate, cheerleading and compliments combine to give students a sense of self-efficacy, empowerment, and motivation. The following example highlights the seamless blending of cheerleading and compliments to achieve the advisor's goal:

Advisor: "Hi Sarah. I haven't seen you in a while. What brings you into our office?"

Student: "I think I have decided about a career, but I'm not sure about my decision."

Advisor (cheerleading): "Good for you! What career has captured your interest?"

Student: "I want to be a counselor. I know to be a counselor you have to earn a master's degree, but I don't know what to major in for my bachelor's degree."

Advisor: "What convinced you to pursue the counseling occupation?"

Student: "My neighbor is a counselor at a high school, and we talked about how he helps students. I have also helped at my church with the youth group and have discovered how much I like working with teenagers. It seems like I can really relate to what they are going through."

Advisor: "Your tone tells me you seem quite passionate about working with teens. Enjoying what you do is so important, and your decision to volunteer with the youth group gave you a great opportunity to investigate your interest [*compliment*]. To be accepted into the master's program in counseling, your bachelor's degree can be from any number of disciplines. Obviously, there are some programs with required classes that are foundational for the graduate level classes. Let's compare the data of the graduate level classes and those of some undergraduate programs…."

Task or Homework

The change that occurs during a solution-focused advising session is only the springboard for change outside of the advisor's office. Through the use of a task or homework assignment, the student can bridge the advising session into his or her own life. Tasks are derived from the information given in the advising session and assist in making a small step toward the student's goals (de Shazer, 1988). Like solution-focused therapy, solution-focused advising uses a formatted sequence at the end of the session; the advisor opens the discussion with a compliment, then offers a rationale for the homework, and finally assigns the homework task (de Shazer, 1988).

Basic forms of tasks include the following: observe for the positives; look for more positive exceptions; find out how the spontaneous exceptions are happening; and try some small piece of the hypothetical solution (e.g., based on the miracle question) (Walter & Peller, 1992). Often, homework tasks follow a common-sense method that is similar to the wisdom used by an old country doctor: If it does not work, do something else, and if it does work, do more of it. When the advisor sends a student out to "search for the positive outcomes," she or he is asking the advisee to look for times when a little bit of the solution has worked in the past (e.g., builds confidence). Often, students are less threatened by an assignment to notice or observe than they are with a task that requires them to act. When the advisor notices that a student is moving toward the goal, she or he assigns the relatively simple task of having the advisee conduct more of the same activity. When a student claims that a goal can only be reached by chance or by actions controlled by others, the advisor needs to explore these seemingly spontaneous exceptions to discover the role of the student in the process. If the miracle question was used, the student should try to make a small part of the miracle come true by applying a part of the hypothetical solution to the current problem. All of these task formats are designed to encourage the student to take an active role in reaching the goal without overwhelming him or her to take steps that are too large and may lead to a sense of defeat.

Advisor: "Tell me about the informational interview you conducted with your high school English teacher."

Student: "It went well. He told me about class planning, what his day is like with the students, and how the teachers work together to assist special students. I somewhat got the impression that he isn't real happy in his occupation. He said that the profession now requires much more disciplining of students than it used to, and he would rather teach than scold students."

Advisor: "It sounds like you gained some valuable information, positive and negative. How did you feel interviewing someone about their job?"

Student: "It wasn't bad. It seemed like my teacher wanted to go on and on."

Advisor: "How likely would it be for you to select another teacher to interview?"

Student: "That shouldn't be a problem."

Advisor: "You may be able to learn how a different teacher addresses the subject of student discipline."

Summary

Solution-focused advising provides advisors with another tool for their box of options. When students appear discouraged, lost, or unmotivated, solution-focused advising may engage students in their own decision processes and spare the advisor's sanity and energy. The overall process of solution-focused advising in conjunction with the techniques demonstrated in this article is a powerful method for moving students toward their goals. However, as illustrated in the examples, the interventions are flexible enough that the advisor may implement them in part with another model of advising.

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