

## STAYING ON THE SURFACE

### An introduction to the workshop Even Briefer – Staying on the Surface

For many years solution focused brief therapists have been accused of being shallow. The answer, of course, is that we are not that deep. Solution focused brief therapists do everything they can to stay on the surface: we have no diving gear, no snorkel and no mask. And if we do go beneath the surface we drown.

The kit needed to see beneath the surface of our clients' lives is a psychological theory, or a modern day fairy story. Psychological theories and fairy stories are inventions intended to throw a useful light on human experience. Neither are true though each might illuminate a 'truth', an aspect of life with which we are familiar. In countless ways this illumination makes our lives richer. As children we learn about the dangers of the world along with the power of love and as adults we have complex and often elegant frameworks to filter and make sense of our experiences. Literature would be a poorer place were it not for Freud, Bateson and the many other theorists who have enriched our ways of looking at individual and interactional behaviour. The mistake most theorists make is to see their ideas as science rather than art, as truths rather than a way of illuminating experience. So Freud, a brief therapist *par excellence* before he becomes who we know, creates a beautiful theory which declares *brief* therapy to be impossible and so defined what solution focused therapists call 'pre-session change' as 'flight into health': the client is running away from the problem and needs to be brought back to face it, if necessary for several years. (Freud also adjusted his Rolls Royce engine of a theory when the grit of childhood sexual abuse interfered with its smooth running.)

The helpfulness of these theories is not hard to see. Just as a child learns that a frog's life always carries the possibility of a royal marriage and so continues to live with hope a troubled adult can, for instance, see that the 'trouble' is not within them but the result of an experience which can be reshaped; like the fate of the frog this idea gives hope and motivation to look for a better life.

From a psychological theorist's point of view the route to a better life varies with the theory. A psychoanalyst might think the journey will take hundreds of sessions over many years, a cognitive behavioural therapist might suggest twenty-five sessions over a number of months; but what each will find is that most clients will give up after only a few sessions and most of these will say the experience was useful. Given that the client's experience of usefulness was quite different to the therapist's belief in what makes therapy useful the theory must have been incidental and the therapy must have been accidental.

Accidental therapy is not new. In the family therapy field the Milan Group famously declared in their *Hypothesis, Circularity and Neutrality* paper of 1982 that what made their therapy useful was not the tasks they gave but the conversation that preceded the tasks. At the same time Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and the Brief Family Therapy Centre team in Milwaukee were accidentally discovering the significance of exceptions to problem behaviours. And ten years later BRIEF had also realised that it was the conversation not the tasks that carried the therapeutic impact to their own developing version of solution focused brief therapy.

For the twenty years since that realisation BRIEF have been struggling, first to reach the surface and then to stay on it. If going below is an invention it can only distract from what is actually going on. If the light our theories cast on a client's life is only the reflected, and distorting, light of a metaphor how much stronger might be the light of the client's actual knowledge, the knowledge which comes from their own lived experience? When we stopped giving the client end of session tasks (from which much of our own enjoyment had come) we found that we also stopped thinking about tasks and instead listened more closely to what the client was saying. Tasks, we realised, were our sneaky way of slipping below the surface. They weren't quite based on psychological theories but were not dissimilar – they required us to make an assessment of the client (how motivated to decide on a doing or an noticing task; how in control to decide whether or not to use a prediction task; how committed in order to decide between noticing what is already their or noticing improvements, etc.) and therefore bring our 'knowledge', beliefs and assumptions into the equation. In effect, just like having a theory in your head, giving tasks requires you to hold a conversation with yourself as well as the client. This doesn't in itself make for ineffective therapy but it is likely to take the client longer to find a way forward – the illumination from a task, born out of the therapist's mind, is as likely to be as dull and distorting as that from a psychological theory.

There is no escaping from the fact that if we apply to a client a psychological theory or a schema for task-giving we are attempting to 'know' the client and this 'knowledge' is likely to obscure as much as illuminate the client's path. Often at the beginning of winter I find my central heating boiler reluctant to pump heat so I whack it with a hammer. Three times out of four I then call a plumber. Our theory-based interventions are like hammer blows at best they shake things into a new configuration or as Maturana put it, they "perturb the system". Better, I think, to leave the hammer in the tool box and send the client in to sort themselves out.

Which brings us to the power of description. When we ask a client to describe a preferred future we are powering up the client's own light onto the possibilities that lie ahead; when we ask the client to look back from this future to its history they shine a light on much that has been hidden from them. The more persistent we are with our questions and the more detailed the descriptions they elicit the more powerful the light and the more likely it is to illuminate possibilities. The challenge then is one of trust.

If we believe that we each know ourselves more than anyone else possibly can (and I do not mean intellectualised or even verbalised knowledge but knowledge that comes from the years of accumulated experience of doing, thinking and feeling what we do, think and feel) then we must trust that we are the best-placed person to use that knowledge in the best way. Why then do we suddenly start having ideas about what our clients need to do to reach their hoped-for futures? Why do we concern ourselves with how they are going to use that knowledge? And even if a client indicates a possible step up a scale who are we to know if that is the right step to take tomorrow. Our intentions might be 'good' but rather than be good for the client they are likely, once again, to obscure the client's way forward. They represent a lack of trust in the client's own ability to see and choose a better path. Rather than search for ways to influence our clients' lives we can search for questions whose answers cast an even stronger light on their successful pasts and future possibilities.

Chris Iveson

20 September 2011