

Don't give up too soon: deconstructing "nothing is better"

Solution-focused and strength-based therapists usually ask "What's better?" at the beginning of every session after the first one (and even in the first session and before the session actually takes place, see Matthew's post pre-treatment changes). If improvements are reported, therapists try to get a detailed description of these improvements ("What improved?", "When?", "Who was involved?" "What happened next?"), and to construct them in such a way that clients take credit for them ("Are you aware of how you did that?!"). If clients see no improvement, this initial negative report is *deconstructed* (de Shazer, 1988; de Shazer & Berg, 1992): the therapist asks questions in order to generate doubts about the "no change" frame and to amplify the description of any small changes that were going unnoticed under it. Some ways to deconstruct are (Berg & Miller, 1992; de Shazer, 1994; Beyebach, 2006):

- Question the initial report: "Are you sure? Is it possible that nothing is better?"
- Ask for smaller changes: "So what is a little bit better?"
- Change the time frame: "So last week was awful; what was better the first week?"
- Change the context: "So things at school have been rocky. What about home?"
- Change the perspective: "What would your wife say is better?"
- Reframe improvements: "How come things are not worse?"

- Use coping questions: “With things being that bad, how are you coping?”
- Use Scaling Questions: “On a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 stands for...”

A study by Reuterlov, Lofgren, Nordstrom, Ternstrom, and Miller (2000) raised doubts about the efficacy of deconstructing reports of no improvement, finding that only in 13% of the sessions they analyzed deconstruction had indeed lead the clients to describe improvements. However, Herrero de Vega and Beyebach (2004) replicated Reuterlov et al.'s study and found that a small but clinically relevant percentage (37%) of the 96 sessions that started with the client reporting “no improvement” actually ended up with the client identifying and discussing improvements. These findings imply that it might be worthwhile to try to deconstruct initial “no-improvement” reports as a first option before changing tracks or even considering a radical change of approach.

More recently, Sánchez Prada and me (Sánchez Prada, 2008; Sánchez Prada and Beyebach, 2014) undertook an intensive, qualitative study of eight solution-focused sessions, seeking a model of successful deconstruction. This study revealed that deconstruction is usually not as simple and straightforward as simply asking “the right question” when clients say that “nothing is better”, but looks more like a complex process in which the deconstruction of no-improvement interacts with the gradual uncovering and consolidation of improvements. In this process, it is often helpful that the therapist first joins with the client and validates the negative reports s/he wishes to share, and only later moves on to ask again for improvements. Also, it is important to check the

relevance of any improvements that might be uncovered, in other words, to make sure that for the client they are as meaningful as for the therapist. Another useful strategy might be to introduce some future oriented and some hypothetical questions (“So if you had felt better last week, what would you have done different about that?”) during the analysis of what happened. Dealing with different level of specificity in the description is a more subtle clinical tool... but that will be the topic of another post.

Once some relevant improvement has been identified, the therapist enters the usual consolidation process, asking lots of details about it and making sure that the clients take credit for his or her accomplishment.

References

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