

BOOK REVIEW

Brief Counseling That Works: A Solution-Focused Therapy Approach for School Counselors and Other Mental Health Professionals, 3rd ed.

by G. Sklare (2014)
Corwin

Reviewed by Keith Fulthorp
Assistant Professor
California State University, Long Beach

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the proliferation of research, theory, and practice related to positive psychology and a strengths-based paradigm. One such paradigm known as Solution-Focused Brief Counseling (SFBC), has gained increasing empirical support and is one that would be of interest to those practicing therapeutic recreation. I have read many works related to the description, elaboration of, and training related to SFBC, but it wasn't until I read Sklare's *Brief Counseling that Works*, second edition (2004) that I felt like I could truly utilize this paradigm in practice. With that being said, the third edition of Sklare's book (2014) further solidifies his work as a "must read" for those interested in facilitating beneficial client change, in a short amount of time.

The book itself is brief (174 pages, plus appendices), but full of deeply impactful strategies for conducting counseling from a solution-focused paradigm. The first chapter provides an overview of the SFBC paradigm, and its use in school counseling and other mental health settings. After providing some insightful testimony from practitioners, Sklare presents a straightforward description of the main beliefs and assumptions of the SFBC paradigm, as well as some key opportunities to practice reframing a problem focused paradigm, to a solution focus.

Chapters 2 and 3 are perhaps the most significant portions of the book, detailing the specific strategies utilized when implementing SFBC. What stands out most about these two chapters, is the presentation of SFBC strategies with case examples, and opportunities for the reader to implement the strategies with practice exercises. Chapter two focuses specifically on the development of counseling goals from the client's perspective. Sklare highlights the goal development process, and the importance of assisting the client in developing positive goals, defined as "behaviors that can be observed and measured so that the clients can recognize when their objectives have been attained (p. 27)." A particularly useful technique presented is "the miracle ques-

tion” and its variations, to help elicit client developed positive goals. Inherent in the discussion of positive goals, is the notion that goals must be related to what clients can do, not what clients report wanting others to do. The latter Sklare defines as negative goals, which include client goals related to the absence of something, an unrealistic goal, a goal where others have to change, or a goal that is otherwise harmful. In each case, strategies are presented with example cases that illustrate how counselors can help clients form positive, behaviorally specific, action-oriented goals.

Chapter 3 presents some more traditional SFBC techniques, all aimed at helping clients refine goals and develop solutions to the challenges that brought them in to counseling. These techniques include seeking exceptions to problems, mindmapping, accepting ownership of successes, cheerleading, scaling, overcoming obstacles to success, and constructing a counselor developed message that summarizes a counseling session for the client. As each technique stated above is presented, examples from case studies illustrate their use in a counseling setting, and the chapter concludes with more opportunities for the reader to attempt to move theory into practice.

Understanding key strategies and techniques utilized in SFBC is one thing; knowing how to implement them in practice is another thing altogether. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide a detailed description of what the strategies presented in Chapters 2 and 3 look like, across initial and subsequent counseling sessions, including a framework for each counseling meeting. Chapter 4 specifically details a five-step plan for an initial SFBC counseling session, from start to finish, along with a case example that includes client and counselor narrative. Chapter 5 highlights an abbreviated version of the SFBC framework aimed at decreasing the amount of time required for counseling, as well as increasing the pace at which clients achieve their goals, while Chapter 6 provides insights into conducting subsequent meetings. These chapters also include a framework complete with case vignettes and a reproducible note sheet to assist practitioners with each type of implementation (initial and subsequent meetings, as well as a condensed meeting).

The last two chapters of this edition of Sklare’s book conclude with recommendations and example case studies for expanding the use of SFBC in school settings, with other therapeutic paradigms such as the sand tray technique, with guided imagery, and with mandated clients. Chapter 7 highlights an approach for working with clients who did not self-refer, and have an expectation for change provided by others (such as treatment facilities, school disciplinary teams, rehabilitation centers, detention centers, etc). For mandated clients, Sklare pairs the approach down to four steps: problem identification, goal formation (using strategies and techniques discussed in chapters two and three), exceptions or past successes and conclusion of the meeting. Chapter 8 briefly presents ideas and recommendations for implementing SFBC techniques in groups, classrooms, and parent-teacher-counselor conferences. Though some of these examples are school based, the strategies and techniques presented could be useful for implementation in a variety of therapeutic settings, including those within which recreation therapists work.

In addition to a variety of examples and opportunities for practice presented within each chapter, Sklare’s book includes three appendices that provide further examples of the implementation of SFBC techniques, with opportunities to practice. Appendix A provides practice opportunities for developing behaviorally specific goals when clients

respond to SFBC questions with vague responses. Appendix B provides a transcript of an entire SFBC session, with an opportunity to practice responding to client answers to SFBC questions, and compare responses to the author's for self-assessment purposes. Finally, Appendix C provides a detailed description of how to use SFBC techniques within a guided imagery exercise.

Sklare's book lives up to its title: It works. Sometimes attempting a new counseling technique feels awkward as one navigates the implementation of new techniques into practice. This book helps mitigate some of the awkwardness by presenting a clear, concise, straightforward approach, and by providing ample opportunities to practice with each chapter narrative. Whether you are a seasoned professional, or just starting out, this is a resource you can't pass up if you are interested in facilitating positive client-led change. Though the content is counseling focused, the strategies and paradigm presented in *Brief Counseling That Works* can be easily adapted into recreation therapy practice, including but not limited to intakes, assessments, treatment plans, and group interventions.