

SOLUTION-FOCUSED CONVERSATIONS IN SCHOOLS AFTER A CRISIS OR DIFFICULT EVENT

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Teachers are often asked to lead discussions with teenagers and children when they return to school after a crisis or difficult event. It is important that these discussions foster a sense of hope and build on resilience. This is no small task. Using ideas and techniques from the solution-focused approach can help teachers have group and individual discussions that are honest and real while still being hopeful and helpful.

Students who have been through a difficult event or a crisis have felt fear, anxiety, sadness, anger. This is what we generally talk about after crisis. But they have also experienced moments of resilience, coping, gratitude, love, and perhaps even joy. **Those who have had the worst experiences will have the most impressive stories of resilience.** Even those who had an easier time will have risen to the challenge and discovered talents, abilities and resources they didn't know they had. When we talk about crisis, it's important that we help students to remember those stories and to talk about their strengths and resilience. Solution-focused (SF) conversations can help.

When you have been through crisis or trauma, it can be hard to hear from someone else that things could have been worse, that others have it worse, or that it's not as bad as it seems (even when it's true). There is a big difference between **telling** someone to look on the bright side (fridge-magnet wisdom), and **helping** them reflect on their experience in new ways so they can see the whole picture (SF conversation).

SF conversations are not about convincing students to see things differently. They are about gently helping them to see the whole story- the good and the bad- and making room to talk about strengths, resilience, and coping, because these are the parts of the story we sometimes need help to identify.

In a SF conversation, we are ready to acknowledge problems ("*That must have been so difficult*") and we are interested in how students coped or overcame them ("*How did you get through that?*"). We are

actively interested in the answers to these questions. We gently insist ("*How did you manage that?*" "*Give me an example. Tell me more*").

We are curious about exceptions and positive emotions. Maybe the student we are talking to did not experience joy. But they may have felt love, gratitude, amusement, or interest. They may have been proud of their efforts. These experiences may be harder to identify and talk about for all kinds of reasons, but they are just as much part of the truth of our experience as our fear and our sadness. Making space to talk about them and to amplify them helps build resilience.

Here are some questions that you can use to structure a SF discussion or activity with students who have weathered a crisis. These questions can be adapted to suit the age of your students and used with groups or individuals. They can also be used for writing or art projects.

Remember, students will answer the question you ask. If you ask neutral questions like, "*How was it?*", you are likely to get mixed answers, including a lot of talk about problems. If you want to help students talk about their resilience and coping, it is important to ask specific questions about it.

And remember, when they talk about what was difficult, take the time to listen and acknowledge what they are saying without trying to minimize it. Then turn your curiosity to coping and resilience. What did they do to cope? What did it help them to learn to do?

1. Questions for talking about a crisis

- *When things were difficult, what was most helpful?*
- *What did you do that made it a bit easier?*
- *Who was most helpful? Who were your helpers?*
- *What are you surprised that you were able to do?*
- *What is one important thing you learned?*
- *What are you most proud of?*

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- *What's one thing you are grateful for?*
- *What did you do to keep it from getting any worse?*
- *What is one new thing you did that was helpful, that you had never tried before?*

2. Questions for looking to the future

- *Now that the worst is over, what would you like the rest of the year to be like?*
- *Now that the worst is over, how would you like things to be? What would it look like if that happened?*
- *What do we need to see to move forward?*
- *Imagine this crisis helped us to make some positive changes. What would they be?*
- *What do we need as a group to end this year on a good note?*
- *We have ___ weeks left of school. How do you want those weeks to be? What should they look like?*
- *If we made a movie of a great end-of-the-year, what would we see on the screen?*

3. Questions for highlighting strengths and resources

- *So, what are some examples in the past where you were able to ___? (refer to answers about the future). How did you manage to be so ___? (**compliment**) Tell me more about that.*
- *When you are at your best, what are you like? What do you do? Give me some examples from before all this happened. Tell me more about that.*
- *If we had to pick 5 words that describe what is best about you, what would they be? (brainstorm)*

- *Let's find some examples for each of these words.
When was one time you were ___?
How did you manage to be so ___?
How did you decide to do this?
What did you tell yourself?
How did you make it happen?
What could have gone wrong? How did you avoid that?*

Author's note:

This document was written for teachers who have training in using the solution-focused (SF) approach. If you are interested in SF and would like to learn more, you can find information about training and free material in English at www.lavoiesolutions.com/english.

Ce document est offert en français. Pour le télécharger et pour avoir des renseignements sur la formation et d'autre matériel en français : www.lavoiesolutions.com.