

LAVOIE SOLUTIONS



Solution-focused brief
therapy: illustrations of the
major principles and
techniques

BRIGITTE LAVOIE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Pre-session change questions	4
Miracle question	6
Exception questions	9
Coping questions.....	12
Scale questions: to measure progress	14
Compliments	17
Amplification — curiosity that increases the impact of all the other techniques	19
Listen, select, build	22
Pause: a real technique.....	24
Suggestions.....	26
Three principles of SFBT, three stories	28

Suggested citation:

Lavoie, B. (2019). *Solution-focused brief therapy: illustrations of the major principles and techniques*. <https://www.lavoiesolutions.com/matériel-gratuit/>.

INTRODUCTION

A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Since 2013, this has been the idea behind my drive to write a monthly newsletter. I wanted to help people integrate Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) in small steps, so that my participants could continue to learn after their training. SFBT seems simple on the surface, but using this approach effectively is much more complex than it seems at first glance.

SFBT provides a non-intrusive alternative that builds on the strengths and skills of clients. It allows them to achieve rapid and lasting change. It has been around for more than 40 years and it continues to evolve. It is evidence-based and its effectiveness has been demonstrated with people from different cultures, living with diverse issues, in a variety of settings. If you are interested in theory and research results, I invite you to read the *Solution Focused Therapy Treatment Manual for Working with Individuals*. This document will better meet your needs.

If you want to refresh your repertoire of questions, if you are comfortable with a more personal tone, and if you like stories, this guide could be for you. I have compiled about ten of my newsletters that present the basic techniques, and 3 stories that remind me of the humble and compassionate attitude that drew me in from the beginning. You will find other texts under the free material tab on my web site, but I hope this one provides a solid review, as well as an invitation and an inspiration for you to practice.

Happy reading!

- Brigitte

PRE-SESSION CHANGE QUESTIONS

Do we really want to ask the client what has already started to change before we see them for the first time? Pre-session change questions seemed difficult to ask when I had my first training. But these questions let the client know that we believe they can make changes, not because they have seen an expert, but because they decided to make an appointment. It is a humbler departure that will influence the rest of the conversations we have together.

From the first call to make an appointment, you can tell the client: *"When people decide to get help, things often start to change. I'd like you to pay attention to what is different, even a little bit, so you can tell me about it."*

I remember one client I asked to do this. I wasn't sure there would be changes, and I was hesitant to ask. She had been hit by a car and had not been on her bicycle since. She was very anxious and she had stopped going out after dark. Her post-traumatic stress reactions had gotten worse, not better. The accident had happened a few months earlier. I started the first session by asking, *"I told you that sometimes things start to change when we decide to get help. I'd like you to tell me what you have noticed that is different since our phone call."* She answered without hesitation: *"Lots of things have changed!"* Obviously, I was very interested in the answer and I asked her to tell me what she noticed. *"Since our call, I decided to get back on my bike. I threw away my helmet and my stained clothes"* (clothes she had been holding onto since the orderly had given them back to her at the hospital). But that wasn't all. When I asked her *"What else?"* (maybe her way of looking at the situation), she added, *"I also started running. I feel so encouraged!"*

The changes that clients name are not always this dramatic, but it is rare that there are none at all. We often hear that the changes started when they decided to ask for help (even while they are on a waiting list). But clients rarely take the time to notice them and to feel hopeful. If we invite them to pay attention to these differences, they are more likely to see them.

For this to work, the formula is important. **We should not ask**, *"Have you seen any changes?"* or *"Were there any changes?"* **We should not say**, *"What did you change?"* or *"Did you do the exercise I gave you last week?"*

Here are some suggestions that are a better match for the solution-focused approach:

- *I know you've been on the the waiting list for __ months. I'm sorry about that. I'd like you to tell me what has started to change while you were waiting. I want to start with where you are right now.*
- *When people decide to call, there are things that start to change, even if it's only the way they think about the problem. What have you noticed that is different?*

At the beginning of each meeting

If you have chosen to use SFBT, you can stop asking questions like, *"How are you?"*, *"How was your week?"*, or *"What brings you here today?"* Instead, you can start each meeting with a question that emphasizes what is changing. Here are some examples you can try:

- *I'd like you to tell me what is different, even a little, since our last meeting.*
- *What has continued to change since our last meeting?*
- *I'm interest in what has started to change since our last call. Can we start with this?*
- *What was less difficult or a little bit better this week?*

- *Last time, you said your spouse would be the first to notice any changes. What would they have noticed this week?*
- *What are the signs that something is starting to change? They might be visible to others or internal signs.*

I don't ask for a recent success or a good move they made. It might be too difficult to own this kind of progress. It's also important to give clients time to respond. When I first starting asking these types of questions, I was so afraid clients wouldn't come up with an answer that I didn't give them time to think about their response. If it seems difficult, I invite them to take their time. A teenager once told me, in front of his mother, *"I think it calmed her down to come and see you. She got off my back a bit."* The mother answered, *"No- it's more like he finally understood that he is not a tenant in the house!"* Even if these answers were sarcastic, each of them still appreciated the difference. I continued, *"Would you like to have more of this?"* They looked at each other and nodded. They were in complete agreement, which was another step in the right direction.

When clients return and says that things are worse, it can help to listen for what might be a sign of change and to help them see this as well. The most eloquent example I have is from a client who said things were worse. To help me understand, she said that things were so bad that she had to bring her son to daycare on Monday. I knew she loved her son very much and was working four days a week so she could spend more time with him. But considering how exhausted she was, I told myself that maybe it wasn't such a bad decision. So I asked questions about what happened next. I asked what she did after she dropped her son off at daycare. With a sigh, she said, *"I went to bed and I slept."* I asked what happened after that. She sounded a bit guilty when she answered, *"I decided to go to the Jean Talon Market. It was wonderful. On Monday, there's nobody there."* I answered with enthusiasm, *"It is wonderful, isn't it? And after the market, what did you do?"* She smiled. *"I cooked a bit. It was relaxing. That's so rare."* (And it was- she had two sons with serious behaviour problems. It must not have been easy to cook in peace.) I continued, *"I'm curious. How did that affect your evening?"* She answered, *"Wait- that's not all. At 3:30, I felt like spending some time with my son so I decided to go get him at the daycare. We went to the park. We had a good time."* At that moment, she realized what was obvious when we looked at the rest of her day. We worked on how she could give herself this kind of break without waiting to be at the end of her rope. It was easier to consider this kind of solution because she had experienced the benefits first hand.

I invite you do do this as well. If you want to improve some aspect of your own life, recognize what has already started to change, even a little bit. Take credit for what you have already done.

MIRACLE QUESTION

Miracolo! Mamma! Miracolo! Miracolo!

Miracolo! Mamma! Miracolo! Miracolo! He was about 8 years old, skipping happily towards his mother. He seemed to be describing in Italian the nature of the miracle in question. I had the good luck to observe this interaction while strolling through a public square in Europe. I caught the mother's eye and she seemed to be used to this kind of moment. Used to miracles, or used to the exuberance of her son. I couldn't resist- I smiled and said, "*Miracolo?*" It was obvious that I was charmed by her son, so she translated what he had just announced. In broken English, she explained to me that his sister had just agreed to lend him her iPad for the duration of their evening meal.

With this, the provider of the miracle approached with the dignity befitting her 12 years. She was trying not to smile at the excesses of her little brother. She wasn't going to react- it wouldn't be appropriate for someone of her advanced maturity. Her mother whispered a few words discretely in her ear, probably to thank her for her generosity. She seemed pleased that her sacrifice has been adequately recognized. She absently ruffled her brother's hair, as adults do. Like she had definitely become an adult too. And that's when the second miracle happened, right before my eyes. Jumping up and down, the little brother grabbed her hand and pulled her forward. She couldn't help but run alongside him. She started to laugh, unable to resist his enthusiasm. Under the spell, she managed to forget that she was almost no longer a child. The little brother seemed to be able to perform miracles as well. Their mother gave me a complicit look, as if she were looking for a silent witness for this moment of grace.

I kept on walking, thinking of you. I told myself that I would have to tell you this story because it sums up what we are trying to do when we ask the miracle question. It's not the miracle that matters, but everything that changes as a result.

Many practitioners are worried about asking this question, as if they felt the pressure to answer it themselves. Rest assured, clients know that we cannot perform miracles. They're going to see other people for that. Why do we ask this question then? Because some clients have the impression that if they don't bring their girlfriend back or make their problem go away, they won't be able to get better. By giving them permission to imagine that this miracle has already happened, they tell us what they hope for. They give us a detailed description of what we can help them do.

Much of what they want can be achieved without divine intervention. We don't ask the client to describe the miracle to us, we ask them questions about how it changes things in their lives. We are looking to identify the signs that a miracle has happened. We pay attention to the small observable differences that are within their control. If a little boy says his big sister is kinder to him, we ask him to describe what he is doing. If he says he stops teasing her, the next question will be: what are you doing instead? The mother is asked to describe what she does if she sees her children having fun together, and so on.

We want to see the unfolding of this future as if we were attending a play. The miracle in a family or a couple is that if one element of the system changes, that change will effect the others. Hearing the benefits, one of the family members may be motivated to take the first steps. The sequence doesn't have to be the same.

For those who may have forgotten it, here is a reminder that the staging is part of the question:

Let me ask you a slightly different question. (If the client accepts, we continue.) This question requires a little imagination. After leaving the office, you go home, have dinner, do homework, and go to bed. While you sleep, a miracle happens! (finger snap) The miracle eliminates the problem that brought you here. You

wake up without knowing that there was a miracle since you were asleep. When you wake up in the morning, what are the first signs that a miracle has happened?

You can adapt this question to the context to personalize it. You can add details by describing what the person does in the evening (playing video games if they are teens or bathing the children if they are a young parent). This precaution makes it easier for the client to engage with the imagery. But it is also possible to be precise about the function of the miracle. The client tells us what makes them suffer, which can be taken into account by including it in the miracle question. Here are some examples:

*Without you realizing it, the miracle allows you to
eliminate this anxiety
“reset” your life
take control of your life
get rid of all this pain
get along as a family*

The client told us from the start what makes them suffer or what they wants. We help them imagine that it happened effortlessly. In doing so, they describe actions that are often very accessible.

After asking the question, the work is not finished. To get a detailed description, you have to look at the details. To get there, amplification questions are absolutely essential. Before asking a miracle question, I invite you to be ready with the following questions.

Amplification questions

What is the first clue that a miracle has happened?

What do you notice that is different?

When you wake up?

The rest of the morning?

What else?

Then what?

What are you doing?

What are you saying?

What are you saying to yourself?

At work?

What are the most significant impacts?

Give me an example so that I understand what you mean.

How do you feel when you ...?

What is the main benefit of saying this?

The more the day goes on, the more we point out what is different because the person acts differently, not because there was a miracle. I never ask: *how do you feel at the start of the day*. Why? Because some clients might stumble on this first question, but also because I don't want them to tell me how they feel. I want to hear what they **do**, what they **say** to each other, because that's what they have control over. It's also what can make them feel better.

A young client of mine suffering from depression once described how he would wake up after the miracle: he would take a shower, and instead of dressing in sweat pants, he would put on jeans. Instead of putting on a shirt from the pile of dirty laundry, he would put on a clean shirt. He would go to his first class.

Since I know about depression, I could have suggested these actions to him. However, it is not the same impact if the young person identified them himself. This exercise has an effect on empowerment and motivation.

Suppose _____, what do you do?

The client may tell us that someone else will change. One delicate way to help them regain control is to allow them to imagine that possibility.

To the first question, a woman answered spontaneously, with an uncomfortable laugh: *My boss is gone!* I admit to whispering to her that I wish I could have done that for her, but I continued: *“Suppose your boss disappears, what does it allow you to do in the morning when you wake up?”* After a break, she replied: *“I would probably cuddle with my boyfriend longer”*. *“What else?”* *“I go back to being interested in what René Homier-Roy (the radio host of the time) said. I would take the time to make myself a café au lait”*. Several other things were different, including in her relationship with her boyfriend and with her colleagues. She literally gave less room to her boss. It was extremely touching to realize that she could regain power over her life without divine (or criminal) intervention to make this person disappear.

What would replace _____?

This question can be used repeatedly to help a client identify what they will do, rather than what they will not do anymore. Here is the most touching example to illustrate this phenomenon. A client explained to me that after the miracle she would no longer have this weight on her chest. When I asked her what would replace this weight, she said: *“Umm.. A hole!”* She had lived with this weight for so long that it was all she could see. I told her that it was perfectly normal for it to be difficult to imagine when she had lived with the weight for a so long. I asked her to take a moment to think about what would replace the hole that morning. After taking a few deep breaths, she replied: *“A column of air ... yes, that's it ... a column of air.”* She was already breathing easier as she described it.

In conclusion

Even if I don't perform miracles, I am often touched by the little miracles of humanity that happen before my eyes, in a public square or in my office- those moments when a client finds hope that it is possible to experience a part of what they have described. I must admit that I needed time to practice these questions. At first, I was afraid of the answers. When I took my time, and when I gave my clients time, I was able to witness the birth of hope and to share moments of grace with my clients.

EXCEPTION QUESTIONS

A short history of exceptions

SFBT was born at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee in the 1980s. It was by analyzing the details of the interviews that Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer found that no problems were present 100 % of the time. Surprisingly, even clients who suffered from chronic and particularly serious problems had experienced periods when their symptoms were less intense or even absent. Clients could even be puzzled by mentioning this anomaly in their negative pattern. They didn't bring it up themselves, since they thought it wasn't important.

The team decided to focus on these exceptions to the problems. They asked questions to try to understand the circumstances, the conditions that had created them. They observed that by asking questions to clarify exactly what happened, the client's hope increased. By carefully studying the recipe for their successes, the client realized that they had done interesting things, spontaneously, without really being aware of it. If we had asked this same client what they had done so far to solve their problem, they would have replied that their solutions didn't work. But when the professionals were interested in a specific day when they were surprised not to have had a panic attack, or these few hours when they felt less depressed, the clients discovered that they should take more credit for these results. In telling these stories, clients reveal creativity and resourcefulness that they did not realize they had. In shedding light on these successes, clients realize that the slope seems to be easier to climb, and that the path to getting better is clearer. Their solutions can be reused.

I would have liked to have witnessed the moment in the history of psychology when a group of psychotherapists asked themselves troubling questions: *Could we help clients by speaking less about the problem? Could this be a way to help clients to suffer less and to feel hopeful more quickly?* After several months of observation of this phenomenon, these hypotheses have been confirmed. More than a technique, it is a central idea of the approach. By following the path of exceptions, we discover the territory of solutions. Instead of making them travel to a TERRA NOVA (and making them discover solutions that they do not know) we ask them to return to their TERRA SOLVO (and help them discover what they have already done).

Ask them to tell you when it happened

At first glance, these questions seem easy. However, I draw your attention to certain errors which are quite common. Many practitioners ask: *Is there a moment when...?* or *Have you ever had moment when...* These beginning sentences suggest that these moments may not exist. It's easier to find exceptions (as a stakeholder) when you believe, when you assume they exist. The other mistake is to ask people how they did it before identifying when they did it.

- *When did you notice that your symptoms were less present? In what context ?*
- *Describe a time when you were lighter, in control, confident, free. (We choose a word used by the client, an expression of their preferred future, the state that followed the miracle.)*
- *Tell me about a time when you were less affected by this problem.*
- *In what context are you less anxious, less irritable? Can you give me an example?*
- *When do you think less about suicide?*

- *I would like you to tell me about a time when you were surprised not to have a panic attack / not to freak out. When was it? I would love to hear more.*
- *When was the last time you managed not to work on weekends? (We can repeat actions that they wish to do more often.)*

By asking when it happened, you allow the customer to leave the problem area and move to a place where they feel more competent. It can take patience, silence, and time to allow them to remember. Painful memories are often on the top of the pile, so you have to search to find a good memory. Photos and videos are not always well organized. It may take time to choose. You can even tell them this so that they don't feel pressured to find an answer too quickly.

Recognize the paths that lead you to an exception

When a client says to me, *"It hasn't always been like that"*, I see it as an invitation to take an interest in this period when it was better: *"When was it like that? Tell me, what were you doing at those times?"* If a client tells you that they lack confidence, courage, patience or motivation, you can see it as an opportunity to take an interest in this resource. Rather than asking why they lack confidence, courage, patience or motivation, you can accompany them to a place where they had it :

- *I would like you to tell me about a time in your life when you had to show courage.*
- *In what context do you have the most patience, confidence, even if it's only a little?*
- *Tell me about something that you managed to do even if you lacked motivation.*

Even if the context is different, even if the conditions were more favorable then, it was still your client who managed to demonstrate the skill or resource they said they lacked.

A colleague told me that it was while looking for an exception that he decided to ask his client who suffered from agoraphobia how she managed to have such a stylish haircut. She had already told him that she could no longer leave the house. He wasn't trying to trip her up. He was genuinely curious about her strategy. Maybe she invited a friend over to do her hair. She replied: *"That's not the same"*. This is where he became even more curious. This is exactly what we are looking for, the moments that are not the same: *"Can you tell me more? I'm interested."* She explained that she had tried a lot of different strategies before she found the right one. She had her hair styled in a salon every week. It hadn't occurred to her that she could succeed in doing the same for groceries, school, etc. He insisted on knowing the details so they could see what they could export.

Focus on how rather than why

Like amplifiers on a sound system, amplification questions give strength and richness to the first questions. The client may be modest about disclosing what they have done. They may think it's not very good. Our (genuine) enthusiasm for their original ideas and initiatives will allow them to overcome their discomfort.

- *How did you do it? I'm interested.*
- *What else? Describe it to me as if I were there.*
- *Give me an example so that I understand what you mean.*
- *Who noticed the difference? What did they notice?*
- *Even if it was easier that time, you still succeeded. How? (or) What?*
- *How did you know you had to say that?*
- *How did you know it was the right thing to do?*

- *It's really interesting. You started off with this attitude. How did it change your interaction?*
- *What did you focus on at that time?*
- *What else was taking on more importance at that time?*
- *What was less important?*
- *What did you tell yourself?*
- *When you said that to yourself, what did it allow you to do?*
- *How did you manage not to react badly that time? It would have been legitimate to lose your cool, but you didn't do it. How did you avoid that? What held you back?*

You can see that these examples are constructed from what the client said, and from a real interest in all the details (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, posture, attitude, tone of voice, beliefs, priorities at that time, values that took over, etc.)

Why am I interested in these details? 1) Because the solutions are in the details. When I dig into the details, I don't know (in advance) which one will be the most interesting. I want to highlight them all so that we can choose the ones they can export to the problem area. 2) When they talk about these details, clients find of resources and skills. I don't ask them how they feel, but these questions allow them to feel confidence, relief or control. The more they talk about these details, the more they enter into the space of these skills. The more they settle in this territory, the more they are inhabited by positive emotions.

If it's difficult, ask them to remember between sessions

If the client has trouble remembering, ask them to think about it between two sessions: *"It's too important. I'm really interested. Can you take the time to remember how you managed to do this so you can tell me the next time?"* When I'm afraid of pushing too hard, I think back to the client who told me: *"It bugged me, your question. I was standing on the bus and I thought, she's funny. She wants to know how I succeed when I succeed. Anyway, it was a change from the other question"*. I asked her what the other question it was. She looked me in the eye and said, *"The one I usually ask myself. Why do I mess up everything that I mess up!"* Indeed, it was very different. If my interest in their successes can help my clients to change the focus of their reflections, I am even more motivated to insist. I hope you will want to do this too.

COPING QUESTIONS

If you are going through hell, keep going. This quote attributed to Winston Churchill reminds me of the role we sometimes have to play with certain clients: helping them to keep putting one foot in front of the other at a time that they describe as unbearable. This is especially important when clients have to deal with terrible news. I used to spend the first meeting letting them talk about how they felt about terrible news. For the past few years, I have focused on making sure that they don't leave the office without touching on themes that help them feel enough hope to keep going.

How have they gotten through other difficult times?

All human beings have already overcome difficulties. If they have an experience of suffering, they also have an experience of resilience. Can we go examine this ability to bounce back, this determination or stubbornness (as a client described it) when they need it most? The immediate aftermath of a trauma or a tragedy is not a moment when they will have the capacity to learn new techniques. It will be easier for them to repeat something they have already done.

What has worked for them before? Here are some sample questions that will shed light on what they did to bounce back or to get through another moment of adversity.

- *Tell me about what you did to get back up again the last time you fell.*
- *What is the most important thing that helps you put one foot in front of the other when it is difficult?*
- *What helped you the most the last time you went through an ordeal?*
- *How did you manage to keep your head above water during the most difficult period?*
- *What value takes center stage when you manage to move forward?*
- *How did you manage not to get worse?*
- *What were the first signs that the worst was over?*

The goal is not to ask these questions one after another, but to offer different alternatives to help them reconnect with their strengths, their abilities, their unique ways of doing things. Clients may not remember right away. It may be important to insist gently or to invite them to think about it between sessions.

I asked this kind of question with a client who had just learned that she had cancer. She stopped in the middle of a sentence and sighed: *"It's the first time I've had cancer."* I took the time to validate the seriousness of this news: *"Of course, and it is completely unfair! You shouldn't have cancer. Cancer sucks."* I continued more slowly: *"I'm not saying it's the same thing as a breakup, but you are the same person who has already rebounded in the face of adversity. I would like us to identify what helped you in the past so that the next few days will be less difficult."* She smiled and said that maybe she needed a new playlist. Music and sports had always helped her a lot. When I left my office, she was much calmer. She still had cancer—unfortunately there was nothing I could do about that. But she knew how to occupy her mind in the next few days so she wouldn't feel so overwhelmed.

What you are feeling is not permanent

People who experience a tragedy usually know that the loss is permanent, that they cannot go back. This is probably what hurts them so much. They do not always know that this acute suffering is not permanent. It is the prospect of feeling this pain forever that can contribute to their despair.

So far, one sentence seems to break through this wall of pain: *What you are experiencing now is not permanent.* I see myself repeating it gently. Clients tell me that this sentence resonates after the session, even if they don't believe it much at first. Little by little, they notice clues that confirm this statement. The intense pain of the first few days, sometimes difficult to describe in words, does not persist over time.

The most eloquent illustration of this phenomenon was offered to me by a client whose son had died by suicide. I asked her how she was when she heard the news. She replied without hesitation: "At minus 1000." She was now at 1 on a scale of 1 to 10. She still needed help, but the distance she had traveled (alone) was remarkable. She could not doubt it. I could only admire it. She started from -1000. Some find scale questions cold. However, it is one of the only tools that allows us to compare two states. This is often how clients start to see how their efforts have led to change over time.

What don't they need to know?

I read an article about an ultra-marathon runner who covered a distance of 800 km (The Bruce Trail in Ontario) despite a visual handicap. To help her, other athletes were part of the race with her. While running, they had to describe the approaching obstacles (*root in front, rock on the left, death on the right*). There were indeed times when there was a real risk of falling off a cliff.

I tell you this story because I was particularly impressed by what she asked them **not to say**. She wanted these guides to keep quiet when there was a hill ahead. They also had to hide the presence of bears or snakes from her. Why? Because she couldn't do anything about it. They were already making noise, which protected her from bears. The snakes were going to go their way, and she had more energy to climb a slope when she had not anticipated it.

This example reminded me that in certain circumstances it is better to know less. For example, in the context of cuts or mergers, it is sometimes better not to listen to the news or to refrain from listening to rumours. It may be useful to know a real danger or the elements on which we can act (a rock or a root to avoid) but it may be necessary to make the decision to move forward by altering our vision. It can sometimes be essential to pay attention to what you can control and ask your loved ones or colleagues not to give information that can only increase distress. This is a suggestion that I regularly make to clients.

In conclusion

I hope this newsletter will be useful for your clients, but I also wrote it while thinking of friends and colleagues who work in the health and social services network who have to deal with changes that they did not want. I hope you will not lose your health in situations like this. I hope you will remember what helped you get through other difficult times. It will not turn bad news into good news. I hope, however, that it won't be any more difficult than it has to be.

SCALE QUESTIONS: TO MEASURE PROGRESS

A day on the beach in the south

You may have heard this story about the aftermath of a hurricane. Strong winds and gigantic waves had caused hundreds of crabs to be stranded on the beach. The heat of the sun would soon dry out the majority of them. A little boy, about 6 years old, had started to throw them into the sea. He was taking them one by one, and was going to carry them by running far enough away so that they would not be thrown back on the beach by the waves. He worked with enthusiasm, as children do when they have a mission. When he got pinched, he let out a little cry and continued his determined run. A man watching him asked him, wryly, “*Do you really think it's worth continuing? There are too many and you are too small! There are so many crabs that you can never make a difference*”. The little boy looked him straight in the eye, while throwing the crab he was holding in his hand into the sea. In an unequivocal, slightly cheeky tone, he replied: “*And this one, if you take a good look at him. Do you think it makes a difference to him?*”

I like to remember this story when I see the magnitude of the task at hand. This little boy, like some people, seemed to have a predisposition to recognize the impact of what they do. For others, there are questions of scale.

Whatever the number, they have succeeded in not being lower

Scale questions allow us to examine the progress made so far. To do this, you must first look back before looking at where you are going. It is not enough to ask: *On a scale of 1 to 10, where are you today? (If 1 is not good at all and 10 is very good)*. No matter what the answer is, it is even more important to ask one or more of these questions:

- *How did you go from 3 to 4?*
- *How did you manage to get there?*
- *How did you manage to go up after this more difficult moment?*
- *How did you manage not to be lower under the circumstances?*
- *How did you manage to stay the same despite what happened this week?*
- *How did you manage not to be worse?*

These questions suggest that you believe that the person has made an effort and that they deserve to be where they are. They may not realize it. It may feel bad not to be higher, so it is important to recognize the efforts, the progress, the result. Of course, we recognize the level of difficulty which can explain why it is not higher. There is no bad score. It's not a report card. Ultimately, the number itself does not matter. What is essential is that this number allows them to measure the distance traveled or to recognize that their condition is not permanent.

What is the next highest number like?

If they client says they are at 4, it could be helpful to ask:

- *What does a 5 look like?*
- *How will you know you are at 5?*
- *What will be the clues that you are at 5?*
- *Who will be the first to notice that you are at 5?*

- *What will they notice?*
- *What will be the first signs that you are at 5?*

If the client tells us a number that is too difficult to reach, we can help them identify a more realistic target: *"Are you sure that is a 5? I get the impression that what you are describing is more like a 6 or 7? I would really like us to figure out what a 5 looks like. Otherwise, you will wait until you see a 6 or 7 to feel satisfied. It would be a shame for you not to realize that you are moving forward."*

To the question: *"What does a 5 look like?"*, one female client answered, with a laugh, *"At 5, I become a man!"* I insisted, curious, *"OK, suppose you are a man, what does it look like? What do you do?"* She replied that she would play hockey. She had never played hockey in her life (and had no plans to start). She didn't want to be a man, but it was a way of expressing something. She became more serious and explained to me that for her boyfriend, physical exercise was sacred. When I asked her what a 5 looked like, she could see him leaving with his hockey bag (religiously). She too wanted to give herself space for physical activity despite all her commitments. She wanted to be like this. If I had just asked her what she was going to do to get from 4 to 5, she would have had a harder time clarifying that idea. She might not have seen it at all. We then went back to a time in her life when she was able to exercise. She teased me: *"You mean a moment when I manned up?"* She thought she was funny. I did too. Scale questions do not always have the effect of de-dramatizing, but I have often seen this collateral benefit (where they help to gain distance from what is difficult). This makes it easier to find answers.

How did you get from 2 to 3?

If you have identified a preferred future, if you have delved into the client's skills, if you have highlighted their strengths by exploring details of specific examples, the client will answer this question fairly easily. If you have not done these other procedures, I would recommend that you **no longer ask this question** (please). It's a good question, but it has prerequisites. Without them, clients will not know what to answer and will feel helpless. If they answer, *"I do not know"*, it won't enough to just give them time to find an answer.

If you know what they have **already** done to go from 1 to 2, or from -10 to 2, or if you know what they have **already** done to be at 7, you can help them identify what they could start doing again. I prefer these softer versions to clarify the next step. These next questions also imply more collaboration. If they can't find an answer, I might make a suggestions, since I know what they have done in the past.

- *What would help you go from 2 to 3?*
- *In all that you have done in the past, what could you recycle that would allow you to go from 2 to 3?*
- *You told me about everything you did when you were at 5. I realize you have less energy right now. What do you think you can repeat with the energy you have now?*
- *What would be the smallest thing that would allow you to go from 2 to 3?*
- *Is it necessary to go to 3? Maybe, under the circumstances, it's already a lot not to go lower than 2. What would help you consolidate your 2?*

As in this last example, it's not always necessary to go a little higher, a little further (no matter what Jean-Pierre Ferland says).

When you work with children or multiple clients

It is not uncommon for teachers, principals, and parents to agree that a child is at 3 (in terms of behaviour) and they would like that child to get to a 10. I remember Thomas, who had Tourette's Syndrome and anxiety. When the teacher talked about her expectations, she wanted him to always have his material ready, to work

unsupervised, and to raise his hand before speaking. The 10 she was describing was to the 10 achievable by little Sandrine who was shy and first in class. Thomas's efforts were doomed to failure.

But if the adults around the child are asked to have realistic expectations, they will usually agree. That doesn't stop them from wishing for an impossible change. Questions of scale can get us out of this impasse. They are told that what they say is a 10 and that we want to go in that direction.

We would only need to identify a 4 for everyone to experience some success. We then specify: *"What does a 4 look like?"* The child is more likely to be successful. It will then be extremely important to specify observable signs rather than the absence of something. Rather than specifying that we no longer want Thomas to jab paper clips into his friend's hand, we'll see clues like: *Thomas plays with the object provided for this purpose when he's too nervous. He asks to go outside when the symptoms are too strong.*

When clients are discouraged

A few years ago, a client told me that he was going to end our sessions because he felt that they weren't very useful. Since he was still in my office, I offered to take stock of our work so far. I believe that clients have the right to stop seeing me whenever they want to, and I will even help them find other resources. But I didn't want him to leave without acknowledging his progress or efforts.

Scale questions allow us to see what has moved. He was working on 4 different aspects of his life (the relationship with the mother of his children, grieving his mother's death, symptoms of anxiety, and his return to work). On a whiteboard, I drew 4 scales. I asked him to write a number for the start of our work together and a number to indicate where he was now. I did the same. He had made progress on every aspect except the return to work. In total, on the 4 scales, he had advanced 8 points. That's what I reflected to him. It sounds technical, but I'm convinced that if I had just told him that he had progressed, I would not have gotten through to him in the same way. He needed to see, to measure. He even said to me, *"You know, I understand better when you talk to me with numbers"*.

This exercise allowed me to remind him that other people only had one issue to work on. He was facing four. Also, we had not made any progress on the return to work, but we had not yet talked about his return to work. This exercise made it clear that he wanted to tackle this subject now. He decided to continue with our work.

Scale questions: the spirit rather than the letter

Scale questions are not specific to this approach, but if used with the spirit of the approach, there are no bad grades and there is no pressure. If you want to revisit them, I invite you to use them for yourselves. You may wonder what number you are at in relation to a goal you want to achieve. Ask yourself how you got there and what you have done not to be at a lower number. Recognize the efforts, the work, and the results. Recognize that if it were easy to be higher, you would have already done so. Before identifying the next step, ask yourself, *"What would a higher number look like?"* You might even give yourself the right to stay where you are (compassionately) rather than demanding a higher number. By removing that pressure, who knows, you might even move up.

COMPLIMENTS

I thought I was good at complimenting my clients until I listened to an interview with Insoo Kim Berg a few years ago. It reminded me of the effect of repeating compliments, and of the importance of the moment and the words I choose. Here are some ideas that can help you offer compliments that will resonate with your clients. Much more than a technique, it is also a way of listening, looking at, and thinking about our clients. It is a way of reflecting strengths.

Go over the files of some clients

When you return from a vacation or when you see clients after a break, I suggest that you reread files, paying selective attention to the strengths of these clients. What impresses you about this client? What touches you? What did this person survive? What did they do that you could hardly have accomplished? What progress have they made, no matter how small? Talk to a colleague about what you admire about this client. Offer the client a summary of their strengths or accomplishments before moving on.

Beware of second-hand compliments

What is a second-hand compliment? It's a compliment that has already been worn by another client. For example, you can tell the majority of your clients that it takes courage to get help or that they have strengths that have enabled them to overcome their difficulties. This kind of compliment does not have as much impact as a custom-made compliment. Clients will more easily reject a formula that applies to more than one person. Clients will be touched by a compliment that applies to them and their context. Here are some examples that may inspire you.

- *I'm impressed. I'm touched.*
- *I admire this kind of attitude.*
- *I can't believe it.*
- *You are so creative.*
- *You are a man of honour.*
- *You have a playful nature that doesn't seem to be derailed by worries.*
- *It's clear that justice is an important value for you. It's probably what bothered you so much with your boss.*
- *In my book, what you just said (specific example) is part of being of a good father (silence).*
- *I can see that you value your daughter (a mother who is too restrictive).*
- *How did you manage not to tear off her head? To keep your cool?*
- *Even though you have symptoms of depression, you tell me about your experiences with such an intelligent sense of humour.*
- *Despite what you have experienced, you have kept your spontaneity.*
- *Your political values impress me. The world would be much better if there were more people with these kinds of beliefs.*
- *When I read books on resilience, there are examples like yours.*

Compliments are not the same thing as positive reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is used to reinforce behaviour. The goal of reinforcement is for the client to repeat the behaviour observed. Many practitioners confuse these two techniques. Solution-focused compliments have another function. They can relate to observable behaviour, but they can also relate to aspects invisible to the eye. When I compliment my client, I want them to know that I see them as bigger than their behaviours, symptoms or diagnosis. Compliments are about the person, their nature, positive intentions, efforts, values, qualities as parent or employee that I see when they speak to me. They don't need to change anything to receive these compliments. It's a way of showing a nonjudgmental attitude, of highlighting their qualities as a human being. Compliments have the effect of increasing the client's sense of skill and self-confidence and their confidence in us.

Beware of conditional compliments

I never tell a client that I trust them or that they are capable of doing what they intend to do. It doesn't mean that I don't trust my clients, on the contrary. But if I tell them that I trust them and then they fail, they will lose the compliment I just gave them. I recognize their strengths and their skills, but I also recognize the level of difficulty of what they are about to do. Before leaving, I will help them identify an easier task. If they come back and they have failed, I will tell them that I have underestimated what awaited them in real life. I presume they did the best they could under the circumstances. If it was easy, they would have already done it.

Do it for you

By listening for compliments, you may have more energy and hope for your clients. Don't do it only for them. Think about yourself as well. When was the last time you took the time to actually receive or offer a compliment to yourself? It would be another great way to practice. In fact, as long as they are sincere, there is no contraindication to practicing with a spouse, a friend, a colleague, a mother-in-law and yourself. There are benefits for both the transmitter and the receiver.

AMPLIFICATION — CURIOSITY THAT INCREASES THE IMPACT OF ALL THE OTHER TECHNIQUES

If you've ever had surgery, you know that the minutes just before are not the happiest. Without the internet to distract you, you try to stay calm and not think too much about placing your life in the hands of strangers. At best, you can forget about your niece who suffered from medical errors and that episode of *Gray's Anatomy* where an intern left a towel in the patient's abdomen.

It was while I was cycling through these thoughts that my surgeon arrived and asked what my favorite song was. I hesitated, taken by surprise. *"I don't know. Maybe Hymn for the week-end by Cold Play."* I was even more surprised to hear my song playing through the operating room speakers.

But the best was yet to come. While we were waiting for the anesthesiologist, the surgeon asked me what this song meant to me. I told him that I had listened to it a lot when I was giving a training in Poland. He continued to be interested. *"That's right- you told me that you were a trainer. But, what was special this time?"* While I was telling him about this moment and he was asking more questions, I forgot how vulnerable I was.

When the anesthesiologist arrived, he asked me where I wanted to go. I was already more relaxed, so I said in a teasing tone, *"I would go back to Maui!"* He perked up. *"This place is so beautiful!"* My surgeon joined the conversation. *"It's true. Everyone who goes there wants to go back. When you think about it, there is so much beauty in the world."* I continued, completely engaged in the conversation, *"I was just reading about it in magazine article, The hundred most beautiful places on the planet. I thought it would be good to look at something beautiful before the operation."* He asked me, *"Can you bring me the magazine?"* And it was on these words that I fell asleep.

You can guess how this moment increased my confidence and lowered my cortisol levels. It seemed to humanize the whole process. It was only later that I realized that they were also solution-focused. What was solution-focused in this example? They didn't try to fix a problem. They did not try to teach me anything and they did not ask me to change. They didn't tell me to calm down or try to reassure me. They applied one of the most important principles of the approach: **the person is bigger than their problem.** They have interests, passions, a mission, dreams. They made me feel like I was bigger than my tumour.

Another belief of the approach is that **the person has resources help them through difficult times.** Even if I am nervous, there is also a peaceful place in me. Even if I feel small, I have felt big in the past and one of my memories can bring this back to me. At this difficult moment, they asked questions to reconnect me with my strengths and my resources.

Experience has shown that for the person to succeed in regaining their skills, you have to be interested, to be curious. When we ask amplification questions, details emerge. When we ask more questions, distant memories seem closer. If you move with them through these territories, you will find resources, strengths, hope, beliefs, convictions, values, actions and thoughts that help them, as well as solutions they can recycle. But even if you don't find anything that can be reused in the next few days, don't underestimate the immediate effect on their emotional state. Exploring these memories can help the client feel better right now. **In the same way that a client can be re-traumatized when they talk about a trauma, a client can be galvanized or soothed by the reminder of a moment of success.**

Sometimes it can be difficult to be curious. There are clients who are very different from us. I'll tell you about an example here where lack of curiosity shut down the discussion despite good intentions. In a hospital

waiting room, I witnessed the following scene. A young volunteer was talking to a man in his forties. They were obviously of different socio-economic status, but she was present and kind. She was trying to make conversation. "Do you like to travel?" As she asked this question, she sat up in her chair. It was easy to imagine that she had toured Europe before starting university, or was planning to go to Thailand at Christmas. She probably thought that she should check the expiration date on her passport so as not to miss an opportunity to leave at the last minute. But at that moment, her attention was completely directed towards the man who had also straightened up in his chair and who announced, "I love to travel!" She seemed relieved to have found a common interest. The wait would be shorter. "Where have you been?" He looked proud when he said, "All over Quebec. There are so many beautiful places in Quebec- I don't think I will ever need a passport!" The girl seem saddened. You could see that she had no more questions to ask. I believe she was empathetic, but she was not curious. I wondered at that time if my surgeon would have had as much interest if I said that the place I wanted to go to was the Camping de Ste-Madeleine, on the edge of the 20, in Montérégie. Maybe not. And yet, this answer would have had so much value.

I imagine that you understand that I use travel to illustrate that with clients, we travel across territories. We are sometimes very different from our clients, socioeconomically, culturally, politically. I would like to tell you that I have never been like this girl, but that would not be true. It may not come to us spontaneously to ask an anxious woman to bring her knitting, or to show you a photo. But if we do, we will see the blanket she made for the daughter of her nephew who was really happy ... and we see that she is more connected with her family than we imagined. It may not be spontaneous to be interested in knitting. But like me, I know you care about people and I know you think they are bigger than their problems. But to demonstrate this to them, it's not enough to say it. It's important to spend more minutes talking about what they are interested in. **If we want clients to overcome their modesty and describe their successes, to tell us what they do to cope, to trust themselves, to feel happy or less anxious, we have to help them remember. Your interest and curiosity will make them want to give details and will help them speak more easily.**

Here are some questions that will help you amplify these moments in the future or in the past. But if I took all this time introducing them to you, it is to underscore how important it is to personalize this work. None of these questions will be as good as those which emerge naturally when you travel in your client's world, rather than sticking to your own must-see destinations.

Questions to explore a preferred future:

- *What do you notice first? Then what?*
- *What is different? What has changed?*
- *Suppose you do _____. What is different?*
- *Suppose you tell yourself _____. How does that help?*
- *What replaces ____? What are you doing instead of ____? What are you saying instead of ____? What do you tell yourself instead of _____. How do you feel instead of ____?*
- *What would you prefer to say / do / feel?*
- *What would you like to do / tell yourself / feel instead?*
- *Suppose you are at your best. What takes up more space? What is more important?*
- *Who notices the change? What difference does it make for this person? If this person is more _____, what is the effect on you? What difference does it make for the two of you?*
- *Why is it important to you?*
- *What does a 4 look like? What does it look like to trust yourself? If I observed it, what would I see?*
- *What clues will reassure you that the change is permanent? How are you going to know that it is enough?*

Questions to get details of the past (moments of exception or resilience, moments that resemble the preferred future)

- *How did you manage to stay calm / assert yourself / protect yourself / trust yourself / stand your ground / ask for help / focus on what was important to you?*
- *How did you manage not to lose patience / not to tell them off / not to use drugs or alcohol?*
- *What made it happen?*
- *What did it help?*
- *What was different this time?*
- *Who noticed? What did they notice?*
- *How did you know it was a good idea / a good decision / the right thing to do at that time?*
- *What value was most important at that moment?*
- *What did you do first (for example, did you speak differently or walk out of the room?) Then what?*
- *What has been most helpful? The most important? What had the most impact?*
- *What made the difference? What has had the most impact? What made it possible?*
- *Describe it to me. Tell me more . Please tell me what happened that time. I'm interested.*

And finally, the question that you already use (of course) and which allows the client to decide when there are no more details to add:

- *What else?*

LISTEN, SELECT, BUILD

Once upon a time, 20 year ago

We all came together to celebrate the 30th birthday of one of my friends. More specifically, her new boyfriend had organized a birthday party and you could see that he had made an effort to earn points. At the end of the evening, when she saw her gift, she exclaimed, *"You have so many great ideas! You listen to me when I talk!"* Indeed, he had bought her exactly what she wanted, and had organized the party according to her wishes. We laughed and started a discussion that maybe it was the secret to lasting relationships: fewer original ideas. In my circle of friends, *"You have good ideas, you listen to me when I talk"* has become a running gag, a way of giving a compliment.

I tell you this story because it explains the conversation I had with a client more recently. At the end of a session, she said, *"You have good ideas. I wonder where you get this."* Without thinking too much, I replied, *"I listen to you when you talk!"* She teased me first: *"I hope you are listening to me, you are my psychologist!"* But she went on, more pensive, *"It's true that you always start from my ideas. I'm the one who is awesome then!"*

Listen to find strengths

At this point, you may be telling yourself that we listen to all of our clients when they speak. There is nothing revolutionary about this concept. I am not teaching you anything new. However, I hope to draw your attention to a phenomenon that is less talked about. When we choose to use one method over another, it's not just the techniques or exercises that change. We also listen in a different way. Our listening may be active, but it is never neutral. Whether we do it intentionally or not, we choose to pay attention to certain words from the client.

If you have learned that it is important to recognize suffering, problems, negative emotions, deficits, irrational thoughts, difficulties or defence mechanisms, you will notice signs of suffering, problems, negative emotions, deficits, irrational thoughts, difficulties and defence mechanisms. While your attention is drawn to these problematic aspects, it may be more difficult to hear positive emotions and intentions, strengths, skills, resilience, original ways of moving forward and coping, useful beliefs and original solutions. When a client talks, they give us a lot of information. You can't pay the same attention to everything they say. We choose, regardless of our approach.

Listen for what is impressive

When we work with SFBT, our listening is focused on words that express positive emotions and intentions, strengths, skills, resilience, original ways to move forward and cope, useful beliefs and original ideas. Each of these elements can be part of a solution co-constructed with the client. If you want to make better use of clients' good ideas, I invite you to note the words that could become treasures if we know how to exploit them. I don't ask the client, *"What is your solution?"* or *"What are you going to do?"* If they knew, they wouldn't be in my office. I ask them all the questions you already know (pre-session, miracle questions, exception questions, coping or scale questions).

These questions bring them to the territory of their own solutions. While they tell me what they did, I look for what is impressive, unique. I listen to find nuggets of gold. I become a gold miner who must sort out the gravel and the precious metal. Like the gold miner who looks carefully through the sieve, I'm sure to stop the client when I see something bright.

Co-construct from their own ideas

Here is an example. First imagine a man in his fifties (poised and professional, not aggressive at all). He works long hours, brings work home. He was trying to set limits and was having trouble. This is what he wanted to improve. I asked him about a time when he was more able to set limits. He mentioned that he had started to tame one of his directors. It was so different from his usual speech that I literally caught this expression. *"Tamed? Did you tame him? How do you tame a director? I'm interested."* He told me what he had done. He had been polite, but reminded the director that he was working on a big project that was a priority for the president. Therefore, it was impossible to respond to his request.

This taming was not at all violent, but this metaphor transformed his posture, made him lighter. This attitude seemed to be promising. *"Let's suppose that we continue with this idea of a tamer. What animals are these?" "Lions, of course."* (He already saw them in his head). We continued to imagine together what might happen if he behaved as a lion tamer in the future. He identified that he could decide that the show would start at 10 am. Before that, the lions could stay in a cage while he set the priorities (the running of the show). At 10 am, he would choose a lion for his first number. The others should stay on their stools (it made him laugh to see his directors on stools). It was less intimidating. We spent almost 10 minutes discussing what would be different if he were a lion tamer. His nonverbal behaviour changed, as did his tone of voice. He was more at ease.

What is important in this example is that we clarified together the details of what could happen if he was in this role. I didn't ask him to tame his directors. We discussed (without obligation on his part) what would change if he imagined himself as a lion tamer. It's the time spent imagining the details, smiling, seeing the different applications that have allowed this treasure to take shape.

Even if this solution seems interesting, unfortunately, you will not be able to use it. You will never be able to tell a client that they could set their limits by pretending to be a lion tamer. This metaphor makes sense because it was his idea. I share it with you to illustrate the process that moves away from ready-made solutions. We are looking to make a unique, custom piece. The more you build solutions from the client's ideas, the more the solutions will be able to grow and evolve with them (without us).

At the next meeting, this client was proud to tell me that one Friday evening (around 4:50 pm) a manager asked for him. Previously, he would have canceled his supper to respond to this request or would have worked on Saturday. He summarized the scene for me. *"I looked around and saw the lights of the marquee turned off. You know, when the stands are empty and the spectators are all gone. There may be a janitor who picks up the candy wrappers left by the children. I figured the show was over and it was time for the lion tamer to go home."*

The most interesting thing about this story is that we had never talked about what he should do if he received last-minute requests on a Friday. He was the one who would write the sequel, because he was the author of this solution.

My part was to choose what I listened to when he spoke.

PAUSE: A REAL TECHNIQUE

Clients like it when we add a pause before the end of an interview- a lot

I have written about how the solution-focused approach was developed using observation of interviews with clients. But did you know that the techniques were established based on client feedback? When we listen to clients, they often surprise us. Imagine the reaction of the researchers when they asked clients what they appreciated about interviews and the clients responded that they appreciated ... when the therapist left the room. These interviews took place behind a two-way mirror. Towards the end of the session, it was understood that the main responder would consult with his colleagues. When clients were interviewed about what they liked about the therapy, they said things like, *"I saw they were taking it seriously. I liked the feedback they gave me when they came back."* It was good to finish with something concrete. Fortunately for us, they also appreciate our return to the room.

More seriously, researchers also noticed that clients seemed to attach more importance to feedback that was given after a break. For couples and families, it was also the time to share their reactions or reconnect. Of course, the therapist did not leave in the middle of an argument. The break came towards the end, when questions had been asked about the exceptions, the good times.

Since clients seemed to enjoy this break and return, it became a technique practiced by those who choose to work with SFBT. I propose that you integrate it into your intervention, even if you are not exclusively using this approach.

Why include a pause?

There are benefits not only for customers, but for us as well. If I manage to stop before the end of the session, I can announce the end. It helps me avoid those "door-knob" conversations. With clients who are contemplating suicide, I need to take the time to estimate the danger and to make sure to check that I have all the information I need to keep them safe before they go. I can then choose to keep them with me longer if I need more time.

Another benefit is taking the time to clarify the content of the compliment and suggestion before I finish the session. This helps to avoid suggesting tasks that are too difficult. Why? Because the break gives me a few moments to think about it. I don't mean to imply here that you don't think during an interview. However, several people I supervise have told me that it is difficult to be attentive to the person and the content at the same time. They are right, it is demanding work. But if you give yourself a few moments to do one thing at a time (in this case, to think), it may be easier (and more satisfying) to end the meeting on a positive note and with a specific task.

You know that ending the session with compliments increases client engagement. These compliments will also have more impact when the client sees that we have taken the time to think about them.

How do we include a pause?

With the client's permission, of course. Hardliners will leave the office (as did Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer). I admit that I have never done it that way. Among other things, I have a private office, and I would find it awkward to meet another client in the waiting room. I do know, however, that some colleagues must go and get the calendar used by the secretary to make the next appointment. They integrate the break at this time. It's a very interesting idea.

Here is my adaptation. I take a moment to stop, without leaving the office. When I see that the meeting will soon end, I ask the client's permission to review my notes. I say something like, *"You said several important things. You noticed that I was taking notes. Would you mind if I take a moment and go over them? I'd like us to focus on something specific."* I could also say, *"The meeting is going to end soon and I find it important to conclude with a suggestion for the next few days. Is it okay if I take a minute to check my notes?"*

I can hear you thinking about the possibility that the client might refuse. If they refuse (which rarely happens), it is because they have remembered something important they want to tell me before I finish. It helps if they realize this while there is still a little time left. If they accept, I reread my notes in front of them. I pay attention to what impresses me and what I could say about it. I also wonder what they could observe or repeat in the coming days. I wonder if it's realistic, considering everything that's going on in their life. If it isn't, I will think of something smaller. At the end of the break, I start with a short summary of what impresses me about this client and I end with a suggestion. I can also ask the client if they want to write what they want to take away from our meeting in their own words. I pass my tablet over to them and take my break while they write. We then share our conclusions.

Once, I decided to call a customer back when I was filling out my file notes. Technically, this is not a break. But this call respects the spirit of the break, because I took the time to stop and clarify my thoughts. As I wrote my notes for the file, I thought about how her daughter would grow up with a model that was so different from the one she had had. She had shown humour and creativity in defusing a situation that could have been explosive with her partner. I chose to leave her a message, because I felt that I had not emphasized this remarkable moment enough. I told her I couldn't wait until the next meeting to tell her in person. Between you and me, I could have waited and started the next meeting with this compliment. But I was happy to leave her a message and the impact was positive. In either case, if you choose to leave a message or start meeting with what you said to yourself in their absence, you are reflecting to the client that when you really take the time to think about it, this is what you see in them.

Use pauses created by breaks in sessions

I have been thinking recently about the example of a school psychologist who went even further with the spirit of the break. You might try this when you see your clients after a break or holiday period.

This psychology told me, *"After the break, it's important to start with compliments, so that's what I did in September."* He prepared a meeting with each student he was likely to see during the school year. He told the young people that he wanted to start the year with a few facts that had impressed him the previous year (in their behaviour, their values, their attitude, etc.). He also told them some positive things he had heard about them. For example: *"Mr. Gendron told me that you really worked hard to prepare for the exam. The principal knew it was difficult for you last year, but you kept going right to the end. You went on vacation before we had a chance to tell you all this. I didn't want to start the year without taking the time to do it."* Imagine the effect of these comments on a student who is apprehensive about coming back to school! I found this idea brilliant. First, he didn't wait for these students to be in trouble to reach out to them. And second, because for these students, adults are usually better at communicating complaints than compliments. In contexts where he didn't have information from others, he mentioned the progress he had witnessed himself.

Even if you do not work in a school environment, it may be appropriate to use holiday breaks to start again with a positive balance. You can ask clients if they want to use this feedback to take the time to recognize the distance they have traveled. Before making this proposal, make sure you have reviewed your file with this in mind. If the client sees their own progress or success, that's ideal. If not, you will be ready to point it out.

SUGGESTIONS

The smallest step is often invisible to the naked eye

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of seeing the Grand Canyon. In addition to appreciating its beauty, I was interested in the information plaques which helped me understand this geological phenomenon. I remember one that said that if we thought rocks didn't move, that they were immutable and immobile, then we were blind. Indeed, if you look closely, every day you can see the work of wind and erosion, of a small landslide, or the effects of the passage of an animal. The canyon changes every hour. In addition, the water is actually stronger than the rock, even if it appears so fragile. It is the rain, the underground river, and the water of the Rio Grande that sculpts the landscape and transforms it continuously, day after day.

This reminded me of one of the assumptions of the solution-focused approach - change is inevitable. But sometimes you need to pay attention to the smallest details and to note the small differences if you want to see it. You have to believe that a small change can produce bigger ones. The suggestions I offer here are chosen for people who do not see that their situation is changing. These suggestions are like a small stream that can create a crack in a belief or behaviour that may otherwise seem rigid. It is by changing the focus, a thought, a question, that we can create erosion or a crack. A very small infiltration can create major changes.

Notice, look for evidence that ...

I am fortunate to be surrounded by people who practice the solution-focused approach on me. I will share an example that happened following cuts in the health and social services network. At the time, I was particularly discouraged. I had the impression that we were losing ground on some important work. I shared with a friend that I was not sure that my work really had an impact. I was wondering if it was worth continuing. She replied, "*You know what you have to do*". For a furtive moment, I thought it was time to open up my cupcake bakery. But that was not what she meant. She said to me, softly, "*It seems to me that it would be important to look for clues that confirm that you are making a difference in the lives of some people.*" That's what I did. It was the first step out of this period. I stopped looking at the big picture and noticed the differences on a human scale.

The suggestion or smallest step is usually co-constructed with the client. Sometimes we can't achieve this. When that happens, we can invite clients to focus their attention to something that can help them. If you leave the client without any suggestions, they might continue to watch for clues that they are no good, or that they don't have what it takes to keep going. They might pay attention to everything that keeps them in a state of helplessness, depression or anxiety. What we observe will grow.

To change what they pay attention to, you can suggest that they look for clues that confirm that they are a good parent, a good person, that they are brave, etc. You could suggest that they notice the clues that their children need him, or suggest that they notice when they have a little more energy. You may want to suggest they look for times when they feel more effective or more confident. You could suggest that a client note the times when they could have exploded but didn't, or when they had a little more hope, even when it was difficult.

Each of these suggestions draws the client's attention to an aspect that they don't see. We also want to invite the client to look for clues that confirm a change, not an end point. For example, I would not ask a depressed person to look for times when they are better. I could, however, ask them to notice the moments when they feel they are moving in the right direction, the moments when they are less critical of themselves.

Remember when...

When a client has difficulty remembering an exception or a skill, it may be useful to help them identify this moment between sessions. It is also possible that they remember that moment, but that they have no idea what they did differently. We can suggest that they remember what they did to be calmer, more courageous, more organized, more motivated, lighter, less anxious, less depressed, etc. Asking these questions is already a small step. It helps the person replace the statement, *"I am no good"* with a question: *"When I am a little better, how do I get there?"*

A few weeks ago, a supervisee made this suggestion to me. I wrote to him to apologize because I had made a mistake with his receipts. I told him I was not good with numbers. He said he couldn't resist asking me, *"When were you better with numbers?"* He thought he was only teasing me, but his question created a furrow, a crack that did its work. He may not have known it, but it changed the way I have thought of this ever since. I repeated this question to myself and ended up finding a context where I had been more organized. This small step has taken me to a place I had forgotten, and I am making other changes.

Sometimes, to move forward, we have to imagine a future where we are better

It is much easier to know how we no longer want to feel, what we do not like in our life, or what others should change to make us happier. When we ask the client for clues that they will be better, they may have difficulty responding. This is why it may be necessary to give them time to imagine, to make this future brighter. Again, the precision of the suggestion will increase the chances of success. We don't just want to ask what they want. This question might lead to impossible answers (new girlfriend, new job, new house, etc.) or the opposite and also impossible (ex-girlfriend, old job or former house).

Here are some examples of more targeted suggestions that help make the future brighter. If the client is at 4, we could ask him to identify a 5. How will he know that he is at 5? What will his children or his dog see when he is 5? What does he imagine doing? With concrete, observable clues ... *Suppose you had 10% less anxiety. How would you know?*

It is very important not to ask the client to do anything. We only want to identify what it would like to look like. We don't say: *"How would you like others to be different?"* Rather, we ask them, *"Imagine that the others stay the same, but you have a reaction that you like more (you are more in control, less affected, quieter, more solid). Can you make this image more precise so that we can talk about it at our next meeting?"* These suggestions for making the future brighter are very different from, *"Think about what you are going to do."* (Which I never suggest - it's way too big). The action is to think (without doing anything else) of an attitude, a way of reacting that would give them more satisfaction in a specific moment.

I invite you to practice these suggestions on yourself to see the benefits. For myself, I waste much less time on what I didn't like when I think about what I would prefer to feel the next time, what I would like to answer in a similar context, etc.

Conclusion

In all these examples, you have seen that dream that is focused and directed is already a change. I hope these suggestions will be helpful as you co-construct idiosyncratic solutions based on your clients' strengths and skills. The essentials and small steps may be invisible to the eye. That does not mean that they are not important. This change of focus makes it possible to create a groove, a crack, which can modify a perception, or change a belief. This is how a small stream can become a river, and how the water can erode a rock, cause a landslide, sculpt a new landscape in the rocks, and transform what seems to be immutable.

THREE PRINCIPLES OF SFBT, THREE STORIES

When I give training, I often get the chance to hear colleagues tell me a story. Without knowing it, three of these professionals gave me stories that act as touchstones to remind me how to better help my clients. These stories explicitly illustrate concepts or attitudes that can be difficult to explain. They agreed to offer them to you as well. I hope they will inspire you. As it happens, the three stories took place in the mountains. Of course, not all human beings are planning to reach Everest, Kilimanjaro or Cotopaxi. For some clients, the end of their quest is not measured in terms of altitude, and their efforts may not be as visible. However, their journey can be as demanding as this kind of expedition.

From the start

Several years ago, a participant told me about a moment that marked her and changed her way of working with students. A few years ago, she had fulfilled one of her dreams by going to Everest base camp. After several months of training, she was finally at the foot of the mountain. She had chosen the best backpack she could find. She had been to specialist shops to look for it. She installed this backpack on the sherpa that accompanied her. She showed him how important it was to tighten all the straps so that there were no pressure points. She took care to check each one of them.

The operation lasted a good 20 minutes. The sherpa turned patiently. He nodded to show her that he understood. He smiled gently at her. He didn't speak French, so she had to show him each step. She checked each fastener herself. She really didn't want him to hurt himself. Besides, she was a little uncomfortable that he had to carry her bag. At least she had helped him. Also, the sherpa was not much larger than her. The backpack suited him perfectly. After this job well done, she went to prepare for the climb. It was then that she had a lesson in humility. She saw out of the corner of her eye that sherpa undid each of the straps. He quickly put the backpack on his head. Before she could react, he had already started moving forward, in front of everyone else. She watched him all the way, and he never seemed tired. He always seemed to take fewer steps than everyone else.

She told me this story, laughing at her concern, at the efforts she had made. She didn't blame herself for her good intentions. However, she realized that she was doing much the same with the young people she welcomed in her office. From that moment on, she started asking more questions about the trails they already knew and about their usual way of carrying their backpack.

On the trail

A young professional once told me a moment that she experienced on an expedition to Kilimanjaro. She was carrying out a personal challenge and she also wanted to raise funds for a cause that was close to her heart. After the excitement of leaving, she felt physical pain, and she had doubts. When I asked her how she managed to continue, she took a moment to think about it and she explained it to me. She wasn't sure if she could make it to the end, but she would look ahead of her and identify where she could put her foot, and concentrated on that step, only that one. Sometimes she wept quietly, and continued. She began to focus on the step she was sure she could take, the step beyond all doubt. She went on, repeating herself: *“One step, the next one, that's all there is. Nothing else. I live in this moment. I live. I walk. One step at a time. Can I take one more? Yes. I will. And another? Yes. So I do it. I don't stop. All I need is the strength to take one more step.”*

At the end

An experienced psychologist also inspired me with a photo she brought back from a high mountain adventure on the Cotopaxi volcano. For those familiar with these types of expeditions, there is always the factor of the unknown. We can train in the best way, but we cannot always predict how our body will react at higher altitudes. Before reaching the top, she started to feel physical pain, dizziness, and palpitations. She continued for a while, wondering what was most important. She talked to the guide and made the decision to stop at 5,400 meters. It wasn't the summit of Cotopaxi, but it didn't matter. It was her summit. So she took a photo of this arrival. This image speaks more than words. She wasn't disappointed when she showed it to me, on the contrary. She was proud (with reason) to have gone so far. She was proud (with reason) of having chosen to stop because it was the best decision for her.

When I saw this photo, I realized how the summit still represents the ultimate success. On the cover of books on leadership, there is often this man contemplating the world, standing, arms open on the highest point, as if it were the ultimate image of a winner. There is also the myth of the sage who drinks tea at the top of a mountain, at such a high altitude that he is surrounded by clouds. For me, the image that represents success and wisdom is the photo of this colleague. An image taken at an altitude one can be proud of because it took real effort to reach. A photo where we can see another summit from a distance that is not ours. A photo that redefines the idea of having arrived and is more rooted in real life.

These three stories illustrate key ideas of the solution-oriented approach. They can turn into questions for ourselves and guide our action.

From the start: begin with their competencies

Do I know their usual way of getting through adversity? Did I ask them to describe to me how they used to move forward, face their difficulties, or lighten their journey? If I don't know or the client doesn't remember it yet, it might be worth spending some time exploring it. If the client goes back to their own way as soon as my back is turned, it may be that I spent a lot of time adjusting my backpack ... on their back.

On the trail: a step beyond all doubt

Another key idea is to focus on the step beyond all doubt. If the client has to think about everything that they should do, that's when they just want to curl up and stop. *What is it that they can do beyond all doubt- the thing they should focus all their attention on?* This is to make sure they can be successful, but also so they will experience less pain. What if I asked my client what they are **sure** they can do this week, rather than what they *could* do this week?

At the end: help them to stop when they are well enough

We have learned to insist that clients stop when they are tired, that they take a sick leave when their symptoms are severe. What if we also invited clients to stop when they are well enough? Human beings are under pressure to always improve, to go further, to go higher. *Could this pressure be removed from our offices? Could we be the first to give them permission not to work on themselves, to have a good time, to take a vacation from personal growth?*

Of course, you can always be in better mental health, and it's easy to want to help a client reach that peak too. *Can I help my client recognize and be proud of their altitude? Can I help them recognize this progress and offer them a break from personal growth? To take advantage of the landscape if they have reached a plateau? To have a base camp where they can rest?* They might come back later. In the mean time, they will have renewed their energy, appreciated the view, and appreciated those around them and their lives.