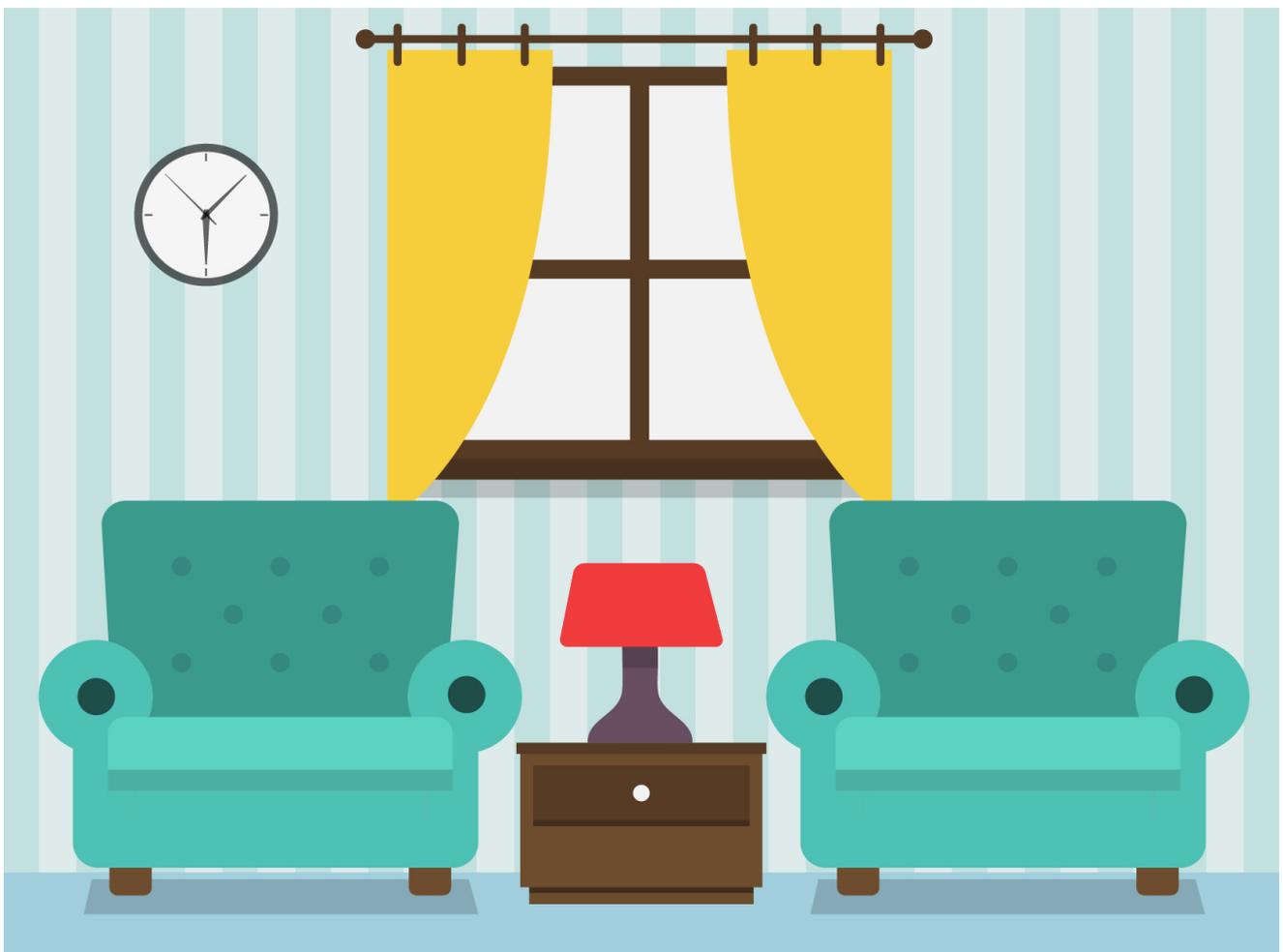


BARRY WINBOLT  
*"Life doesn't have to be like that"*

## 6 REASONS WHY BRIEF THERAPISTS HAVE MORE FUN



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**Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is enjoying a surge in popularity across a range of professions. One reason for this is because, I believe, people in the helping professions are expected to do more with less.**

Resources are stretched, budgets are still being cut, and, as the people who hold the purse-strings look for still more savings, longer-term therapy is seen as a 'luxury' that can be dispensed with.

This may be a tad too simplistic as an explanation for the growth in popularity of Brief Therapy, but as any Brief Therapist will tell you, we are not too interested in explanations, it's outcomes that count. There are certainly several other reasons for the growth of interest in SFBT, and there is one which probably nobody but me will tell you about. It is this: Brief Therapists have more fun!

You won't hear this widely discussed because the only people who talk about it are solution-focused practitioners themselves, and they generally only get together to collectively discuss their work when they migrate to their annual conference and the like. If you have a Brief Therapist as a friend, or better yet, you live with one, of course, you'll have heard all about what fun SFBT is, but then, you'll have stopped listening to them banging on about it long ago.

The fact is that increasing numbers of practitioners of many persuasions are studying and using Brief Therapy techniques with their patients and clients. And, judging by the requests for information about Solution Focused Brief Therapy that are landing in my inbox, it seems to be a worldwide trend.

I have been an SFBT practitioner and trainer for over 20 years and my book *Solution Focused Brief Therapy for the Helping Professions*, is still selling steadily as interest in Brief Therapy gently climbs. I've noticed the growth chiefly through traffic to my website, with an increased number of searches for topics like 'Brief Therapy', 'Solution Focused Brief Therapy', 'SFBT', and even, 'Single Session Therapy'

This article is therefore driven by demand; I haven't been writing much on Brief Therapy since my book was published in 2011. I thought I'd said all I had to say on the subject at that time, and I didn't see the need to add more. But I'm now working to correct this omission by providing regular contributions and information on Solution Focused Brief Therapy.

Though I have been writing less on the topic, I'm still a Brief Therapy practitioner and trainer of SFBT, and as enthusiastic and passionate about what I do as I ever was. My ideas continue to evolve and – as interest in the subject grows and produces a new curiosity – I realise there's a lot that we therapists should be sharing, that formerly we kept to ourselves.

I'm using 'BriefTherapy' and 'Solution Focused BriefTherapy (SFBT)' interchangeably here. Not all brief approaches are Solution Focused, but most are, or at least they use the same principles as SFBT.

Incidentally, BriefTherapy is quite specific in the way that it is structured and applied. It is not just a stripped-down or diluted form of traditional long-term therapy, it is different. As one of the pioneers, Steve de Shazer put it, BriefTherapy is "*not just less of the same*".

## Core principles of Solution Focused Brief Therapy

The distinguishing idea in SFBT is that practitioners look to the future, focusing on outcomes (goals), rather than enquiring about the past, and analysing the causes of a problem.

Collaborating with the client – using the client's knowledge of him- or herself and their life experience – a brief therapist seeks to co-construct workable solutions to the problems or complaints that bring the latter to therapy.

Solution Focused BriefTherapy is based on solution-building rather than problem-solving. The three guiding principles most often cited are:

- If something isn't broken, don't attempt to fix it
- If something is working, do more of it
- If something isn't working, do something different.

While the guiding principles are essential to the approach, other elements, which are perhaps more accurately called strategies, are more fluid; they will feature in most sessions, but not necessarily all.

To take two as examples: goal-setting, though a vital component, won't be used in every session. Likewise, asking about exceptions (times when the problem is absent or less dominant), won't necessarily be part of every conversation either. Experienced practitioners pick and choose their interventions to suit each conversation.

Essentially, BriefTherapists see their clients as resourceful and creative human beings who, whatever the gravity of their problem, have experience and inner resources they can draw on. Even the most resourceful person needs help from time to time as they wrestle with life events, but this is temporary. Chronic complaints – say, drug or alcohol addiction – are approached in the same way. The problem may be enduring, but this doesn't have to mean that its effects need be a life sentence.

What's more, with even the most extreme difficulty – say, a relationship problem or depression – there are lighter moments when the difficulties are not so apparent, or when the client functions better in spite of them (exceptions). So from an SFBT perspective, clients are not seen as damaged, incapable or helpless, but as resourceful people who could use some help with a particular problem, at a particular time.

## Chimes of the times

These ideas have obvious appeal in the social, health and welfare fields. The term 'therapy' is misleading in that the ideas are widely used in these and many other areas where practitioners draw on counselling skills in their work, but would never see themselves as therapists. Hence my choice of 'helping professions' in the title of my book.

In a busy world where results are what counts, the public is becoming better informed as well. It used to be thought that clients don't generally care about what TYPE of therapy model we follow, they just want relief from their complaints. While this is still true, there are some who deliberately seek out a therapist who will work briefly, strategically and collaboratively. This is often a reaction to a previous, unsatisfactory, experience of therapy, but it also chimes with the mood of our times where people increasingly expect services and solutions to fit in with the demands of work and lifestyle.

Public perceptions of therapy – as a weekly business needing long-term commitment and the money to pay for it – are still alive and well. But as people are increasingly well-informed, they are ready to challenge the received wisdom of some therapists who were seen as distant, uninvolved and unwilling or unable to explain things to their clients in simple and accessible language.

## Therapy should be FUN

There's another thing about public perceptions of therapy; it has traditionally been seen as a serious business. What happens in the therapy room should, of course, be private and confidential, but does that mean that it should also be serious, dour or heavy?

I won't go into detail here because I've written about this on my blog at [www.singlesessiontherapy.com](http://www.singlesessiontherapy.com), but the conventional view (fuelled by therapists themselves, unfortunately), is that personal crisis, pain and suffering don't sit well with discussions about success, lightness, a fresh outlook, positive energy and even fun.

Many therapists buy into beliefs about personal pain, persistence and intractability of clients'

problems, and sadly, this influences how they work and quashes optimism and inspiration.

In Brief Therapy, by contrast, the idea is to challenge (with due caution and sensitivity), aspects of the client's mindset and outlook that are contributing to the problem or complaint. Symptoms – especially when they are chronic ones – may seem to the client to be permanent and insurmountable. It is the brief therapist's job to politely knock some holes in the edifice of negativity, and some 'common-sense' into the client's thinking by challenging the false logic that so often contributes to their difficulties.

Any competent therapist matches (paces) the client's experience. In Brief Therapy, we draw out and amplify those parts of the client's experience that we think will be helpful and affirming for them. There are always more possibilities than problems, it is the brief therapist's mission to shine some light on the former; to alter the dominance of the latter in the client's perceptions.

These are hotly contested ideas among counsellors and therapists themselves. They challenge the received wisdom about mental health and human change, and they can seem provocative and far-fetched. The debate will continue among professionals for a long time yet, but 'the client knows best' is one of the central tenets of SFBT, so if they are saying that Brief Therapy helps them, who are we to argue?

## A personal viewpoint

From my own perspective, Brief Therapy suits my temperament and my general sense of optimism about human potential. It's an approach that doesn't suit everyone – practitioner or client. Ideas about emotional and psychological wellbeing are so deeply entrenched in our societies that they can be difficult to shift. I know from 20 years' teaching the subject that some people can never 'get' the essential simplicity and practicality of Solution Focused ideas.

The way we work tends to fit with our worldview, and for whatever reason thinking in a solution focused way about life and the stuff it throws at us comes naturally to me.

I appreciate that it is not for everybody, and I wouldn't preach that it should be.

Brief Therapy is essentially about action and direction. DOING something different means getting on with it, and DIRECTION means looking forward (in both the literal and the metaphorical sense). The past is important, but it is not the primary focus; change can only happen in the future.

It is not an intellectual exercise, so analysis and over-thinking won't persuade anyone who doubts the validity of these ideas to think differently. The best way to learn about solution

focused ideas is through practice (learning by doing), rather than reflection and analysis. This is true for both budding practitioners and their clients.

The bonus for solution-focused practitioners is that we tend to have fun when we go about our work. So do our clients, and that's part of what makes it effective.

## 6 Reasons Why Brief Therapists Have More Fun

In using the term 'fun' I don't want to appear flippant or dismissive of the trials and difficulties that clients bring into the therapy room. Therapists are people too, and we take our work seriously, but some of us don't believe that humour and lightness are taboo. At the right time and in the right place, they are essential components of successful therapy.

We do well to remember this, and that the privacy of therapy provides a safe area for the client to discuss, learn and reflect on their experience and the changes they are hoping for. Jokes and banter – which after all reflect real life in balanced and healthy relationships – are just as valid in the therapy room as elsewhere.

When I write about therapists 'having fun' I'm really saying that therapy should be relaxed, natural and satisfying as any other enjoyable conversation between equals. It's my way of demystifying therapy – which still seems slightly frightening to many people – and reminding therapists, myself included, that when we take ourselves too seriously we do a disservice to our clients.

These six reasons are just a start. There are more I'm sure, but these are the ones at the top of my list as a therapist:

### Brief Therapy makes us more creative

SFBT is not a model, it's a set of techniques backed by a philosophy. So therapists don't have a set formula to be slavishly followed with each client. Every client is different and so each session will be unique.

In training sessions, I often say that I think a primary requirement for a brief therapist is the courage to think on their feet and get involved. We can't sit back and wait for the client to do all the work. It stretches the mind and makes you more creative as a therapist when you realise that you have the responsibility of making each session count.

### Brief Therapy can be lively

Brief Therapy is an active process that produces some animated conversations, in which one must remain vigilant, and alert for clues to resources in the client's conversation that perhaps

they had missed. It doesn't allow the practitioner to trot out those standard and non-committal therapy responses like "How do you feel about that?" or "Uh-huh". We have to work at it, and keep the energy levels buoyant.

Whatever the problem, the client should leave the session feeling better than when they arrived. They may not have found their solutions yet (usually they haven't), but they should feel more hopeful and optimistic. Sessions tend to be animated and, however dour the clients predicament, punctuated with lighter moments and even laughter.

## **Brief therapy is action-oriented**

All brief therapists are different, but one thing unites us. We believe that therapy is about doing things that make a difference. Insight and reflection are important, but the client can do that on their own time. We want therapy sessions to be about learning, understanding, and even instructing, so that the client can begin to feel more hopeful and confident about themselves and their future.

Since one of the mantras of brief therapy is "*Do something different*", therapists will often prescribe things for the client to do in order for them to try out new behaviours or consolidate existing successful ones. These tasks (homework assignments) are generally carried on the client's time. They act as a bridge between sessions and allow for the testing of ideas, among other things.

Traditionally, therapy was born out of a process of reflection and insight, much of it outside the client's conscious awareness. Naturally, this involved the therapist in a lot of sitting around and listening, often to the same narrative week after week. Effective listening is still paramount in Brief Therapy, but the satisfying thing is that it is also action-oriented; the aim is to produce results that are visible and measurable.

## **Brief therapists work hard (so do their clients)**

When every session counts the onus is on the therapist to make that happen. In an hour-long appointment (typically), we have to ensure, as best we can, that the client will leave the session more hopeful and resourceful than when they arrived, and that they'll have some course of action planned (with the help of the therapist), to foster and consolidate moves towards the positive change they are seeking.

This can be hard work, it requires that we are creative imaginative and responsive. Maybe the 'fun' of the title is stretching it a bit, but hard work is generally satisfying and always involves a sense of purpose.

## Brief therapists see the results

This is linked to the last point. Discussions about outcomes, positive change and success are built into the brief Therapy framework. It is uplifting when our clients report their progress and successes to us.

This too is a fundamental part of the process; acknowledging successes helps the client build confidence in the process and to recognise and build on positive change. But why should the client have all the fun – it's affirming for the therapist too.

## Brief therapists get more time off

I have had a mantra for most of my working life. It is that *"I seek to make myself redundant"*. By this I mean my aim – when working as a coach, therapist or consultant – is that I should no longer be needed as soon as possible. Brief Therapy does the same. As soon as the client is reasonably sure that they can manage on their own, the therapy ends.

This means that, if they are managing themselves wisely, brief therapists get more time off. As a consequence, there is less risk of burnout and more importantly, they have more fun doing the other things they like doing.

## Conclusion

Interest in Brief Therapy, SFBT in particular, has grown significantly in recent years. This is partly driven by economic and other constraints – doing more with less – but it should not be seen as a corner-cutting version of long-term therapy. Fewer sessions is a RESULT of the approach, but not a REQUIREMENT of it (see de Shazer 1985 or Winbolt 2011 for more on this).

There may be many other reasons for the growth of interest in SFBT, and I have suggested one, which is that Brief Therapists have more fun. Despite the rather flippant title of this article, (a shamelessly attention-grabbing headline, I admit), I have aimed to illuminate some of the distinguishing characteristics of Brief Therapy and, I hope, shine a light on some of the widely held misconceptions about this approach.

Though interest is growing there is still a vast amount of confusion among therapists and clients alike as to what the term 'Brief Therapy' means. I have contrasted brief and long-term therapies for illustration, not because I want to claim that either is better than the other. Brief Therapy provides a distinct, focused and forward-looking way of working which has much to offer in a world which is struggling to meet the mental health needs of its populations.

## Reading and sources

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## Links

Post: The Logic of Depression: <http://wp.me/p4WIZ2-cj>