

insidious emotional-terror, or even normal marital-sadism. It is aspirational for me, Frank. Like you, I have seen the lights come on and couples step out from the shadows. I've witnessed the transformational power of committed relationships. Another quote from Rilke is on my fingertips as we close this out: “To love is good, too: love being difficult. For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation” (Rilke, 1934, p. 53-54). Opening up space for that sort of authentic striving in couples therapy is a daily practice.

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Solution building with couples: A solution-focused approach – “The most amazing thing I have ever heard a client say”

Elliott Connie

Clients can be amazing! I cannot stress this enough. Whenever I am asked to write about my work as a therapist, I am always excited but I am also quite nervous. The nerves come from a strong desire to express my thoughts clearly while capturing the amazement I experience while working with clients. In writing this article, I will do my best with both.

Upon being introduced to the solution-focused approach, I was almost immediately interested, and I have ever since remained interested in the impact of solution-building conversations in couples therapy. In my practice, the majority of the clients I see are couples and, in recent times, I have been writing about and training practitioners to use the solution-focused approach in their work with couples. Previous to learning the approach, I had little interest in working with couples and I would even go as far as to say I actually had an aversion to working with them. During my internship, I was at a community mental health clinic and received most of my referrals from my supervisor. Whenever I was informed I had another round of referrals heading my way, I would secretly hope, “No couples”. However, once I began to practice in a solution-focused way, things changed drastically. Somehow, this approach made so much sense to me and seemed to fit well when working with couples. Since that time, I have focused my practice on working with couples and have grown in my belief that this is a helpful way to conduct the business of couples therapy.

In the beginning, I was skeptical of the approach. It just seemed so basic and I kept finding myself thinking, “It cannot be this simple”. I was originally trained in problem-solving approaches to psychotherapy so,

that was not about understanding and unraveling the problem, I doubted. To this day, I credit the clients I have seen over the years with teaching me to believe in this process, to trust their resources and skills, and not rely so much on my own. This was a revolution for me and is what makes solution-focused practice such a challenge; it requires a high degree of discipline by the therapist to stick to using language that is congruent with solution building instead of doing traditional problem-solving work. This, in my opinion, is especially difficult when one works with couples. Just as those I have worked with over the years have helped me, I want to share with you a client's story to demonstrate the approach and how it can be used in working with couples. This is a couple that moved me, both because of what happened within the session and also because of what occurred in the months after we met.

The introduction

I first became aware of David and Nancy when another couple I was working with mentioned they had friends that might be interested in coming to see me. I was warned they had been having trouble for a number of years and that Nancy was so upset with David for “something”, that she was always cursing at him and calling him names, even in front of their children. This couple I was seeing took one of my cards and said they would pass it on to their friends and off they went. A few days later, I received a call from Nancy, scheduling an appointment for her and her husband on the advice of their friends. As the date of the first session came closer, I became increasingly keener to work with this couple.

room. On this night, they were introduced to each other by their mutual friend but did not speak together other than briefly. David admitted asking his friend where Nancy worked and, on the following day, he went to her office to discuss the products she was selling. That is how their relationship began and they were inseparable from that point forward. By this time in the session, the mood had significantly changed. They were no longer tense and there were no signs of the heavy atmosphere that had been present just moments before. I had heard of strengths and successes I would not have heard unless we had spent those few moments connecting. I learned Nancy once had a tremendous amount of confidence in David. I also learned that, even though David had lost his business, he was now thriving in a new field even though he hated it. These two pieces of information proved to be very important even though I did not realise it at the time; I simply filed the information away in my mind as evidence of strengths and moved on.

Preferred future description. *“Suppose a miracle occurred tonight while you were sleeping that resolved all of the problems you are currently experiencing and created happiness for the two of you. When you woke up after this miracle, what would you first notice that would let you know that something was different?”* The word ‘happiness’ was used because that is what the couple had said they wanted. If they had used another word or phrase to describe how they wanted things to be different then that word or phrase would have been used. David stated the first thing he would notice would be Nancy being nice to him. When asked what that would look like (to elicit further detail), he explained she would be touching him more and using nice words. *“Good morning”* or *“Have a nice day”* were examples of the type of nice words he would notice. Nancy stated she would notice David being confident and happy. When asked what that would look like (again, to elicit further details), she said he would have a different walk and he would speak proudly and sound surer of himself. As the conversation ensued, each continued to describe what the future would look like, using very detailed and descriptive language. The more the details were explored, the more the couple grew closer in the session. The language used by the couple had shifted from being harsh and profane to being hopeful and complimentary. Even the

were now sitting closer and had positioned themselves so their legs were angled towards each other.

Scaling. Once a detailed description of the future with happiness (once again, I am using the word “happiness” instead of another word because that is what the clients said they wanted) had been accomplished, we began to see how close or how far away the couple currently was from their desires. *“On a scale of zero to ten, if ten represents a future where you have total happiness and zero represents one where there is no happiness, where are you today?”* David said something I had not expected to hear and something I have not often heard when asking couples this question. He asked, *“You mean before the session or now?”* I let him know I was curious about both since his asking made me think there was a difference. He stated, *“I think we were a zero when we came in but, after hearing her talk about me so positively and discussing our future together, I think we are actually closer to four or five”.* Nancy agreed with David’s assessment and also commented that she felt better after the conversation and was very surprised by this fact. I then asked, *“Since no one has the perfect relationship, where would you like to be on that scale when therapy is over?”* They each answered they would be satisfied if they were able to get to eight.

Providing feedback and suggestions after a break. My office is not very large; it has just enough room for a family to sit, my chair and a desk. At this point in a session, it is common for me to take a break and turn to my desk and jot some notes on note-cards that I keep on the desk. That is what I did when working with David and Nancy. I began to list all the strengths and resources I had noticed in the session. I recalled all of the exceptions to the problem that were spoken of. After a short time, I turned back towards the couple and read my comments from my note-cards. I told Nancy I was very impressed she had somehow remained hopeful even though she had been so upset by the way things had been going. I commented about how she seemed to be very good at showing her emotions to her husband. At first, she had not been happy with him and clearly showed that to him, but, as the conversation shifted, she clearly showed the evidence of her positive shift to him. I was truly amazed! I commented to David he must have been a very capable man

to have built a successful business. I was also impressed that, after the closing of his business, he had somehow become successful in his new career. I wondered aloud how he had done that even though he hated his new job. David then said the most amazing thing I have ever heard and I felt honored to be sitting in the presence of this couple. David explained that each day he drives to work, then sits in his car for a moment and thinks to himself, *“No matter what is waiting for me in that office, it cannot be as bad as not paying the bills for my family”.* This was clearly a difficult thing for him to say and he was crying as he made the statement. Nancy was tearful, as well. The couple asked if they could set up another appointment and we agreed to meet in two weeks. In the meantime, I asked them to notice what gets better between the two of them.

The follow up

When the date of the second session arrived, I was eager to see how things had gone between David and Nancy. I felt the first session had gone well, but you never really know until the couple reports on their progress. When I saw them in the lobby, it was quite clear things had changed; they were sitting close together and laughing. In my office, I asked, *“So, what has been better?”* *“Everything”*, they proclaimed! As we reviewed the details of their progress, each listed several changes. David’s confidence had returned and Nancy was no longer making hurtful statements about him in front of the children. The details went on and on. When asked how they had made such changes, Nancy explained it most succinctly. She said she had forgotten how she used to treat David, back when his confidence was at its highest, and she missed being that person. She had let her hurt and fear dictate how she treated him and never thought to consider how that treatment affected him. David explained it had been so long since he had heard Nancy talk to him so kindly and pleasantly that it was like a jolt that propelled his confidence forward. Once again, I was quite curious about the details of this progress and the second session was all devoted to discussing the nuts and bolts of the changes. We identified large, obvious changes, such as an increase in intimacy in their lives, and small, less obvious changes such as *one of the children spending more time around the family and not staying in*

At the end of the session, the couple stated they were not sure they needed any further sessions and seemed surprised when I agreed. I wished them luck and away they went.

What has happened since and a few closing words

As I reach the end of this article, I hope I have accomplished my goal of telling the story clearly, and respectfully honoring David and Nancy. They are truly special people and I owe them, as well as other couples I work with, so much for teaching me that the solution-focused approach can be helpful. As I mentioned previously, this approach has always made complete and total sense to me, but I simply could not believe it was that simple. As you can see in my interaction with this couple, it can seem that simple. I did not make any groundbreaking suggestions nor develop some revelatory insight into their problems. We simply focused on where the couple wanted to be in the future. That was it: nothing more. About six months later, I received a call from David seeking to schedule another appointment for himself and his wife. I was not sure if this meant their success had continued or not, but I hoped the reason they were coming in did not mean they had not been able to sustain the changes. It turns out things had continued to get better for them. The reason they wanted to have a session was in order to thank me for helping them. Things had become so much better that David had decided to open another business and Nancy expressed total confidence in him. I was amazed, and further reminded of the powerful simplicity of this approach; a simplicity that you have to keep working hard for the rest of your career at to maintain.

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Elliott Connie

Chalk and Cheese

The doers and the non-doers, across the chasm they meet
For one an active pleasure; the other, a passive treat
And doers, who need to go swimming, dive in and get soaked to the skin
Whilst the non-doer stands at the water's edge and gingerly dips a toe in

The doers love to go dancing; their energy burns up the floor
The non-doer steps out so lightly but aims for a nil-nil draw
The doer hosts all the best parties, the guests raise their glasses in toast
Yet the non-doer who shuns the admirers is the one who's invited the most

The doer writes of love with a passion to envelop the one that she chooses
The non-doer writes all of the same words but it's invisible ink that he uses
The doer is dealt cards of action and by rights should come first in the race
But the non-doer trumps all her aces with that hard to read look on his face

So doers of the world you be cautious, when a non-doer captures your heart
For the non-doers by their non-doing, dictate the stop and the start
And leave you the doer bewildered and unsure of what once was so true
For non-doers are simply the best at doing what doers could never do

A.M. Toase

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