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The solution-focused taxi

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<http://ct.counseling.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/taxi.jpg>

"Taxi! Taxi!"

Nearly everyone has experienced taking a cab ride. The idea of hailing a taxi, asking the driver to go to a particular destination and paying the fare is something to which many people can easily relate. The metaphor of such a journey translates to solution-focused counseling, and this article offers five ideas that can be used to conceptualize counseling from this perspective.



1) Deciding to take a taxi: A person's decision to seek counseling (that is, to become a client) precedes the hailing of the taxi. According to MentalHealth.gov (<http://MentalHealth.gov>), fewer than four in 10 adults with a diagnosable mental health challenge obtain professional services. For children and teens, that figure is less than 20 percent.

Numerous obstacles can deter the decision. William Miller and Stephen Rollnick's motivational interviewing approach highlights the notion of ambivalence in taking steps toward change. Meanwhile, a qualitative study published in 2012 by Amelia Gulliver, Kathleen Griffiths and Helen Christensen found stigma to be the most significant barrier to seeking mental health assistance among youth who were elite athletes. Seeking solutions, relief or *something* positive is the hope in standing curbside with hand raised and asking for help.

2) Finding the right taxi: The next step is finding an available cab, which can be a difficult endeavor in a busy city. Assuming that a cab stops, what is the first thing that prospective customers do upon entering a taxi? Fundamentally, customers seek safety and assess whether the cab can take them to their destination successfully. Secondly, customers might evaluate the cab's cleanliness, scent or the space provided for them. Some observers may even notice the design of the cab. As someone once commented in one of my (Fredrike Bannink's) workshops, the front windshield is larger than the rear one, signifying that it is preferable to focus forward (that is, on the future) rather than backward (in the past). I (John McCarthy) once waited 15 minutes in a downpour for a cab, only to reject it because of its odor. (The driver proceeded to growl at me.) If the cab is not acceptable, people may exit it as quickly as they entered.

Consider the array of taxis to choose from: rickshaws, compact cars, sedans, luxury vehicles. In a similar way, prospective clients search for counselors (representing the modality of movement in the therapeutic journey) with whom they can collaborate. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they wonder about the safety that accompanies trust: "Can I have faith in this counselor related to confidentiality and competence?" In other words, does this counselor have a valid "driver's license"? If the fit is not correct, the client may terminate counseling as quickly as that prospective customer exited the taxi.

In essence, the solution-focused counselor (cabdriver) has five goals to meet via asking the right questions — helping the client (customer) get to his or her desired destination in a) the safest, b) most pleasant, c) most direct and d) least expensive manner in e) the shortest possible time.

3) Determining the destination: "Where would you like to go?" the cabdriver asks. This query represents the goal-formulation element, set at the beginning of the therapeutic journey, that is critical in solution-focused counseling. Describing the destination — the positive end result — dictates the direction of the solution-focused taxi. The passengers (clients) set the destination because they have the resources to determine the site, while the driver (counselor) brings competency to the process through his or her knowledge of the city and how to take passengers to their destinations in the best possible way.

We live in worlds that our questions create. The questions we ask determine what we find, and what we find determines our behavior as counselors. Asking questions is an important technique in solution-focused counseling. Solution-focused counselors are *not knowing* — they ask questions to elicit the clients' expertise instead of giving advice — and they *lead from one step behind*.

If the passenger said, "I don't know where I want to go," the cabdriver might be baffled, sitting in the driver's seat and wondering how to proceed. The driver could simply drive, hoping to get the passenger to the desired destination in some haphazard way, but the odds of that are quite slim. The likely result would

be a dissatisfied customer. If the passenger said: "I don't want to go to the airport," the cabdriver would ask, "So where DO you want to go?" Nondestination: are of limited benefit to cabdrivers and their customers because they merely indicate the places where the ending point isn't.

In reality, however, clients may not yet know their goal upon coming to counseling. In their mind, something needs to be changed, but what that something is may be unknown. They know only one thing: what they want to get *away from*. An overly eager counselor may respond, "I understand that you don't know where you want to go yet. Let's get started anyway." But where and how to proceed? If the client relates, "I just don't want to be depressed anymore," the starting point is a negative goal. As Steve de Shazer indicated in 1991, the idea of stating negative goals is one way to ensure therapeutic failure.

Rather, the cabdriver could ask, "What do you know about your destination?" Elements of what the destination is like can be helpful in finding the direction. I (Fredrike Bannink) once heard the story of a passenger in Asia who got in the taxi at the airport but didn't know the name of the hotel where he had a reservation. Yet because he knew the vicinity — a conference center somewhere near the city — the driver was able to look up the hotels in that area and began naming them aloud. Eventually, the customer exclaimed, "Yes, that's the one!" The idea of linking the preferred future — the destination of the client — to the current location is instrumental in solution-focused counseling.

The idea of having or inviting other people in the taxi with the main passenger is an intriguing notion. Perhaps they are in the front seat, the back seat or even metaphorically squeezed into the glove compartment. These fellow passengers may represent the main passenger's (client's) support system, which could include family members, partners, friends and key advocates at school or work. While they do not tell the main passenger where to proceed, they are along for the counseling ride in a helpful, encouraging manner.

Perhaps passengers truly have no inkling of where they want to go, but it is conceivable that someone else does. The cabdriver may ask, "Who or what do you think can help you?" If this is not helpful, the cabdriver may come up with suggestions that have helped other passengers in the past: "Hey, I have an idea," the cabdriver may say. "Why don't you look at the contacts in your cell phone, perhaps under 'favorites'? Maybe one of them would know the direction."

Sometimes another person wants to determine or even does determine what the destination should be. Solution-focused counseling conceptualizes the alliance as a customer relationship, a complainant relationship or a visitor relationship. In a customer relationship, clients see themselves as part of the problem and/or the solutions and are motivated to change. In a complainant relationship, clients acknowledge a problem and suffer from it but do not see themselves as part of that problem and/or the solutions. They may think someone or something else should change. In a visitor relationship, clients are mandated and may view themselves as problem-free. From their perspective, it is others who have the problem regarding them or who falsely perceive them as the problem.

Clients in a visitor or complainant relationship could well get some guidance from another significant figure in their life regarding what change in behavior is desired or necessary. The eighth-grade student referred to the school counselor may give a curt, "I have no clue why I'm here," but the English teacher might in a similar way, the adult in a drug rehabilitation program may express astonishment at being sent to counseling, but the probation officer may have a clear notion of why that happened. Meanwhile, clients in couples therapy may want the other person to change.

4) Making progress: How will the cabdriver and passenger know whether they are driving in the right direction? Charles Snyder's hope theory states that hope is like a journey: a destination (goal), a road map (pathway thinking) and a means of transport (agency thinking) are needed. Research on the subject of hope has shown that it is important to have a goal and ways to reach that goal. Solution-focused counseling encourages clients to develop a detailed vision of what their lives might be like when their problems are over and to make a "mental road map" of how to get there. The emphasis is on inviting clients to create the vision by drawing on their own frames of reference by listening for openings in sometimes problem-focused conversations. This fosters hope and motivation in clients and promotes self-determination.

Another way of knowing that the cabdriver and passenger are making progress is to evaluate the process and invite the passenger to give feedback from time to time. Is the client progressing toward his or her preferred future? If not, what should be done differently? Solution-focused counseling is based on two assumptions: If something works (better), do more of it; and if something is not working, do something else.

Still, bumps in the road may be encountered. "Uh oh," the cabdriver says to the passenger after the destination is determined and they are under way. "There's some construction that I didn't anticipate." With that, another possibly less desired route must be taken. In Gerald Sklare's 2004 book *Brief Counseling That Works*, he discusses the idea of "flagging the minefield," a process that examines possible obstacles to the goal of success in solution-focused counseling. In the taxi metaphor, bumps in the road and construction may necessitate taking another road. That doesn't mean, however, that the destination won't be reached. It will simply be found in another way. As the saying goes, "All roads lead to Rome."

5) Ending the ride: It is the passenger who determines the end of the cab ride. De Shazer stated in 1991 that if counselors accept the clients' problem statements at the beginning of treatment, by the same logic they should also accept clients' declarations of successful improvement as a reason to end the treatment. Clients' destinations — and thus the end of the ride — come into view if, during the sessions, the client and counselor have been attentive to:

- The occurrence of exceptions and the presence of parts of the client's preferred future that indicate the desired changes are taking place
- The client's vision and description of a new life
- The confirmation that change is taking place and that the client's new life has, in fact, begun

Conclusion

The metaphor of the solution-focused taxi offers a constructive vision of what solution-focused counseling can look like. Deciding to take a taxi, finding the right one, determining the destination, making progress and ending the ride are all parts of the metaphor that make it easy to utilize. This metaphor may serve to change the focus of counseling and how counselors work in helping people to change.

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


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