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Solution Focused Counseling

Finding solutions to resolve problems -children, adolescents and adults- can see positive change in their lives in a short time. Struggling with decision making, strained relationships, crises, time managing, family loss, financial loss, etc. can make life miserable.

By shifting our focus towards solutions, rather than the problems and their history, the attention is placed on who is doing what, when the problem is *not* present. Persisting with the problem has no benefit without positive consequences. It only has value in letting us know what has happened so that we can pursue a positive outcome. Placing culpability away from ourselves gives us some temporary relief, as someone or something else is at fault. But it prevents us from finding the resources and strengths to prevent the problem from reoccurring. We can't expect to make other people or events different, but we can change how we deal with them and how we accept it. Walter and Pellet in their work (1992) contend that the process is accomplished by focusing on what is right and working on successes, as the key to making change happen. They relay the story of the baseball player who was in a batting slump. He was watching a video of himself striking out. When his manager came in and asked what he was doing, he explained that he was watching himself striking out so he could see what he was doing wrong. The manager told him to stop and watch a video when he was hitting the ball to see what he was doing right and do more of that. Discovering what is positive in our lives or what we would like to have happen, will set the stage for making it happen.

Let's look at some common problems in our *home, school, and work places* and how real change can happen when the focus shifts from the problem to finding solutions.

Home Environment

Raising children today, as our parents raised us, is becoming more and more challenging. Our families are generally larger, with presumably less time to tend to each child. We no longer consider that "children should be seen and not heard" and that a quick spanking helps. The mantra is to encourage self-confident children by encouraging self-expression. However, freedom of expression without a rule of communication boundaries, can risk having rebellious children.

Allowing too much freedom can be like driving a car without breaks. Parents are more and more uncertain as to when to be lenient or when to apply a strict approach in situations. Certainly if you have children who are happy and healthy, you want to maintain that confidence. Overwhelmed with challenging situations without success, parents will listen to anyone with opinions. What can make it worse is when children spot parents struggling with them, the stage is set for out-of-control children.

Parenting strategies more commonly focus on explanations for misbehavior in an effort to solve the problem. Using a solution focused approach to raising children, the interest is not on why a specific problem happens but rather how to change it. We go to the doctor to be healed not to find out why we are sick.

Judy, a mother of two children ages three and six, is employed outside the home as an Assistant Teacher at the ABC Child Care Center. She is described by her employer as happy, friendly with the staff and children, and capable! Able to perform tasks productively, without stress. Judy is comfortable with her

job. The Head Teacher reported that Judy aptly assists her in managing the classroom, as well as taking lead responsibility for three special needs children identified with behavioral difficulties. At home she is described differently by her husband, Chaim. Often unhappy and edgy with him and excitable with the children. Judy reported that she feels more pressure at home to get things done; preparing supper, dispersing the kids fights, cleaning messes and tending to their bedtime on schedule. She noticed how her employer chronicled her competent performance at work. How she employed good management skills and "know how" with ease. Once Judy observed herself acting differently at work than at home, given similar circumstances, it became easier to change herself. She was able to get Chaim's involvement, from being as she described "detached and lazy", to join her using a team approach and preparation planning, the format she practiced at work. Focusing on positive solutions; rather than reasons for Chaim's laziness, and the children's misbehavior, had a profound effect on the outcome. Judy's situation improved. Chaim recognized the difference his involvement meant to Judy and the pleasure he missed with his detachment. Just thinking that she was the only person responsible for the children's welfare overwhelmed her. Enlisting her husband help and his empathy, helped Judy recognize that she was not in it alone, and assured her that he cared about her and the children. Taking a solution focused approach, they worked out a successful plan that included, a family outing to the pizza store one night a week, Chaim's support for one hour in the evening to relieve Judy, and additional help from a local high school student to get the children to bed on time when Chaim was learning or coming home late from work.

Work Environment

Sarah came for counseling out of desperation. Sarah is employed as a bookkeeper at a large construction company. Her boss was not easy to get along with. He likes to micromanage. He watches the clock, meeting Sarah at the door if she returns minutes late from a lunch break, watches who empties the waste basket and never praises good work. Sarah reported that if she didn't need the income desperately, she would have left long ago. His negative attitude had made her miserable. In other areas of her life, Sarah reported no problem dealing with people. As a successful chair of her local school board and a good friend, Sarah is regarded as an asset; able to share responsibilities, write meeting minutes and agendas for the group, and readily offer a lending hand to co-workers and friends. In a counseling session, Sarah recognized that her boss's attempts to micromanage was his way of actually managing his business. She was able to recognize that she could extend her willingness to share information and her caring nature with her boss, as she did with the school board and friends. A family business that he inherited, her boss had little knowledge about what Sarah was actually doing and "being in the dark", and micromanaging was his way of validating himself as the authority in the company. Sarah decided to take a few minutes every so often to stroke his ego and to share what she was doing with details related to her work. Soon after her boss lost interest in the details of her work but was pleased that Sarah included him in the process. Sarah reports that now her boss has gained more trust in her and less reason to complain about trivial things. As she describes she has him "eating out of her hand".

School Environment

Mayer is a first grade student at the local Yeshiva. He was having a lot of difficulty keeping up with the group, particularly forming words with letters and vowels in Hebrew. Since reading is a major function in his class, Mayer felt so much pressure, particularly when a classmate called him dumb. The school met

with Mayer's parents to discuss the problem and to recommend a board of education evaluation. When meeting with the psychologist for a fact-finding intake & to administer the evaluation, the parents reported that they felt as if they have failed Mayer. The teachers described being frustrated, waiting for the parents to do something about the problem. With my experience operating an evaluation site, schools wait for parents to do something, while parents blame the school for not doing enough, resulting in arguments, hurt feelings, frustration and defensiveness. In this situation, the worst part was that Mayer felt all the pressure and frequently did not want to go to school. Testing revealed that Mayer presented at the average range of intelligence with no ostensible reason for the difficulty in reading; at least not based on testing results.

Fortunately those involved recognized that Mayer's problem needed to be dealt with immediately. Speculating cause of his difficulty was all they could go on, which is time and again the case. Exhausted and perplexed, his parents, teachers, and the Board of Ed evaluator, who saw Mayer in their respective settings, came up with an action plan. The evaluator, suggested to observe Mayer over a week, then meet again and come up with a viable plan. The focus of the group was to achieve an affirmative outcome. Enlisting the former pre-school teacher's support, for how she had related positively with Mayer, and concentrating only on current accomplishments and positive interactions at school and at home, Mayer was reading at grade level by year-end. To quote Charles Franklin Kettering, automobile inventor, describing the Wright brother's successful aircraft flight (They) "*flew right through the smoke screen of impossibility*".

Since its genesis in the mid-1980s, solution-focused counseling has proved to be an effective intervention across the range of problem presentations, by developing a picture of the 'solution' and discovering the resources to achieve it.