

CANADIAN SFBT NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Summer Edition 2017

When I began thinking about this summer edition of our newsletter, I thought and then dreamt of interviewing my co-editor Dina Bednar. Mark and I often see her as the driving force of the Canadian Solution Focused Therapy Center. She has tones of energy, loves to learn, lives and breathes SFBT and it just fits as to how she sees the world. We thought you'd like to know her better as well; especially her wisdom about her work and SFBT in particular.

Dina has been one of my major influences in SFBT work. I am always impressed how I get to notice SFBT ideas in everything she says and does inside and outside of the therapy office. She is masterful in using the tools of SFBT with her clients and students alike.

Thinking systemically with a strength-based lens is the hallmark to who she is. Dina does not leave a stone unturned until she not only can find strengths in the people she sees, she also honours others experience of her experience. These then lead to transparent, empathic and hope filled conversations.

This year, Dina was also the recipient of the City of Hamilton Employee Spirit Award. The write-up says it so well. "Dina is a strong proponent of single session and brief therapy.

She strongly believes that her clients and their families have the strengths and abilities they need to overcome life's challenges. Accordingly, she focuses on what is 'right' with them rather than on what is 'wrong', an approach that infuses them with hope."

Added to this interview, we have a book review on *Autism and Solution-Focused Practice* by Mattelin, Volchaert and Cook and a training pearl to share.

This past spring we had the opportunity to train students who are part of the SFBT certificate program and folk at the Durham School Board. These experiences continue to excite us in so many ways.

Geri

Please feel free to reach us anytime at:
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INTERVIEW WITH DINA

Dina, as we begin this interview I'm hoping you can share how you got connected to SFBT. Are there any turning points in your journey as a therapist that lead you to SFBT?

I remember quite vividly the first time I was exposed to SFBT. I was doing my externship at a mental health center and on the wall there was a flyer advertising Insoo Kim Berg and Scott Miller's book "Working with the Problem Drinker". I ordered the book and within the first few pages I knew that what I was reading made total and complete sense to me. It was like coming to my therapeutic home, it was familiar. What made this so very familiar was that my whole Greek upbringing had elements of SFBT, this looking out for the positives, strengths and resources of every individual and the constant reframing which is truly an art. It was this idea that you can, in conversation with others, make the story that is going to work best for you. You can make and develop the story that will best help you achieve your goals and through the art

of reframing continue to grow the story. To quote Michael Hoyt 'some stories are better than others'- choose a good story! And it is never too late to make a better story. That flyer advertising the book was just the start. I began to read everything I could on SFBT and everything I read became more turning points, then the work itself became a turning point.

What were some of the ideas that hooked you? And, what keeps you hooked?

I am going to answer your second question first Geri. What keeps me hooked is the constant learning that comes with SFBT, I love to learn and with this approach you are always learning: Systemic therapy, MRI, Ericksonian ideas, Wittgenstein, post-modernism, Bhuddist Philosophy, languaging, metaphors, reframing, microanalysis...The list continues, it is a honeymoon of learning that never ends. It is just plain FUN! That's what keeps me hooked. Insoo Kim Berg said that SFBT was simple but not easy, I think she was absolutely right, it

Basically you can say I am passionate about SFBT because I have had the privilege of seeing what it can do. That hooks me! Hook, line and sinker.

is deceptively simple, yet you need to keep practicing it all the time and developing yourself – gee I love that! I am hooked on slicing it as thinly as possible, going slow and looking at each and every utterance and contemplating all the possibilities and opportunities embedded in language. I am hooked on co-constructing and finding out what the client wants, their theory of change, who they are, exploring exceptions, strengths and virtues. Basically you could say I am passionate about SFBT because I have had the privilege of seeing what it can do. That hooks me!! Hook, line and sinker!!

I am curious about what currently excites you in your work. What matters most in the work you do?

What always matters most to me is that the client finds what we are doing useful to them. I work with children, adolescents and their families and my clients have taught me and continue to teach me how to become a better therapist. What is exciting me these days (and I consider myself very blessed because something is always exciting me) is the neuro-developmental research that totally supports SFBT, and single session

work. So much can be done in a single encounter – we forget that, and if we forget that how can our clients know? The brain research encourages me to keep on developing new neuro-pathways in dialogue and not talking about the problem, let those problem saturated neuro-pathways wither away.

One thing that always excites me is the idea of harvesting or tilling for gold – looking for abilities, strengths and virtues. I think this is especially relevant for our work with children and adolescents, this opportunity to slow things down for them so they can appreciate and also have the language to describe themselves in positive ways. Kids often don't know or appreciate all the wonderful things that make them unique and special. It makes a big difference in life to see yourself in a positive light. SFBT gives the opportunity for that.

Dina, I know you to be an avid reader and perpetual learner. Can you speak to some of your major influences that have contributed to your ideas around SFBT work? And, how that feeds your practice?

I think that the field of psychotherapy requires all of us to be perpetual learners and avid readers. Read

everything you can, and go back and read the original literature. Major influences have included Milton Erickson who I consider the grandfather of SFBT. His ability to use everything about the client, even the weeds constantly inspires me (utilization). People have the answers, our job is to give space and through our questions present these opportunities for people to express their next steps and what they need to do. The MRI clinic including Gregory Bateson's work on systemic thinking and communication, and the art of reframing. We are all constantly reframing, and it makes a big difference to know this and be intentional. I have enjoyed Bill O'Hanlon's work, Michelle Weiner Davis, Ellen Quick (read her books!!) and of course everything that DeShazer and Berg have written. I also think it is essential to read the different theories and approaches, the more you know the better you are. I have valued the attachment work that Sue Johnson is doing, the positive psychology movement, elements of ACT, it enhances one's work to keep an open mind and to keep learning. It keeps you humble too!

Everyone who works with you knows how Milton Erikson's work has had

such a profound influence on your ideas of therapy; so much so that your family is also very aware of his work. I'd love it if you'd share some stories around that. Are you up for that?

Oh boy, have I gotten some good ribbing from my children over my love of Milton Erickson! Milton is definitely a huge influence in my work – to the point that I am looking for a hypnosis course. My first exposure to Milton Erickson was through Jay Haley's book 'Uncommon Therapy' (if you haven't read this I highly recommend it – it is a classic, and will enhance your SFBT work). I read the book while we were on vacation in Austria and Hungary, the association has stuck all these years. I have probably read everything about and by Dr. Erickson and my family has heard about everything I have read (sorry guys!). My older two children had a running gag, they would say 'mom do you know who discovered the new world? Or who invented the computer?' The punch line was always: Milton Erickson! They had a lot of fun with that!

A few years ago my husband was in Phoenix for a meeting and actually took time to go to the Milton Erickson museum which is in his original house.

My husband took a picture with Erickson's housekeeper and brought back souvenirs (which I still have). I have a great husband! I guess you could say that Milton Erickson has had a positive impact on my whole family.

I remember your enthusiasm when you discovered Seligman and Peterson's book on character strengths and virtues and also ideas around neurobiology. Can you describe how you integrate those ideas with SFBT?

A focus on strengths has always been embedded in SFBT work, what I appreciate about Seligman and Peterson's work is they made it more intentional. They took these concepts and researched them extensively coming up with a theory that if you practice your top five signature strengths a day you will be happier. They have also provided a questionnaire to determine personal signature strengths. This is very useful with my work with children and adolescents. Often children do not have the language to describe themselves or what they are good at, especially in positive ways. During a session I always want to make the time to discover those specific strengths that makes this person unique, and to

provide a language, always checking out if this fits for the client, and an opportunity to co-construct new neuro-pathways. Words continue to be magic, they give shape to identity and to hope.

Dina, you refer to SFBT as an approach and it is often seen by others as a model. Can you share your thoughts about this distinction?

I am happy you brought that up Geri. Steve DeShazer, one of the originators of SFBT, always intended SFBT to be an approach and not a model. A model would limit it and freeze the natural evolution, it would potentially also devolve it into being solution-forced! This goes back to Milton Erickson who stated that for every client you have to invent a new approach. The tenets and assumptions of SFBT allow for a greater flexibility and encourage us as therapists to be very curious and to lead from one step behind the client. What does the client think needs to happen? What is the client's goal? What difference would that make? Suppose that happened what would they be doing differently? Defining it as an approach allows it to continue to evolve and change, a model stifles that.

I think the nature of SFBT, the developers' original intentions, utilization, and co-construction means that it is different all the time- with every client. That's what makes it an approach and not a model. That is the magic of this approach! It is always a work in progress.

I know how alongside being a therapist, you are also both a supervisor and instructor in SFBT as well. What advice do you have for people thinking about SFBT as their approach of choice?

My advice for developing therapists who are interested in SFBT as their main approach is take your time and make sure you have a love of learning. Take the time to learn it well – don't just learn the techniques. Take the time and make the effort to understand the philosophy behind it and the history. Read the SFBT literature, attend the conferences, tape and watch your sessions, do micro-analysis of your sessions. Finally ask your clients if what you are doing is useful to them. Cause it don't mean a thing if it is not useful! And have fun!!

What do you think the future has in store for SFBT?

This is an exciting time for SFBT for many reasons! First, all the research

on neuro-biology supports SFBT as a very useful therapeutic approach. I think we are going to see a growing emphasis on that. Secondly, there is more and more interest in single sessions/walk-ins. SFBT lends itself very well to single session work. SFBT use to be called a 'rumour' thirty years ago, now I am starting to see a growing excitement out there. Younger therapists are researching and publishing and that is creating a wonderful momentum. I think we are in for a thrilling ride!

Dina is a registered marriage and family therapist who works in a children's mental health clinic. She is the assistant director of the SFBT certificate at OISE, University of Toronto, the co-editor of the Canadian SFBT Newsletter and one of the directors of the Canadian SFBT Centre. Dina provides training internationally for SFBT and Single Session Therapy (SST).

Calendar:

Please send us your SFBT events so we may announce them to:

Canadiansfbtnews@outlook.com

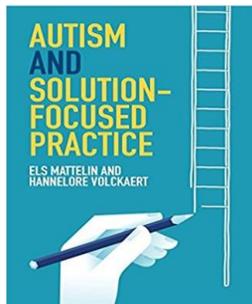
Book Review

Els Mattelin, Hannelore Volchaert and Elaine Cook.

Autism and Solution-Focused Practice (2017).

Jessica Kingsley

Publishers: London and Philadelphia



Review by: Dina Bednar

Els Mattelin, Hannelore Volckaert and Elaine Cook from Belgium have written a much needed basic primer on working with people with autism in a solution-focused way. This is a timely book as I recently heard in conversation about a student with autism who was making the point that therapists did not know how to work with this population. The authors spend some time at the beginning of the book explaining exactly that; the many good reasons that people with autism do not feel understood. Mattelin et al. take great exception to the DSM5 calling

autism a disorder. Instead, they refer to people with autism as ‘different’ people with no judgement.

The book is neatly divided into two parts: the theory and the practice. Under ‘theory’ the authors describe their understanding of autism and the solution-focused diagnosis. Under ‘practice’ the authors discuss the adaption of the therapeutic context to autism and define and describe their acronym of d.i.f.f.e.r.e.n.t. which stands for dealing with; increasing competencies; finding goals; follow; explicit; resources-respect; explore; normalize; taking a first step.

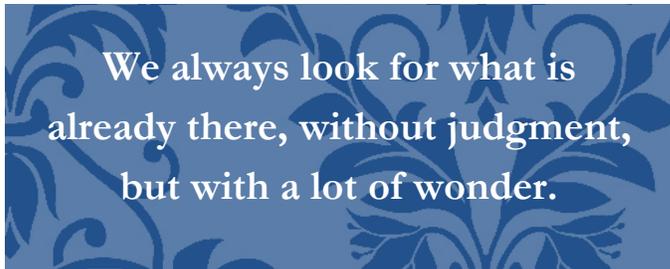
The authors describe how people with autism give a different meaning to experiences and make the important distinction between limitations, restrictions and problems. The book is full of good common sense strategies to engage this population and ways of working with them that maintains respect and a belief in the clients’ competencies and resources, such as using concrete and clear language, using metaphors, stories and narratives in useful ways and making obvious the coping mechanisms that the client is already using. The authors write that “therapy is about change and



people with autism don't like change (p.78)." I appreciated how much they stressed the necessity to concretize the goal and how questions explore and concretize; and to offer psycho/social education. The writers have kept it simple, in true SF form, and have illustrated how the SFBT approach is a good fit with people with autism. "If we approach people with autism with the basic attitude of respect, 'not knowing', listening and asking questions, equality, understanding and empathy, we think that we have done a very good job (P.47)." They have done a very good job!

The book does have some limitations. I kept on wanting them to give more information, and expand on the acronym. I wish there had been more on normalizing and the use of self-disclosure for normalizing. I also think that more examples of cases would have been useful.

Overall, the authors provide an easy to read primer full of useful information to work with this often misunderstood population!



We always look for what is already there, without judgment, but with a lot of wonder.

Training Pearl

One of the exercises that we utilize in our training is a strength finding exercise. And, we find that this is a rather an easy and fun exercise when we ask people to talk about something they like to do (i.e. hobby) and have people share strengths and values they hear as a result of the story shared.

Our exercise is a little different and we ask you to join us in this exercise. Find a partner and ask him/her to think about a pet peeve of theirs. What really bugs them? What can really get under their skin? Can they give examples of when this pet-peeve really got to them? Can they remember when they noticed it for the first time? Often a pet peeve has the potential to show weaknesses and the nasty side of us.

Yet, while your partner is sharing their story, your job is to only listen for strengths and values. Once she/he has finished their story, share with them your reflections of their strengths and

give reasons as to why you saw these strengths and values. After you share this with them, ask them to reflect on your reflections. Then switch and share your pet peeve and give the other person the opportunity

to do the same. We are always so impressed with the depth of conversation this brings.

This past spring we had the privilege to do some training for the Durham School Board. Several people told us how this was such an amazing tool to use when they were frustrated with the student in front of them. They began to listen for strengths and values instead of problems. One person asked to leave for a few minutes so she could email her husband to tell him the strengths she now noticed in his pet peeve that often “drove her nuts” which in turn would result in frustration.

We encourage you to try this on personally and then try this the next time you hear a partner or parent talk about their frustrations (pet-peeves).

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