



Fourth Edition

SOLUTION-FOCUSED
COUNSELING
in Schools

John J. Murphy



American
Counseling
Association

2461 Eisenhower Avenue, Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22331
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Dedication

To Deb, thanks for your steady love, patience,
and everything else.

To my ever-growing family, thank you for the love,
energy, and game nights.

To the students, parents, and teachers
I've been privileged to serve, thanks for your ongoing
lessons on how to be useful.





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Preface

My best hope from writing this book is that it ends up being useful for you and the people you work with. The more I practice and teach the solution-focused approach, the more particular I become about how to describe it in workshops and writings. As a result, the fourth edition of *Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools* is organized in a way that seems to work well for school practitioners and others who want to learn more about the approach and apply it in their everyday work and lives.

What's New in This Edition?

The content and organization of the fourth edition reflect a comprehensive workshop on solution-focused counseling in schools as closely as possible. For example, just as a workshop would begin with a live demonstration, the book begins with a practical illustration of solution-focused counseling that includes real-life dialogues with a struggling student and her caregivers. This new organizational feature runs through the entire book and includes common challenges encountered by practitioners, in-chapter and end-of-chapter experiential activities and practice exercises that provide a more personalized experience and invite you to apply chapter content to your work and life. Although these elements were included in previous editions to varying extents, they are featured in a more deliberate and prominent way this time around.

Another new feature of the fourth edition is that it breaks solution-focused counseling into *three main tasks* (setting a direction, building on exceptions and other resources, and exploring progress) and *three main techniques* (asking, listening, and amplifying). Even though there are subtasks and specific techniques that fall under these broad categories, keeping the three main tasks and

techniques in mind helps you to keep things straight when you're reading about the approach and to remember "where you are and what you're doing" when you're practicing it.

Other important changes in this edition include the following:

- a new chapter describing useful developmental considerations and adaptations when working with child and adolescent students (Chapter 4)
- a new chapter illustrating practical methods of exploring progress in solution-focused work—which includes effective ways to respond to students who report improvements, no change, or declines from one session to the next (Chapter 8)
- a new chapter on frequently asked questions about solution-focused counseling in schools (Chapter 11)
- an expanded discussion of empirical, conceptual, and professional support for solution-focused counseling in schools (Chapter 10) that addresses effectiveness research on solution-focused practice in schools; updated findings on common factors of effective counseling; multicultural aspects of solution-focused practice; and the alignment between solution-focused counseling and the core values, ethics, and standards of school-based helping professions
- additional examples and discussion of "other applications" of solution-focused practice in schools beyond individual counseling (Chapter 9)
- new appendixes that contain a list of solution-focused questions (Appendix A) and crib sheets for conducting first and later sessions (Appendix B)
- new in-chapter "activity boxes" and end-of-chapter "discussion and practice" items that invite readers to reflect on chapter content, to practice solution-focused techniques, and to experience certain aspects of solution-focused counseling in a more firsthand and personal manner
- increased emphasis on the importance of listening to students, incorporating their words into follow-up questions and conversations, gathering details, and coconstructing meaningful solutions or "preferred futures" that are grounded in students' everyday lives and relationships

Organization

The fourth edition of *Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools* is divided into three parts. Part One (The Basics) begins with a brief introduction to solution-focused counseling, a real-life illustration that

includes transcripts of counseling sessions with a student and her caregivers, and a discussion of my own journey toward becoming a solution-focused school practitioner (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 offers a big picture perspective that includes the origins of solution-focused practice along with an overview of the main principles, tasks, and techniques of the approach. Chapter 3 describes the main role of the counselor along with specific types of questions and methods used in solution-focused counseling. Effective school-based counseling requires a basic understanding of child and adolescent development and a willingness to adjust counseling formats and methods to fit the developmental needs and preferences of students. Chapter 4 describes practical developmental considerations and adaptations for working with children and adolescents.

Part Two (The Process) provides the nuts and bolts of implementing solution-focused counseling in schools—setting a direction based on what the client wants from counseling (Chapter 5), building on exceptions and other resources that students bring to counseling (Chapters 6 and 7), and exploring progress throughout counseling in order to make needed adjustments and determine when to end services (Chapter 8).

Part Three (The Rest) rounds out the book with chapters on other school-based applications of solution-focused practice (Chapter 9); empirical, conceptual, and professional support for solution-focused counseling in schools (Chapter 10); frequently asked questions (Chapter 11); and putting the approach into action (Chapter 12).

Real-World Examples

Most people learn best through examples, so the book is full of real-life examples and dialogue from counseling sessions involving a wide range of preschool through secondary students, caregivers, and school difficulties. Commentary is sometimes included in the dialogues to provide a more vivid experience of solution-focused counseling from the practitioner's perspective. Unless otherwise noted, the examples and dialogues come from notes and tape recordings of my work with students and caregivers (the term "Counselor" is used in most of the dialogues for the sake of consistency). Confidentiality has been maintained by disguising certain aspects of the situation so that individual students and caregivers are not identifiable.

Target Audience

This book was written primarily for school counselors, psychologists, social workers, graduate students, and mental health practitioners

who work with young people and school problems. Teachers, school administrators, and parents have also found the book's ideas and methods to be useful in their work. Previous editions have been adopted by numerous training programs as a required text for graduate classes in school psychology, school counseling, child counseling, social work, and allied professions.

School practitioners and practitioners-in-training often express appreciation for the approach's cultural responsiveness, practicality, and goodness of fit for schools and students. For many practitioners, the idea of doing what works as simply and efficiently as possible is a refreshing change from counseling approaches that are too cumbersome and impractical for schools. Building solutions from what is "right" with students—their strengths, wisdom, small successes, and other resources—also appeals to school practitioners' desire to empower, energize, and encourage struggling students instead of focusing primarily on their deficits and weaknesses. These are just a few of the reasons why solution-focused counseling is being implemented by a growing number of school practitioners throughout the world. I hope you will also find useful ideas and methods that you can implement in your work.



Acknowledgments

I will always be grateful to Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and their colleagues in the Milwaukee group for their tenacious efforts to identify and replicate what worked in therapy—and to encourage their clients to do the same in their lives. This edition also reflects the inspiration and influence of Barry Duncan, who taught me how to centralize clients in every aspect of their care. What began many years ago as a postdoctoral experience at Barry's family therapy institute has grown into multiple collaborations and a strong friendship.

I appreciate the support of the University of Central Arkansas (UCA), the UCA Psychology and Counseling Department, and the ideas and friendship of my colleagues and students. My current and former students, too many to name, have provided valuable proof-reading and encouragement. A special thanks to Julianne Wright, Stacy Moore, Leah Mohlke, Deb Murphy, Jessica Reinhardt, and Kathy Minke for their feedback on this edition. I am very grateful to Carolyn Baker, American Counseling Association's publisher, for her ongoing encouragement, professionalism, patience, and friendship over the past 25 years and four editions. Words cannot properly express my love and appreciation for my family—Deb, Tom, Helen, Erin, Corey, Maura, Robbie, Ruby, Julia, and Dottie. To students and workshop participants throughout the world, and readers of previous editions, thank you for your enthusiastic response to the work. I will close by thanking the students, teachers, and parents I have been privileged to work with over the years, as they continue to teach me how to be a useful school practitioner.



About the Author

John J. Murphy, PhD, is a licensed psychologist and professor emeritus of psychology and counseling at the University of Central Arkansas. He received his PhD in school psychology from the University of Cincinnati and completed postdoctoral work with Dr. Barry Duncan at the Dayton Institute for Family Therapy. Dr. Murphy has worked in urban, rural, and suburban schools as a teacher, school psychologist, and mental health consultant. He continues to work with students and caregivers and provides training and consultation for state associations, school districts, and other agencies throughout the United States and overseas. He received the American School Counselor Association's Best Book of the Year award for the 1997 edition of *Solution-Focused Counseling in Schools* (American Counseling Association) and was named one of the top five school psychologists in the United States by the National Association of School Psychologists. His books have been translated into multiple languages, and his work has been featured in counseling textbooks, the *New York Times* bestseller *Switch*, *Fast Company* magazine, and the DVD training series *Child Therapy With the Experts*.

Dr. Murphy is a consultant and trainer for the North American Chinese Psychological Association and a project director with the Heart and Soul of Change Project, an international research/advocacy group that promotes respectful, client-directed services for underrepresented persons and groups. He is a popular keynote and workshop speaker who has met with thousands of mental health professionals, teachers, and parents throughout the world. His workshops are known for their practicality and passion for helping people change with dignity.

To offer feedback on the book or to inquire about training opportunities, contact Dr. Murphy at jmurphy@uca.edu. You can also visit his website (<https://www.drjohnmurphy.com>) to learn more about workshop offerings and other aspects of his work.