

Classic SF Paper

Introduction to 'A solution-focused approach to mental health supervision'

Alasdair J Macdonald

Triantafillou, N. (1997). A solution-focused approach to mental health supervision. *Journal of Systemic Therapies* 16, 305–328.

This is a classic paper because it has influenced a generation of workers as one of the early works on the evidence for success when using SF methods. It begins with the financial difficulties facing health care in Canada in the 1990s. The paper addresses directly a problem common to many health care systems. Mental health administrators are called 'supervisors' but their tasks are mostly administrative, aimed at reinforcing policies and managing caseloads. These are valuable tasks but are not the same as the oversight of the clinical practice of mental health workers.

The author proposed that an SF model of supervision might have a beneficial effect for staff and for the recipients of care. There is a useful discussion drawing on the literature about supervision as described by experienced SF practitioners. There follow in the text four ground rules for supervision which are aimed at increasing a client focus for the work. First, establish an atmosphere of competence; secondly, search for client-based solutions; thirdly, provide feedback; and fourthly, follow-up the supervision process.

The model was piloted in a residential unit for adolescents run by a private children's mental health agency. Managers and

Address for correspondence: 3 Beechwood Square, Poundbury, Dorchester DT1 3SS, United Kingdom

supervisors were trained in the model. At 16 weeks' follow-up, there had been a significant drop in serious incidents and in the use of medication within the unit as compared with another unit receiving the same form of supervision as before.

As an appendix to the paper, there is a useful set of guidelines, listing likely questions to be used with staff during each part of the process. This section will be useful to coaches, managers and leaders in commercial operations as well as those working in mental health and health care settings.

It is a paradox of psychotherapy that supervision is widely believed to be essential to all mental health workers, yet there is almost no evidence to support this anecdotal belief. This paper is one of very few attempts to demonstrate that supervision is effective in improving either staff morale or client outcome. This is important because of all therapies, the SF model is the one most often challenged on 'the evidence'. Other therapy models may make sweeping claims for effectiveness but are asked to provide little or no evidence. (*Improving Access to Psychological Therapies implementation plan: National guidelines for regional delivery* (2007) www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_083150; Leichsenring, F., Rabung, S., Leibing, E. (2004). The Efficacy of Short-term Psychodynamic Psychotherapy in Specific Psychiatric Disorders: A Meta-analysis. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 61, 1208–1216; Fonagy, P., Rotha, A., Higgitt, A. (2005). The outcome of psychodynamic psychotherapy for psychological disorders. *Clinical Neuroscience Research*, 4(5), 367–377.)

In my opinion, this paper is useful reading for all of those interested in SF approaches and the benefits of such approaches in the workplace, whatever workplace is being considered. The content of the paper itself provides valuable ideas for coaches and managers, as well as examining some of the relevant organisational constraints. The outcome data shows that a small intervention at low cost is enough to produce significant effects on the functioning of the agency.