

## 21 Solution-Focused Techniques



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Several informal surveys have given an impression of the relative popularity of different solution-focused techniques. The following 21 techniques seem to belong to the most well-known and popular solution-focused techniques: scaling questions, the past success question, the preferred future question, the platform question, the exception seeking question, reframing, indirect compliments, the miracle question, summarizing in the words of the client, the what-is-better question, normalizing, the usefulness question, the observation question, the perspective change question, the coping question, the continuation question, the prediction suggestion, leapfrogging, and mutualizing. Below is a description of these techniques.

1. **The scaling question:** The technique of scaling questions originated more or less coincidentally when a client, in a second session with Steve de Shazer, answered to his question how he was doing: “I’ve almost reached 10 already!” de Shazer began to play with the idea of using numbers to describe one’s situation. This started the development of the scaling question used in solution-focused therapy. Today, scaling questions have developed into the most well known and most frequently used solution-focused techniques. Scaling questions are relatively easy to use and extremely versatile. Nowadays, many therapists, coaches and managers use them. Even many people who know little about the solution-focused approach know the scaling question.
2. **The past success question:** The past success question is the question when things have already been better and what made that possible. By asking this question the client may remember when he has already been able to cope with a problem or to solve it. Remembering one or more past successes is likely to increase the confidence and hopefulness of the client and usually helps the clients find ideas to take a step forward. Some examples of past success questions are: “When have things already been a bit better?”, “Have you ever been able to solve such a problem before?”, and “Have ever experienced a situation which is a bit like the situation you want to achieve?”
3. **The preferred future question:** This is one of the most essential types of solution-focused questions. It is the question with which the coach invites the client to describe

how he or she would like the situation to become. The coach or therapist encourages the client patiently and curiously to vividly describe the preferred future, (or the 'desired situation'). The preferred future gets described in terms of concrete, positive results. A few ways in which the question can be posed are: "What does your preferred future look like?", "How do you want your situation to become?", "What would you like instead of the problem?", and "How will you notice things will have become better?" When asking the preferred future question it helps to encourage clients so that they can build an image of their preferred future step by step. Usually a good sign is when clients begin to describe in positive terms what they themselves will do differently in that situation. When this happens their motivation and willingness to try out steps forward usually increases.

**4. The platform question:** The platform question helps to see the client what is already there. Examples are: "What have you already achieved?", "What is already there?", and "What has helped to bring you to your current position?". By focusing on what has already been achieved, people usually get a different, more positive perspective both on their current situation ("It is not all bad!") and on their future. Once they start looking at the glass as half full instead of half empty, they become more hopeful that they will be able to achieve their change goals.

**5. The exception-seeking question:** In solution-focused change, an assumption is that the intensity of problems fluctuates constantly. There will always have been situations in which the problem was less intense and when things were better. These situations are identified and analyzed because they will often help to find ideas to solve the problem. An example of how exception-seeking questions may be asked is: "Are there times when the problem does not happen? When was this? What was different? How did you make that happen?"

**6. Reframing:** With reframing the professional gives a positive twist to the words or actions of the client. He or she sees the positive meaning or intention in or behind the words of the client and highlights that. Insoo Kim Berg once explained the concept of reframing nicely: "Reframing is simply an alternate, usually a positive interpretation of troublesome behavior that gives a positive meaning to the client's interaction with those in her environment. It suggests a new and different way of behaving, freeing the client to alter behavior and making it possible to bring about changes while "saving face". As a result, the client sees her situation differently, and may even find solutions in ways that she did not expect."

**7. Indirect compliments:** Complimenting indirectly means inviting the other person through a question to describe what was good about what he or she has done and what has worked well. An example of an indirect compliment is: "Wow, how did you manage to finish that task so quickly?"). You might also call such kinds of questions 'affirming questions'. It is also possible to include the perspective of other people in indirect compliments. An example may be: "What do your colleagues appreciate in how you work?" An advantage of complimenting through questions is that you activate the

other person. Also, there is less chance that he or she will feel embarrassed or will turn down the compliment ("It was nothing special"). Instead, you challenge the other person and make him or her reflect ("Actually, how did I do that.... let's see.....?").

**8. The miracle question:** Another solution-focused classic is the miracle question. The miracle question is a sequence of questions which invite the client to vividly describe a day after which the problem has miraculously disappeared. It goes like this: "Suppose our meeting is over, you go home, do whatever you planned to do for the rest of the day. And then, sometime in the evening, you get tired and go to sleep. And in the middle of the night, when you are fast asleep, a miracle happens and all the problems that brought you here today are solved just like that. But since the miracle happened over night nobody is telling you that the miracle happened. When you wake up the next morning, how are you going to start discovering that the miracle happened? ... What else are you going to notice? What else?" The miracle question in fact is a special case of the desired situation question. It often leads to hope, energy and ideas for steps forward.

**9. Summarizing in the client's words:** Solution-focused professionals frequently summarize what clients have said while sticking to their choice of words (this is called language matching). Advantages are that the client will feel taken seriously. Also, it helps them and gives them some time to think about what more they should tell. After a summary, it is often not even necessary for the coach to ask a question because clients already know how they would like to proceed. [Peter De Jong and Insoo Kim Berg](#) give six important functions of solution-focused summaries: 1) The summary reassures the client that the SF practitioner was listening carefully, 2) The summary reassures the SF practitioner that he has heard the client accurately, 3) By using the client's words in the summary the SF practitioner shows respect for the client's frame of reference, 4) The summary (if done descriptively and in a spirit of openness) has the effect of inviting the client to say more (correct, revise or add), 5) The summary has the effect of putting the client in control of how to describe their experiences, and 6) The summary assists the SF practitioner in formulating the next question based on what the client has just revealed.

**10. The what-is-better question:** This is also one of the most frequently used solution-focused techniques. The what-is-better-question is mainly asked in follow-up coaching or therapy sessions (second and later sessions) with clients. The advantage of this type of question is that it helps the client to focus on which progress has been made in the past period and on what has worked well. This usually has a motivating effect, often leads to more awareness of what works and to useful ideas about further steps forward.

Some people who first hear about what-is-better-question are first a bit reluctant about using this slightly strange question. They think it's a bit awkward ("Isn't it more normal to just ask how things are going?") and they fear their client may think the question is strange, too. Well... to be honest, the question is a bit strange indeed. But the thing about is .... it works amazingly well. The value of the answers to the 'What's

better?' question is enhanced when you, as a coach, ask probing questions. You keep asking until the situation is described so concretely that it is easy to see what happened, what was good about it and how the person has managed to accomplish it. Much more important, however, than that the coach understands this is that the client see this concretely. The questions of the coach are a tool to accomplishing this. The interesting thing with the 'What's better?' question is that you repeat it often ("What else is better?"). Usually you don't just ask it 1, 2, or 3 times, but rather 6, 7, or 8 times. The surprising thing often is that client indeed manage to mention as many examples as that (encouragement by the coach is important of course). Also, coaches are often surprised to find out that sometimes the most interesting examples of what's better are not the first or the second ones that are mentioned. Sometimes, already 6 examples have been mentioned and then, suddenly, the client mentions a very important improvement, also to his or her own surprise ("Gee, I forgot that has happened but it is actually really important."). On a video tape I once saw a client who mentioned something like 35 things that were better. While the conversation proceeded his smile got bigger and bigger.

You may wonder: "But what do you do when the answer is 'Nothing is better!' or 'I have no idea!'" Coaches who want to ask the 'What's better?' question are sometimes worried that their client will answer like that or that they may even say: "What is better? Nothing's better. Everything has gotten worse!" Or that they may be irritated about the 'strangeness' of the question. In answer to this, I like to say two things. One is that although these things may indeed happen, in the majority of the cases they tend not to happen. Most clients do need a few seconds and some encouragement but then, they actually started mentioning improvements.

**11. Normalizing:** One of the nice things about the solution-focused approach is that it has many subtle and effective techniques. One of them is normalizing. Normalizing is used to depathologize people's concerns and present them instead as normal life difficulties. It helps people to calm down about their problem. It helps them realize they're not abnormal for having this problem. Other people in their situation might respond the same. This is important, because if they felt angry and they'd also feel their anger was pathological, they'd have two problems, their anger and the fact that they behaved pathological. That their behavior would be pathological would be a surplus problem to the original problem (the thing they were angry about).

Normalizing helps to prevent this surplus problem from happening. By saying something like: "Of course, you're angry, I understand. It's normal to be angry right now." You can help people to relax and to move on relatively quickly beyond their anger.

**12. The usefulness question:** A question which is used a lot in solution-focused coaching is the so-called usefulness question (sometimes referred to as the useful-question). The purpose of this question (of course) is to make conversations as useful as possible for those involved. Solution-focused coaches use usefulness questions at the beginning of conversations, during conversations and at the end of conversations. At the beginning, of conversations questions like these can be used: "How can we make this conversation

as useful as possible?”, “What do you want to come out of this conversation?”, and “How would you notice afterwards that this conversation has been worth your time?” During the conversation, questions like these can be used: “So far, has this conversation been useful to you?”, (if yes) “What was useful?”, “How was it useful?”, (if no) “What are your ideas about how we can make the conversation more useful?”, and “How can we make the remaining time as useful as possible?” At the end of the conversation, questions like these can be used: “Has this conversation been useful to you?”, and “How is what we talked about useful to you?”

By asking usefulness questions, it becomes easier for people to focus on what they want to come out of the sessions. By asking the question, they will remember their goals and linking the conversation to these goals. The question has an activating effect. By asking the question people will usually become actively involved in the conversation right away. The interesting thing is that the usefulness question can be applied just as well in one-on-one conversations as in group sessions.

**13. Observation suggestions:** When clients find it hard to identify examples of earlier successes or exceptions to the problem, observation suggestions can be applied. Here is an example of this intervention may be done: “Could you, between now and our next conversation, pay attention to situations in which things are a bit better? ... When you notice that things are better, could pay close attention to what is different in that situation and to what you do different yourself? And could you make a note of what is different and what you do that helps so that we can talk about it, next time we meet?”. The observation task often has a surprisingly strong effect. The question makes them notice more consciously what goes right in their lives. Usually, this helps them become more optimistic and gain more confidence.

**14. The perspective change question:** A powerful and simple way to help people visualize how their situation will be different once their situation will have become better is the perspective change question. Essentially, this question is: “How will other people notice things are better?” There are many different ways to phrase the question. Here are some examples: “How would our customers notice that we would have become more customer focused?”, “How will other colleagues notice that the conflict will be solved?”, “How would your manager notice this coaching is no longer necessary?”, and “How would our competitor notice that our company has become more competitive?” The perspective change question helps client to develop a broader view on themselves and their situation and to look more objectively so that they can build clearer goals. Often, this type of question is also referred to as the 'relationship question'. This name is especially relevant when the perspective of a significant other is used. When clients are asked to imagine how, for example, their partner would notice the difference the question usually strengthens the relationship with that person. By answering the question clients find it easier to view things from the perspective of the other person which helps to appreciate this perspective more. Also, clients come to appreciate the relationship with this person more.

Perspective change questions help clients to view themselves from a third-person perspective. There is some research indicates that doing this has a motivational

impact.. When we picture ourselves acting in the third-person, performing the type of behavior we would like to perform, we see ourselves as an observer would. It helps to view ourselves as the kind of person who performs such behavior which increases the likelihood of engaging in that behavior.

**15. The coping question:** solution-focused professionals use a specific kind of question that works well when people are going through hard times and can barely find the energy to do something about their problems. This type of questions is called ‘the coping question.’. When normal strategies to solve problems don't seem to work anymore you can try this question. An example of a situation in which you can use the coping question is when your client says he or she is now at a zero on the scale (see the scaling question). The basic form of the question is: “How do manage to keep going?” But there are many other ways of phrasing the question. Here are some examples of coping questions:

- What keeps you going under such difficult circumstances?
- How do you manage to deal with such difficult situations each day?
- What helps you to keep going even though things are really hard?
- How can you explain to yourself how you have been able to do so well while the circumstances are so hard?
- It is admirable how you have been able to keep on going under such difficult circumstances.... how did you do that?
- How did you manage to cope before you gave up?

The coping question helps people in difficult situations to find new energy to keep on dealing with their problems. By using the coping question clients are helped to become aware that they in fact are managing, at least to some extent... This helps them to see that they are still able to do some things well and that their energy has not faded completely. By exploring how they do cope they can become more aware of what it is exactly that keeps them going. What is still so worthwhile for them to get out of bed each morning and to face the day? By becoming more aware of this you will see, nine times out of ten, that the motivation and hope of this person will strengthen almost immediately.

**16. The continuation question:** A solution-focused technique which often works well, both with individual and with organizational change is the continuation question. The question tries to identify that which does not have to change. Here some examples of how it may be phrased: “What happens in your situation that you want to continue to

have happen?”, and “What doesn't have to change because it is already going well enough?” By asking this question you make clear that the client (or employee) does not have to change more than necessary and you acknowledge that there are things that are going well. Inviting clients to focus on what does not have to change has the following advantages: 1) they feel taken seriously and appreciated because the coach or therapist implies and acknowledges that there are things that are already going well, 2) after clients have made a list of things that do not have to change they usually find it easier to proceed to focus their attention to things that do need to change, 3) while they focus on what is already going well enough, clients usually get some ideas about what they might do to make progress.

17. The yes-set: The concept ‘yes-set’ refers to a technique with which the professional conducts the conversation in such a way that the client is tempted to say ‘yes’. One way of doing this is by summarizing what the clients has said in the words of the client. Another way is to which the client can very easily say ‘yes’. A few examples of such questions are: “Is it alright if I ask you a question?”, “Would you like your situation to become a bit better?” An effect of the yes-set is that clients become more suggestible and admissible. This helps them to focus more on the questions that are asked and to become imaginative in answering them. Some solution-focused professionals use the yes-set in a reversed way, too. When they notice in themselves a tendency to object to or reject something a client says they restore an openness to what client says by saying ‘yes’, or by thinking ‘yes’.

18. The prediction suggestion: A lesser known intervention in the solution-focused approach is the so-called prediction suggestion. In essence with the prediction task, the coach asks the client: "Each night, before going to bed, predict whether or not you will succeed in ..... (whatever it is the client wants to accomplish) the next day." Prediction suggestions are based on the idea that what you expect to happen is more likely to happen once the process leading up to it is in motion. While making clients set in motion the processes involved in having a better day. No matter what guess the predictor puts down, the idea that clients might have a good day is bound to cross their mind. Of course, having a good day is what they really want due to which a self-fulfilling prophecy might develop and this might prompt "better day behavior" the next

day.

**19. The overcoming the urge question:** In the solution-focused approach it is seen as normal that people who try to change their behavior will sometimes feel the urge to fall back to old, less desired behaviors. Most people who to quit smoking will at some point feel the temptation to light another cigaret. Giving in to this urge can threaten the change process because it can negatively affect clients' motivation to go on. A good skill to develop in change processes is the skill to overcome the urge to fall back into old behaviors. The way solution-focused practitioners may help their clients to discover and develop this skill is to suggest the following to them: "Pay attention to what you do when you overcome the temptation or urge to fall back". This type of observation task, the so-called 'overcoming the urge question', presupposes that clients will indeed be able to overcome their urge, at least in some situations. When they find out how they resist and overcome the temptation they can become more aware of this skill and further develop it.

**20. The optimism question:** The optimism question helps clients to identify reasons for optimism. Here are some ways of asking this question: "What makes you optimistic?", "What indications do you have that you will be able to achieve ...?", and "What small signs do see that indicate you will succeed in ....?". Even in very difficult circumstances both clients and coaches or therapists are often surprised by the fact that still some reasons for optimism can be identified. When this happens, clients' hopes are lifted. The optimism question makes use of the phenomenon that, often, what you focus on becomes more important. This is also the case with this question. It makes change easier by strengthening optimism.

**21. Mutualizing:** The solution-focused approach is often used in situations in which two partners have disagreements (conflict resolution, mediation, marital therapy, etc). One skill is particularly helpful in these kinds of situations in which people may differ in perceptions, interests and goals: mutualizing. Phil Ziegler explains the process of mutualizing as reframing issues or goals in a way that all parties can agree to. He gives an example of a mediation case: "If one parent says: 'I want the child living with me full time because that's what's best for my daughter. And the other says: 'I want our

daughter living with me half time and half time with you because that would be best for her.' Then I would say, 'It's pretty clear to me that both of you want to develop a plan that will be best for your daughter--you disagree at this point about what plan would be best but you share the common goal of making the best plan for her. Can we all agree about that?'" Instead of emphasizing the different positions and goals the solution-focused practitioner mutualizes the preferred future.