

A new perspective on solving problems

I've been reading a very good book called 'The Solutions Focus' by Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow. It's basically a business book, but based around ideas from a form of therapy called solution-focused brief therapy.

The basic idea is that of not trying to analyse a problem but instead analyse glimpses of the solution and expand on them. For example, in an interview Mark McKergow describes a person who suffered from an anxiety disorder. The therapist asked them to recall times when they NEVER felt anxious. They realised that on a certain day of the week they were never anxious, and further analysis of this day revealed a range of things that they did which helped to eliminate their anxiety. Thus solutions were uncovered.

I think that this approach is really superb. I've long been of the opinion that most problems are unsolvable, in the sense that we look to batter them into submission or eliminate them. But focusing on problems usually makes them worse. You don't get yourself out of debt by thinking about DEBT 24/7. You get out of debt by concentrating on making and saving more money. As Einstein once said: most problems cannot be solved at the level of thinking which created them. Most therapists and business consultants seem to get their clients to fix all their attention onto the problem and analyse it in great detail, turning it over and over in their minds. Oftentimes, in my opinion, this is not very healthy or helpful.

Here is how you can use this technique in your life. Think of a problem you have. Now, imagine you wake up tomorrow morning and a miracle has happened during the night and the problem has magically been solved all by itself and an ideal state is now in existence.

How would you first realise this had happened? What would be the signs?

What would be the next sign? And the next?

What would be the first sign that your family, or your co-workers would notice?

List as many of these as possible.

Now, imagine a 1-to-10 scale, where 10 equals this perfect state where the problem has been totally solved, and 1 equals the problem at its very worst.

Where are you currently on the scale?

Lets imagine, for example, that you are at '3' (a common answer).

Now, this is interesting, because how come you are already as high as 3? You are not at 1. Therefore something has been happening to lift you a little way towards the solution. Write down every little thing that has lifted you as high as a 3. How far up the scale have you gone in the past? Maybe you've had a day when you went up to 6 or 7? What was happening then which created that?

As you list these things you will start to see that you've already got little peices of the solution to your problem at hand. All that remains is to work out how you can expand on these little peices. Do more of them. Do them more energetically and more often. Or use them as a starting point for thinking of other solutions.

The trick is not to get too hung up on trying to solve the problem in one big move. Most of the time its more practical to inch towards solving it. For instance, if you are at a '3' then work out what you could do to get yourself to a 3.5 or a 4.