

CONCEPTUAL ARTICLES

Unspoken Answers: Using Silence in Session – Engaging Client Silence With Thoughtful Solution Focused Questions to Address Family Discord

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This article explores how using silence as part of a family therapy session can address family discord, particularly when paired with thoughtful Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) questions that prompt clients to reflect and respond within their own minds, fostering personal insights without the pressure of verbal responses. This method led to unspoken answers that ultimately facilitated meaningful progress. The powerful changes for the family were reinforced in follow-up meetings, revealing significant shifts in the family dynamic. This article details the questions posed, the therapeutic process, and the outcomes observed, illustrating how engaging client silence with Solution Focused questions can be a powerful way to address family discord. [Chinese traditional](#) [Chinese simplified](#) [Polish](#) [Romanian](#)

This case study highlights a unique approach taken by the therapist Ayse Adil, who managed the session without ending it prematurely or dismissing anyone. By engaging clients with questions while they remained silent and responded within their own minds, she created a productive session free from the bickering that had occurred at the beginning of the session. Although the clients answered silently, they were actively engaged, processing the therapist's questions internally. This method led to unspoken answers that ultimately facilitated meaningful progress.

The use of a silent session is not a new idea, neither is it new to Solution Focused Brief Therapy. As far back as 2006 Eileen Murphy whose organisation, Eileen Murphy Consultants based in the UK, wrote about devising the silent session specifically for working with vocally resistant clients. At the time that the silent session was used in this case example above this was not known to Ayse.

The powerful changes for the family were reinforced in follow-up meetings, which are described in pages 11-16 of this article, revealing significant shifts in the family dynamic. The article also acknowledges the mother's role as a co-researcher in exploring this technique. Her participation was crucial to the session's success, suggesting that employing client silence in a structured way may be beneficial in similar cases in the future. This

article details the questions posed, the therapeutic process, and the outcomes observed, illustrating how engaging client silence with Solution Focused questions can be a powerful way to address family discord.

“Silence is a source of Great Strength.”

—— **Lao Tzu**

“If there were a little more silence, if we all kept quiet...maybe we could understand something.”

—— **Federico Fellini**

“The most significant conversations of our lives occur in silence.”

—— **Simon Van Booy, Love Begins in Winter: Five Stories**

Psychotherapy involves a client seeing a qualified professional for assistance in solving problems and making desired changes in their life. This primarily involves the use of verbal communication within the context of a therapeutic relationship. Progress may be hindered on occasions due to different factors. For instance, clients might struggle to articulate their thoughts effectively. In couples and family therapy, clients may excessively engage in unproductive arguing, bickering, and conflict, which can also impede progress. An approach that has been found to be effective in dealing with verbal conflict with families is solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) which relies on the use of questions to activate positive emotions to counter the negative emotions generated (Kim & Franklin, 2015). However, there are times when even the use of SFBT questions is not enough to shift the conversation among the family members into a more calm, positive, and productive direction. The rationale behind using this approach was to intentionally do something different to break the cycle of verbal conflict.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, Silence, and Imagery

A solution-focused silent session is where the therapist poses questions, and clients respond internally, reflecting on their answers within their own minds rather than speaking them aloud. Alternatively, clients might engage in activities such as drawing to express their thoughts. In this particular case, the therapist chose to have clients answer internally as a spontaneous decision to diffuse the bickering that had arisen during the session. This approach allows clients to process questions deeply and at their own pace, creating a calm space for self-reflection and insight. The session was an attempt to allow the clients time to respond to the questions posed without interruption and criticism. In terms of silence it is only the therapist voice which is heard throughout and only a brief response at the end of the session as to whether the clients found the conversation useful.

When the topic of silence in psychotherapy is discussed, it can refer to the client not responding to the therapist's questions or not engaging in the process in general. Such client behaviours are usually viewed negatively and referred to as client resistance (Levitt & Morrill, 2023). At the same time, it is understood that some silence is a part of the process of therapeutic

conversations. The gaps in the conversation give clients time and space to reflect and form a measured response to what clients often experience as difficult questions.

The Solution Focused Approach is a future-focused, goal-directed, evidence-based brief therapy approach that helps people and organisations achieve change by creating *solutions* rather than focusing on *problems* and the events that led to them. (de Shazer et al., 2007, 2021; Kim et al., 2010, 2019) In the Solution Focused approach, we are asking clients to answer questions that they may not have expected in a therapeutic conversation. Clients will usually expect to be asked about their problems, such as “What brings you here to see me?” which may not be easy to answer but is something the client would generally have given some thought to. However, a Solution Focused practitioner will ask a more future focused question opener such as “How would you know coming here to see me has been useful to you?” which requires a different thought process. Consequently, an SF therapist is not put off when a client responds with silence or says, “I don’t know.” According to Macdonald (2011) “Future-oriented questions in Solution-Focused Therapy often catch clients off guard, as they are not typically asked to think about their goals or potential solutions as is the case in traditional therapeutic approaches. Silence following such questions is a natural and necessary part of the process, allowing clients to engage in deeper reflection.” The silence gives the client the time and space to formulate an answer to your questions, to make sense of what is being asked of them, and to search their mental database for already tried and tested previous answers. To ask a client a future focused question would need more time to process as the ready-made answers may not be available to them.

In this article, we will present a case study involving a family where most of the session was conducted without verbal responses from the clients to the questions posed to them. In this case study the clients were seen online which was due to the distance involved from their home to the offices of Family Based Solutions. Although the case study is an example of the use of a silent session, the case study has the additional use of grounding the clients, this had the effect of reducing the conflict and tension between the family members. According to Porges (2011), “The foundation of effective therapy lies in creating a safe and nurturing environment for clients. Techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided visualization can help clients to relax and feel grounded, allowing them to fully engage in the therapeutic process.” (Porges, 2011). Ayse felt the family would benefit from grounding exercises, as when the client feels comfortable and relaxed, they are more able to explore their thoughts. By grounding them in their own space it took the heat out of the situation. Grounding techniques are often used in therapy to help clients manage distressing emotions and connect them to the present moment. By anchoring the client in the present it can make it easier for the clients to think with more clarity and focus (Porges, 2011).

It will be shown how Ayse Adil with the questioning, is asking the family to engage in (un)guided imagery (Greene & Lee, 2011) by closing their eyes and visualising their preferred future in as much detail as possible. Doing this is different from guided imagery which “refers to a set of therapeutic techniques with the purpose of enhancing individuals motivation toward future events by imagining a ‘positive future’ and to practice and rehearse skills useful to future behavioural engagement” (Hamilton et al., 2013). The difference in the imagery used in the case study is that Ayse is not guiding the clients through an imagined place or set of actions; in this case the clients are visualising their own personal journey towards their unique preferred futures.

The use of unguided imagery involves mental simulations which are another form of mental imagery more aligned to the intervention used with the family. Mental simulations are defined as rehearsals of future events (Cole et al., 2021). These are divided into two distinct types, outcome and process mental simulations. Outcome mental simulations require the client to consider the meaning of the desired outcome and how it would feel to attain their goal. Process mental simulation requires the client to think about the specific sets of actions needed to attain their goal, who else would need to be involved in the process and potential barriers to reaching their goals and how to overcome them. The family in this case study are guided to give thought to and visualise the relevant steps towards their unique goals which has the effect of increasing their confidence in performing the behaviour successfully. This involves detailed visualisation of the procedural aspects rather than just focusing on the end result.

The case presented in this article were receiving services from Family Based Solutions. Family Based Solutions was established in October 2012 by the three founders and since then has worked with 985 families. The charity is based in London and was established to support clients who are being abused by their children, families recovering from domestic abuse and working with adult perpetrators of domestic abuse. The charity began using the solution focused approach in 2014 as the main family intervention.

Case Study: Milly, Penny and Mother

Background Information

The referral came from the college one of the daughters was attending. They were asking for family support as the student who attended their college was very stressed and not able to cope with the situation at home. The referrer stated that their student was at the point that she was seriously considering leaving the family home. The family consisted of mother and two daughters ages 15 and 17 years old, the younger of whom had an Autism diagnosis. Ayse Adil meet with the mother in the first instance below is the information gathered from that conversation. The article will then go onto the family meeting and follow up sessions with the individual family members. There will also be shortened extracts from the live interview with the mother from the SF24 online conference held in August 2024.

1:1 Meeting via Zoom with the Mother

The meeting was an opportunity to get an insight as to the mother's concerns and how the family could be best supported. The mother explained that her husband had died 6 years previously and that he was very abusive towards her and the children. He was verbally abusive and when he was abusing them he would forbid them to cry. The husband was also financially abusive deciding when and where money could be spent. Although there was a sense of relief since his passing, the mother felt they did not know how to grieve. The mixed emotions of losing a husband, a father and the sense of relief that he was no longer around to watch their every move was taking a toll on their mental health.

The mother had given up her job as a schoolteacher to care for her two daughters. During the 6 year period after the fathers passing, they had all seen therapists and were given a diagnosis of PTSD. The 15-year-old daughter, who shall be referred to as Milly, was diagnosed with Autism at the age of 8. The father always denied and would not accept the diagnosis. His belief was that she was an attention seeker. The mother stated that Milly had learned to mask her behaviours in front of her father out of fear that he would hurt her.

The 17-year-old daughter who we shall refer to as Penny, was struggling with her own mental health and had tried to take her own life after her father's passing. Mother explained that the added pressure of her sister's condition and lack of understanding meant they were constantly arguing and this was taking its toll on her and Penny. Mother explained that the house is unbearable to live in when both girls are at home together. Consequently, it was agreed that a meeting would be arranged for the family the following week. Mother warned that there may be resistance from the girls and apologised in advance if they come across as rude or "cold."

Family Meeting via Zoom

The family were together sitting around their kitchen table looking into the laptop screen. Ayse introduced herself and her role within Family Based Solutions, and proceeded to ask them individually what their own experiences were from previous support they had received. This was asked of them as the girls stated they were reluctant and not hopeful that this intervention would work for them. They had previous experiences of therapy which was negative and were not willing participants.

The first question was, "What would tell you that this session would not be a waste of your time?" They all had similar responses, "not being judged," "not telling me there is something wrong with me," and "making me feel uncomfortable." Just to note, they used many "colourful" words to describe their experiences. The follow-up question was, "what would you like to see happening instead?" Asking this helps clients to "visualise a positive outcome, fostering a sense of hope and direction." (Miller et al., 1996) The response from all three was simply, "I don't know."

Transcript of the remainder of the session

(Ayse Adil is referred to as AA)

AA: Mum what would you not change about Milly?

(this question was aimed at looking for strengths and what they would not change about each other.)

Mum: Oh, erm I'm not sure. Well, she has a lovely character, can be very caring when she wants to be, loves the dog. (Milly had aggressively interrupted mum at least 5 times at this point to suggest her mum had depression and has a clouded brain therefore can't think properly)

AA: Milly, what would you not change about your mum?

Milly: Just so you know I will give you 10 minutes. If I don't like this then I am leaving. I know what I would change. Thanks to her and my sister even the dog has anxiety. She was diagnosed by the vet with anxiety and even she is popping pills.

AA: On no. Sorry to hear that. Then it is even more important that we all work together to help your dog overcome her anxiety (the dog was laying on the kitchen floor and did not move for the entire duration of our session).

Penny: Will you just shut up (to Milly), just stop. I can't put up with you.

Milly: (mimics Penny) Like you care anyway.

Mum: Milly you must understand that both Penny and I are really struggling with our mental health.

Milly: (sarcastically), really? Never noticed. Never noticed you both crying all the time.

Mum: Yes Milly, which is why I take my medication, to help me get through the day.

Milly: (sarcastically) And how is that working for you?

Penny: Just shut up (to Milly)

Milly: (talks to AA) Last week I made an effort, and I asked Penny to watch a movie with me. For once she agreed and we put on a film on Netflix that I had seen before. I asked her what she thought of the film, and she said, 'it was good, but I didn't like parts of it'. I mean how can you say it is good, then say I didn't like parts of it. How is that even possible?.

Penny: It's my opinion Milly. Let it go.

Mum: (to AA) Do you see what I have to live with?

At this point the girls were arguing, mum was crying, and the dog remained motionless on the kitchen floor. At this point it was clear that the arguing and bickering was interrupting the session and making any thoughts of future progress highly unlikely. AA decided to use the silent session as a means of ending the discord in the room and preventing a premature end to the session. AA had used a silent session in a previous case that was similar in that the family were all talking over each other and disagreeing.

AA: Okay.... I am going to try something with you guys. I will be asking you questions and all I need you to do is to answer the questions in your own head. The rule is, you do not speak, you do not disclose your thoughts to anyone of us. If it would be helpful you can get a notebook and pen to

take notes of the questions. When you are ready for the next question, give me a thumbs up. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, please let me know and I will stop. I will ask you to close your eyes, unless this makes you feel uncomfortable. The questions will be in regard to you and your family.

The silent session was used in the moment due to the conflict in the family session. It was very apparent that there was little chance of avoiding the parties blaming each other and little in the way of listening to each others point of view.

Milly ran upstairs to get three notebooks and pens. Ayse noted it was past the 10 minute point and Milly was still taking part in the session. Whilst Milly was upstairs Ayse scanned the room to see if there were any objects that could be used in the session. Ayse wanted to begin the session with some grounding and visualising exercises to get the family ready for the questions that were to follow.

The Silence Begins

AA: I would like you to close your eyes and visualise where you are sitting. Feel the pillow on the chair you are sitting on. Move your hands to feel the wooden chair where the pillows end. How does the texture feel? Smooth? Rough? How cold does it feel? Feel your feet on the ground. Feel your hands and move your fingers. Now, visualise the kitchen you are sitting in. Without opening your eyes or moving, visualise where you are sitting and where the other members of your family are sitting. Think of a time when the three of you sat on these chairs by the dining table and enjoyed a meal together. What did you eat? What was the conversation that made this experience a good experience? What did you do to contribute to this?

AA: Only using thumbs up or thumbs down, tell me if you are comfortable to proceed (thumbs up from all)

AA: Without turning around I want you to visualise your fridge. On the fridge there is a magnet. On this magnet there is a photo taken of the three of you at a theme park on a water ride. Mum is sitting at the back of the waterlog, Milly is in the middle and Penny is at the front. I would like you all to visualise the expressions on your faces coming down on the log. Take a moment to remember how it felt (Milly and Penny began to laugh, mum then joined in, their eyes remained closed).

AA: What do you remember when you were on that ride? (pause)

AA: What could you see? (pause)

AA: What did you hear? (pause)

AA: What could you smell? (pause)

AA: Was there a conversation between the three of you? If so what was it? (they all began to giggle) (pause)

AA: What was the highlight of the day for you? (pause)

AA: What did you enjoy most? (pause)

AA: What did you do or achieve that day that you are most proud of? (pause)

The questions and grounding used in this part of the session were in an attempt to remind the family that there were times when there were exceptions to the presenting problems. The detail that the questions would have elicited in the families thoughts it was hoped that it would make them feel more relaxed and less problem saturated

AA: (checked in with the family-they were happy to proceed this was indicated by the thumbs signal from all the family members)

AA: Thinking about everything you guys have been through, despite all of that, what keeps you going? (pause)

This was the beginning question in Ayse eliciting the families strengths and resources and how they have managed to keep going despite all their past trauma. At FBS the families we support have all had some form of abuse between the family members, it is important for us to bring out how they have managed to cope and their strengths and resources. In a normal session where the clients answer verbally this question can often elicit answers such as “I don’t know” or “I have to keep going I have no choice” which can then lead back to problem talk and a sense of hopelessness. In having the answers kept in the families heads the answer given was not known to Ayse so the session could continue uninterrupted.

AA: What would you not change about each other? (pause)

Think of at least three things. (pause)

AA: What do you appreciate most about your family? What else? (pause)

AA: What else wouldn’t you change? (pause)

AA: Imagine things were better at home, what would be different? What else? What else? (pause)

When the time between the question and the thumbs up was short Ayse would ask more ‘what else’ questions as this short time span was taken to mean the question was easy to answer so getting the clients to think of other benefits would put more detail into their answers.

AA: On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being everything at home is going great and you are all communicating better and 1 is the complete opposite, where would you scale it at the moment? (pause)

It was mentioned in the initial meeting with the mother that the home had become unbearable and they were constantly arguing. The scale was framed in a way to get the family to imagine a home where the communication was more positive and their relationships were in a much better place.

AA: What are you already doing to contribute toward you reaching your 10? What else? What else? (pause)

AA: Was there a time when you would have said a lower number? (pause)

AA: Thinking back to that time, identify the strengths you used to help you get through it? (pause)

AA: What other strengths can you identify? (pause)

AA: What did you have to overcome and how did you do it? (pause)

AA: Thinking about the number you have identified today, what do you think you must do to get to the next number up the scale? Please identify what YOU must do, not other family members. (pause)

It is important that each person in the family has a role to play in attaining their preferred futures. It cannot be left that only certain members of the family make the desired changes.

AA: What difference will this make to the family when you do this? What else? (pause)

AA: How will other family members benefit from this? What else? (pause)

AA: How will you benefit from this? What else? What else? (pause)

AA: Thinking about moving to the next number on the scale, what is the first thing you will notice that will tell you, you are working towards the next number on the scale? (pause)

AA: How will you do this? (pause) What else? (pause)

AA: Can you foresee any challenges you may face when you are working toward the next number? (pause)

AA: If so what are they? How will you overcome these challenges? (pause)

AA: Sometimes people can feel all sorts of emotions including sadness. If you are having a good day, but another person in your family is feeling sad, what will you do differently, so the home environment remains calm? What would the benefits of doing this be? What else? (pause)

Ayse asked a lot of questions regarding how the family would cope with any setbacks. This was due to the initial chaos of the family meeting and a previous meeting with the mother on her own indicated that the problems facing the family were complicated and entrenched. It is also realistic to assume that like all families there are ups and downs in familial relationships.

AA: How confident do you feel about working towards the next number on the scale? (pause)

AA: Is there anyone that can help you get to the next number on the scale? (pause)

AA: If so, how would you approach them and what would you say? (pause)

AA: Life can be quite busy and the person you approach for support may not be available. Where else can you go to get support? (pause)

AA: On a scale of 1 to 10 how willing are you to work on reaching the next number on the scale? (pause)

AA: Visualise the kitchen. Visualise each other and how the person next to you might be sitting. Remember a time when you were happy with this person, a moment or a time when you were laughing together. What was amazing about that time? Feel the cushion under your bottom. Feel the wooden chair. Feel your feet and wiggle your toes. Now slowly open your eyes.

This was the end of the session which had taken just under 45 minutes to complete, the family gave no verbal responses to the questions. The session ended in the following way.

AA: How was that for you guys?

Milly: It was relaxing. Mum, do you remember when we came off the water ride, and you felt so dizzy?

Penny: Yeah, and then she felt so sick (all family members laugh)

Mum: It was my first time, give me a break (laughing)

AA: And what else was useful?

Penny: I enjoyed that, it was nice. I thought it was going to be rubbish to be honest.

Milly: So did I.

Mum: It felt good to feel the good times and remember that we have been through so much, but we are together, and we have lots of moments where we are happy.

Ayse was relieved that she was able to conduct the session and end the bickering that the session had begun with.

Follow up session with mum 1:1 after the silent session

Ayse met with Mum two weeks after the families silent session. The meetings were arranged by email with the mother. The gap of two weeks was to allow some time to elapse so the family could have time to notice any changes. The first thing Ayse noticed was the dog. She was wagging her tail and wanted attention. Mum reported that things were much better. She still has no idea what Milly's and Penny's best hopes were from the silent session, but they are spending more time together as a family and are enjoying each other's company. Mum's best hopes were for her to find herself. Since the silent session she has been out more and told the girls she is seeing someone and has been enjoying date nights. She was surprised that the girls were extremely happy for her. Mum has also started painting again. She gave this up when the girls were little as her then husband decided that it was a waste of money.

Follow-Up Session with Milly

The follow-up session with Milly occurred two weeks after the silent session. Milly described the silent session as "loud". It was the loudest session she has ever had. She stated it was loud because it was the most she has spoken in a session. Asking what difference it made to her, she said, "I felt acknowledged, and it was fun to think about times where her mum and sister were happier." She was very surprised to notice that her mum is happier and her sister is less 'grumpy'.

Follow-Up Session with Penny

The follow-up session was two weeks after the silent session. Penny explained that her sister had calmed down. Through conversation she realised her sister has calmed down as a result of the changes that she and her mum had made. Penny was now attending college most days and had taken up knitting with her mum. Penny described the silent session as different but "a

good different.” She stated she was able to follow the questions and although at times she found some difficult to answer, she appreciated being in control of when the next question would be asked.

SF24-Building Hope, Empowering Change

The SF24 conference took place on 3rd May 2024. This online conference was held over 24 hours and over 4 different world time zones. A free event where Solution Focused practitioners who use the approach in various settings and agencies, gave a workshop on their use of the approach. Family Based Solutions hosted a workshop on “Working with Families Experiencing Multiple Challenges.” Mum indicated she was happy for her real name to be used in the workshop.

This was a workshop hosted 39 attendees who were able to ask questions of the mum as to her experience of the silent session and the outcomes for her and her children. The following transcript has been edited to highlight the main points from the session with the questions that were posed by the attending delegates.

Transcript Highlights from the SF24 workshop

The mother in the case study was asked to give her thoughts on the use of the silent session and the impact it had on her and her daughters. The whole workshop session is available to watch on the following link: [YouTube](#) the mother in the case study joined (18 minutes and 24 seconds) into the session.

Mum: There’s a lot of arguing and disputing each other’s points of view in our house. The silent session was a shocker. I was in an abusive, coercive relationship for 20 years, and voicing my own desires and hopes was brave. Saying them in my head without my children hearing was powerful for me and them.

The silent session was used to ensure that each person could think without interruption. Ayse felt the session was spiralling out of control and something had to be done to bring some sense of order to the session. The only indication that the questions were being answered was from the thumbs up signal from the family members. The mother indicated that due to her previous abusive relationship with her partner she had lost her voice due to the controlling nature of the relationship. The silent session is a way of ensuring that survivors of domestic abuse can begin to voice that which previously was forbidden or ignored.

Mum: One powerful question Ayse asked was, “How would anyone looking in know you’d made some changes?” It shifted my perspective. The dynamic in our household changed massively. Within a week, the arguing stopped. I started doing my little bits and bobs, feeling revolutionary. Our house is a lot better. I’m down in my studio doing my artwork, and the kids are happier. It hasn’t solved all our problems, but the shift in our dynamic is huge. Silence gave us permission to make changes. The kids noticed I was much happier. Silence created so much action in our house.

The use of asking who else apart from the family might notice the changes in this case shifted the mothers perspective on the problem. By the mother renewing her passion for her Art made her happier which had the effect of lessening the arguments shifting the previously negative interactive patterns within the family unit

The delegates were given an opportunity to ask questions of the mum.

Delegate 1: Mum that was awesome. Thank you for sharing. Something I was wondering is the sorts of questions you were asked. So you answered them in your head in session. Have you since then re-visited the questions? Do you ever come up with other answers? And have the answers changed over time?

Mum: Really good question. So I did write them all down. And I have re-visited them, you know, when you have a wobbly day or whatever, and think, 'do I still want those things'? And do I 'do I want to change them'? But, you know, It's a lot of teeny tiny steps to get quite a big change that I'd like to get to.

Delegate 2: Again thank you, mum, for being here. I may have said, okay, don't answer out loud, but write it down instead. I don't know if I would have had the courage to go with silence. And I'm wondering, it sounds like it was better to just answer silently rather than have everyone write it down. But I'm wondering if I'm right, that you felt that writing it down later, instead of at the time was better?

Mum: I think not saying it out loud meant that , you know, I know I could think of things that are really important. And I think for my eldest one who was permanently shouted down by my 15-year-old, for once they could say what they wanted to say in their heads without having to dispute it.

Delegate 3: And mum thanks again for sharing part of your story with us it's very helpful. My question is, what was your reaction when Ayse first suggested to you and your children a silent session? Did you like question her sanity or competence? Or did you wonder 'what the hell is she doing?'

Mum: And so I was very surprised when she said, like, we are all going, no talking for 20 minutes. I'm just gonna do these questions. And I, you know, we were all really shocked. And it took a lot of self control for people not to shout out, or whatever. And I think initially, I did think, well this is a load of rubbish, but you know, I did think, Oh this is a bit of a cop out. Because surely it's about us understanding each other or whatever. But actually, it was unbelievable, within the first question. And we're all there. And then seeing my teenagers respond, you know, nodding or whatever.

Ayse: Can I ask a question? Mum, had I not have introduced a silent session at that point that I did, do you think the session would have gone as well? Or do you think the outcome would be similar?

Mum: I don't know what you would have done instead. Everyone was joining in, which was great. But you could see the dynamic having people shouting each other down. And I think it would have just spiralled out of control, or my youngest would have just walked off, you know, or my eldest

would have just gone completely silent, and just agreed with everything. The youngest one said, ‘I think it stopped that sort of spiralling dynamic’ But I had it, I had it in my head, and no one was gonna shut me down, or anything or dispute it. And I wondered if my teenagers felt the same, even though we were just hearing ourselves.

Ayse: One of your children said to me, about a week after the session, that was one of the loudest sessions they had ever had. I asked if that was a good thing? Or a bad thing? They said it was a good thing.

Mum: They just went well, ‘god that was amazing’. And everyone went off to their own places, but I think it was really, yeah, it felt really powerful.

Delegate 4: Can I ask mum, not knowing what the family wanted, did it take the pressure off from carrying out your ideas?

Mum: Yeah, I think so. I think we all want to try really hard, but we’re also exhausted. And I think a lot of you may know, we felt like we were failures in lots of ways individually. For other people, or the other kids, or whatever, for each of us to say, ‘oh but you didn’t do it’, or ‘I thought you were going to do that, and you haven’t done it’, it took all of that away. And I’m sure it’s the same for my guys who find life really difficult a lot of the time to have the pressure taken off, that you just have a go in your own little ways. But and also, I think it made us look at ourselves different because we’re like, looking for positive things about each other, to see if I’ve noticed someone doing something differently in a nice way.

After receiving compliments from the delegates for her input mum stated the following.

Mum: Oh, well, I’m just so absolutely grateful for the help. I just thought I didn’t have any hope. But by the end of just talking, because it’s all about looking for a solution. Not like why, what and how the past has been?. I actually, I think I emailed Ayse after and actually felt like, oh there might be hope, you know, maybe things can change, when I’d just given up you know, and I think my guys had given up too you know, all of us have been battling suicidal thoughts and everything because it was just how do you ever get out of all of these endless storms of emotions and trauma and behaviours that you get trapped in? So I think yeah. Gave us all hope and positivity, which I think we had kind of run out of.

Delegate 5: Thank you so much for coming and sharing with us. I wonder, what did you notice about yourself after your silent session? Like, what did you notice about yourself? What did your kids notice about you that, that you could recognise as oh, that’s different, that’s better?

Mum: And I think, for me, I’ve been so focused on the behaviours of my youngest, how it was affecting the rest of us, how can we manage these behaviours? Yeah, that was in my mind. And, and then I came away from that session thinking, well, it’s not about them, that there’s this massive thing I need to do. I’ve got something I’ve really got to work on, which I hadn’t expected. And I hadn’t realised, so it made me, you know, we were all a bit quiet afterwards hopeful, but quiet.

Delegate 3: This question is to both of you. It's got two questions. Ayse you said that you suggested a 20 minute, silent session? And then you did it. So I'm just wondering then, from the end of that to the end of the session, how did you end the session? And mum, what was that like for you in terms of the way the session was ended? What kind of instructions? How did you wrap it up?

Ayse: I wanted them to feel safe. So I was describing where they were, before they opened their eyes again. So to feel where they were, what they were doing, the texture of the chair, all of that. And then I asked them to open their eyes and right the silent session is now over. Was that useful? That's one question I will ask all the time. I was asking this question during the session as well. Is this useful? Has this been useful so far? I would ask this every four or five questions because the session was actually 45 minutes. It was 15 minutes of me trying to get you guys to listen to each others wishes, then I thought, I'm not good at this. I don't know what to do over Zoom. So it was about them, acknowledging where they were and what they were doing. And then ask them to open their eyes, and then ask them to just sit, and said 'was that useful'?

Mum: Yeah, I think what was good about that is, you know, like, at the end of the film, you know, you get the end of the film, and like the youngsters, who then instantly get something else and flick through, or whatever, let it sit with you. So I think to regroup ourselves, and then it was, you know, just sit with it for that little bit. So it's still there, you're not jumping onto the next thing. It's kind of like it's still all there.

Mum had further interesting insights later in the session which are highlighted below:

Mum: Because I think for me, the answers that leapt into my head were not necessarily the answers my conscious mind might have realised so as I was, you know, part of me was a bit shocked with what I was thinking, you know? I was shocked what came into my head. I didn't realise that's what I really wanted.

Follow up emails from Mother

In the following days after the SF24 session mum sent two emails with her thoughts and what she wanted to express during the conference. Below are the contents of the emails (the heading was her own)

Email 1

the power of silence/the *loudness *of the family silent session

- freedom to use a voice (internally) when it hasn't been safe to use your voice (externally)
- freedom to think without being overruled/interrupted
- freedom to think without judgement/upsetting others

- time to focus on/process 1 question (not scanning/racing ahead to next set of questions)
- time away from worrying about saying right/wrong ‘answer’
- time away from giving answer the questioner ‘wants’
- allowing subconscious to be heard
- surprise at ‘hearing’ what you really want/hope

Thank you for helping us all to make changes.
I’m working hard at working on myself!

Email 2

FBS Silent session 08/03/2024. In this email mum gave her thoughts to the questions posed to her and her silent responses.

What would you like to change?

How I am affected by others emotional states, looking to others for validation, tiptoeing around others emotions, feel responsible for others feelings, be frightened of anger and rejection, feel I am a failure, doubting myself, losing myself, lacking the courage to stand my ground, to be proud of who I am, being open to new ideas but not apologetic for my values, struggling to enjoy time on my own.

What would life look like if you changed it?

I wouldn’t be buffeted by their emotions and would remain calm/happy while they work through what they are working through, I wouldn’t crave reassurance.

What could you do to achieve that?

Take responsibility for my own happiness, take time to fulfil myself by going on runs, massages, engaging in my own art activities, saying ‘I am taking time for myself because I need to, I am worthy’ enjoying time on my own.

What difference would that make to you?

I would not begrudge others for not meeting my needs, be more satisfied, be more fulfilled, have more energy to cope with others as I would not be running on empty, have more self-confidence.

Who else would be affected by the changes?

I would not be on such a short fuse, have more patience, be less needy, be an example of valuing oneself.

The emails gave the mother an opportunity to reflect and realise that by working on her own self-confidence and that she could engage in activities that gave her pleasure without feeling guilty. The reflection showed that she realised that by working on herself would have added benefits to how she managed difficult situations. It was interesting and satisfying to note that she had now felt she was “worthy” which would have been something that was taken from her in her previous abusive relationship.

Discussion

Ayşe only had non-verbal cues to assess if the questions were impactful or missing the mark. It was noticed that the clients looked up when the question was asked which was taken to mean they were thinking about the question. There were some frowns at points which could indicate the question was confusing or unexpected. The time between the question being asked and the thumbs up was also longer or shorter with certain questions. Ayşe the therapist in this case felt it was very important to gauge the clients facial expressions. It is difficult to make any inferences from a person's facial expressions or body language which is subjective and not perhaps an exact science. However, for Ayşe it was important for her to see the clients even though it was over a video call. This she stated gave her clues as to the difficulty or ease of the clients' mental responses. This guided her as to whether to ask more 'what else?' questions according to the time elapsed between asking the question and getting the thumbs up signal from the clients to move to the next question.

Ayşe asked questions towards the end of the session such as, "let's assume you've made improvements for several weeks and you have a setback, think of as many different ways as you can overcome these setbacks," another example was, "How would you not let that setback prevent you from moving forward?" This was included as Ayşe felt it was a family who had years of disputes between them and that it would be natural for them to face some setbacks. The questions were aimed at preparing the family for these setbacks and what they could do to overcome them and not go back to the old ways of communicating.

The difference in this silent session was the use of grounding the clients and getting them into a relaxed like state of mind. The grounding was added as the family were communicating negatively and the session was in danger of ending prematurely whereas in a session where the client may not be engaging verbally where the grounding would not have been necessary. With this approach benefited both the therapist and the family, who began the session in a state of conflict and disagreement. The family was asked to close their eyes, picture in their minds their surroundings, and their body positions, which had the effect of bringing them into the present moment. By being more present they were slowly able to calm their minds and get ready to answer the questions posed to them with much less interference from the previous conflictual discussion.

The family were asked to think of a time when they were in the space together, enjoying each other's company, what they had as a meal and the pleasant conversation they had together. This would have had the benefit of the family visualising a time when they were happy to be in each other's company. The same would have been true of the family describing the event in the picture on the fridge door. They were asked to describe the day in detail when they were on the water ride in an amusement park, what they could feel, hear, smell and the expressions on their faces. This again helped

them to remember a time when they were happy together which would have deepened their state of relaxation before the questions from the therapist. The tension that was in the room previously would have been overcome by the remembering of calmer, happier times.

In Solution Focused Therapy one of the assumptions is there are times when the client is able to manage their problems in a way that is more useful or when the problem would normally occur but did not. This in SFBT is known as an exception to the clients presenting problem. “Exceptions challenge the notion that problems are pervasive and insurmountable. By highlighting instances when the problem is not present or is less intense, SFBT therapists help clients recognise their own agency and capacity for change. This shift in perspective empowers clients to build upon their strengths and create meaningful solutions” (Franklin et al., 2012).

In SBFT the miracle question has the potential, transforming preferred futures into visual images. The clients are asked to describe a future that they would like to see for themselves in as much detail and interactively as possible. It is an intervention which is based on the clients hoped for future, it is for the client to describe the possible not to imagine the impossible. “When therapists use the miracle question, they are encouraging clients to describe in detail what their lives would look like if a miracle happened and their problems were solved overnight. This detailed description helps clients to identify what they truly want and to recognize the signs of progress when they occur” (Nelson & Thomas, 2007).

In the mothers email her bullet points are an interesting insight into the clients experience of a silent session:

- **Freedom to express her thoughts internally which she could not express externally**

This is important as many of the clients we see at FBS are not ready or too ashamed to speak of their experiences out loud. We have found that male victims of domestic abuse are embarrassed to speak about an issue which is generally gender specific. Parents who are being abused by their children has also a lot of stigma and shame attached, in a silent session they are free to explore these issues without judgement or criticism.

- **Freedom to think without being overruled/interrupted**
- **Freedom to think without judgment/upsetting others**

These comments indicated that the client could focus all her attention on thinking about the questions unopposed. There was a clarity in a sense that without interruption she could fully explore the thoughts around the possibilities of change. What others would notice when these changes were made and the differences this would bring to her and her family. In the silent session the client is front and centre stage of the change process. The

opportunity for the mother to think about these changes and speaking them in her head was very powerful for her. In particular because she was in an abusive/coercive relationship with her husband for 20 years which she made the following statement, “I was in a really abusive, coercive relationship for 20 years. And you have to be very brave to voice your own desires and hopes, when all your hopes and dreams have been broken for so many years.” Mother also indicated that if the session were not conducted in silence her eldest daughter would have just agreed with everything that was said and in silence she could be honest with her answers without having to justify them or being shot down by her sister.

- **Time to focus on/process one question (not scanning/racing ahead to the next set of questions)**

The family were in the driving seat when it came time for Ayse to ask the next question. The next question was not asked until all three of the family members were ready to move forward. This gave all three of them the opportunity to fully absorb and think about their own unique answers. Mother has indicated here that there was no pressure to move quickly onto the next question or predict what the next question might be.

- **Time away from worrying about saying the right/wrong ‘answer’**
- **Time away from giving the answer the questioner ‘wants’**

As all clients are unique regardless of their presenting problems and will have different ideas about causes and solutions. The answers are also unique and cannot be wrong or right, they are just the clients’ unique perspective on their problem. It can be the case where clients feel they need to give a particular answer to a question. This could be from what they feel the therapist wants to hear or to not come across as deficient in some way. In not having to voice their answer this fear is removed from the conversation; the client can be completely honest with themselves and the things they want to be different. It also gives the client more room to really think about their preferred future without other members of the session putting doubts or obstacles in their way.

“When clients are encouraged to think through their problems without interruption, they often develop better problem-solving skills. This practice helps them to become more adept at identifying solutions on their own” (Addis & Martell, 2004).

- **Allowing the subconscious to be heard**
- **Surprise at ‘hearing’ what you really want/hope**

“The subconscious mind is active at all times and it is constantly working to bring our conscious thoughts and desires into reality.”

— **Carl Jung**, *Man and His Symbols*

The mother in this family was surprised at what came to her mind when she was contemplating her best hopes from the session. On the surface it does not seem related to the problem that the family were facing for many years. However the fact that she began to take up her passion for art made a big change to her and how she was able to cope with the many issues facing her and her children. The mother was able to get into her studio in her own time and at her own pace with no outside pressure; or inside pressure, she was not going to be blamed if this was not carried out. One of the assumptions of SFBT is that the solution does not always relate to the problem and indeed the therapist does not need to know the problem to affect a solution. In an interview with Victor Yalom, Insoo Kim Berg said:

We discovered that there's no connection between a problem and it's solution. No connection whatsoever. Because when you ask a client about their problem, they will tell you a certain kind of description, but when you ask them about their solutions, they give you entirely different descriptions of what the solution would look like for them. (Berg, as cited in Yalom & Rubin, 2010, Solution-Focused Model section)

The mother has in this case example taken up her painting hobby and it has in turn made her happier and in a more positive frame of mind. Her improvement in her mental wellbeing also had positive consequences for her daughters and their relationship.

The mother had indicated that to achieve her best hopes she would ‘take time for herself’. Art was one of the things she had identified that would help bring this about. In email 2 we can see the responses to the questions asked of the mother which as she answered in her head was unknown to Ayse. This case study shows clearly that Ayse did not need to know the problem or get feedback from the client, for the client to affect positive change. In a usual session where the answers are given verbally the therapist may have asked ‘so what difference would it make to you if you were taking time for yourself’ this is the therapists way of getting the client to think more deeply about the proposed changes and how it may affect those around her as well. This was not needed in this case and also the client was able to think about the differences without interference from Ayse and other family members.

Conclusions

This case is a clear example of the therapist being client centred. It has been referenced that Insoo Kim Berg, one of the founders of the SFBT approach stated ‘not to leave footprints in the client’s life’ (Insoo Kim Berg, quoted in George et al., 1999, p. 36). this was in reference to allowing the sessions to be client led and allowing them the space to find their own solutions. It is very difficult to leave no mark on the clients as just being in the room with a client leaves an impression with the client. The interchange of questions and answers leaves a footprint and it is a choice as to which

question the therapist will ask next depending on the clients answer. The choice of question from the therapist can then take the conversation down another route which may or may not be fruitful. The list of questions that were asked of the client listed earlier are the standard types of questions asked in an SFBT intervention. The therapist has complete confidence that the client can answer the question and has the inner resources to make the changes they hope to make.

The silent session in this case example had the benefit of ending the family discord that was evident at the beginning of the meeting. The silence allowed everyone to take part on an equal footing and without fear of reprisals from the other members of the family. It is an alternative way of supporting families where there has been no improvement in their presenting problem due to blame and self-blame. It can help with clients who are reluctant to speak due to perhaps poor experiences of previous therapy sessions and as in this case where some clients have never been able to express their true hopes for fear of retaliation when they are or have been in an abusive relationship. As in any session with a client/s it can never be truly known how effective the session has been to the client. This can only really be known with the follow up session where the client can inform the therapist of any changes to their presenting problem. As therapists/practitioners how often have we felt that the initial meeting went really well only to find in the next session things have remained the same or have deteriorated. In reality it is always what clients do outside of the session that will have the most impact in improving their situations. In the silent session there was no pressure on the family members to carry out anything they had decided to implement to improve their relationships. This was not known to the therapist or the individual family members themselves as to what they would do differently so were not held accountable if they did not manage to carry out their next steps towards their preferred futures. The only clue the family would have is if they recognised someone in the family doing something differently and in this case the mother made this point, she was looking for any sign of improvement in the family dynamic. The mothers viewing had changed to one of looking for exceptions to the family dynamic rather than of noticing times when the family were not getting along. The session offered profound insights into how a silent session could transform family dynamics and empower individuals to make meaningful changes. The feedback from the mother in particular demonstrated that that she began to see that she was worthy and could take time for herself and engage in activities that brought her some joy. This in turn led to her feeling more calm and able to face the challenges that had plagued the family for years. Trusting that the client knows what is best for them even though it may not relate directly to the problem was the difference that shifted how she coped with the poor communication.

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