

CONCEPTUAL ARTICLES

Empathic Solutions

Gianluca Ciuffardi^{1a}, Sonia Scavelli¹, Andrea Leonardi¹

¹ Fondazione Franceschi Onlus

Keywords: Solution Focused Brief Therapy, Empathy, Communication, Imagination, Solution

<https://doi.org/10.59874/001c.154161>

Journal of Solution Focused Practices

Vol. 9, Issue 2, 2025

The article illustrates the application for the first time to the Italian reality of the work carried out by solution focused innovators such as Eve Lipchik, who proposed (1999; 2011) a new and original approach to consider solutions and strategies within a solution focused framework. This approach emphasizes the importance of empathy in brief therapy. For example, it highlights the need to consider whether a solution works well not only for the person proposing it, but also for their family, colleagues, and so on. In this case, using empathy and other social skills can help us find the best solutions for various situations, taking into account our needs as well as those of others. Through our experience of a European project on the use of empathy in daily life, we present our approach to working with groups and the insights that emerged during the various meetings.

Introduction

The application of Solution Focused Brief Therapy by our team goes on for at least twenty years. In fact, in the early 2000s, we began field trials of this approach in an Italian context, integrating it with more conventional methods for treating cocaine addiction. The outcomes were encouraging, leading to the resolution of over 60 per cent of clinical cases (Leonardi et al., 2006). Our work over the last years has resulted in the publication of several international articles (Leonardi et al., 2009, 2012) and one operational manual in which our team presented clinical data and intervention procedures (Leonardi and Velicogna, 2009).

In 2009, our clinical experience with cocaine-addicted patients led to the establishment of the Fondazione Franceschi Onlus, a non-profit organization whose activities promote social programs through concrete engagement in various areas of social and psychological work. The Franceschi Foundation mainly operates in the field of psychological assistance, paying special attention to issues related to pathological addictions. It offers support to people of all ages and backgrounds who are experiencing difficult situations, whether psychological, physical, social or familiar. Alongside this direct commitment, the Foundation promotes and carries out scientific research

^a Fondazione Franceschi ONLUS, Via San Gallo 40, 50129, Firenze, Italy
Tel/Fax 055 4628878 Email segreteria@fondazionefranceschi.org

activities in psychology and bio-psycho-social sciences. The aim is to develop effective tools for preventing distress, monitoring critical situations, and promoting psychophysical well-being. Another area of action is training and scientific dissemination: through courses, conferences, lectures and publishing activities, the Foundation disseminates psychological knowledge and promotes cultural and social skills.

From a perspective of continuous evolution, we continue to apply the solution focused model not only to the treatment of cocaine abuse and addiction, but also to address various psychological problems. Furthermore, this approach has been adopted in educational settings (Ciuffardi et al., 2013) and we have contributed to the spread of a solution-focused culture in Italy by publishing the Italian edition of the Handbook of Solution-Focused Therapy by Bill O'Connell and Stephen Palmer (2014), as well as other original works (Leonardi et al., 2019).

The purpose of this article is to present the work that the Fondazione Franceschi Onlus has been doing for several years in the field of adult education, based not only on the solution-focused tradition, but also on studies on empathy and emotional intelligence. Among the various applications of solution-focused, one of the most important is working with adults to promote healthy and constructive relationships, characterized by curiosity and mutual recognition of needs and emotions. The article illustrates our work in this area, in which we have tried to integrate de Shazer's specific techniques with creative language and some exercises to promote a change of perspective: in our opinion, this approach could be very well integrated with the solution-focused way of thinking.

The solution-focused approach has often been misunderstood by so many people as a set of pragmatic techniques and future-oriented questions designed to encourage patients to draw on their own resources to overcome current problems, avoiding overthinking about their past, except when this past might have been functional in identifying still valid and practicable solutions. According to our theoretical and practical proposal, solution-focused therapy could be further enriched by the ability to empathize with the vision of other people, just as the psychological tradition based on empathy (Rogers & Kinget, 1965; Rosenberg, 2015) can also benefit significantly from using the tools of the solution-focused approach. In fact, prominent authors such as Eve Lipchik (2011) have pointed out that solution-focused techniques can produce disappointing results if they neglect the emotional and empathic dimensions. Furthermore, with the development of artificial intelligence (AI), it has become clear that emotional and empathic aspects are key to "putting difference to work" (de Shazer, 1991) between machines or avatars that could be used for therapy, and the significant value of the human presence, attention and empathy provided by "real psychologists". Without empathy psychologists risk becoming obsolete, especially if they rely solely on techniques derived from various theories and research traditions to conduct their clinical work.

Peaceful communication

In a time like the present, which is characterised by uncertainty and wars for the conquest of territories and natural resources, peaceful communication is a fundamental value for promoting social and civil progress. Today, more than ever, people need to learn how to communicate with others in a positive and peaceful way, recognizing their own needs and those of others in a constructive and empathetic relationship. One of the most important aspects of empathy is the ability to dialogue with oneself, to try to better understand our states of mind and to give meaning to emotional experiences. In fact, it's only through true and conscious communication with oneself that it's possible to build authentic and sincere relationships with others, enhancing each other's strengths and facilitating the acceptance of others' points of view on the fundamental issues of existence. The Fondazione Franceschi Onlus in Florence has organized important research and training initiatives in recent years, including the publication of a scientific article on peace and Buddhism (Uga et al., 2010) and participation in a European partnership project for the development of social skills through peaceful communication. This activity is part of a project called Grundvigt, funded by the European Community, which took place with other prestigious centers and organizations in France, Germany, Lithuania, Poland and the United Kingdom. All organizations involved have been committed to empowering disadvantaged learners to strengthen social and civic competences, humanistic values, empathy and self-esteem. Trainees of the adult education groups joined the project because they wanted to learn how to communicate peacefully and constructively with other people. They wanted to learn how to consider other people's perspectives in order to understand their points of view, and they wanted to increase their empathy so that they could interact with other people in a more functional and warm manner. According to the partners' expertise, we have focused on communication in gender relations, within families, in terms of (un)employment, and referring to the internet and social media. Our overall topic has been intercultural learning, both within our multicultural countries and across Europe. Citizens of modern societies need to cope with differences among equals (formally) in a peaceful way and therefore have to develop appropriate competencies. For that reason, we have aimed to support learners in developing communication exercises based on their experiences and transforming them into nonviolent interactions. They have achieved this in groups at the local level and during the transnational project meetings. Professional trainers have facilitated and evaluated these processes, exchanged methods and ensured broad dissemination.

We immediately considered this project to be ideal for applying the solution-focused techniques revised from Eve Lipchik's perspective to the Italian context, because it involved heterogeneous groups of people with very different resources, experiences and abilities. The composition of the groups reflected a richness that only a solution-focused approach is capable of enhancing, even in non-clinical settings. Indeed, we should not overlook

the systemic origins of solution-focused therapy, which was unsurprisingly developed through the work of de Shazer and his colleagues with couples and families at the Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC) in Milwaukee. The theory and related techniques were originally developed in a group setting, taking into consideration the relationships between individuals. They were only later applied to individuals, considering them as systems, and then to individual therapy.

During the meetings in Florence and in other European countries, some exercises were done to develop everyone's listening skills. For example, participants were asked to pay attention to the needs and emotions of others through body language, using graphic and written elements or musical themes. In another exercise, participants were asked to introduce themselves to the group with a gesture that had a personal meaning, and then to try to simulate those suggested by others. In this way, each participant, one after the other, tried to re-propose the gesture of another that he or she had previously memorized, thus constructing an emotional and behavioural alphabet with which they could communicate among themselves in a non-verbal way. Other exercises were based on expressing oneself in an artistic and original way, using drawings, collages and other images to express emotions, ideas and interests, as well as listening to stories from the local folklore tradition. Still other exercises focused on bringing out one's own resources and those of others through original types of role-playing: in one of these, teachers encouraged participants to compliment each other on their achievements in a particular area, such as work or hobbies, or more generally on the way they had been able to overcome the challenges that life constantly poses, by recalling metaphors from famous books, films and other stories from the oral tradition. Indeed, one of the key principles shared by both empathic and solution-focused approaches is the consideration that each person is still trying to do their best, in complicated situations and often without the benefit of past experience. Other exercises involved creating a "joint story", starting with a narrative incipit ("Once upon a time, there was a straw hat..."): the participants in each group had to develop the first phrase in turn, "walking in the shoes" of those who had preceded them. They could not close the sentence, but rather had to leave an open ending that could be continued by the others. This "simple but not easy" exercise fostered great respect for each other's perspectives and stimulated creativity, encouraging participants to find original and innovative solutions to the problems encountered by the various invented characters. This enriched the story with new elements each time and led to unexpected outcomes. A variant of this exercise involved inventing different endings for well-known stories and fairy tales from each country's folklore, where the "good" and "bad" characters were swapped to give the story a different development and open up the narrative to something new and unexpected. This change of perspective is similar to the change of view and perturbation of the system of ideas and constructs that questions such as the miracle question or research for exceptions to the main problem

aim to bring about in patients' mindsets. In both cases, the sense of surprise and curiosity is the same, as is the possibility of viewing one's own and others' stories from a different perspective. This involves using "keys to solution" (de Shazer, 1985) that are different from the usual ones.

Trying to change the point of view with which we look at the other has helped to create a climate of great trust within the learning groups during the meetings planned by the European project, also valuing the resources that are most functional in building a relationship based on respect and recognition of one's own and others' needs. During these meetings different topics were discussed, such as non-violent communication in gender relations, as well as the relationship between people from different cultures in different areas (family, work, school and the web). It should be made clear that these meetings did not have therapeutic aspects, but only experiential and educational ones, where empathy becomes an indispensable tool to know better other people. In order to improve human relations in modern multicultural societies, citizens should learn to deal with "differences among equals" in a peaceful way, to express their needs constructively and to develop appropriate interpersonal skills. Therefore, during the various meetings held in Florence and in other EU countries, we have been reflecting on how to promote well-being in relations between people and different social groups.

Walking in someone else's shoes

With regard to empathy, a distinction can be made between a cognitive component (knowing the other person's point of view) and an emotional component, which is related to observation and the sharing of emotions. There is also a motivational dimension that can lead people to act by seeking cooperation with others, not just competition in and out of groups. Even in the midst of the digital age, we believe that empathy is still a fundamental personal skill because it can put the human being back at the centre of everything in nature. Trying to understand others better, putting oneself in someone's shoes for a moment, without forgetting one's own needs, can enable people to build healthier relationships capable of evolving together, where relying mainly on digital exchanges would risk drying up the same concept of relationship in the long run. The act of communicating well should be mediated by conscious reflection. Only through peaceful communication both interlocutors (i.e. the persons who take part in the conversation) cease to want only to persuade others to change their way of thinking or feeling about a particular issue or situation. Peaceful communication allows people to open up to a new, jointly constructed perspective that is capable of overcoming each other's partial views. One of the essential principles of peaceful communication - but the same concept could also be applied to the solution-focused approach - is that learning to listen means first trying to perceive the interlocutor's point of view in one's own mental space and thus avoid falling into the trap of automatically formulating objections, criticisms and closures to what has just been said. This does not in any way mean abandoning one's own personal position

on an issue or topic, but simply trying for a few moments to step back from one's own reference system and consider that of another person, in order to have the chance to better define and revise some elements of one's own ideas through a peaceful confrontation with what the other person is saying. In this sense, the best kind of listening is what Rogers & Farson (1957) called "active listening", which consists of the conscious participation of the listener in an attempt to learn something new about what is being communicated, whereas passive listening is colder, more detached and rigidly anchored in one's initial beliefs, which can never evolve in new directions through mutual enrichment. Instead, one way to learn something new is to open up to the other person's ideas with genuine interest and curiosity, accepting that we may feel somewhat "displaced" from our initial certainties and beliefs. In this way, it can be helpful to try to be more empathetic during the communication, which means trying to observe and perceive the emotions that our interlocutor is feeling, allowing the emotions and feelings of others to resonate within us, without being completely removed from our own states of mind. In fact, the act of peaceful communication shouldn't be driven by the external emotional flow, but it would be better from the insight of how the other person feels and expresses in a non-verbal way, while remaining fully aware of one's own needs and emotional states that one feels at that moment. Active and empathic listening is therefore based on empathy and acceptance of what the other person is saying, two qualities which in turn are based on creating a positive and constructive relationship, such that the other person feels empathically understood and not judged for their ideas and feelings about something or someone. We use the human ability to recognize and interpret the mental states of others, often unconsciously, to navigate ourselves in the social world, perhaps the most complex environment in the universe.

Empathy reflects the human ability to understand others - how we interpret their thoughts and emotions, especially when they see the world differently. In this regard, it may be useful to recall what Zeno, the famous philosopher of ancient Greece, argued: we have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we speak. According to the great philosopher of Stoicism, if a person is able to listen actively, it is possible to learn something new, while in the opposite case there wouldn't be any learning. In fact, dialogue always presupposes active listening; there is no dialogue without participatory listening and the commitment to understand what the other person wants to communicate to us. According to Carl Rogers (1965), one of the main experts in the study and practice of empathy, any inability to communicate is caused by the difficulty of listening to what the other person is trying to say, especially when he or she doesn't pay attention to non-verbal communication. In this view, people in dialogue should be seen as members of a musical orchestra, each playing a different instrument from the others. Learning to accept each other's differences, to value them within the conversation, can lead to the diversity of opinions and feelings eventually

being integrated into a kind of melody that is different from the simple algebraic sum of different ideas and emotions, but it can become something qualitatively different. It's interesting to note that the kanji symbol for active listening is the most complex in the entire Japanese alphabet: it consists of five smaller characters representing ears, eyes, attention, mind and heart (which is also the largest character). In Japanese culture, therefore, the act of listening is not just a passive sensory process in which sounds are mechanically and randomly delivered to the ears and then decoded by the brain, but it's also an active psychological process in which perceived sounds are translated into concepts and feelings of increasing complexity.

According to different authors (Rogers & Kinget, 1965; Rosenberg, 2015), the main elements to construct a good listening activity are the following:

- **the suspension of judgements and classifications**, such as beautiful, ugly, etc., avoiding to define the interlocutor or what he or she is saying in predetermined “categories” of meaning;
- **the ability to observe and listen**, gathering all that we need to know about the actual situation, remembering that silence sometimes helps to understand better and that true listening is always new and is never defined in advance;
- **putting oneself in the other person's shoes** and showing empathy, trying to understand the other person's point of view and sharing, as far as is humanly possible, the feelings he or she is expressing;
- **checking understanding**, both in terms of content and relationships, reserving the possibility of asking open-ended questions in order to facilitate the other person's exposition and to improve one's own understanding;
- Finally, **try to pay attention to the physical-spatial context** in which the communication takes place, not only to facilitate the interlocutor, but also to feel comfortable during the conversation.

Through these preliminary principles, it's possible to connect with the world of others, using a genuine act of imagination. The term empathy comes from the Greek word “*empathia*”, which literally means “affection”: the ancient Greeks in particular used this term to describe the complex and deep relationship between the audience and the actors in a comedy or tragedy. In fact, from its origins, the dimension of empathy refers to the ability to feel and arouse emotions in front of a work of art or the tales of the Aedi, creating a deep bond that in medieval times was renewed by the minstrels who were able to move the audience by singing about the exploits

of the Knights of the Round Table or the Breton Cycle. Even the notion of the imagination coming from the heart, celebrated by great artists such as Michelangelo or Dante Alighieri, referred precisely to the ability to “see” the inner beauty and strength in the uniqueness of each person, animal or natural element. The link with the fictional and artistic nature of empathy is also confirmed by modern scientific research: according to Keith Oatley (1992), for example, there is not much difference between the empathic response elicited by the narration of a literary text and/or watching a film, compared with the direct observation of real and physical events. Indeed, in both situations, the individual’s empathic responses could have the same intensity and physiological expression.

The empathic and shared solutions

There is also a growing need in various work settings to improve the spirit of collaboration and teamwork, in order to better face the challenges that the modern world keeps throwing at us. In light of these considerations, de Shazer’s (1991) solution-focused approach, which is internationally recognized for its high indices of effectiveness (Selekman & Beyebach, 2014), can really help people to build healthy and positive relationships with others, valuing the strengths present in each of us and accepting others’ points of view on the fundamental issues of existence. This approach could be seen as a different way of communicating than usual because it is based on creativity and open-mindedness. It therefore takes the form of a different language from the usual, capable of promoting relationships based on the recognition and discovery of resources, thus counteracting from the outset those prejudices that risk leading to the construction of walls between people. Instead, by overcoming the burden of stereotypes, the solution-focused model can actually help to “open windows” and build human relationships based on trust and respect, in order to increase the well-being of people’s lives and thus contribute to the realization of personal aspirations. Without necessarily coming into conflict with others, but promoting and enhancing collaboration and cooperation. According to de Shazer’s model, the best system for getting out of a problem or conflict situation is almost never to try to identify the reasons or causes that led to the creation of a problem - an activity that inevitably leads to blaming oneself or others - but to be able to focus together with others on possible solutions that can finally be shared in order to overcome the problem together.

A very useful and valid set of questions to ask in such situations could be the following: Where am I focusing my attention at the moment? On the problem or on the solution I am trying to achieve? Does my solution take into account the feelings and needs of others? When we made a decision, were we able to communicate what we wanted to do or achieve? Do I need the help of others to achieve what I really want?

Based on the principles of the solution-focused approach, it’s possible to say that there are two different and opposite ways of focusing attention, which in turn require radically different ways of thinking:

- Focus on the problem: What's wrong with my interlocutor's thinking? Why is there a problem? Whose fault is it? What is the cause that, in retrospect, has definitely created the problem?
- Focus on the solution: What are my goals? What do my partner and I want? What resources from the past do we still have at our disposal? How can we find a mutually beneficial agreement or compromise? What are the strengths we can use to cope with the difficulties of the present?

In the first case, attention is inevitably drawn to the most negative elements of a situation or discussion: in this way we tend to think not in terms of possibilities and opportunities, but in terms of limits. This process makes a possible form of cooperation more difficult and shifts the relationship to the side of competition and challenge, where only one can win. We end up imposing our point of view on the other person, whereas finding a joint solution to the problem would require greater open-mindedness and strategic cooperation.

In the history of psychology, de Shazer's approach tried to shift the focus of the therapeutic process from the problem to the solution: according to his principles, it's not necessary to investigate the causes that would have created the problematic situation, as is usually done in traditional paradigms - just like psychoanalysis - but it's more important to help the patient to imagine another scenario with the miracle question - another scenario, relying on his creative abilities. Alternative and original solutions can always be found to get out of the problem. All this creative process should, of course, take into account the system of relationships that the individual is confronted with and relates to in daily life, and not only his or her own point of view, but also the needs and visions of other people involved in the situation. Solution-focused is a pragmatic approach that helps people make deep changes in the way they think and act towards others, because it's almost never possible to solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that created it. Solution-focused questions encourage people to think differently and more creatively than they usually do, giving them a different perspective and changing the way they interact with others. What is important are the changes that can be made in the present and the attempts to achieve desired and future goals step by step. In many cases the solution could be right in front of our eyes, in our everyday relationships with others at work, school, family and so on.

In order to facilitate the learning of solution-focused principles in relation to these issues, during the meetings and training planned in our project, we have proposed role-playing exercises such as those mentioned above to stimulate the recognition of one's own and others' needs, as well as the ability to imagine scenarios and contexts different from the current one, as happens in the miracle question. This type of logic is very close to children's creative language: in fact, every time children play "pretend that...", for example, a

medieval knight or an astronaut, “as if...”, they challenge a dragon or explore an alien world, without knowing it, they are doing something very similar to the miracle question as conceived by de Shazer, through which they try to recreate some characteristics of childhood, such as curiosity and the emotion of surprise at unexpected positive events.

Therefore, the solution-focused approach can also be used in empathic communication to shift the discussion from the problem to the solution. There are several ways to achieve this goal, such as:

- *looking for exceptions* in the present and past, a method that helps to focus attention on what is working well rather than just complaining about everything that is not working well;
- using *future-oriented questions* to better clarify one's intentions and ideas for implementing positive changes;
- *using creativity*: first people imagine the preferred future, and then they try to present the desired future to themselves and others, without the presence of the problem.

During the meetings in Italy and in other countries, the exercises stimulated the most creative part of each of us, trainers and learners: it was always possible to relate and communicate with others in a more effective and constructive way, learning how to resolve conflicts peacefully, through dialogue and imagination, inspired by examples, metaphors and analogies drawn from history and local traditions. Through practical exercises, the participants were able to develop appropriate and original ways of solving problems that can be applied to different contexts of daily life and work, enhancing their creativity and promoting acceptance of differences, two essential skills for living better in today's complex society.

Submitted: May 20, 2025 BST. Accepted: December 10, 2025 BST. Published: December 18, 2025 BST.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

References

- Ciuffardi, G., Scavelli, S., & Leonardi, A. (2013). Solution-Focused Brief Therapy in Combination With Fantasy and Creative Language in Working With Children: A Brief Report. *International Journal of Solution-Focused Practices*, 1(1), 44–51. <https://doi.org/10.14335/ijfsp.v1i1.14>
- de Shazer, S. (1985). *Keys to solution in brief therapy*. Norton & Co Inc.
- de Shazer, S. (1991). *Putting Difference to work*. Norton & Co Inc.
- Leonardi, A., Fioravanti, P., Scavelli, S., & Velicogna, F. (2006). Programma Conoscenza: trattamento psicoeducativo integrato ed evoluto per problemi di cocaina. In G. Serpelloni, T. Macchia, & G. Gerra (Eds.), *Cocaina. Manuale di aggiornamento tecnico scientifico* (pp. 637–653).
- Leonardi, A., Fioravanti, P., Scavelli, S., & Velicogna, F. (2009). Programma Conoscenza. Psycho-educational, integrated and evolved treatment for cocaine addiction. *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction*, 7(4), 513–529.
- Leonardi, A., Scavelli, S., & Ciuffardi, G. (2012). The Interactional Approach in the Treatment of Cocaine Addicts. In D. Belin (Ed.), *Addictions - From Pathophysiology to Treatment*. InTech. <https://doi.org/10.5772/50728>
- Leonardi, A., Scavelli, S., & Wolf, F. (Eds.). (2019). *As If. Brief contributions to Brief Therapy*. Fondazione Franceschi Onlus.
- Lipchik, E. (2011). *Beyond Technique in Solution-Focused Therapy: Working with Emotions and the Therapeutic Relationship*. Guilford Publications.
- Oatley, K. (1992). *Best Laid Schemes: The Psychology of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Connell, B., & Palmer, S. (2014). *Manuale di Terapia Centrata sulla Soluzione*. Libri Liberi.
- Rogers, C. R., & Farson, R. E. (1957). *Active listening*. Industrial Relations Center of The University of Chicago.
- Rogers, C. R., & Kinget, M. G. (1965). *Psychothérapie et relations humaines*. Editions Nauvelaerts.
- Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (3rd ed.). PuddleDancer Press.
- Selekman, M., & Beyebach, M. (2014). *Changing Self-Destructive Habits: Pathways to Solutions with Couples and Families*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203386019>
- Uga, V., Zilli, I., Scavelli, S., & Leonardi, A. (2010). The Value of Peace: Subjective Importance and Perceived Self-Efficacy in Promoting Pacific Cohabitation. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 38(10), 1355–1358. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2010.38.10.1355>