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CASE STUDIES

Solution Focused Practice With Men Who Purchase Sex: A Case Study From a Voluntary Charity Setting

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This case study describes Solution Focused mentoring with a man who sought support to stop purchasing sex. The case is presented as it illustrates how Solution Focused practice can be adapted to a highly stigmatised and shame-laden behaviour, without adopting a confrontational, moralising, or deficit-based stance.

> *"The world is indeed full of peril and in it there are many dark places. But still there is much that is fair. And though in all lands, love is now mingled with grief, it still grows, perhaps, the greater."*
>
> - J.R.R. Tolkien in The Fellowship of the Ring (1954)

Men who purchase sex are frequently positioned within public and professional discourse as either offenders to be corrected or risks to be managed. This case study contributes to Solution Focused practice by offering a detailed account of how the approach can support change in this context, whilst maintaining ethical sensitivity and client agency.

The mentoring described here takes place within a broader social context shaped by concerns about human trafficking and sexual exploitation – exploitation sustained by the demand that fuels it. Approximately 11% of UK men report having paid for sex at some point (Jones et al., 2015, p. 116), and emerging research indicates that many men experience psychological distress in relation to aspects of their sexual behaviour (Lau & Miles, 2023, p. 8).

This paper presents a single case from Flint, a UK-based project that provides confidential and non-judgemental mentoring for men who want to stop buying sex. The paper focuses on the process of the work rather than evaluating programme effectiveness, providing detailed session excerpts and reflective commentary. The case aims to highlight transferable principles of Solution Focused practice that may be of interest to practitioners working with shame, moral distress, and socially sensitive behaviours.

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Case Context: Client, Practitioner, and Setting

The client was an adult man who, seeking support to stop buying sex, self-referred to the project's mentoring service. He described longstanding ambivalence about his behaviour, accompanied by feelings of shame, moral conflict, and concern about the kind of person he wanted to be. He was not mandated to attend and was not subject to criminal proceedings at the time of referral. The client identified personal values, including compassion and faith, as important reference points in his life.

Prior to the commencement of mentoring, men are asked whether they prefer a secular approach or sessions incorporating a faith element (Flint offers both), and whether they want their sessions to be in-person, online or via telephone. The client chose sessions with a faith element, which permits greater use of faith-oriented language when constructing questions, as will be illustrated later, and opted for these to be conducted online.

Mentoring is offered free of charge, initially for six sessions, after which mentor and mentee review together whether an extension would be helpful. The client received 16 sessions in total. Sessions are collaborative in nature and are not positioned as therapy, although mentors draw on Solution Focused principles and practices.

The mentor in this example is a UKASFP (UK Association for Solution Focused Practice) Accredited Practitioner, with experience delivering coaching and training within third sector, public sector and community settings. The practitioner worked within the project's safeguarding and supervision framework throughout the mentoring process.

Approach and Focus of the Work

The mentoring was explicitly Solution Focused in orientation: Rather than exploring the origins of the client's behaviour or attempting to understand its causes, the work prioritised the client's best hopes, preferred future, existing strengths, and small, achievable signs of progress. Attention was paid to language that reduces shame and supports the client to view himself as capable of choice and change. The excerpt presented throughout the remainder of this article comes from an initial session.

A Starting Point

> *"The years had not been kind... but perhaps... there were kinder years still waiting"*
>
> - Khaled Hosseini in A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007)

How do you imagine starting a conversation with a man who's been buying sex and feels unable to stop?

Sitting on a train, travelling to meet one such man for the first time, I found myself rehearsing possible scenarios: *What on earth do I say? How should I begin?* I had quietly assumed that this intervention would require something more complex, more specialised, perhaps more confrontational

than other issues I had worked with. In hindsight, that was an unhelpful stance to take. I had unintentionally elevated the behaviour into something requiring a different kind of practice.

Fortunately, upon arrival, my thinking settled. The dialogue that followed, honest, uncomfortable at times, but also unexpectedly warm and humorous, reaffirmed my trust in the disciplined simplicity of the Solution Focused approach.

The session presented below was no different. I began by establishing direction, inviting the client to articulate their hopes moving forwards. For clients anticipating scrutiny, judgement, or awkward conversations about their historical sex buying, this shift towards desired outcomes rather than the problem and its causes can be confusing at first, but also liberating.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: So, I'll jump straight into the questions. The first one that I always ask people, is, what would you say your best hopes are from coming to mentoring?

Mentee: I've been thinking about that recently. I definitely want to retrain my mind to see this [sex buying] as something inappropriate, something not right, something disgusting. Just to see it for what it really is. I also want to build compassion for the women who are doing this because I think there's a... as much as I can possibly describe it verbally, there's a lack of compassion that's hidden at the back of my mind somewhere, I guess... And to have a better relationship with God and to have a better relationship with women in a romantic way... Yeah.

Reflective Commentary: Faith, Worldview, and Cultural Context

Clients do not always respond immediately to the best hopes question. I'll often allow pause for thought, and if needed, rephrase the question in a way that conveys the same intention: *How would you know this session had been worthwhile?* followed by, *and what difference would that make?*

On this occasion, the client responded readily and noted that he'd already been reflecting on the question prior to the session. This may represent "presession change" (Lipchik, 2011, p. 44), where shifts in thinking begin between booking and attending the first conversation. The very act of anticipating change can initiate it.

The client's references to God and compassion emerged organically. Although he had opted for intervention with a faith-based element, my role was not to evaluate or shape his theology. Instead, I treated these themes as client-defined reference points that might support the changes he desired. Using the client's own language and framing helped keep the work aligned with his worldview rather than my own assumptions.

Issues of masculinity, shame, and secrecy were also implicitly present. Purchasing sex often exists within a private sphere, shielded from relational accountability. The client's longing for "a better relationship with women in a romantic way" suggested a tension between behaviour and identity,

particularly within his moral framework. In this context, beginning with best hopes rather than behavioural interrogation may reduce defensiveness and create space for agency. The question is not, *"Why have you done this?"* but rather, *"Who do you want to become?"*

Exploring the Future

> *'When something difficult happens, victims accept defeat, but heroes ask, "What does this make possible?"'*
>
> — Donald Miller in Hero on a Mission (2022)

Now that an initial direction has been established, I can invite the client to articulate their 'preferred future' - a version of life in which the challenges remain real, but their hopes are present, visible and embodied.

I sometimes encounter the misconception that preferred future conversations are a form of action planning. This confusion is understandable. Many professional frameworks are structured around identifying tasks, assigning responsibility, and defining timelines. Whilst this way of working can be helpful, it's conceptually distinct from a Preferred Future description.

Think of a mountain, for example, its peak representing the client's hopes and desired outcomes. Standing alongside the client at the foot of the mountain, action planning points to the summit and asks: *"What do you need to do to get up there?"* Preferred future conversations, by contrast, enquire with gentle curiosity: *"Suppose that somehow you do reach the summit, what will it be like?"*

By inviting description of his 'mountain top', rather than directing tasks and actions, I convey an assumption that change is possible: the more the client explores his hoped-for future, the more compelling it may become, and the stronger his desire to move towards it.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: Okay. So, retraining your mind, building compassion for the women, a better relationship with God, and better romantic relationships as well. Cool. I'll ask a couple of questions about each of those, if that's alright?

Mentee: Yeah. Sure.

[A little time is spent exploring the topic of 'retraining your mind'. For brevity, the discussion is omitted here, the client articulates "putting the dangers forefront before any type of benefits".]

Mentor: Okay. And building compassion for the women. If you were able to do that, and get to a new level of compassion for the women, what do you think the impact of that would be?

Mentee: I think if I can feel compassion for them, then there... I think in this industry, there's like, two sides of it. There are women who are doing it because they actually love to do it, and then there are women who are doing it because that's the only way to make money, and there are other people who

are trying to make money out of them making money and all that stuff. So, understanding that it's not a situation that I should be, or that it's not an industry, that I should be contributing to. And actually, just praying for those women that they find other ways of making money. Praying that they break free from whatever situation they are in. I think having compassion for them is, like, I wouldn't feel more... like I would feel more disgusting. I would feel more like I'm using them. I think if I can have a bit more compassion, that would be like a deterrent to want to go to them, I guess.

Mentor: Yep. So maybe praying for them more, feeling like paying for sex is using them, and that compassion acting as a deterrent. What else would be a couple of signs that you'd notice about yourself, that told you, you had become more compassionate towards them? What would be another two or three small signs that you would notice about yourself?

Mentee: I guess in a way, it would look more like... I wouldn't find myself being... I don't know. I wouldn't find myself being aroused to them, I guess. Like, if I saw someone in a vulnerable situation, I guess, maybe instinctually, I would want to help them instead of wanting to use them... if that kinda makes sense?

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: So, I think that if my mindset kinda changes, then... not so much helping them, because, you know, I can't help everyone... but like, it's along those lines, you know... helping them by leaving them alone. Not contributing to it. Not wanting. Not seeing. Not thinking, "oh, this is a possibility with them" or "I'm gonna go ahead and do this", you know?

Mentor: Mhmm. Yeah. Okay. So instinctively wanting to help more than use, or at least not contribute to their situation.

Mentee: Yeah.

Mentor: Okay. Great. And what do you think that would be like? I know I'm pushing you, but you've answered these questions well, so I'm gonna go for more detail. That ok?

Mentee: That's fine.

Mentor: What would be the first thing you'd notice? The first sign? Let's say next time you come across this sort of situation or, you know, you see one of the women, what would be the very first, small sign, that you'd notice about yourself that tells you, "okay, something's different here, I'm feeling more compassionate"? What would be the first little thing that told you something's shifted, that God's changed something in you?

Mentee: Knowing the type of person I am, probably more tears, like, more emotional. I've always been an emotional type of person, but I think over the last couple of months and years, I've kind of become a bit more apathetic. So, I think just seeing that emotional side of me come back. Not just in this area, but just everywhere else, and, like, just having that passion for people again. Seeing people and, like, I don't know, wanting to embrace them with God's love.

Mentor: Mhmm.

Mentee: You know? I guess something like that. If that can ever come back again, that'll be like, "Okay. Cool. There's been a radical change", because I know I've lost touch with that and...

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: I couldn't even bring myself to cry for nothing. So, if I can find myself being more emotional in that type of setting, I know something's changed for sure.

Reflective Commentary: Detail, Identity, and Emotional Reconnection

Throughout this preferred future dialogue, focus remains on description rather than instruction. The client is not asked how he will achieve compassion, but what it would look like if compassion were present. We move progressively from more general outcomes ("what do you think the impact of that would be?") to increasingly specific indicators ("what would be the first small sign?").

Notably, the client's description shifts from cognitive reframing ("understanding it's not an industry I should be contributing to") to emotional restoration ("more tears," "having that passion for people again"). This movement suggests that the preferred future is not simply behavioural, but identity-level change. Compassion, for him, is not abstract; it's embodied in relationships, emotional responsiveness and acts of kindness.

The moment where I state, "I know I'm pushing you... I'm gonna go for more detail," reflects a deliberate practice principle: asking myself, *what's one more question I can ask about this?* The aim is not interrogation, but elaboration: The more concrete the description becomes, the more impactful it might be.

In hindsight, I would change the phrase, "... you've answered these questions well ..." to, "... thanks for answering all my questions so far ...". The latter acknowledges the client's continued efforts, whilst avoiding any unintended value judgement on there being a 'right' way to answer.

Reflecting on this process, pushing for greater levels of detail and hearing the client describe the return of tears to his life, reminded me of words from a former teacher: "Because of my interest in the minutiae of a client's hoped-for future we find ourselves in very intimate 'moments'... the client hears themselves say something that opens new possibilities." (Iveson, 2024)

Importantly, the conversation continues to uncover details of the client's preferred future, rather than investigating unwanted behaviour from the past. In this way, the dialogue supports agency whilst avoiding defensiveness, creating space for change to be described before it's enacted.

Expansion

> *'So many things are possible just as long as you don't know they're impossible.'*
>
> — Norton Juster in The Phantom Tollbooth (1961)

Preferred future descriptions don't end once an initial picture emerges. We get to stretch the landscape of that future, inviting the client to notice additional contexts in which the hoped-for change might appear.

I once discussed this with Evan George from BRIEF, who after hearing my clumsy attempt to explain what happens during a preferred future conversation, offered a much simpler and more elegant metaphor: *we're building a home for possibilities.*

This image has remained with me throughout my practice. Once the foundation for a rich preferred future description has been laid, we invite the client to continue expanding the house, opening new rooms, exploring alternative spaces, and noticing the details inside each one. Every description enlarging the client's sense of what may be possible.

In the previous section of dialogue, the client had begun to describe a shift from apathy toward compassion and emotional responsiveness. Rather than moving swiftly on, our conversation lingers, considering where else, in what other 'rooms', this renewed "passion for people" might appear in his life.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: Cool. Okay. So, passion for people replacing the apathy. Mhmm. Where else do you think that might show up in your life? If that passion for people comes back, if God brings that back into your life, where else might that show up, do you think? Where else in your life do you think that passion for people and that emotion might start showing up?

Mentee: In small senses, it's been showing up in my value for community.

Mentor: Mhmm.

Mentee: I think for the past couple of weeks, I've been involved more in, like, community stuff, you know, hanging around with many friends. I've got people who've messaged me, because I've got quite a friendly friendship group, and we do a lot of activities together. I'm not on social media much, but my friends love to post. Then people see it and are like, "oh, bring me in", "Next time you guys do something, let me know". And my birthday dinner was a great opportunity to bring lots of people together. I don't have 30 friends, but 30 people showed up.

Mentor: Wow.

Mentee: But it's just, like, getting them to speak to each other, getting them to hang out with each other. I know certain people that don't like to open up, but one of them told me at the end what they had been going through, like, a breakup and stuff. So, it was nice to, you know, to be aware of that. I don't know. That kinda did something for me. So, I think in other areas of life, it's about seeing that community, our community being a lot more enhanced than it was before, that could be a sign.

And I think once upon a time, a long time ago it feels like it, I've always wanted to do humanitarian work overseas. I don't think that's realistic for the moment. I don't think that's in my path or in my calling right now, but maybe just serving more in my local area, I guess. It doesn't have to

be humanitarian work abroad. I think just seeing that compassion and that purpose come back and serving more in that type of area. That would be a sign. Yeah. Yeah.

Mentor: Cool. So, community, purpose, serving.

Mentee: Yeah.

Reflective Commentary: Expanding Possibilities

Several developments are visible here. First, the conversation begins to expand beyond the original focus on sexual behaviour. The client's hopes now encompass broader aspects of identity and relational life: community participation, emotional openness, and a sense of purpose.

This expansion is significant. Rather than framing change purely in terms of *preventing* a problematic behaviour, the conversation begins to articulate what a life filled with passion for people might include. The client's descriptions of hosting gatherings, connecting friends with one another, and noticing others' struggles suggest emerging strengths around hospitality, attentiveness, and social leadership.

Secondly, elements of the client's hopes are already present; recent experiences of community engagement and emotional connection provide glimpses of the preferred future already occurring in everyday life. Noticing and allowing the client to elaborate on these moments brings them into clearer focus.

The client also reflects on a long-standing interest in humanitarian work but reframes this aspiration in more locally achievable terms: serving within his own community. This reframing comes from the client himself and rather than challenging his sense of what may or may not be feasible, I focused on reflecting the emerging themes: community, purpose, and service.

Finally, this segment illustrates how preferred future questions can broaden a conversation from behaviour change to identity reconstruction. The client's desired future is not merely one in which he avoids purchasing sex; it is one in which he becomes a man who contributes to community life, cares for others, and lives out his values more consistently.

Instances of Success

"Beautiful things don't ask for attention."

— Sean O'Connell in The Secret Life of Walter Mitty (2013)

As identified, the client had begun to articulate multiple **instances of success**: Moments from the past and present where his desired future was already visible. By drawing attention to those efforts and achievements, which may otherwise pass unnoticed, our conversations shift from speculation about change to evidence that change is concretely possible.

Rather than attempting to build confidence through persuasion, e.g. "I think you're capable", we invite clients to recognise their existing resources. The aim is not simply to identify achievements, but to reflect upon *how* they came about and what those efforts reveal about the client, the person that they are, and their potential.

In the following exchange, the earlier discussion of community provides an opportunity to explore the client's relational strengths in more detail.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: So, how did you manage to get 30 people to your birthday dinner? Sounds like quite a crowd.

Mentee: I do everything. I do cricket. I do rugby. I go running.

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: I do water sports. I do everything. And I just have different people in those spaces who I value. A lot of them being school friends, sixth form friends, uni friends.

Mentor: Wow.

Mentee: Just bringing them together to all meet each other. To say, "hey, these are all my friends."

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: Friends from running. Yeah. Just different people.

Mentor: Yeah. I'm getting the impression you enjoy bringing different people together?

Mentee: Yeah. Over time, I've definitely fallen in love with that, for sure.

Mentor: Cool. And how have you juggled that? Do you know what I mean, like, how have you managed to keep in touch with those friends, even back from school days? What have you done to maintain those relationships?

Mentee: Nothing extensive. I think for the most part they are my university friends, and even now we all kinda live in the same area. So, I think proximity is what kinda keeps us together because, like, I know someone who lives five minutes away. I know someone who lives ten minutes away. So, it's not too hard to keep up with people when they're in a close area. Also, with some of the people who went to my school and my sixth form, we're all like in a group chat type vibe together. So yeah, it's not an individual relationship. It's more like a group relationship. Yeah, that's pretty much it.

Mentor: Okay. So, local proximity helps and then things like group chats.

Mentee: Yeah.

Mentor: And in what ways have you been able to show them compassion? Because you mentioned the person who is going through the breakup. In what ways were you able to show a bit of compassion towards them on that occasion?

Mentee: I guess, after she told me about it and after I had got back home, I just texted her because I know a heartbreak can lead you to madness. At least in my experience anyway, it doesn't have to happen for everyone. I just checked in on her and made sure that she's healing well and, you know, her

head is in the right place, her heart is in the right place. And, yeah, she said she's good. She's getting over it. She's not gonna look back, etc. So, yeah, just checking in on her and just making sure she's good.

Mentor: Okay. So, checking in, making sure she's feeling well, feeling alright. And again, I'm just gonna keep trying to make this a bit harder because you answer the questions so well.

Mentee: Yeah.

Mentor: What about the text itself and the way you spoke to her? How did you phrase that in a way that conveyed some compassion and some care?

Mentee: Probably the emojis I used to be fair.

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: Just letting her know that I care. Letting her know that I understand heartbreak can be tough. I'll, you know, invite you out to more events because you asked, which is interesting because we don't speak that often. And the fact that you asked to hang out with us more shows that, I don't know, it's a telling sign that you clearly need that form of community.

Mentor: Right.

Mentee: So, she's in the local area. I play volleyball locally. I invite her. She's rubbish. But it's fine, there's so many people who aren't good anyway. I've also been planning to host a movie night now for a long time. Probably won't.

Mentor: Okay.

Mentee: But anything along those lines, just to invite her out. Going out for a walk etc, inviting her out just to see how she's getting on. But, yeah, in that initial text, I think it was just the emojis, and I just let her know that, you know, we'll all link up at some type of event soon. So, yeah, just stay strong, I guess. Yeah.

Mentor: Yeah. Okay. So, conveying that understanding, showing that willingness to build community, inviting her to stuff, and using the emojis.

Mentee: Yeah.

Reflective Commentary: Competence and Compassion in Action

This exchange illustrates how instances of success can emerge organically from earlier preferred future descriptions. Whilst exploring how the client's hope for greater compassion might develop in the future, the conversation naturally unearthed occasions where compassion may already have been evident. Questions such as "How have you managed to keep in touch with people?" and "How did you phrase the text message?" invite the client to unpack the practical and relational steps involved in those moments, making implicit skills visible.

By now, multiple competencies are apparent: The client demonstrates an ability to maintain friendships across different social circles, bring people together in shared spaces, and to notice when others may need support. His description of checking in with a friend after a breakup, inviting her to community activities, and communicating care through small gestures such as emojis, illustrates a form of everyday compassion already present in his life.

The conversation reveals that qualities the client hopes to cultivate in his life, compassion, attentiveness, and community-building, are not entirely absent. Rather, they are already part of his relational repertoire. By highlighting these examples, the dialogue helps reframe the client not simply as someone struggling with a problematic behaviour, but as someone who already possesses many of the qualities associated with his hopes for the future.

Identity Questions and Choice

> *"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."*
>
> — Edith Eger in The Choice (2017)

A core stance within Solution Focused practice is to view the client as the expert on their own life. Rather than interpreting behaviour or offering explanations, we rely on the client's own observations, reflections, and emerging insights. Given we're speaking with an expert, it would be foolish not to ask for their opinion, not to allow space for them to consider life and its challenges through the lens of their own expertise.

Identity questions express this stance by inviting clients to consider what their actions and efforts reveal about the person they are and can become. Instead of analysing behaviour from the outside, clients draw conclusions about their own character, values, and capacities.

Over the years, I've witnessed numerous clients uncover a seemingly revolutionary or guiding thought whilst answering identity questions. These "lightbulb moments" are rarely dramatic; more often they emerge quietly, as clients hear themselves articulate possibilities or recognitions that had previously remained unspoken.

The following exchange illustrates such a moment, as the conversation turns toward what the client's community-building and relational care might suggest about his identity and autonomy.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: Cool. Okay. I think that with this compassion stuff, as well as applying to the women, it also sounds like it's about local community, these people from different areas that you bump into.

Mentee: Yeah.

Mentor: What do you think that shows about the person you are and the person that you can be? What do you think the way you're a hub for people from all kinds of different groups, connecting people in your community, shows about the kind of giftings God's given you?

Mentee: I never thought about it in that way, but when I do find myself around people, and I know this probably doesn't answer your question, but it kinda feels fake. It kinda feels two faced. Because it's like, I can have a compassion on this level, but then I'm doing this [sex buying] in the dark. It kinda just doesn't feel genuine. But you said the type of person I can be...

Mentor: Mhmm.

Mentee: In fact, when I think about it, it makes me even more angry. Because it's like, if I can be this person, but I'm being this other person, then I'm just choosing. I'm just choosing to do that. I'm just choosing not to be a good guy. And if I can this easily just choose not to do the right thing, then there's something wrong somewhere. You know? It makes me angry to know that actually in the past, like, three, four days, especially with the birthday celebrations, I've shown I can choose to be the good guy. I'm never normally nice to myself or give myself credit like that. I think I can genuinely break free from this thing. But if I can break free and I haven't, then clearly, this is a choice then.

This isn't, "oh, I've got an addictive brain". This isn't, "oh, you know, this is too hard". This is just "you wanna do it because you wanna do it", and that just says a lot about me and where I'm at with it all. But I never really saw love and bringing people together as a gift from God. I guess it is in a way. And I guess upon reflecting on that, I don't even know how to feel about it... I just don't feel that my life completely aligns with that. It doesn't completely align with that mission call.

Mentor: Yeah. Okay. So maybe as well as pursuing compassion, greater compassion, maybe that sense of, like, being genuine as well? Like, knowing and feeling that all the parts of your life are lining up?

Mentee: Yeah.

Reflective Commentary: Identity, Alignment, and Agency

As intended, my identity question prompts reflection from the client, whose response highlights an internal tension between two versions of himself: one that demonstrates compassion, community-building, and passion for people, and another that participates in behaviour he experiences as misaligned with those values. The language of "fake," "two-faced," and "not genuine" reflects a perceived gap between identity and behaviour.

Notably, the recognition of **choice** emerges from the client. Without directly confronting the misaligned behaviour, the client arrives at the conclusion his actions represent choices rather than inevitabilities. This moment of self-recognition appears to generate both frustration and possibility: frustration at the inconsistency, and realisation that change may be within reach. Such moments are not treated as confrontations or moral corrections, but rather opportunities for the client to clarify the relationship between their values, identity, and choices.

Faith again shapes the client's interpretation of these insights. His reference to a "mission call" provides a framework through which questions of identity and alignment are understood. My brief reflection, highlighting the ideas of "life lining up" and "being genuine", attempts to summarise and organise the client's language without introducing new interpretations.

Scales

"At every point
On the path,
You were learning.
Gratitude found you.
Sunlight found you, too.
And in the end,
After everything,
You grew
How you were meant to."

— Morgan Harper Nichols in Remember How Far You've Come (2020)

At this stage, **"genuine compassion"** had emerged as a helpful phrase for capturing the client's hoped-for change. I used this anchor alongside a Solution Focused scaling question to explore where the client currently stood in relation to their desired future.

In the exchange below, 10 out of 10 represents "genuine compassion", while 0 represents the opposite. Numerical precision is not the point here; what matters is the conversation the scale makes possible. Whether the client places themselves at a 2, 4, or 7, my intention remains the same: to identify the efforts, resources and successes that allow him to score that high and not lower.

It's worth noting that, in hindsight, I would have preferred to describe the upper end of the scale as simply '10', rather than '10 out of 10'. The latter may carry connotations of a marking system; it's certainly not my intention to score the client, but rather to provide two reference points for our conversation.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: Okay. So, you have been, and you can choose to be that compassionate guy. It'd be good to put a little marker down on that, so we can map it over time. So, if I ask you to imagine a scale from zero to ten, where ten out of ten is, let's call it "genuine compassion". Right?

Mentee: Mhmm.

Mentor: At 10, you've reached a point where you're genuinely compassionate, and zero out of 10 is the opposite of that. Where would you put yourself at the moment? Where would you say you are at the moment on that scale?

Mentee: Okay. I think two weeks ago, I would've put myself at, like, a five or six.

Mentor: Mhmm.

Mentee: In recent times, I think I probably put myself around, like, a seven.

Mentor: Yeah. Okay. And what are, let's say, three things, that have helped to get you up to a seven, rather than being lower?

Mentee: The birthday celebrations. Bringing people together. Yeah. Just the people I care about being around me, I think that kinda just softened my heart a little bit. That took my score up a little bit. And yeah, the birthday celebrations that have happened over the past week in different spaces.

Mentor: Cool. Okay. And what's one other thing that's keeping you pretty high on the scale rather than being down at the bottom?

Mentee: I would say my conversations with, like, real women. That's how I'd put it. Like, I think there's someone who I was talking to last week. It's weird, but she works with my uncle. She's a little bit younger than me, and I guess my uncle was trying to play Cupid, which was very, very weird. Very weird.

Both: [Laughter]

Mentee: And, yeah, we started talking, and that was... She was surprisingly cool, but I was like, my uncle does not know my type! So, I don't know what he was doing! Again, a very weird situation. Right?

Both: [Laughter]

Mentee: Yeah. Yeah. That was cool, but then I was talking to her, and I sent her a text yesterday saying that I wasn't sure. In a sense, the allure that someone I didn't really know could possibly fancy me was good, but it's the fact that I wasn't genuinely interested in her. So, I think my ability to cut that off showed me that I can choose to say "no" to unhealthy situations and say "yes" to healthier ones.

And then there's this other girl who I probably should, only because of me struggling with this [sex buying], I should probably put a distance between. But she's someone who I've enjoyed talking to in very small doses over the past couple of weeks. But, again, I just can't talk to her without feeling fake, you know, without feeling like I've got this... without feeling that... I don't know, man... There is this burden that's always on my shoulders.

Mentor: Mhmm.

[These 'mhmm's are what Tomori and Bavelas (2007, p. 34) term "minimal listener responses". Though easy to overlook, they are arguably an influential part of Solution Focused Practice, demonstrating our attentiveness to clients and their stories. Bavelas (2015), for example, recalled the variety of Steve de Shazer's m-hm's as one of the tiny, moment-by-moment details that revealed his brilliance as a therapist.]

Mentee: Talking to anyone doesn't feel good. But the conversations with them have made those choices a lot harder.

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: And it's made me look at real people in a different light. I actually value their emotions and feelings and have started looking at them holistically. So that's helped a little bit, but I don't want that to be the help factor. You know? I don't want talking to women or dating them to be the changing factor. I want it to come from me. I don't want to change because I don't wanna feel dirty when I talk to a girl.

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: I wanna change because I wanna change. Although I have acknowledged those small, small factors, and they've been helpful. I won't lie. Having someone there that you can maybe possibly care about, makes you start questioning your thoughts, and questioning your actions. It's made me be a bit more intentional about things. That's been helping. That's been helping.

Mentor: Yeah. Yeah.

Mentee: But then again, there's still a lot of question marks and things to work on in those spaces. But yeah.

Mentor: Yeah. Okay. So, there's been some useful conversations. You've noticed yourself looking at people differently, thinking about people more holistically, and you've exercised that ability to cut off situations that maybe aren't healthy, aren't going in a good direction.

Mentee: Yeah.

Mentor: Like with the woman that you spoke to when your uncle was playing Cupid.

Mentee: Yeah.

Reflective Commentary: Recognising Progress

Several aspects of the scaling conversation are noteworthy. First, the client places himself relatively high on the scale, describing a shift from "five or six" to "around seven" in recent weeks. This upward movement is attributed not to external interventions, but to experiences that have reinforced compassion and relational connection; particularly the birthday gathering and engagement with friends.

Secondly, the conversation highlights the role of real-world relational encounters in shaping the client's perspective. His reflections on conversations with women suggest a growing attentiveness to their emotional experience and a greater awareness of the relational implications of his behaviour. Importantly, the client also describes an instance of exercising restraint, choosing to disengage from a situation that he did not feel was genuine.

This ripple effect is a valuable aspect of Solution Focused conversations, their positive impact multiplying through and beyond the client to the benefit of others. I believe that men like this client, brave enough to seek help and enact change, will prove a significant part of the solution to sexual exploitation, with capacity to support and encourage others to overcome challenges of their own.

Lastly, the client expresses a desire for change to be internally motivated rather than externally driven. His statement: "I wanna change because I want to change", reflects an emerging sense of ownership over the process. Our exploration of different reasons for the client being as high as a seven, has brought both existing progress and emerging agency into view.

Small Signs of Progress

"Be not afraid of growing slowly; be afraid only of standing still."

— Chinese Proverb

As the conversation continues, further instances of success emerge, and at times they are accompanied by additional expressions of the client's hoped-for future: A desire "to stick through the frustrations," "use God as a key foundation to fight temptations," and "to have more faith."

My attention shifts toward identifying **small signs of progress**: a continuation of preferred future dialogue, but at a more immediate and incremental level. Rather than describing life at the "summit," the client considers what progress might look like partway along the path.

This can be done by building on the previously established scale, exploring what a small increase in genuine compassion might look like, or by 'leading from one step behind' (de Shazer et al., 2007, p. 4), listening carefully to the client's latest answers e.g. "to have more faith" and allowing them to steer the conversation. Either way, my intention is to elicit hypothetical signs of progress through conditional language: *if*, *suppose* and *imagine*. These seemingly insignificant words, laced with possibility, invite the client to describe change as something already happening, rather than something to be achieved through instruction.

The difference between signs of progress questions and action planning ones can seem minimal, as demonstrated by the comparisons below:

Solution Focused	Action Planning
If you moved up the scale by one small point, how would you know?	What do you need to do to move up the scale by one point?
Suppose that somehow you reach an X on the scale, what will be the first sign that shows you've done so?	What actions are needed to reach an X on the scale?
Imagine that your ability to manage frustrations improves a little, what will you start to notice about yourself?	What steps do you need to take to better manage frustrations?

What's more, the answers to these questions may also sound identical. Take for example a student who wants to be more confident in maths: An action planning question might ask: "What do you need to do to boost your confidence in maths?" and they may answer: "I need to start putting my hand up more and answering more questions". Whereas a Solution Focused question: "If you were more confident in maths, how would you know?" might produce the answer: "I would be putting my hand up more and answering more questions". The answers might look similar, but the key shift is moving from *"I need to..."* to *"I would be..."*.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: Ok, so you mentioned the idea of having more faith. Let's just stick to that for a moment. Suppose this is something God helps you out with, and you start to notice yourself having more faith and that growing in you, what will be the signs of that? What will be the initial small signs that you are growing in faith?

Mentee: I think the first sign is something I don't do anymore, which is praying when I feel tempted. Because if I can pray when I feel tempted, it's me saying I trust God to answer my prayer in some type of way. Like, I trust that the only way I'm not gonna do this is by His own strength. That would be big because I don't think I've really done that, and believed it whilst doing it, in a long time. So, yeah, that would be big.

Mentor: Yeah. Okay. So, praying when you feel tempted, which is tied in with that sense of trusting God.

Mentee: Yeah.

Mentor: So, when you say that would be big, what difference do you think that would make? If you started praying when you felt tempted?

Mentee: Not all the time, but I have felt the power of God, like, remove those feelings and, like, subside the waves and the mad thoughts in the past. And it would be nice at times when I feel that way, for those feelings and thoughts to be subsided in a moment of prayer. Yeah.

Reflective Commentary: From Possibility to Practice

This segment illustrates how future descriptions translate into recognisable, in-the-moment behaviours. The client identifies a specific and observable sign of progress: praying at the point of temptation. This is not introduced as a prescribed strategy but emerges from the client's own reflections on what "having more faith" would look like in practice.

The distinction from more directional, action planning language is once again observed. Rather than asking, *"What should you do when you feel tempted?"* the conversation enquires, *"What would you notice if your faith were growing?"* Whilst the client's response transforms an abstract value, faith, into a concrete behavioural indicator, it remains a possibility to be explored rather than an obligation or task to be completed.

Earlier parts of our conversation focused on identity, community, and longer-term change. In contrast, this exchange centres on the critical moment of temptation, where decisions and choices are made. By locating signs of progress within these moments, the conversation connects the client's broader values to specific situations in which change becomes observable.

Finishing Up

> *"To be passive is to let others decide for you. To be aggressive is to decide for others. To be assertive is to decide for yourself."*
>
> — Edith Eger in The Choice (2017)

Trainees often ask how I bring sessions to a close, and the answer is rather simple. Instead of introducing something new, I focus on allowing what's already emerged to settle.

At times, this involves pausing on a previously described sign of progress, allowing the image to linger like a cliffhanger in a compelling story: *"So, if you grew in faith and trust like you've described, you would be praying when you feel tempted, letting those waves of unwanted thoughts and feelings subside. Thanks for sharing, would you like to meet again in a couple of weeks?"* The intention is not to reinforce through instruction, but to reflect the client's own words back to them, leaving space for them to determine whether, where and how those possible changes begin to appear.

On other occasions, as in this session, I give the client the final word – inviting them to identify something significant from the conversation.

Session Excerpt

Mentor: Ok, my final one for today is this: What's something you've heard yourself say today that you'll maybe think about a little bit more, or something you've heard yourself say that you're pleased to hear yourself talking about?

Mentee: I think it was just nice to verbalise everything, if I'm honest.

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: A lot of these are thoughts that I have with myself quite often, but it was just nice to verbalise them. When I'm talking to myself about it, there's not really much laughter, so it was nice to, like...

Mentor: Yeah.

Mentee: Just smile and laugh about a couple of these things a little bit. I think the one thing that has been standing out and is standing out even more is like, again, all with the power of God, but how it's really just a choice that I have to make. And I really just need to remind myself to just make the right choice. Just make the right choice. Just make the right choice. So, yeah, hopefully, just making better choices, one day at a time, one hour at a time.

Mentor: Cool. Cool.

Mentee: Yeah.

Mentor: Okay. Well thank you for your efforts today and for answering all my questions, I'll be in touch again soon to organise the next session.

Mentee: Thank you so much.

Reflective Commentary: Consolidation and Ownership

The client's response suggests that the act of verbalising his thoughts, in a therapeutic and responsive context, was important. Ideas that previously remained internal and unstructured have now been expressed, heard, and reflected upon. The presence of humour and lightness also appears to have played a role in making the conversation useful and accessible.

The theme of **choice**, which emerged earlier in the session, is revisited again by the client. Importantly, it's not framed as an external expectation or instruction, but as a personal realisation. The repetition of "just make the right choice" reflects both determination and an awareness of the ongoing nature of the challenge.

Endings such as this don't seek to resolve the problem fully within a single session. Instead, they mark a point at which new ways of thinking, noticing, and responding may begin to take shape. The emphasis remains on what the client has recognised and what they may begin to notice in the time that follows.

Discussion

> *"Our pain and our challenges chisel us into better versions of ourselves. For sure, the blow of the chisel hurts. But the result, if we allow it to be, is a sculpted character competent to create a better world for themselves and others."*
>
> — Donald Miller in Hero on a Mission (2022)

This case study illustrates several ways in which Solution Focused practice may be applied to interventions for men who want to stop purchasing sex. While the findings are necessarily limited to a single case, a number of themes emerge that may be relevant for practitioners working in similarly sensitive contexts.

First, the stance that people are capable of change is foundational. In this case, adopting a non-judgemental and future-oriented position created space for the client to articulate his own hopes, values, and motivations. The decision to work with self-referring individuals reflects an underlying assumption that many men who purchase sex may already experience a discordance with their behaviour and may respond to opportunities for confidential and respectful engagement.

Secondly, the emphasis on desired outcomes shaped the direction of the work from the outset. Prioritisation of the client's hopes for the future, rather than unwanted past behaviour, appeared to reduce defensiveness and supported a more collaborative exploration of change.

Detailed description also played an important role. Throughout the session, progress was supported by inviting specific accounts of the client's preferred future, existing resources, and emerging signs of change. These moments of description facilitated clarity and self-recognition, allowing the client to connect abstract values, such as compassion and faith, with concrete experiences and behaviours.

This process resonates with Katti Jisuk Seo's (2021, p. 52) description of the "micro-moment," where practitioners attend closely to tiny fragments of conversation, trusting that meaningful change can emerge from finely detailed description. Dwelling on such moments allows the client to

experience their preferred future in tangible, embodied ways. In this case, the conversation explored emotional responses, relational interactions, and small shifts in how the client views himself and others.

By attending to moments where elements of the preferred future were already present, the session facilitated a shift in perspective: from viewing change as something distant, to something already underway. Identity-oriented questions around these 'instances of success' contributed to the client's developing sense of agency. As he reflected on what his actions revealed about the kind of person he is and could become, the client articulated a growing awareness of choice and personal responsibility. Importantly, this realisation emerged from his own reflections rather than external interpretation.

More broadly, the case highlights the value of treating the client as an expert on their own life. This stance kept the conversation grounded in the client's language, experiences and interpretations, generating engagement where shame and defensiveness might otherwise have limited constructive dialogue.

Conclusions

Overall, this case suggests that a Solution Focused approach may offer a collaborative and ethically sensitive way of engaging men who wish to stop buying sex, without relying on confrontation or instruction. It shows how change can be supported through careful attention to language, detailed description, and the client's own emerging understanding.

As a single case example, this account does not provide evidence of effectiveness. It does, however, illustrate how Solution Focused principles can be enacted in this context and may offer a basis for further exploration.

Perhaps the clearest account of what such work can contribute comes from our clients themselves. One individual reflected:

> *"[The project] made me feel comfortable and safe. They helped me grow in character and learn new things about myself which will help me get free from my addiction. When I had nowhere else to run, they supported me and I will be forever grateful."*

In keeping with the collaborative spirit of the approach, I also contacted the client from the transcript roughly one year after our conversation and invited him to read this article. He offered the following thoughts, which seem an appropriate way to close:

> *"The movie quote "beautiful things don't ask for attention" stood out to me; in the past year I've been trying to see myself as a beautiful thing that doesn't need to seek attention in wrong places. Yes, I've had downs, but there have been changes too. If it's any encouragement to anyone, the next step is possible - you just gotta keep taking one step after another."*

Ethical Considerations and Consent

The client provided written informed consent for anonymised material from the mentoring session to be used for publication and training purposes. At the outset of the work, the client was informed of the limits of confidentiality, including circumstances requiring safeguarding escalation.

All identifying information has been removed or altered to protect anonymity, including names, locations, occupations, and specific biographical details. The session material presented below is based on a video recording and its subsequent transcript. The practitioner has carefully selected and edited (where necessary) portions of the transcript to reflect the substance and sequence of the conversation as accurately as possible, while ensuring confidentiality. Any resemblance to actual individuals is coincidental.

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