

# **The Thesaurus of Useful Explanations: Arriving at Solutions Coming through the Why**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper describes some possible ways to handle clients' declared interest in the causes and explanations to their problems. Case examples demonstrate both the origin of these tools, as well as their content. Designed to provoke Solution-Focused therapists' current way of thinking about causal assumptions, it is open and inviting to new suggestions in this direction. Keeping in mind that explanations have little or nothing to do with solutions, readers are encouraged to follow their clients' unique ways of arriving at solutions, quite often demanding a simple and useful explanation as a step towards discussing their hopes, wishes, and goals.

*'One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.'*  
Jack Kerouac

## **Introduction 1: Who Has Been Concerned With What?**

In a late interview (1994) John H. Weakland replied to a question from Steve de Shazer's trainees about therapists' education and training "... *In the first place, I certainly do not have any complete program, or a curriculum, or a syllabus for every course, but only a couple of rather general ideas. It seems to me to be of two parts: One part would be NOT training for therapists, but essentially sort of background and history – people are to do some reading of various names in the field NOT to know how to do therapy, but to see WHO HAS BEEN CONCERNED WITH WHAT, and how did they think about that what. And that's all, that's all. Areas that they considered of interest and importance that have something to do with this field, and how did they think about it. And then the second part would be training, and as far as I can see, it would mean as much observation of a variety of therapists either live or on tape as possible, and talk about what was seen and heard, and then a lot of supervised*

*practice with a therapist whose style and approach makes sense to the individual student. I don't think I would go much beyond that."*

Across millennia and cultures a number of people have been concerned with the ways we can use this extremely powerful tool – language – for the benefit of our fellow beings.

Many felt that language contains unnecessary, useless, and even harmful elements, and have wondered respectively what these might be, in order to 'shave them away', thus trying to simplify and improve the use of language.

## **Introduction 2: The Heritage of Language Razors**

*"Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity."*

William of Ockham

This 'Razor' shaves away unnecessary assumptions, and is very valuable in therapy. Simpler explanations are usually better than more complex ones.

One of the builders of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, Steve de Shazer, however, was quite dissatisfied with the use of the Ockham's Razor in therapy. He took a couple of steps forward, the first one being Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea that we should free language of any explanations at all (including the simplest), leaving only descriptions lead us towards meaningful and useful language games.

*'We must do away with all explanations, and descriptions alone must take their place.'*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The second step that Steve de Shazer made was getting rid not only of all explanations, but also of some descriptions – these of problems.

*'You do not need to know what a problem is in order to solve it.'*

Steve de Shazer

Following this de Shazer's Razor, most Solution-Focused therapists have acquired the habit of avoiding clients' concerns about the possible causes to their conditions and complaints. Traditionally whenever the 'why' question appears in a therapeutic conversation, it is ignored in ways similar to Insoo Kim Berg's approach to such instances: *'We are going to come back to this later...'* with this 'later' never coming to the scene. Some therapists may even experience negative reactions to these situations, that we may jokingly call *causo-phobia*, or *why-allergy*. In most instances, the 'orthodox' Solution-Focused way today is to follow Wittgenstein and de Shazer instead of the client. That is how any therapist's direct dealing with the 'why' can be seen as a kind of heresy to this approach.

Only one other 'Razor' cuts even deeper into language – the Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion, i.e. the Buddhist idea that all signs share an ultimate signless nature, and going

beyond illusion requires getting rid of not only all explanations as well as descriptions, but also of any verbal language at all.

The picture below tries to show: William of Ockham, Ludwig Wittgenstein of Vienna, Steve de Shazer of Milwaukee, and Siddhartha of Shakyas and their Razors, ‘shaving away’ everything to the left, and preserving what remains to the right:



Besides the above, many other ‘razors’ have been designed in human history, like Darwin’s Evolutionary ‘cut off’ of divine interference in life development; or Freud’s ‘shave away’ of the illusion we are as reasonable as we think we are; etc., but they are used outside the usual content of therapeutic conversations, and so shall not be dealt with here.

### Introduction 3: Where Does the Client Want to Go Now?

One of the basic tools used in Simple Therapy is the Opening Question: *‘You know, my job is to ask questions, and they need to be as useful as possible, in this case for you, so... what do you think is the most useful question you can possibly hear from me now?’*

After the usual initial moment of confusion, and quite often laughing or smiling after that, roughly one third of clients start formulating questions for themselves and giving answers to these. This forms the Highway to Solutions – in usually several turns of the Client’s Question – Client’s Answer Therapeutic Wheel a solution picture is described and then acted upon by them. About another third reply with *‘I don’t know’*, and this is an implicit invitation for

therapists to do their job, i.e. to use their therapeutic tools. The remaining third of clients state some variation of a 'why' question, trying to understand (before doing anything else) what the causes to their problems/complaints are.

Then the usual Simple Therapist's reaction is to guide the client in his/her search for explanations by asking a variation of '***So, what do you think is the simplest possible and mostly useful explanation to your problem?***'

The rationale behind this question is:

Solution-Focused therapists assume they are not experts on the CONTENT of clients' lives, but they need to be experts on the PROCESS of constructing useful conversations. So, they have to be aware of how to practically use the Ockam's Razor. That is why clients are asked neither about ANY explanation coming to their minds, nor about OTHERS' (including Freud's, Jung's, Pavlov's, Selye's, Maslow's, etc.) explanations, but about THEIR OWN, SIMPLE, AND USEFUL explanations.

Over the years many clients have come up with really amazing, brilliant, and creative answers, and some of them turned out to be useful not only for themselves, but for other clients in similar (and sometimes not similar at all) situations. This is how a collection of clients-created, simple, and useful explanations was formed and gradually grew. This Thesaurus, discussed here, is designed to assist both therapists and clients in this third kind of conversational situations, when clients want to discover why their problems exist, but are unable to find useful answers themselves.

## **Some Case Reports and the Simple Explanations Derived from Them**

### **Case report 1: The Vomiting Girl and the Final Cut of the Ockham's Razor**

*A father brought for consultation his 7-year-old daughter complaining of her vomiting everyday for the last week during the second school lesson.*

*When the therapist tried to orient the conversation towards possible exceptions from the problem, girl's strenghts, etc., the father became very upset and refused answering his questions.*

*He declared he has some kind of 'analytical approach', so he refused to talk about anything else but "the cause for her condition, as we can only handle the situation if we know why this happens".*

*At his point in the session the therapist had no idea what to do, so he decided to follow the client, and asked the usually avoided in SFBT 'why' question:*

*- Okay, what do you think is the cause of this problem ?*

*- I think that her teacher in writing is to blame. My daughter has never been physically punished, and this teacher hit her on the head with her massive golden ring when she was not*

*doing some task, so the child reacts to this aggression by vomiting, i.e. refusing to accept such a crude attitude. Maybe we need to change the school she goes to.*

*- Okay, and what does the teacher think about this ?*

*- Well, she says my wife gives the child too many antibiotics on necessary and unnecessary occasions, so she vomits as a side reaction to the drugs...*

*- And what does your wife say ?*

*- She is sure my parents are to blame, as we were out of town for a couple of weeks, they looked after the child at that time, and the problem started right after we came back...*

*- And what do your parents say ?*

*- They think my wife is feeding the child with unsuitable for her age and inappropriate food, and her stomach doesn't accept it.*

*The therapist asked the girl:*

*- Your father thinks it is important to know the cause of this, do you have any idea about it?*

*The father looked shocked by the idea that the little girl might have something to say on the issue, so quite intrigued he also asked:*

*- Yes, what do you think ?*

*The girl thought for some time, and replied:*

*- Well, I think the first time it happened by chance...*

*- By chance ?! - the father said - And what about the other times after ?*

*- Maybe it became a habit of mine.*

*...*

*- So, what are we going to do about it? – the father asked.*

*- Well, if my mother doesn't give me breakfast for a week, I shall have nothing to vomit, so the habit will go away.*

*The therapist said to the father:*

*- I promise to you that absolutely nothing bad will happen to your daughter if she has no breakfast for a week, eating all her other daily meals. Do you think your wife will agree to this?*

*- Yes, if you say so – the father replied.*

*- Okay, I say so.*

*After this session they never showed up again.*

*The therapist happened to meet the father in the street a couple of months later, and he said they didn't call again, as 'after three no-breakfast days', on the next Thursday the girl wanted to have her morning meal again. The problem was all gone.*

### **The Confirmation**

Upon hearing the above story, a father said:

*- Yes, it is exactly what happened to us, too. When our daughter was three, she didn't sleep one night, and then this became a habit of the whole family for the next four years. We tried many and different therapies, but they all failed. She continued screaming and walking around nightly, and we gave up trying to do anything about it. Then, at the age of seven, she just fell asleep one night, and this became a new habit of us all. We sleep quite well for the last couple of years now.*

This gave rise to a very simple explanation to both problems and solutions, that was called the Final Cut of the Ockham's Razor: ***Everything Happens First, and then Becomes a Habit.*** This simple and non-judgmental explanation can usefully explain many human problems as well as solutions: wet/dry beds; drinking/abstinence; hearing voices/not hearing them; vomiting/not vomiting; insomnia/sleeping well; running away from school/going there; depression/well-being; obsessions/none of them; It accuses no one of anything, and opens the road to solutions by pointing out that all these problems are mere habits, that can be replaced by other habits, or at least can be modified, and eventually overcome.

### **Case report 2: The Carpenter and His Energy**

*- You know, my job is to ask questions, and they have to be as useful as possible for the people I meet, in this case for you. So, what do you think is the most useful question I can ask you right now?*

*The client laughed a lot, and then after a silence of thinking he replied:*

*- I have to know why this happens to me.*

*- Okay, what do you think about it?*

*- Well, maybe it is accumulated stress, I guess. From my parents, the clients, the bank, the crisis, I have no girlfriend, ...*

*- Accumulated...*

*- Yes, you know, when you are at a funeral, for example, the energy there piles up in you...*

*- Accumulated energy?*

*- Yes, energy!*

*- ...*

- ... *Maybe I just have to organize my energy differently. You know, for years I've been thinking about jogging and walking along a two-kilometers-long path that runs right by my home, but I never found the time and energy to do that after work. And now I realized that I have to do this walking early in the morning, before anything else I do that day!*

Some clients may benefit from 'explaining' their symptoms/complaints as manifestations of misdirected energy. Then the solution obviously involves redirecting their energy in some other, more benevolent and useful way.

### **Case report 3: Because I Am Alive!**

- *I want to know why I get these panic attacks.*

- *So, what do you think, why do you get these panic attacks?*

- *Well... maybe because I am alive! When I die, I'll have no panic, no aches, no short breaths, nor anything else, do I?*

- *Yes, you'll have none of these. Dead people don't complain of panic, aches, short breaths, anything, I agree. Only living people have all these complaints.*

Therapists need to be very careful in using this 'explanation', as it carries a possible misunderstanding – it may be perceived by some clients as disrespectful or unserious.

### **Case report 4: Because He Loves Me**

*A gypsy woman in her mid-40-ies was attacked by her jealous husband who hit her with a knife seventeen times on many parts of her body. The accident took place in a taxi-cab, and she survived it due to the lack of space there (so he was unable to swing his knife better), and the thick winter clothes she wore.*

*In court the forensic surgeon stated, that the victim escaped death by pure chance, with one of the cuts penetrating her pericardium, but only touching the myocardium of her heart. When the judge gave the word to the victim of the attack, she said:*

- *Your Honor, I know you will sentence my husband to jail for attempted murder, which is a serious crime by your law. I will not bring civil charges against him. The only thing I beg you for, is give him the shortest sentence permitted by the law, and I know he will behave as best as possible in jail, so he gets out even sooner, as I need him to help me with our four kids, and the two kids of my sister, who left the country a couple of years ago.*

- *What are you saying? Did his brothers frighten you, or did they force you to say this?*

- *No, his brothers have nothing to do here, this is what I want, and I stand to my word.*

- *Did they pay to you? How much money did they give you?*

- *No, no money is involved here! I tell you what I want!*

- *But he almost killed you?!*

- *Yes, your Honor, because he loves me.*

No solutions whatsoever were talked about in this case (and there could hardly be any), yet this lady managed to keep her family together using a simple explanation. Hopefully no one in the world should be loved in this way, but anytime a couple/family is engaged in conflict, we can use this explanation: *'It is obvious that you love each other, and sometimes the fire of love can get out of control... so this is all you need – keeping your love under control!'*

The lesson this woman taught us is that the opposite of love is not anger or hatred, but indifference.

**Case report 5: Because I Say So** (as retold by Georgeta Tudor in personal communication, Bucharest 2015)

*Bogdan Ion, a Romanian therapist, worked with a male client, who was redecorating his house for a long time and as he finished one thing, he was noticing that something else needed to be done, and this went on and on. And from one moment on the task became an endless one.*

*One day, some friends came to visit him and they noticed how much work is still needed. In that instant, the man understood something and he told them: 'No, it is done!' They insisted by showing him what he yet has to do, and that the house still needs a lot of things to repair. The man said:*

*- It is done! I am telling you, it is done BECAUSE I SAY IT IS DONE!*

...

Why are we happy/unhappy? Because we say so!

Why do we have/do not have problems? Because of exactly the same reason!

Whenever clients are language-conscious and sensitive, this 'explanation' can help them reframe (sometimes quite radically) their situation.

## **Repetitorium**

For the time being, the Thesaurus of Useful Explanations contains five simple, clients-suggested, non-accusing, and (most importantly) useful explanations to a wide range of human problems:

- It happened first, and then became a habit;
- It is one's energy;
- Because one is alive;
- Because two love each other;
- Because one says so.

## Discussion

Steve de Shazer used to define SFBT as ‘just a toolbox’. This definition is particularly useful for the search of new tools that can be added to the toolbox.

The Thesaurus is one such set of tools. Just as we can rely on a bunch of questions, found to be useful in diverse contexts, now we can also bravely face the clients who are interested in the causes to their difficulties.

Wittgenstein’s idea that we need to do away with all explanations and only descriptions should take their place is widely accepted by many SF practitioners around the world, but it may increase many clients’ uncertainties. As Masserman pointed out, *‘The clinical relevance of the Uncertainty Principle is that all therapy (Greek—therapeien, service) is effective only insofar as it increases the recipient’s confidence as to his physical well-being, alleviates his concerns about his interpersonal securities and fosters comforting the philosophic beliefs.’* Many clients feel interpersonal security with their therapists when the later agree to discuss causal issues with them, and that comforts their philosophic beliefs, usually very different from Wittgenstein’s beliefs.

What we need to keep in mind is that we ask about simple causes to clients’ problems not because we are interested in them, but only because this particular client has chosen to go in the ‘why’ direction for a while. Taking them seriously (Steve de Shazer & John Weakland, 1994) requires interest from the therapist about the possible causes to the problem, if and when the client is interested in that. When satisfied with a useful explanation, clients usually change the direction of the conversation, and start being interested in solutions instead.

Sometimes all it takes to help clients go beyond their search for causes is to follow them for a while in Causes-land. Just spending some Time in a search for explanations, even without reaching them, may happen to be enough. Their usual reaction is to follow therapists in Solutions-land:

*‘I will follow you, will you follow me... I will stay with you, will you stay with me?’*

Michael Rutherford, Phil Collins, Tony Banks

As Insoo Kim Berg put it *‘it makes common sense to me that if I listen to clients, they listen to me in response; if I respect clients, they respect me back’* (personal communication, 1994)

So when we follow clients in their search for causes and explanations, they usually respond by following us in our search for solutions.

*“Reason obeys itself; and ignorance submits to whatever is dictated to it”*

Thomas Paine

Following Paine, we can say that clients have their reasons to ask at one time or another why something happens to them, and the not-knowing or ignorant therapist submits to whatever he is dictated by them to do.

This, however, is only partially so. While maintaining his not-knowing position about the CONTENT of the conversation, the simple therapist remains an expert on its PROCESS.

Reminder: Being such expert requires that BEFORE using any of the explanations mentioned above, the therapist needs to ask *'Okay, you want to know why your problem exists. So, what do you think is the simplest and most useful explanation to it?'*

If and when clients come up with a useful explanation themselves, the therapist just forgets about this Thesaurus. The process is identical to the way the Opening Question is used: therapist's questions are asked only if and when clients are unable or unwilling to state their own ones.

## **Conclusion**

Whenever a client is ready to follow the therapist's search for solutions, we can use the traditional SFBT tools, and co-create with her the desired miracle picture, sometimes even not-knowing anything about the problem.

When clients want to talk about their problem/situation in detail, we rely on Wittgenstein's Razor, and follow their problems' descriptions in the MRI style, until a solution is found.

If clients want, however, to know before and above all why their problem exists, and we want to save them from entering the useless Grand Theories Labyrinth, we can use the Thesaurus of Useful Explanations, thus helping them go beyond the 'why', and then enter Solutions-Land at a later moment.

Whenever a client refuses/is unable to use verbal language, we put to work the Diamond scalpel of Siddhartha Gautama and try to help him/her in non-verbal ways – by using music, fine arts, animals, dance, sports, plants, etc.

Now it is the time for you, dear reader, to listen to your clients for other simple explanations they propose, that can be added to this Thesaurus. For a tool to be put there, it needs to be:

1. Client-proposed (in one way or another);
2. Non-accusing of anyone for anything;
3. Simple enough to be
4. Useful for the client who proposed it;
5. And can be used with other clients in similar situations for their own benefit.

Good Luck!

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Plamen Panayotov is a psychiatrist, working as Chief Physician at the Day Clinic of Rouse Mental Health Centre, Bulgaria.

He is Chairman of the Board of Solutions Brief Therapy and Counseling Centre Rouse, a non-governmental non-for-profit organization, running a number of social services for people with mental problems and addictions – protected home, day center, social rehabilitation and integration center, and social firm. The Centre spreads SF ideas in diverse social areas. Plamen teaches Solution-Focused Brief Therapy at Angel Kanchev Rouse University, Simple Therapy at the Bucharest University, and in private courses.

As a student of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, he is a fan of doing more with less. Lately, however, he tries to go Zen – doing almost everything with almost nothing ☺.

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