

Solution-Focused Ideas Guide

Supervision: An Interview with Eve Lipchik

Interview conducted by Cheryl Storm, AAMFT Supervision Bulletin editor, with Eve Lipchik, M.S.W.

Published in the AAMFT Supervision Bulletin, Vol. VIII, No. 1, Spring 1995.

Storm: *How do solution-focused ideas guide your supervision?*

Lipchik: For the most part, I make the same assumptions about supervision as I do about clients regarding inherent resources, past positive experiences, and uniqueness. In discussing cases with them I will ask very similar questions as I do of clients: What do you think is working for you in this case? What has worked in the past for you when you felt confused? Whose goal is more important at this time, yours or the client's? I also try to understand supervisees' learning styles so I can use them to facilitate our collaboration. An idea that has become very important for me in solution-focused work in the past few years is the emotional climate or context in which therapeutic conversations take place. I believe that clients have to feel respected and comfortable in order to benefit from the collaborative experience and it is the role of the therapist to establish and maintain that climate. Techniques by themselves are not enough. The same goes for the supervisory experience. Supervisees have to feel safe in their relationship with supervisors in order to profit from it. I try to be respectful and understanding at all times of their points of view and their actions. For example, in a situation where a supervisee is giving too many suggestions to a client or may be trying to influence the client in some way, I might talk about "working too hard" rather than being critical. This allows for a much less threatening conversation about options. I also do a lot of experiential exercises with supervisees to help them develop the respectful, curious stance and to maintain the boundaries between themselves and clients that are necessary to do that. At the same time, I cannot assume the nonexpert position on supervisees' views as much as I can with clients because I feel a

supervisor has to be guided by some theoretical principles and practice techniques. How these are utilized by supervisees in their collaboration with clients requires some judgment which immediately places the supervisor in the position of expert.

Storm: *Several authors have written about using solution-focused ideas in supervision. They differ regarding how they address "supervisee growth areas." How do you deal with supervisee growth areas you notice?*

Lipchik: There is a difference between personal growth through therapy and growth through supervision. The former is based on the make-up, experience, and needs of a unique individual; the latter goes beyond that to include a specific body of knowledge and how to apply this for the benefit of others. So I think of it as both: first, bringing out the supervisee's strengths and using them, and, second, reinforcing and teaching certain concepts. More specifically, the way I think of the process is to have supervisees identify learning goals and steps toward achieving them. Part of the process is their ability to evaluate how they are moving toward those goals and what they need to keep doing. As their supervisor, I also feel it is my responsibility to point out areas of growth they may not be aware of. They don't have to respond to it, but if I don't offer my perspective, I am limiting opportunities.

I find the most effective form of supervision to be videotape. The rule for watching videos together is that the supervisee, group of supervisees, or I will ask to stop the tape at places where we see something that we think is either very good, or something that we want to question and talk more about. When I stop the tape at areas that I want to highlight I might ask: What were you thinking at this point? What do you think is going on between you and the client here? What do you think the client might be thinking at this time? How many different ideas can you come up

with? How does what is going on here fit with the client's goals? How do you think your question (or statement) is helping the client find his or her own answers?

Storm: *One of the logical extensions of solution-focused ideas for supervision is to have supervisees bring a case that they feel is going well rather than a stuck case. Do you practice this?*

Lipchik: No. My experience has been that supervisees want to discuss what is not working, rather than what is working. It is my practice to underscore positives whenever I can anyway, so they already know what I think they are doing right. I have ongoing conversations with supervisees about how their needs are being met, and the most common request I get is to point out more things that they should work on.

Storm: *Some supervisors have noticed that by emphasizing supervisee successes in therapy, supervisees may assume a "Pollyanna" quality in their supervisors. Have you noticed that?*

Lipchik: Yes, sometimes the process of focusing on positives too much can give that impression. After all, when you commit to a program of supervision you expect that there are things you don't know yet and you want the supervisor to help you change them. If the supervisor keeps focusing only on success, supervisees may actually end up feeling short-changed. It is very important to tell people what they are doing right, but you should also guide them toward areas of continuing growth.

Storm: *Can they get an inflated sense of their competence if positives are overemphasized?*

Lipchik: Yes, that's possible. And that would be a terrible shame. If supervisees get the impression that there is a point where one can know everything there is to know they will be deprived of future growth. Supervision should be a model for self-evaluation for that purpose. But, again, we really shouldn't generalize. Each supervisee is unique, just as each client is.

What is important is that supervisors think about how each of their supervisees learn best. Some people are motivated by praise and others need a little anxiety.

Storm: *Can focusing on "successes" limit the development of supervisees by not pushing them to develop new areas?*

Lipchik: Yes, it can, if carried to an extreme. Some people think of solution-focused therapy in extremes like that...you are only supposed to talk solution talk and no problem talk. Well, that's a theoretical guideline, but if one were to get too rigid about applying this idea it might be more harmful than helpful. That's how I think about it in supervision, too.

Storm: *When supervision is often regarded as an intensive process over time, how does the idea of being brief fit with supervision?*

Lipchik: You know, I have actually had many people who call to inquire about training in brief therapy for their staff or providers, express surprise that it is not brief. I have a hard time convincing them that it takes just as long as any other respectable therapeutic modality. I explain that brief therapy is about a type of conversation between people that opens up new options for them based on who they already are and what they already know. The fact that it is usually brief is a side effect, not the main purpose. Supervision or training of therapists in general has to be an intensive process that takes a longer period of time because it is a process of skill finding and skill building. A person might find a solution to a personal problem in one hour or less, and be the judge of whether that suffices or not. In professional education, people who are designated "experts" because of their standing in the profession make decisions about how long a course of study should be and how satisfactory achievement is to be judged. These standards are based on what has worked in the past for the profession in general, not on individual talents or needs. So being brief in therapy has nothing to do with the supervisory process of people who want to work briefly.