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**Abstract:** Defines single-session brief counseling, explains the brief counseling training program, and discusses how the brief counseling program satisfies inservice training needs and promotes professional and personal development. Ways to incorporate brief counseling into school programs are given. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2010 APA, all rights reserved)

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**Full Text Database: BRIEF COUNSELING: HELPING COUNSELORS ADOPT AN INNOVATIVE COUNSELING APPROACH**

Secondary school counselors use individual counseling extensively to help students deal with problems such as peer conflicts, stress, eating disorders, school phobia, and loneliness (Frank, 1987). Nevertheless, many counselors ask themselves: "Where can I find the time to help so many students?" One answer to this question is to use Single Session Brief Counseling--a concise, action-oriented approach to helping.

The Brief Counseling Project was designed for two purposes: first, to examine the effectiveness of Single-Session Brief Counseling in a school setting, and second, to provide school counselors the opportunity for professional development. The focus of this article is on how Brief Counseling served as a vehicle for the counselors' professional development. In this article we (a) define Single-Session Brief Counseling, (b) explain the Brief Counseling training program, (c) discuss how the Brief Counseling program satisfied in-service training needs and promoted professional and personal development, and (d) suggest ways to incorporate Brief Counseling into school programs.

### **SINGLE-SESSION BRIEF COUNSELING**

Most counselors have learned humanistic, behavioral, and psychodynamic therapy models based on the assumption that counselors have substantial time to counsel individuals (Corey, 1991). This assumption does not reflect the reality of school counseling. We searched for counseling models that recognized that counseling time was severely limited. As alternatives to prevalent therapy models, several time-limited counseling and therapy models have been developed and hold promise for application by school counselors (Amatea, 1989; Amatea & Sherrard, 1991; de Shazer, 1985, 1988, 1991; Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982; Lopez, 1985; Molnar & Lindquist, 1989; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Some authors have even proposed single-session counseling based on these models (Bloom, 1981; Littrell, Malia, Vanderwood, & Kimpston, 1991; O'Hanlon & WeinerDavis, 1989).

The Brief Therapy Center in Palo Alto, California, uses a four-step model with the number of sessions limited to 10 (Fisch et al., 1982; Watzlawick et al., 1974). In the Brief Counseling Project with high school students, we radically modified the Brief Therapy Center's model by reducing the number of sessions from 10 to 1 to answer the question: How successful can students be in reaching their goals if they have but one counseling session and two follow-up evaluation sessions? We believed that the Brief Therapy Centers approach was appropriate for a secondary school setting because it was relatively easy to learn, emphasized problem solving, and focused on student-generated solutions. Because it was a school setting we substituted the word counseling for therapy.

When using the four sequential steps during a single session, the counselor (a) helps the student define a problem on which the student would like to work; (b) delineates the student's attempted solutions to the problem; (c) assists the student in setting a specific, but limited goal; and (d) gives the student a task designed to help reach the student's goal.

The fourth step involves having the counselor design an intervention for the client (Watzlawick et al., 1974). In our research we simplified the fourth step by having the intervention be one of de Shazer's (1988) generic tasks, such as: Do something different, no matter how surprising or fun or enjoyable or off-the-wall it might seem. With high school students we added the additional injunction, "It cannot be illegal, immoral, or harmful to yourself or others." Students often responded with a "knowing" smile.

### **TRAINING IN SINGLE-SESSION BRIEF COUNSELING**

Beginning in early 1990, the researchers began monthly 2-hour training sessions with four experienced counselors at East High School in Sioux City, Iowa. Initial meetings focused on explaining the fourstep Brief Counseling model outlined in the Project's training manual. The researchers provided demonstrations of each Brief Counseling step. The counselors were encouraged to practice the steps in role-play situations during the training and with their students. Brief Counseling practice sessions with students were audiotaped, and the researchers gave feedback to the counselors about their effectiveness in doing Brief Counseling.

In late spring the counselors were ready to begin data collection for the Brief Counseling Project. The counselors used the data individually to assess their effectiveness in applying Brief Counseling; the researchers used the data to assess the overall impact of Brief Counseling in a school setting.

Immediately prior to the counseling sessions, the counselors had students complete data forms. Students supplied demographic information, specified the concern or problem, listed three feelings associated with the concern, and rated the intensity of the feelings. While students were completing forms, the counselors consulted protocol sheets to determine which Brief Counseling treatment group the students would be placed in related to data collection for the research project: (a) counseling steps 1-3, (b) counseling steps 1-4, or (c) counseling steps 3-4 only (Watzlawick et al., 1974). The counselors were free to deviate from the protocol if the students' concerns were clearly inappropriate for the assigned treatment condition or for Single-Session Brief Counseling.

During the counseling session the counselors recorded the goals toward which the students were working. At the follow-up evaluation sessions the counselors recorded the students' success in reaching their goal and how they rated their feelings.

## **SATISFYING IN-SERVICE TRAINING NEEDS**

The Brief Counseling Research Project addressed the in-service needs of the counselors in several ways. First, the counselors' in-service needs for additional training were met with the introduction of the new Single-Session Brief Counseling model and the techniques needed to implement it. After the researchers demonstrated the Brief Counseling model and each of the four steps, the counselors practiced with their students. Periodic feedback was provided by the researchers after the counselors practiced applying the model. Overall the counselors were, as one stated, "eager for the opportunity to get in on the ground floor regarding an intriguing, challenging, and innovative counseling model."

Second, the counselors' in-service needs for short-term counseling approaches were met by the introduction of the singlesession model. Because of severe on-the-job time constraints, the counselors were quite receptive to the crispness and brevity of the Brief Counseling model. As one school counselor observed:

As counselors we find ourselves doing more and more things with the same amount of time. If we could find a way of having things move quicker and at the same time find a way of providing help for our clients, then we were really interested in the idea of Brief Counseling.

Third, learning about Brief Counseling in a convenient location, their own school rather than a university environment, was important to the counselors and reduced their anxiety because they "weren't in a classroom anymore." One counselor summarized the experience by stating the following:

It contained many of the aspects of a counseling practicum without the anxiety of tests and grades or the need to travel somewhere to work with new clients in a strange setting. We were instructed in the new technique; practiced, recorded data via information sheets and audiotapes, and experienced critiques by fellow counselors and the trainers. All this was at our work site and within the normal work day and with our usual clients.

Finally, the Project provided the counselors a systematic tool for assessing their counseling effectiveness. The training provided a way for the counselors to assess their counseling strengths and weaknesses. Because of students' feedback, counselors were quickly aware of their students' success in reaching goals.

## **PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The counselors perceived their participation in the research project as an opportunity for both professional and personal development. One counselor stated this even more strongly when she said, "I have taken a professional and personal risk." Anxiety was also associated with the Project because it had been several years since most of the counselors had taken a counseling practicum. One counselor reported that initially she had said to herself, "Oh my

gosh, it's been years since I've tape recorded my sessions!" As the Project progressed, the counselors reported to the researchers that they saw professional and personal development in three areas: changes in their own personal styles of counseling, increased functioning as a counseling team, and positive implications for the school's counseling program.

Changes in the counselors' own personal styles of counseling occurred. Learning Brief Counseling meant that the counselors began to think within a new framework and understand its purpose. They did not find the Single-Session Brief Counseling difficult, but they found it took time to modify their customary ways of counseling. Learning a more action-oriented approach challenged the ways these counselors conceptualized counseling. At first the Brief Counseling approach seemed rather "unfeeling" in orientation. As the counselors practiced setting goals and giving students tasks, the counselors discovered that they could retain their personal styles while following the model. Counselors who liked to focus on clients' feelings found that they could still do that even while becoming more structured. As one counselor said, "I became more cognitive in orientation, more organized, and started doing better follow-ups." As the counselors became more comfortable in doing Brief Counseling, they experienced satisfaction in seeing successful client outcomes.

Changes in the counselors' own personal styles of counseling are captured in the following statements: "The program has added new techniques to counseling techniques that I currently use, and that has been exciting"; "I now realize I don't need to collect as much background information from the student") and "I learned I need to do better follow-ups, and the Project has given me that tool." Counselors found that they were approaching counseling in a more action-oriented manner. For example, one counselor said that he had "developed a more active focus in identifying the student's concern and then defining a positive and measurable goal selected by the student." Another counselor stated that she is more inclined "to focus on the 'here and now'--action oriented. I need not always deal with the history of the problem." Sometimes the Project had a major effect on counseling orientation. One counselor reflected this when she said, "Perhaps the greatest change for me has been a shift from career guidance to career counseling. I'm no longer the 'information giver'--I am teaching process."

While individual counseling styles were affected, the counselors noted that they also enhanced their functioning as a counseling team. The group experienced team building, fellowship, and departmental camaraderie as they met with the researchers for their monthly training and review sessions. The Project provided the counselors with an opportunity to share and solve problems together, and it served to give the counselors a common language as they discussed their concerns about counseling students.

Finally, because of increased communication among the counselors and a common language for talking about counseling, there were indications that the Brief Counseling Project might

have future implications for program development. By participating in the Project, counselors were being influenced "to look at what we are really doing versus what we say is important." Counselors independently experimented with the model and found it flexible enough to adapt to working with both students and parents together, with teachers in a consulting role, and with students in group counseling.

### **INCORPORATING BRIEF COUNSELING INTO SCHOOL PROGRAMS**

Based on their year of learning and implementing Single-Session Brief Counseling, the counselors experienced considerable professional development. The counselors had challenged themselves by their willingness to learn a new counseling approach and, as a consequence, they found themselves empowered as they helped students to be empowered. Based on our observations of the year in-service training in Single-Session Brief Counseling, the following recommendations are made for counselors in other schools.

First, meeting as a team was a very useful vehicle for receiving feedback while learning the new model and its accompanying set of skills. The high school in this project had four counselors, so the meetings were at the counselors' school. In schools where there is one counselor we suggest that the counselor meet monthly with one or more counselors from other schools, perhaps rotating the meeting place. As one counselor said, "Sharing experiences with others using Brief Counseling is valuable. I suggest pairing up with someone already familiar with or using the technique so questions can be answered and applications critiqued."

Second, Brief Counseling seems well-suited for students in a high school setting. It is also appropriate, however, for elementary and middle school students, as illustrated by the many cases reported in Amatea (1989), Amatea and Sherrard (1991), and Molnar and Lindquist (1989).

Third, the Brief Counseling model is highly flexible. The counselors found themselves adapting the model for use with groups as well as individuals, and with parents, teachers, and administrators as well as students. One counselor said his group members learned the technique and applied it in helping each other.

Fourth, the limitations of the Single-Session Brief Counseling model should be acknowledged. Brief Counseling is but one tool a counselor can use to help students reach their goals. As with all tools, it is important to choose the best one. A single-session model is not an appropriate tool for problems involving abuse of drugs and alcohol, cases of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or situations when supportive counseling is needed.

Finally, professional development means challenging oneself to take risks. We suggest that taking risks be passively reframed as the opportunity for personal and professional growth.

The Sioux City counselors embraced the opportunity to learn Single Session Brief Counseling. As they engaged in the process of helping students using this cutting edge approach, the counselors experienced the excitement and fulfillment of personal and professional growth.

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