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A Solution-Focused Intake – Conceptualization and Applied Examples

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ABSTRACT

Solution focused (brief) therapy (SFBT) is a counseling approach that focuses on supporting a client to identify solutions to problems through enhancing their use of existing resources such as strengths, values, and knowledge. Whilst SFBT has gained popularity in contexts such as mental health support and school counseling, its application within sport remains relatively underutilized. This article introduces a Solution-Focused Intake as a way of integrating Solution-Focused tools and techniques into applied sport psychology. Key techniques, with an emphasis on those used to clarify athlete goals and explore past experiences, are discussed, alongside applied case study examples.

KEYWORDS

SFBT; intake sessions; sport psychology; applied practice

Introduction to SFBT

Originating from the work conducted by the Brief Family Therapy Center (de Shazer, 1985), Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) can be viewed as an athlete-led counseling approach that encourages individuals to utilize their strengths and resources (e.g., social support, previous experiences) to find solutions to the challenges that they may be facing (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004). Solution-focused practitioners work on the underlying premise that clients possess the strengths, knowledge, values and strategies to achieve their goals and develop a solution to their problem, even if they are yet to acknowledge or realize this yet (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; McCormick, 2014). This places solution-focused work as an opposing approach to the more 'traditional' problem-focused approach is typically seen in sport psychology, such as the use of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Whilst CBT practitioners may look to identify the root cause of a problem, asking questions to understand the impact of negative thoughts, feelings and emotions and understanding

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'why' a problem is occurring, a SFBT practitioner instead directs the conversation toward 'how' a problem can be solved (Grant, 2012; Grant & O'Connor, 2010),

In order to facilitate change, SFBT practitioners focus their work on several key assumptions and principles (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004). These assumptions include a focus on what works, that there are always exceptions to the problem that is currently being experienced, that the athlete is the expert in their situation and that the interaction between athlete and practitioner is one of collaboration and cooperation (see Berg & Miller, 1992 and Høigaard & Johansen, 2004 for further details).

To understand the application of solution-focused principles and assumptions within Sport Psychology, Figure 1 highlights a fictional example of the information that a Solution-Focused practitioner may identify within a case study in comparison to a Problem-Focused practitioner.

On the surface, the focus of SFBT on identifying goals, resources, strengths and what works best for the athlete, has potential applications within a sport and exercise context. Within sport, SFBT has been applied to a handful of topics such as; a general overview of the concept (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004), application within a team context (McCormick, 2014), injury support (Gutkind, 2004), leadership (Maechel et al., 2022), imagery (Bell et al., 2011) and integration alongside a strength-based approach (Castillo & Bird, 2022; Gunning & Smith, 2025). Alongside this, there is a growing application of Single Session Therapy within sport (SST; Bowman & Turner, 2022; Pitt et al., 2015., Pitt et al., 2020). SST refers to the delivery of a single, often brief, session without uptake on further sessions from the client and can be conducted with any method of practice (e.g CBT, REBT), although SFBT is the most used approach (Pitt et al., 2015, 2020). For example, within an elite sport context Pitt and colleagues (2020) developed a framework for practitioners to implement when conducting SST with athletes that was strongly couched in SFBT principles. Readers interested in learning more about the use of SST within Sport Psychology are encouraged to read the work referenced within this section of the article.

The current article adds to this existing literature by providing an insight into the potential application of SFBT techniques specifically within a sport psychology intake session, creating a Solution-Focused Intake (SFI) and is based on the experiences of the first author.

Author background

The application of SFBT within the intake session has been an approach to practice I (the first author) have adopted during applied practice. At the time of writing, I have recently completed the British Psychological

Jasmine is a 21-year-old 400m sprinter competing at a national level. She recently returned to training following a hamstring injury sustained during competition. Although her physical recovery has progressed well, Jasmine reports ongoing struggles with confidence and anxiety. She describes a sense of disconnect from her pre-injury form, often expressing concerns about whether she can return to the athlete she once was. Feelings of pressure have also increased as she compares herself to teammates who continued to improve in her absence. During the initial conversation, Jasmine discussed a recent personal best that she achieved in the gym as well as how supportive her coach is. She also noted that her anxiety typically peaks during high-intensity sprint drills and in pre-race scenarios, where she describes strong fear of re-injury which was the same as when she was injured 3 years ago. She often holds back in training, despite being physically cleared, and has skipped a few low-stakes races which has further added to her struggles. She is currently getting ready for the next season where she has set herself the goal of winning a medal at the national championships.

Problem-Focused Elements:	Solution-Focused Elements:
• High anxiety • Low confidence • Fear of Re-Injury • Holding back in training • Skipping races • Disconnect from pre-injury form • How can we remove/ limit these feelings? • CBT / REBT approach	• National Level Sprinter • Physical recovery has gone well • Personal best in the Gym • Support from Coaches • Has previously recovered from an injury • Has set goals for the next season • What would she rather be feeling instead? • How can we do more of what works?

Figure 1. A fictional client case study with examples of potential focus areas for problem-focused practitioners compared to potential focus areas for solution-focused practitioners.

Society (BPS) Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (QSEP) and am a HCPC registered practitioner, with 4 years applied experience. I was first introduced to Solution-Focused approaches during my MSc and began to implement the approach within the second and third years of my supervised practice. I have completed a Level 1 Qualification in SFBT from BRIEF UK (BRIEF, 2025) in order to develop my applied skills of the technique. During this period of my practice, the second author, who is a HCPC registered Sport and Exercise Psychologist with over 15 years of applied experience, was my applied practice supervisor.

Intake sessions in sport psychology

Forming the start of the working relationship between an athlete and practitioner, the aim of an intake session is to provide an opportunity to understand the goals of the athlete, highlight their current strengths, and understand any current 'problem' behaviors (Keegan, 2016; Simons, 2024). Methods of conducting intake sessions range from structured interviews such as the Sport Clinical Intake Protocol (SCIP; Taylor & Schneider, 1992) or the Performance Interview Guide (Aoyagi et al., 2017), analysis of strengths and weaknesses such as Performance Profiling (Butler & Hardy, 1992; Weston et al., 2013) or contemporary approaches such as Psych-Mapping (Latinjak & Mathas, 2025).

Whilst there is no 'correct' way of conducting an intake session, and practitioners should apply an approach that is congruent with their professional philosophy, it has been suggested that practitioners are cautious about the inclusion of 'quiz like', 'probing' and 'why' questions early into the intake session (Chow et al., 2024; Lukas, 1993; Simons, 2024). An athlete may not know the answer to 'why' questions, hence their potential rationale for seeking supporting in the first instance (Lukas, 1993; Simons, 2024), and 'quiz like questions' can cause anxiety and create an unwanted power differential between athlete and practitioner that may hinder the building of rapport (Chow et al., 2024). Alternatively, it is possible that an athlete does not perceive (or is in denial) that there is a 'problem' and thus may be reluctant to answer probing questions, damaging the building of the working relationship (Simons, 2024).

Instead, it can be argued that the focus of an intake session could be on building a picture of the athlete whilst fostering trust and rapport, achieved by asking questions that an athlete can readily answer without deeper probing (Chow et al., 2024; Simons, 2024). This may include discussions around the athlete's strengths and existing resources, previous experiences within the sport, and what they, as the athlete, view as their own best possible performance (Chow et al., 2024)

Within my practice, I have found that using a Solution-Focused Intake (SFI) provides me with an alternative approach to intake sessions that moves away from a focus on problems and 'why' behaviors occur and toward helping an athlete consider 'how' they might begin to make small changes toward their '10/10 performance.' Personally, I find this approach still allows me to gain a sufficient understanding of the athlete's needs and experiences and facilitates the development of a working relationship. However, it is of course acknowledged that practitioners working from other philosophical standpoints may wish to focus their intake session on aspects of the athlete's performance (and broader life) that are most pertinent to them. The aim of the current article is not to promote a SFI as

the *only* approach to intakes, but rather an *option* that practitioners may choose to adopt within the contexts that they work in. It should also be noted that whilst it would be possible to conduct the SFI as a form of SST, the aim is to use the information gathered within the intake process to form the foundations of a longer-term intervention that can be conducted utilizing a range of consultancy approaches.

A Solution-Focused intake

It should be noted that a SFI is not a formal, recognized approach but instead is an approach to intake sessions implemented by the first author that utilizes core assumptions and principles of SFBT. The first author adopted the approaches utilized by existing SFBT literature within sport and traditional counseling contexts including (see Castillo & Bird, 2022; Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; MacDonald, 2011; & McCormick, 2014) as well as techniques taught as part of the BRIEF Foundation Level 1 Course (BRIEF.ORG.UK, 2025)

The aim of a SFI is to provide a framework to an intake session that focuses on providing an athlete-led, collaborative approach whilst focusing on observable and actionable changes over a deep exploration of problem behaviors. The framework provided below is designed to help facilitate the process of conducting a SFI, however practitioners are encouraged to adapt the approach to their own philosophy, context and levels of experience in order to make the approach most effective for them. Overall, a SFI is broken down into four key focus areas; Initial introduction, 10/10 performance, current performance, and one-step higher. Each area is discussed in detail below, with examples of questions that a practitioner may wish to use at each stage presented.

Initial introduction

Prior to engaging in a SFI, practitioners may choose to start the intake session with an initial introduction and rapport building stage. This may include the athlete providing demographic information, an overview of their background in the sport, any highlights that they may have previously had in their 'career', previous challenges that they have overcome, their life outside of sport and a surface level insight into the reason they have sought out support (if needed/appropriate). Other topics of discussion for this initial introduction may also include a practitioner providing an overview of their philosophy of practice, previous experiences and the aims of the intake session. In the context of completing a SFI, the aims of the initial intake are to outline the athlete's future goals (i.e. their 10/10 performance), explore current progress, existing resources and strengths

(i.e. their current performance) and outline plans for next steps and changes (i.e. 1-point higher).

10/10 Performance

Following the initial introduction stage, the first element of a SFI is the *10/10 Performance,* adapted from the 'Preferred Future' techniques used within SFBT (Iveson et al., 2012). Providing an athlete-led start to the process, the aim of this section is to highlight key attributes that the athlete feels are required for success in their sport as well as possible strengths that they possess. Within my practice, this is usually achieved by initially asking the athlete the following question: *Imagine that you have the best possible performance in your sport (a 10/10), what would this involve?* This can also be adapted to explore a 10/10 performance across a whole season, or for a specific component of their sport (e.g., a 10/10 performance as a goalkeeper, or a 10/10 injury rehab process). Once the athlete has started to identify factors that they associate with their 10/10 performance, additional follow-up questions can be asked, such as: *What would you be thinking at a 10/10 performance?* Or *What would you be feeling at a 10/10 performance?* See Figure 2 for an overview of potential questions that may be asked during this phase of the intake.

Overall, by the end of this phase of the intake session, it should be clear to both practitioner and athlete what this 10/10 performance would consist of and provide a potential direction for the subsequent intervention as well as goals to be achieved by the athlete. The aim is not necessarily to achieve this 10/10 performance during the consultancy process, but instead to highlight future goals that an athlete may be able to achieve. Within my practice, I often use the metaphor of a 10/10 performance being the peak of a mountain that we are slowly working toward.

Current performance

Once a 10/10 performance has been identified the next stage of a SFI is to help the athlete identify their current performance in relation to these goals, utilizing scaling techniques that are commonly used within SFBT (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; Iveson et al., 2012). This approach to scaling is adapted from previous SFBT literature both within sport (Castillo & Bird, 2022; Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; McCormick, 2014), traditional counseling (MacDonald, 2011) and motivational interviewing (Bundy, 2004).

In order to establish their current score, the athlete is asked the following question: *On a scale from 0 (nowhere near) and 10 (at your best possible performance) where would you currently rate yourself today?* Once an initial score has been identified, it is then key that the practitioner

- Imagine that you have the best possible performance (a 10/10), what would this involve?
- What would you be thinking at a 10/10 performance?
- What would you be feeling at a 10/10 performance?
- What would you be doing at a 10/10 performance?
- What would others see if you were at a 10/10 performance?
- When you wake up, what would indicate that you will have a 10/10 performance that day?
- If the 'problem' that is currently holding you back no longer existed, what would be different about your performance?
- Pick three words to describe what you would be thinking, feeling and doing if you were at a 10/10 performance.
- What else? (Can be used as a follow up prompt in response to an answer to any of the above question).

Figure 2. Key Questions used to identify a 10/10 performance.

asks the athlete to justify this score by asking: *Why that score, and not something lower like a 1?* The phrasing of this question is key, with the aim to identify the current level of progress (no matter how small) and the existing resources, strengths and strategies that the athlete has previously used that have contributed to their performance so far, rather than causing them to adopt a problem-focused lens by exploring what is 'missing' from the their performance by asking why they are not something 'higher. In doing so, even a low scoring athlete (e.g one that scores themselves a 3) is able to consider what they are doing to be that high up the scale (compared to a 1) rather than considering all the 'problems' that may be occurring that are holding them back from being at their desired 10/10 performance. That being said, if an athlete did identify potential barriers that are limiting performance (e.g., I'm not higher because I still get anxious about big competitions), this could provide an insight into potential intervention target areas that the athlete may find beneficial to their performance. Figure 3 provides examples of additional questions that a practitioner may wish to ask to further expand on this phase of the intake process.

- On a scale from 0 (nowhere near) and 10 (at your best possible performance) where would you currently rate yourself today?
- Why that score, and not something lower like a 1? (Note: the aim is to identify current resources and strengths that are allowing the athlete to perform successful, not to highlight what they are currently 'missing').
- What are you thinking that puts you at that score?
- What are you feeling that puts you at that score?
- What are you doing that puts you at that score?
- What do others see that put you at that score?
- Pick three key behaviours that you are currently doing well that are keeping you at your current score
- What else? (Can be used as a follow up prompt in response to an answer to any of the above question).

Figure 3. Key Questions used to identify current performance.

One step higher

The final stage of a SFI is focused on identifying small changes that an athlete believes would move them 1 point higher toward their 10/10 performance. The focus should be on identifying specific, positive, observable and controllable (SPOC) behaviors (McCormick, 2014) that can be implemented both in training and competition, as well as outside of sport. Practitioners may want to start this phase of the SFI using the following question: *If you moved 1 point higher—closer to your 10/10—what would be different?* Figure 4 highlights further questions that could be asked to aid this phase of the SFI. With these factors identified by the athlete, the practitioner may then choose to focus the remainder of the intervention on developing key skills that may help facilitate these skills or behaviors, whilst also encouraging the athlete to take accountability and ownership over these changes where appropriate.

Finishing a SFI

The above process highlights the key stages of a SFI that a practitioner may wish to adopt when working with an athlete. By the end of the

- If you moved 1 point higher – closer to your 10/10 – what would be different?
- What would you be thinking if you moved 1-point higher?
- What would you be feeling if you moved 1-point higher?
- What would you be doing if you moved 1-point higher?
- What would others see if you moved 1-point higher?
- Pick three key behaviours that would move you 1-point higher
- What else? (Can be used as a follow up prompt in response to an answer to any of the above question).

Figure 4. Key Questions used to identify changes that would move the athlete 'One point higher'.

process both athlete and practitioner should understand each other's background (*Initial Introduction),* factors that contribute to a successful performance and potential goals (both for the consultancy and longer-term) (*10/10 performance),* current strengths, strategies and resources (*current performance)* and potential areas for improvement and development *(one step higher).* Practitioners could then use this information to complete a case formulation (using a model of their choice) and plan additional sessions as part of the intervention if appropriate. A SFI may also help to facilitate the use of other solution-focused/strength-based interventions such as a Strength Based Performance Profile (Castillo & Bird, 2022). Figure 5 below provides an example of a completed SFI.

Other considerations

Throughout a SFI, practitioners should pay attention to strengths, resources, strategies and that are identified by the athlete and using appropriate counseling skills to summarize these (see Katz & Hemmings, 2009). Practitioners may also want to explore other SFBT concepts, such as exceptions and the miracle question (de Shazer, 1985; Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; McCormick, 2014) that could be incorporated into the different phases of a SFI. Whilst the above framework is targeted toward individual work in a sporting context, it could easily be adapted to suit different contexts, such as exercise referral, team consultancy or organizations.

10 (*10/10 Performance)*	Scoring 2+ tries Pre-Performance Routine Assisting Turnovers Kicking Consistently Tackles Winning	Having a good rounded game Outwitting opponents Positive body language/ emotions Feeling connected Focused Enjoying the game Skills
8		
7 (One Step Higher)	Doing more of the 10/10 Providing constructive feedback Developing my 6/10	Being better at reflecting Creating a routine for all things Helping others
6 (Current Score)	Enjoying myself Building Confidence Scoring Having a good time	Playing well Learning to be myself School going well Kicking & associated routine
5		
4		
3		
2		
1		

Figure 5. An example of a completed SFI.

Applied examples

To provide insight into the potential application of a Solution-Focused Intake, I (the first author) have identified two examples from my own applied practice during which a Solution-Focused Intake was implemented.

Not enough hours in the day: The SFI in a team context

As part of my work with a professional cricket academy (male players, aged 16–18), it was agreed that I would conduct several 1-2-1 sessions throughout the season in order to provide individual support to players alongside broader workshops and observations provided as part of the support package offered. Players attended training at a central location twice a week, and I was onsite at least once a month to provide support.

To begin this process, an initial intake session was conducted with all ten of the academy players at the start of the season to outline potential psychological goals and targets to be achieved throughout the year. Due

to limited time, it was agreed that I would complete all these initial intake sessions within a four-hour period, with each player allocated ~20 min to meet with me.

As a result, the more "traditional", longer format of an intake session would not have worked in this context. Utilizing the SFI in this context allowed me to meet each player individually, establish initial rapport and start building a working relationship with the players as well as establishing their goals for the season through the 10/10 Performance and Current Score elements of the process. Players were first encouraged to consider what both a10/10 performance would include and what a longer term 10/10 season would involve in regard to thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Following this, players were asked to rank their current level of performance and provide a current score that they felt reflected their feelings going into the winter training period and their reflections on the previous year. Finally, players were asked to identify action points that could be implemented once they left the meeting room and returned to training. Players also had an opportunity to suggest other topic areas that they would like to focus on longer term as part of the support.

The 10/10 scale was completed on a worksheet in front of the athlete which they took with them as a reminder of the discussion after the session. This initial 10/10 performance was then used as a reference point in follow up meeting with the players, allowing them to assess their progression from initial current scores toward their 10/10 performance. Furthermore, common topic areas that were discussed as being part of a 10/10 performance (such as feeling confident, being focused, and dealing with nerves) were used to provide topic areas that were then addressed with the whole group through workshops and psychologically informed training drills.

The visitor client – individual context

Visitor clients were identified by Høigaard and Johansen (2004), as those who were required to work with a Sport Psychologist without it necessarily being their choice. Within sport this may be due to requirements from an organization, the result of meeting funding requirements or recommendations from coaches or other support staff.

As part of my work, I provide support to athletes on a national, funded, talent pathway. These athletes compete in a wide range of sports, including canoe-slalom, badminton and alpine skiing and are provided with a full range of multi-disciplinary support, including Strength & Conditioning, Physiotherapy and Psychology. As part of the requirements to maintaining access to the programme and associated funding, all athletes were required to engage in at least one session with a Sport Psychologist with the

opportunity for future work also provided if deemed necessary. As a result, these sessions fit the profile of SST and were often conducted as such. I approached sessions with these athletes with two aims, to build enough rapport that they felt they would want to return for future sessions, and to provide athletes with an opportunity to identify key action points that they would deem beneficial to improve their overall performance or wellbeing even if they decided not to access additional support beyond this session.

Unlike the previous example, in which the SFI was completed in 20 min, in these intake sessions a full hour was allocated to conducting the SFI, allowing for a more in-depth process to be completed. With the athletes I worked through the SFI as outlined above, gaining insight into their chosen goals, strengths, strategies and resources that had been successful in the past and recommendations for their own development going forward. Athletes were provided with a digital copy of their notes for their own use following the session.

Uptake for follow up sessions varied, with some athletes choosing to engage in regular additional sessions that covered topics such as Strength Identification and Development, Competition Planning and Goal Setting, whilst other athletes only engaged in one (or no) following sessions. For athletes who engaged in the SFI but chose not to engage in additional sessions the feedback from them was that engaging in the initial conversation was enough to help them acknowledge that they could overcome their challenges and make progress toward their goals through their own actions.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is to provide practitioners with an overview of a SFI, a potential alternative to conducting an intake session that focuses more on identifying 'how' we might create change, rather than a deep dive into the 'why' of a problem that can form the foundation of both SST and longer-term interventions for athletes. By utilizing SFBT techniques, a SFI provides an athlete-led and collaborative approach that identifies background information, goals, current performance and actionable changes that both the practitioner and athlete can make. Applied examples are also provided to give insight into the real-world application of using a SFI. The purpose is not to discredit existing approaches and protocols which are well supported by literature and evidence, but to encourage practitioners to explore alternative approaches that they may wish to adopt to their current practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

Data available from the first author on request.

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