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The Solution Planner: How to Create the Life You Desire One Solution at a Time

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BOOK REVIEW**The Solution Planner: How to Create the Life You Desire One Solution at a Time**

Erica Bowen

Independently published, 2020, 141 pages, ISBN-13 979-8626892710 (paperback) £9.99 (ebook available at Amazon £7.49)

Review by Matt Selman

Senior Lecturer & Programme Lead for Evidence Based Psychological Practice

The *Solution Planner* is a self-help book based primarily upon solution focused brief therapy techniques. The back cover claims the solution focused nature makes this self-help book unique which I will dispute given existing publications such as O'Hanlon (1999) and Metcalf (2004). That aspect aside the format is different to many self-help books with it having two distinct sections, a workbook and a planner. The workbook consists of an introduction to solution focused brief therapy techniques, covering the core approach and core techniques such as the miracle question, scaling, and identifying exceptions. This is all accompanied by exercises and with space in the book to write the responses which encourages practice.

In addition to the solution focused practice there is also reference to the 24 Character Strengths identified in Positive Psychology. This is unfortunately lacking in its description and unclear in its relevance serving only as a list of the Strength names - no descriptions - that can be developed through practicing the journaling in the book. This is at odds with how Character Strengths are understood and conceptualised in the literature where a small number of signature strengths of the individual are identified and utilised rather than developing all 24 areas as the author suggests here (Niemiec, 2017).

Another area included is 'The 8 Domains of a Good Life' (Creativity, Healthy Living, Excellence in work and play, Independence, Relationships, Knowledge, Inner Peace, and Spirituality). The source is not referenced, with these placed into a 'Wheel of Life' diagram enabling a rating of 0-10 on enabling the reader to assess where they view themselves on meeting. This is used as a guide to areas of life where goals may be identified. There is a more explanation of the domains for this section. The benefits of including this are not clear given that people using SFBT have been able to identify what they want to change perfectly well without this. It could also have a prescriptive aspect in an implied optimal 10 for all these areas being the ideal - how better to identify your perceived short-comings across life which does not sit so well.

The second part of the book is the planner. This consists of a 12-week journal with set questions repeated to record progress and develop the techniques introduced in the workbook section. After the first week there is a helpful review section for any difficulties that might have been experienced. The following 11 weeks are a repeat of week one focusing the reader on the areas they have chosen to work on. In much the same way that mittens on a cord attached to a coat vary on the context of the person using them from fantastic for young kids who lose things to a contrasting more dangly embarrassment for the ambitious CEO - the inclusion of the planner could be equally great or frustrating.

A positive is for the more disorganised person there is no need to print sheets off or search out a pad and paper, it is easy to review previous weeks without sheets getting lost or put to one side and it is all there ready to flick back to the workbook for a quick check. For pure convenience we mightily eagerly await a second edition that comes with a pen attached by string so there is nothing getting in the way of completing or for the hopelessly disorganised a smartphone find my Planner App that can locate a misplaced copy.

The counter is a lot of the book is simply the pages repeated (there is a kindle edition so this will either be shorter or very frustrating to complete). There is also the experience of how much space is allocated to areas. Having worked with the planner I found there were areas where I did not have enough space and others where there was an entire page and I only had line or two needed; a plus for the pen and paper approach and no querying "Should have written more?"

A real strength is the deliberately interactive nature of the book inviting action and the opportunity to start experiencing change from the SFBT exercises through to the planner. This fits well with the SFBT approach in changing behaviour and finding what works. I am sure many self-help books are read and people feel better briefly imaging change, but nothing happens. Aimed as it is to the general reader another strength is the accessible writing style. There are multiple typos, not the best illustrations, lots of empty space around the side of pages and an unclear use of references (there are only five, but it is not clear why these and not others) which may be linked with the self-publishing as an editor and proof-reading service might have addressed.

Overall, I think someone looking for self-help for something relatively minor in their life would find benefits in engaging in the exercises in this book and get a sense of solution focused practice - particularly if that person was on the disorganised side but did have a pen. For those with some existing idea of solution focused practice or the therapist/coaches considering it as a supporting text I think it would not really offer much over a brief worksheet or personal journal and the inclusion of the non-SFBT areas might be distracting or require additional work so I could not recommend.

References

Metcalf, L. (2004). *The miracle question: Answer it and change your life*. Crown House.

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The reviewer

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