# How to use text messages as a dialogue tool in SF conversations

by Anne-Marie Wulf

# Introduction

Nowadays everybody owns a cell phone and knows how to text. This is a new format of communication, where the cell phone (and almost any digital media) puts time and place out of order and thus gives us an opportunity to text 24-7.

In my practice as coach and social worker, I received many text messages from clients, and I discovered, that sometimes it took them hours to formulate and construct a text message. I then became curious about, how my responses could be helpful for the clients: how could I respond in another way, that just by a quick reply as “oh, let’s talk about this when we meet next week”.

I designed a master-thesis on this topic and have microanalysed 12 text dialogues by focusing on questions and formulations. What happens in the client’s responses when the coach asks questions based in Solution Focused assumptions, and what impact does the coach’s choice of formulations have on the text dialogue?

This article will attempt to answer these questions and present some ideas on how to use text messages as a dialogical tool in practice. Furthermore, the article will point out the benefits of using text dialogues and offer perspectives on where it can be used.

# Digital and mobile mediated communication

One of the earliest forms of digital communication is the telegraph, where the purpose was to minimize the communication to the least possible and understandable entity (Tagg, 2012). With the development of computers and the Internet, the field has gained additional dimensions, and today we communicate in a variety of contextual contexts (Dalsgaard et al. 2013), on different media and very often at the same time. Some would probably recognize the image of the teenager sitting at the computer, online on SoMe and listening to music, while updating friends and at the same time trying to do homework.

Patterns of digital communication can be analysed and put into perspective depending on the sender and recipient (Hoem, 2011). The sender can be a TV channel that broadcasts a program or a post on Instagram that gets a lot of likes, and likewise recipients can switch between being a reader of a blog post or a group on Face Book that cooperates in collaboration, exchanging knowledge and information. The category of text messages that became the focus of my research is text messages, put together into dialogues characterized by a communication pattern produced, distributed and used by single individuals.

Mobile-mediated communication is communication on mobile phones, tablets and laptop with communication forms such as conversations, chats, mails, text messages and instant messaging, some of which requires access to the ubiquitous internet (Sharples et al., 2007). Mobile-mediated communication is asynchronous, thus giving the individual time to think and formulate the content of an answer. It gives a shift in time, but only the time it takes to formulate, write and send the message. This means that communication can be relatively fast from minute to minute, but also take several hours (Baym, 2015).

Finally referring to Giddens (1994, p. 21), sending a text message can be described as "a human act under the conditions of modernity", where the social system is tied together by time-and-space. However, with mobile-mediated communication the context is removable and changing, and thus dialogues can take place, regardless of where we are and whether we are moving or not. The separation of time and space creates the opportunity to have relationships with "absent" others, which is one of the characteristics of text-dialogues.

Over the past twenty years, a number of scientists in the fields of linguistics, media science and communication have researched text messaging and various aspects of it. The linguist Caroline Tagg, did a discourse analysis of 11,000 text messages from teenagers to the elderly looking at factors such as spelling, grammar, discourse markers and identity construction. Drawing on the sociologist Erving Goffmann’s conceptual understanding of identity, as being constructed and created in the interaction between people, Caroline Tagg talks about the "construction of identity" (Tagg, 2012, p. 176), and how to perform differently in online and offline connections. Tagg points out that para-linguistic features such as intonation, gesticulation, clothing and otherwise are absent in online contexts, in which individual identity alone is expressed through the use of words and characters in text messages, and she concludes in her analysis, that "performance of their identity draw on elements of their offline relationship” (Tagg, 2012, p. 172). Being a linguist, Tagg also has a focus on linguistic choices in text messages, and how those choices can be linked to verbal utterances, and concludes that the text messages are often a spoken language. The discourse analysis from Tagg is interesting in terms of the linguistic approach, but does not focus on the significance of the linguistic and lexical changes in text messages and their potential.

# The Solution Focused Approach

Solution Focused practitioners integrate the linguistic focus in their practice (De Jong & Berg, 2006). De Shazer (1988, p. 78) writes about a woman, who in a therapy session expresses "I'm depressed", that "once there is doubt, once the exception is seen to make a difference, the client can change the form or grammar of his statement to "At times I feel depressed". And if there is the opportunity to talk about the fact, that "sometimes I am depressed", there is also the opportunity to talk about the negation, "sometimes I am not depressed", which makes a difference for the client, and the problem becomes less static and more dynamic. Thus, by building on the client's experience of problem-free moments, solutions can be constructed. In text-dialogues, the linguistic focus is enhanced, as words and characters become the central parts of a Solution Focused text-dialogue.

Social workers, therapists, coaches and mentors are very often trained from a medical problem understanding perspective, seeking the cause of the problem so as to understand and solve it (Berg & de Jong, 2002). This understanding is important for the dialogue between mentor/mentee, coach/client and questions will in that context properly be focusing on collecting information, constructed to gather knowledge and produce factual data. When did it start? How long have you been sad? Are there others in the family suffering from depression? In contrast the Solution Focused approach concentrates on "listening with a constructive ear" (Ratner et al. 2012, p. 54), as a preferred way into the dialogue, where the client can speak of himself as being competent with goals and dreams for the future. From responses to these questions, more questions can be constructed such as: What difference would it make when you are no longer sad? What do you want to be instead of sad? When did you last have a moment when you experienced yourself as happy or relieved?

For the Solution Focused practitioner, the process of change is linked to basic assumptions, such as changes in one part of the client's life affect and influence other parts of the client's life and that small changes in one area of ​​the client's life can lead to major changes in other areas of life (the ripple effect). Clients change and develop through focussing on past successes and their own resources and competences - the perspective of such a conversation is forward-looking and future-oriented, focusing on the client steps towards "the preferred future". The therapist’s role is to support the client in describing everyday life where the problem doesn’t exist and to clarify moments where “glimpses of the preferred future” already occurs, that is to look for exceptions to strengthen the client and build on successful moments (De Jong & Berg, 2006). For the Solution Focused dialogue, various techniques and tools are linked, including different type of questions such as scaling, coping, the miracle question (tomorrow-question) and more.

The Solution Focused approach is pragmatic rather than theoretical with presumptions and assumptions about people that can be summarized as follows (De Shazer et.al. 2012, pp. 2-3):

* There is not necessarily a core-relation between a problem and the solution
* Small changes in one area lead to greater changes in other areas of the client's life.
* The client is an expert in own life and has inherent resources and potential.
* No problems are constant; there are always exceptions to the problem.
* Linguistic choices affect the client's work towards changes.
* The client's work is oriented towards his preferred future, which can constantly change.

# Microanalysis

A useful method for investigating and analysing communication between therapist and client is conversation analysis (CA), which tries to clarify patterns and examine what can be said jointly about communication. In the 1960s, the founder Harvey Sacks began to investigate whether and how there could be a form of social order in the everyday conversations, and formulated a methodical approach for analysing conversations, based on the assumption that people will always try to create meaning in interaction with others (Stensig, 2010; Fehr & Pomerantz, 1997). The idea of "turn-taking" is a central concept and refers to how we understand each other in the exchange of speech (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974, p. 696). A turn is a constructed entity, an action, a speech or a text message, and there are rules that one constructs the first turn and that the next turn can be assigned (for example, by looking at the person or saying their name), or the next turn can be self-chosen (e.g. by just one in the class answers). Another central concept in CA is adjacency-pairs, which are the smallest organized sequence and a pattern of two successful utterances, said by two different persons, in which the second part of the adjacency pair is relevant and expectable. An adjacency-pair can consist of bow 🡪 bow, question 🡪 answer, request 🡪 response or request 🡪 rejection (Steensig, 2010, p. 297). If text-dialogues are viewed from CA, the smallest device will be a text-message with a question and a text-message with an answer. As mentioned, Sacks examined everyday conversations and was influenced by the ethno methodologist Harold Garfinkel. Together, Sacks and Garfinkel referred to situations where one person had said something, and the other had summarized, described or reproduced this with verbal expressions, as formulations (de Jong et al. 2013, p. 25).

Understanding communication as an interactive co-constructive process led psycholinguist H.H. Clark to the development of the "collaborative model" in cooperation with his colleagues (De Jong et al., 2013, p. 20). The collaborative model argues that meaning is merged into a three-step process between speaker and listener: A) X presents information, B) Y shows that he has understood or not understood, C) X confirms that Y has understood. Any such completed sequence represents a collaborative constructed unit. Clark named these units "grounding circles" (De Jong et.al. 2013, p. 21), and considered dialogues as a complex process in which understandings and meaning are constantly co-constructed in collaboration with the other.

Based on Clark's ideas on collaborative processes, Janet B. Bavelas, and her colleagues at Victoria University in Canada, experimented in collaborative co-constructing processes in face-2-face dialogues, leading to the development of Microanalysis (De Jong et.al. 2013) as a tool and method for research. Specifically, film recordings of conversations, mainly therapeutic with the software program ELAN, were analysed by playing micro sequences of perhaps 10-20 seconds duration, to examine how therapist and client co-constructed the dialogue. Through her research, Bavelas identified at least three major traits that the therapist contributes with and uses in the collaborative process; questions, formulations and lexical choices (De Jong et.al, 2013, p. 21).

Part of the co-creation of the dialogue will often be the therapist's question, understood as a presentation of information: What’s your name? Where do you come from? In a contextual framework such as the coach/client relationship, questions from the coach will be influenced by her experiences, knowledge and theoretical references: we talk about the coach’s presumptions. These presumptions affect and co-create the question the coach’s constructs to the client, which is why McGee et.al. (2005, pp. 19) points out:

*Therapists who have cultivated an appreciation of the efficacy of questions understand that to question is to powerful linguistic leaves. It is necessary to ensure that the blade is used to reveal strength and beauty rather than to carve away these same qualities.*

As mentioned, formulations are introduced by Sacks & Garfinkel, and transferred into therapeutic contexts and referred to as mirroring, paraphrasing, echoing, summarizing and reflecting the client's words, where the response was used to normalize the clients situation (De Jong et. al., 2013, p. 26). In Microanalysis formulations are an active therapeutic tool, which can be linked to the therapist's – or coach’s approach. Specifically, De Jong et al. (2013) suggest, "all formulations are influential choices rather than passive evidence of understanding" (p. 26), and present 3 distinctions. Thus formulations will always:

1. *Omit* some of the client's words.

2. *Preserve* some of the client's words precisely

3. *Preserve* some of the client’s words in a transformed version. The altered form is influenced by the *lexical choice*, and can thus be a summary or an offer of another understanding anchored in the therapist's theoretical frame of reference, i.e. *adding new words*.

In the following you will see the importance of lexical choices in practice and what influence these choices have on the text-dialogues, as well as the impact of Solution Focused questions in text-dialogues.

# Microanalysing text messages

Text-dialogues are very different from therapeutic dialogues, where both are present together. One major difference is the fact that people cannot see each other. Another, that the communication can be both largely synchronous - and asynchronous. It would be too extensive to analyse, for example, pauses in text-dialogues, as we don't know the cause of the break. For a start it would be necessary to define a pause, which is difficult in asynchronous communication. In particular, if there was a pause between two text messages, it would be difficult to know what made the pause, and whether this pause could be related to the dialogue.

Mobile-mediated communications, such as text-dialogues, are an obvious field for research, such as length of message, length of dialogue, the use of emojis and images, abbreviations of words and the question-answer combinations. As mentioned earlier, some of these topics have already been subjects of research, but how text-dialogues can been seen as an approach or tool to support clients reaching their goals, or working towards their best-hopes has not yet been explored.

This study includes text-dialogues with three clients from three different SF-practitioners, of which I am one. The group of clients were aged between 18-64 years, with mental difficulties such as anxiety, depression, stress, PTSD, among others, and social issues such as loneliness, isolation and poverty. The relationship between client and practitioner is built upon weekly face-to-face conversations, and the text-dialogues in this research are to be seen as an supplement to these conversations.

# Questions

In Solution Focused conversations we ask a lot of questions. We listen/select and build our questions on the client’s answers, and the questions can be seen as an invitation to dialogue. Implicit in questions are the practitioner’s assumptions and preconceptions about the client, based on the practitioner’s theoretical foundation. With Solution Focused practitioners it should be possible, by microanalysing the questions, to reveal some SF-assumptions in the questions.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 22.03.2016  Kl. 08:43 | Coach | It isn’t good, that you're feeling so bad, Line, because it's probably very hard to get a faster appointment. I’m thinking, *what do you do of good things to keep up the spirit despite pain and discomfort?* - Maybe we can take some time to talk about it after tomorrow's meeting. Have you also informed Lone that I'm participating? |

In the example you’ll see the coach’s assumptions regarding the client - assumptions fitting with the Solution Focused approach,

* She’s able in taking actions: *I’m thinking, what do you do…*
* She’s able to target her actions in a certain direction - *doing good things*
* The actions are targeting a specific effect *- good things to keep up the spirit*
* She’s competent and full of resources - *keeping up her spirit despite pain and discomfort.*

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 09.10.2014  Kl. 18:11 | Coach | *Is there any way that would make it easier for you to accept, how things are?* On a scale of zero to ten, where ten would mean, that you have accepted it in a way that is good for you, *where would you place yourself?* |
| 18:14 | Client | I don’t know, maybe two |
| 18:20 | Coach | *What puts you at two, and not at one?* |
| 18:22 | Client | That I’m on my way, that I have the courage to feel. |
| 18:23 | Coach | Okay, *and what tells you, that you’re on your way?* |

# Another example of questions using scaling,

* Focusing on what’s already working - *what puts you at two, and not at one*?
* Detailed descriptions on what’s working - …*and what tells you, that you’re on your way?*

In summary, how to use questions in text-dialogues, the most frequently used questions the SF-practitioner asks, are questions beginning with *What, when, where, who – or how,* which gives the client an opportunity to reflect and respond with explanations and descriptions of both her own thoughts and feelings, as attempted initiatives. Clients also respond from the perspective of their own life and potential opportunities for action, which creates opportunities for clients to speak of themselves as humans with skills, resources and competences.

# Lexical choices

De Jong et. al. (2013), introduces the importance of lexical choices in the therapist's formulations, meaning the therapist makes a selection of the client's words in the formulation of a response, question or summary. This selection is governed by the therapist's theoretical foundation and understanding, and is important for the co-construction that occurs between client and therapist.

Analysing formulations, you will find that words have been omitted, words are preserved in an exact form, and words are transformed in a certain way. Tom Andersen (2003, p. 114) writes about the connotation of words,

*The use of negative connotations will inevitably lead to the definition of someone or something in a way that drivers to the user of the negative connotation (.....) and it's easily to think, that there is something about a "someone" or the "something" that should be different”.*

Words can thus be connoted both positively and negatively, and the analysis can centre on the coach’s lexical choice of words that are positively connoted, as lexical elections are rooted in the coach's theoretical reference (De Jong et.al. 2013).

## Text-responses *preserving* words from the client in exactly form

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| 10.03.2015  Kl. 17:16 | Client | I could *express some emotions* that I had tried to suppress, so I could have a good day in the woods tomorrow. But I cannot really do that. And it closed up for it. |
| Kl. 17:20 | Coach | What difference does it make for you to be able to *express some emotions*? |
| Kl. 17:29 | Client | I would have felt walking in the woods tomorrow, even though I couldn’t handle it and could not enjoy nature or his company at all because of repressed anger. And as I now experienced, one feeling leads to another, so the whole thing becomes clear for me. And by staying with the feeling, it’s going faster - not to stay with them, are terrible torture. |

In the example the client introduces the concept of *expressing some emotions* as a potential opportunity, which the coach constructs her next question upon: *what difference does it make for you to be able to express emotions*? In the coach’s question is implicit an understanding, that the client *can do it* (express emotions), and thus the client is presented by the coach as a person capable of acting.

The coach can preserve single words or phrases from the client to construct the next text message. Clients words or phrases used in the coach’s response, contribute to co-construction of the dialogue creating a collaborative process. Words that are preserved can be used in the formulation of questions, such as the presentation of a possible action, such as recognition of a feeling or as reinforcement. When the coach retains the client’s words in a text message, the client responds with further perspective and description, which can create associations and change the focus towards more positive and action oriented thoughts.

## Text-responses *omitting* words from the client

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 09.10.2014  Kl. 17:01 | Client | *I was really sorry, so I thought, now I’ll go to the café, even though they only have one hour open, so I wouldn’t be sitting at home.* |
| Kl. 17:06 | Coach | Super. What else do you know, can be helpful? |
| Kl. 17:46 | Client | To be in the feelings. *I wasn’t aware of the birthday invitation waiting and now that I have answered, I have been incredibly sad yesterday and today. I was very restless before I went to the café and I just sat down and cried down by the lake.* |
| Kl. 17:56 | Coach | Wow, it must be hard (smiley with blurred eyes) What does your experience say about, how long you have to be in your feelings before it just gets a little bit better? And how will you notice, that it has become just a little better? |

In the client’s first message all text are omitted, and instead the coach formulates a question based on the client’s actions: "*What else do you know, can be helpful?”* In the second response of the coach, most of the client’s words are (again) omitted and four words (*be in the feelings*) are preserved and used in construction the following question: *"What does your experience say about how long you must be in the emotions before it just gets a little better?* The coach doesn’t focus on the client's problems and negative emotions, but on what will be helpful and work towards feeling better.

Summarizing, it can be seen how a SF-practitioner omits words from clients in text-responses. This research shows that whilst the client’s *negative* descriptions of thoughts, feelings and actions are omitted, they can also be used as a form of recognition, affirmation or as a starting point for a question. Issues that omit the client’s negative descriptions thus direct the client in a particular direction and allow responses with action-oriented descriptions and focus on what goes well. Negative words can be preserved for the purpose of adding, through a lexical choice.

## Text-responses *transforming* words from mentee *in a positive direction*.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Friday d. 16.12.16  Kl. 09:57 | Client | You have to try it too, it tastes delicious too*! I was very happy to get up and bath and wash my hair and get a few baked bread* (smiley with happy smile) |
| Kl. 10:09 | Coach | Lovely Line. I sit here and smile broadly over your recovery and maybe mostly *your will* and *strength* (strong arms emoji) May I disturb you with a request from Hanne-Vibeke? So can I call? |
| Kl. 10:10 | Client | Yes ☺ |

The client expresses that she was very happy to get up, shower and wash hair and then get baked crisp bread. Her statement is supported by a happy, smiling smiley. The coach's response is a summary, a formulation in which all the actions the client has made (come up, been in bath, washed hair, got baked crisp bread) and the feeling it has given rise to (very happy) are transformed and presented positively as *your recovery* and with an invitation of an explanation of this recovery: that *she has will and strength*. On the other hand, the client's actions are connoted in a positive direction by "recovery" and anchored in her with the word "*yours*". The lexical choice is also seen in the words *will and strength*, both of which are strongly positive.

From the overall microanalysis, it appears, that to a greater extent than actual words, sentences about emotions, actions and process, are summarized and transformed. Positively connoted words are added as lexical handles in the transformation. This makes it possible to bring new perspectives to the client and to reinforce expressions. When problems are transformed constructively, the client responds with detailed descriptions of her or his own actions, thoughts, and next possible steps to take. When the coach's responses are being transformed in a positive direction, it can cause the client to express gratitude. Challenges and efforts of the client can be transformed into lexical choices into words such as will, courage, strength, profits, and boundaries.

## Text-responses assuming *solution focused assumptions*

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 16.06.2016  Kl. 16:06 | Client | Hehe, thank you, it's nice relaxing for me, it's a bit like when people see series I think J (smiley with crooked eyes) But will try to sell some if the flea market turns into something, I can’t use so many. |
| Kl. 20:18 | Coach | Nice with a place in the flea market (thumbs up) We do hope the flea market can be possible. Can I book the card with the Goose? Perhaps the best thing about the cards is that you have found *a good way to relax*. I think that could be *yet* *another important positive spiral*?! |
| Kl. 20:35 | Client | Sure you can (hands clapping) Hope it’s going to happen. But my mother also said that I might also ask the florists if I had to sell them there. *Yes, and the time I spend walking and looking for things to do, is a good way to be positive*, - would you believe, that once for many years I ate and throw up (smiley with hospital mask for mouth) - *so yes, that's a spiral of good-stuffs.* |

The text messages clearly show a dialogue, where both the client and her coach to support the dialogue also frequently use emojis such as smileys. When the coach writes "great with a market stall on the flea market" it’s supported with a "thumbs up" smiley, which indicates a kind of approval or acceptance. Similarly, the client supports her text-message, where she writes about "eating and throwing up" with a "medical mask" smiley, which indicates "something with illness or hospital". Assumptions are also seen in the coach's expression of finding a good way to relax, where one can see the assumption, that Line *will find* a way to relax and the way will *be good.*

Another example in which the coach's assumption is showed is in the sentence *yet another important positive spiral*, where the coach with the lexical choice of the word '*yet*' indicates the assumption that there is more than one, and with the word *'important'*, points out that the good spirals are significant - focusing on the positive, and pointing into a certain direction - a *positive* spiral. With the addition of the word ‘spiral’, the coach also creates the opportunity for the client to see one more procedural development with loops as in spirals. Again, comes a presumption that development is not a continuous progressive process, but can take place circularly, in loops and with "two steps forward and one back". This might bring the client courage and hope if she stagnates in her development process. The client responds with further detailed descriptions, presents several ideas and puts life into perspective by talking about "*the time I walking and looking for things to do”* as a good way to take a positive approach.

In summary, Solution Focused assumptions appear in the coach's lexical choices, additions and formulations. The presumptions guides the coach to use lexical handles, selecting and adding words pointing in the direction of the next step or what the person is most pleased with. This introduces opportunities for the client to talk about herself as an active person. The client responds with detailed descriptions, produces ideas, forms parts of processes and formulates perspectives on her life in positive terms.

# Conclusion

This research concludes that, working from a Solution Focused approach, choosing premeditated lexical handles, a coach in text-dialogues can create possibilities for the client to talk about him- or herself in a way where he/she is active, energetic and capable as a human with resources, strengths and possibilities.

A coach can formulate questions in many ways: propose a direct action or ask for explanation, in contrast to when the coach asks questions with “Wh-words” that invites reflection and perspective. In text-dialogues, where the coach preserve the client’s words in exact form, and applies them to questions, recognition, or opportunity of action, this can cause the client to associate in a way in which the focus is shifted towards describing himself as being active and with opportunities.

The coach's lexical handles appear in the choice of words that are exactly preserved - these are often positively-quoted words, just as when the coach makes lexical choices in transforming the client’s sentences into positively connoted words or phrases. This allows the client to respond with reflections, new perspectives and detailed descriptions. Transforming sentences towards positive words containing actions, or a challenging situation, can be transformed into positive descriptions of the client as one with will, determination or courage.

Formulations from the coach containing Solution Focused assumptions provide the opportunity for the client to respond with reflections, detailed descriptions, produce new knowledge and talk about himself as competent and active about which next step to take. Since linguistic choices and relational positioning to the client are rooted in the coach's theoretical reference, the knowledge produced thus confirms the coach's anchoring in the Solution Focused approach.

What does it mean for the client to be able to reflect on new perspectives and produce new knowledge, insights and opportunities for action? What does it mean that the client can talk about himself as being more competent, active with resources and strengths like courage, determination and strength? I would refer to Tom Andersen (2003, p. 114) when he writes "... this "positive" language does not only influence the development of more useful (helping) descriptions and explanations, but can equally affect the entire person to whom the language is directed". It has a significance impact, how we talk about ourselves, exactly what significance would qualitative interviews with clients bring forward.

The central part of text-dialogue is the linguistic and relational aspect that can arise and be present in different contexts. The context of coach/coachee can be seen as equating with for example therapist/client or teacher/student relationships. I myself preferred to talk about my practice as *conversations about changes* – the changes clients want in life, thus I don’t talk about myself as therapist, coach or mentor.

I have shown what happens in text-dialogues between coach and client, when the coach formulates questions anchored in the Solution Focused approach. The type of text-dialogues that have been the subject of my research appear in a number of areas as possible topics for further development and research, where qualitative interviews could contribute additional knowledge. The knowledge produced is applicable to other professionals, who work relationally with different groups of humans and already are applying or wanting to use text-dialogues in their practice with the purpose of working in a developmental perspective.

From my point of view this research raises two particularly important points. Firstly, as we move into a more digital mobile lifestyle, text-dialogues can be a helpful, co-constructing and collaborative (therapeutic) tool, for instance for people in remote areas. Secondly, research confirms that working from a Solution Focused approach gives people significantly beneficial opportunities to talk about themselves in a positive, future-oriented way.

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