

THE MIRACLE QUESTION Steve de Shazer (BFTC)

The miracle question was developed beginning in the early 80s and I have been using it in almost every first session ever since.

I think my (our) initial mistake was to call it "**the miracle question**" when it has never been just a simple question. Rather, its purpose was to shift the conversation quickly and easily into the future when the problems (that brought the client to therapy) were gone. That is to say, the "question" itself was never as important as the client's response. Over the years of dealing with the wide variety of client responses I have somehow sort of learned how best to respond to their responses. In part, I learned this from watching how Insoo Kim Berg responds to her clients' responses. Further, I learned this from watching how other therapists' responsive behaviour did not lead to the kind of miracle picture Insoo's clients were able to develop. So here is a sketch of the pattern that I have worked out.

PART ONE

"I have a strange, perhaps unusual question, a question that takes some imagination ...

[Pause. Wait for some sort of signal to go ahead with the question.]

Suppose . . .

[Pause. The pause allows clients to wonder what strange and difficult thing I might ask them to suppose.]

After we finish here, you go home tonight, watch TV, do your usual chores, etc., and then go to bed and to sleep . . .

[Pause. Pretty normal, everyday stuff. Not so strange after all.]

And, while you are sleeping, a miracle happens . . .

[Pause. The context for this miracle is the client's normal, everyday life. This construction allows for any kind of fantastic wishing.]

And, the problems that brought you here are solved, just like that! . . .

[Pause. Now the focus is on one particular miracle that is in line with his or her coming to therapy.]

But, this happens while you are sleeping, so you cannot know that it has happened."

[Pause. This is designed to allow the client to construct his or her miracle without any consideration of the problem and without any consideration of the steps that be or might have been involved.]

"Once you wake up in the morning, a) how will you go about discovering that this miracle has happened to you?" OR, b) "how will your best friend know that this miracle happened to you?"

[Wait. The therapist should not interrupt this silence; it is the client's turn to talk, to answer the question. In fact, when the client's response is "un-reasonable" (in the therapist's view) the

therapist's most useful response is to continue his/her silence which gives the client a change to "fix" the response, to make it more reasonable.]

[Many clients, particularly adolescents, find it easier to describe the day-after-the-miracle from the perspective of other people. The individual's perspective is then dealt with in Part Two.]

PART TWO

"A) How will your best friend discover that this miracle happened to you?"

OR,

B) "how will you discover that this miracle has happened to you?"

PART THREE

"When was the most recent time (perhaps days, hours, weeks) that you can remember when things were sort of like this day after the miracle?"

PART FOUR

"On a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 standing for how things are the day after the miracle and 0 standing for how things were at the point you called to arrange this appointment, where - between 0 and 10 - are you at this point?"

[This "progress scale" is designed to help both therapist and client figure out where the client is in relation to his/her goal(s) for therapy.]

"On the same scale, where do you think your best friend would say you are?"

"On the same scale, where would you say things were when things were sort of like this miracle day?"

PART FIVE

(The opening question in second and later sessions.)

"So, what is better?"

["Better" is a construction and this is designed to remind both therapist and client that one of the goals in these subsequent sessions is to help the client describe things as "better." Failure to begin the subsequent sessions with this question undermines the value of the other four parts.]

PART SIX

(The "progress scale.")

"Remember that scale where 10 stands for the day after the miracle? Where would you say you are today on that scale?"

[It seems more useful to ask about this without reminding the client of his/her previous rating. If the question is asked this way: "Last time you were at 3, where are you now?" Clients tend to respond with "3" and they tend to respond to the open version with a rating "higher" than that they gave in the previous session.]