

On Creating a “Virtual Miracle” in Couples Therapy: Two Case Examples

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Abstract

De Shazer and colleagues (2007) traced their clients’ reactions to the “miracle question” to the ways they could imagine how they (and others) would behave the morning after a miracle in their relationship happened. However, this article hypothesizes an additional stimulus: the ways that clients experience each other in real time during the session. Emotional reactions to the ‘miracle question’ may result from clients’ imagining their own and their significant other’s loving reactions in the future, and also from their direct observation of their significant other’s potential for loving interactions in the here-and-now.

Key Words: Solution-focused brief therapy, couples therapy, family therapy, miracle question, virtual miracle

For Steve de Shazer, the co-founder of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), the term “virtual miracle” stands for clients behaving in the therapy room as if they are living through and experiencing what happens the day after the miracle has solved their relationship problems (de Shazer *et al.*, 2007). Whereas the ‘miracle question’¹ – at a minimum – allows the clients to explore what they might want out of the couples’ therapy, that exploration would not amount to a “virtual miracle,” according to de Shazer, unless it includes some sense that they have actually suspended disbelief and – for the moment – are actively imagining their goals as partly or wholly accomplished. De Shazer *et al.* (2007) argue that therapists can bring this shift about by encouraging clients to describe the day after the miracle in specific behavioural detail, and the more specific the better. As clients share these details, what slowly becomes apparent is a change in the ways that clients express themselves: their descriptions of the day after the miracle become increasingly intense and emotional, suggesting that they are seeing themselves doing and feeling the very things that they are describing. Thus,

Sara describes that the morning after the miracle, she will go out on the terrace with her tea and sit down in the sun, and – as she says this – she raises her face as if towards the sun that is clearly there for her in her mind’s eye. Victoria’s mother shows with gestures, facial expressions, and tears, what happens when Victoria becomes ‘huggy’ the morning after the miracle. Anna and her mother stretch their hands toward each other and touch as

they describe what will be different between them the morning after the miracle (de Shazer, *et al.*, 2007, pp. 40-41).

This article intends to examine the widely-held belief that solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), given its emphasis on behaviour and behavioural description, ignores and devalues clients' emotions (Kiser, Piercy & Lipchik, 1993; Lipchik, 1999; Lipchik, 2002; Lipchik, Becker, Brasher, Derks & Volkman, 2005; Piercy, Lipchik & Kiser, 2000; Turnell & Lipchik, 1999). While Miller & de Shazer (1998, 2000) do not treat emotion as the royal road to therapeutic success, or even as an end in itself, de Shazer *et al.* (2007), nonetheless, see it as an essential part of the "virtual miracle" experience, especially given its capacity to produce four critical benefits to clients: (1) when clients imagine their problems have been solved, they are in a better position to discover new potential sources of fulfilment; (2) the positive feelings which accompany these discoveries heighten clients' motivation for change, by giving them a foretaste of the rewards that await them; (3) these positive feelings support the sense that change is possible, emboldening clients to take the difficult first steps on the journey; and (4) the 'virtual miracle' experience serves as a preparatory enactment of an actual miracle, making it possible for clients to "simply go home and do it". This is a benefit de Shazer *et al.* (2007, p. 41) have called "the strongest reason for asking the miracle question", and "something that happens rarely (if ever) when the miracle question is not asked".

While some contend that solution-focused brief therapy's exploration of clients' most desired future through the miracle question is something of "a language game" that is "unnecessarily cognitive and detached from human experience" (Piercy *et al.*, 2000, p. 27), de Shazer and associates argue that it is a therapeutic technique designed for the specific purpose of helping clients connect with *their* human experience: to help them transform their most cherished feelings and aspirations into memorable and vivid stories (de Shazer *et al.*, 2007; Miller & de Shazer, 2000). Citing Wittgenstein, they showed that: behaviour-talk and emotions-talk are not mutually exclusive; that precise communication about emotions is extraordinarily problematic without behavioural descriptions as points of reference; and that any effort to describe emotions such as "anger," "love," "depression," etc., appear vague and abstract, entirely cut off from everyday life, if not coupled with descriptions of clients' concrete behaviour (de Shazer *et al.*, 2007; Miller & de Shazer, 2000).

This article hopes to explore the connection between behavioural description and emotion by examining two of the couple interviews conducted by the co-founders of SFBT, Insoo Kim Berg (1994) and Steve de Shazer (2008). This article also hopes to explore how a "virtual miracle" can be facilitated more easily in couples' therapy when both partners are present. Although the question of the applicability of the solution-focused brief therapy to couples has been raised and discussed for at least

thirty years (de Shazer & Berg, 1985), the advantages of having both partners present for the ‘miracle question’, as well as the relationship between the “virtual miracle” experience and couples therapy, has yet to be examined. Indeed, only one scholarly work – *More Than Miracles* (2007) – even uses the term “virtual miracle” and that book, in line with de Shazer and Berg’s tendency to minimize the differences between individual, couple, and family therapy, as well as the differences between seeing one, two, or more clients at once, only describes how the “virtual miracle” can be facilitated in sessions with clients seeking help with individual-centred problems, as opposed to couples seeking help with their relationships. In their words,

Since our practice and the practice of the Brief Family Therapy Center (BFTC) involve seeing individuals (people who live alone, half a marital pair, or one member of a larger family group), couples (married and unmarried, heterosexual and homosexual pairs), and family groups (two or more people representing at least two generations or parents without the troublesome child), we found that the distinction between marital therapy and family therapy does not apply. A problem is a problem; the number of people (and their relationship to one another) whom the therapist sees to help solve the problem does not seem a useful distinction (de Shazer & Berg, 1985, pp. 97-98).

Without question, asking clients to imagine how their absent partner might respond to signs of the miracle can be beneficial, insofar as it prompts clients to be on the look-out for their absent partner’s positive actions (Zeigler & Hiller, 2001, p. 196). This article proposes to add to this discourse by examining why it might be better for partners to explore the ‘miracle’ question together.

This article asks how questions about each partner’s miracle experience in the presence of the other can set a cycle in motion, in which a positive response from partner A triggers a positive response from partner B, which, in turn, triggers another positive response in A, and so on, so that the mutually-reinforcing loop of positive feeling becomes stronger and more elaborate the more questions are asked of each partner. This spiral can be explained, on the one hand, by balance theory’s (Heider, 1946) assumption that one good turn deserves another as a means of balancing the ledger of good will, a pattern that Hoyt (2008, p. 286) calls a

“virtuous cycle ... where you trust John [because] he steps up and does the right thing, so you trust him more, so he does the right thing more, and things build up in a positive way, back and forth.”

This spiral can also be explained by the theory that positive emotions, unlike negative ones, make people more receptive to new ideas, alternative approaches to problems, and to initiating new courses of action (Fitzpatrick & Stalikas, 2008; Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Kim & Franklin, 2015). Thus, after a person experiences a positive feeling about his or her partner, he or she should be more open to feeling and doing something positive for the other in reciprocation. Hearing partner A express positive

choices, thoughts, and perspectives about partner B, tends to open partner B to more positive choices, thoughts, and perspectives about partner A.

What follows, then, has three main objectives: firstly, to explore the connection between thick behavioural description and the expression of positive emotion; secondly, to explore the kinds of techniques and clinical skills that can maximize the benefits of the miracle question: specifically, how and why therapists should not only ask the miracle question, but also follow-up questions addressing how else clients would notice the miracle and react to it. Finally, this article attempts to show that, while significant change is frequently associated with asking the miracle question of a married or unmarried partner alone (Berg & Dolan, 2001, pp. 37-38), asking the miracle question, with both partners present, may offer a unique opportunity to generate new interactional positions and to provide access to unacknowledged positive feeling.

Case Examples

The Berg (1994) and de Shazer (2008) sessions selected for this analysis have several similarities: both are initial sessions; in both cases, the clients are a married middle-class black couple with two children; in both, the wife assumes the role of principal complainant with the husband more or less acknowledging that he has to do a better job; in both, the couple's primary goal is to "save" the marriage from dissolution; and in both, the therapist asks the miracle question at the beginning of the session. Among the differences, in the de Shazer session, significantly more time is spent exploring the miracle question. Also, in the de Shazer session, the conversation between the partners becomes much more positive as the session progresses. And, notwithstanding the fact that therapy outcomes are rarely immediate and rarely easy to measure, only in the de Shazer session do the couple and therapist declare the session a success. The obvious question, given these similarities and differences, is whether de Shazer's more protracted exploration of the miracle question may have contributed to that session's apparent greater success.

Berg's Interview

In keeping with the question of how the miracle question affects clients' emotional expression, it is important to note that 'Leslie', the wife in the married couple seen by Berg, looked markedly unhappy from the start of the session. For instance, as Berg began asking her husband about his job as a corporate attorney, Leslie's arms remained folded over her chest in a gesture of discomfort and defiance. As Bill, her husband, attempted to answer Berg's questions about his job, Leslie not only looked away from him, she rolled her eyes and grimaced, as if to say, "*There he goes again*". When

Berg turned to Leslie to ask if her husband is good at his work, she responded sarcastically: *“Well, you probably should ask some of the ladies that he sees so much. You know, those are his clients—excuse me—those are his clients, but he’s out every evening. So, I guess he must be good”*. Leslie continued in this vein, revealing a laundry list of complaints about her husband, including: he is never home; he sees other women at night; he doesn’t help with the housework or children; he doesn’t wear his wedding ring; he patronizes her; etc., with Bill responding either by defending himself (*“If I have to work seventy-two hours a week, I do not have time to wash dishes”*) or by blaming Leslie for her *“zero understanding about what’s going on”*. In response to the latter comment, Leslie snapped: *“See ... it’s always me. I have zero understanding. He understands it all. He understands it all. That’s the problem. You know, I don’t think he is frustrated. We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me making the appointment. I think he’s happy that it just goes on and on and I have to work myself to a frazzle”*.

This is where things stood twelve minutes into the session, both partners locked into their negative positions, each blaming the other, when Berg introduced the ‘miracle question’. She took a minute and a half, from beginning to end, to ask the ‘miracle question’. It took so long for two reasons. First, she was speaking in a very slow monotone. Second, as she introduced the couple to the miracle scenario, she also inserted micro-questions such as, *“Do you have a good imagination?”* and *“Do you believe in miracles?”* after which she paused to give Bill and Leslie a chance to respond. While Berg and Dolan (2001, p. 7) have likened clients’ reactions to the ‘miracle question’ to a hypnotic trance with fluttering eyelids and dilated pupils, where clients’ attention is almost entirely directed inward, this description does not apply to Bill and Leslie. They appeared highly engaged, showing enormous pleasure from the beginning of the ‘miracle question’ to its conclusion, when Berg asked them what would be different the morning after the miracle.

Bill: A smile in the morning instead of avoidance.

Berg: You’ll smile at Leslie?

Leslie: He would put his arm around me.

Berg: You would put your arm, okay, he would put his arm around you?

Leslie: Would be a real sign of a miracle at this point.

Berg: Okay. Alright. So, suppose he does. What would you do in response to that?

Leslie: I won’t turn my back to him.

Berg: Okay. Okay. Is that right? Is that what she would do? Would that be a miracle for you?

Bill: Yeah. Yeah. I think it would.

Berg: That would be a miracle for you?

Bill: It would be very different.

Berg: That would be different. Okay.

Bill: Yeah, it would be a miracle. It would, it, yeah. It would really be different than what’s been going on of late.

Berg: Okay. So, when she turns her back towards you instead of ... I mean, so she's facing you. When you smile at her, she'll face you instead of turning her back toward you. What will you do when you see her do that?

Bill: Oh, I suppose I'd embrace her probably.

Berg: Uh-huh. So, you'll give her a hug?

Bill: Yeah.

Berg: What about you, Leslie? What will you do when he gives you a hug?

Leslie: Well, if he hugs me, I'll give him a hug back.

Berg: Ah, ha! Okay. Okay. What will come after that?

Leslie: Tomorrow's Saturday? You never can tell.

Bill: A miracle!

At this point, Bill and Leslie's laughter had become positively uproarious. A session that could have been described as grim and angry had suddenly transformed into a party. An outsider observing the twelve minutes preceding the 'miracle question' might have thought these two hated each other, but if that outsider observed only Bill and Leslie's responses to the 'miracle question', the negative impression would have been reversed. After Leslie said, "*Tomorrow's Saturday. You never can tell*", rocking side to side with laughter, Bill's rejoinder, "*A miracle!*" came out like "*God be praised!*" or "*Hallelujah!*" celebratory and joyous, as if their miracle had already happened.

How can we account for this extraordinary reversal? First, it should be recognized that Berg did not ask for Bill and Leslie to express or describe their feelings. Rather, she remained focused on the task of elucidating the behaviours that Bill and Leslie imagined would go along with their miracle fantasy. While her questions, "*What will you do when you see her do that?*" "*What will you do when he gives you a hug?*" and "*What will come after that?*" appeared directed to obtaining descriptions of behaviour, what she got back was intense feeling. Leslie's affectionate words, "*Well, if he hugs me, I'll give him a hug back*" were accompanied by affectionate looks and gestures at Bill, and those looks and gestures, in turn, called out reciprocal looks and gestures in him, suggesting that Leslie's miracle fantasy had not only become a stimulus to Bill's fantasy, but had become a way for them to connect in the present moment, a way to demonstrate they still found each other fun and attractive. In other words, Bill and Leslie's behaviour suggested that they were not only imagining a possible future when they would be affectionate with each other. They were feeling each other's affection and optimism in real time during the session.

Unfortunately, the laughter and smiles that characterized Bill and Leslie's initial responses to the 'miracle question' did not last very long. Three minutes after Berg first began constructing the miracle narrative for them, she shifted perspectives from the future to the past with the questions, "*When was the most recent time when you had a morning like that? When would you say was the most*

recent time? Maybe not all of it, but just pieces of it, parts of that sort of miracle picture?" These are important questions. In fact, "exceptions" questions, where the therapist seeks to identify elements of the miracle experience in the clients' history, are standard practice for solution-focused brief therapists (de Shazer, 1988, 1994).

However, in hindsight, they may have come too soon. De Shazer *et al.* (2007, p. 45) recommend that the therapist follow up the 'miracle question' with at least three or four "what else" questions (e.g. "*What else would tell you that a miracle had solved your problems?"*) in order to extend and solidify clients' virtual reality experience, but, in this instance, Berg did not inquire beyond the imagined morning hug. Perhaps, because that fantasy elicited such a joyous reaction, she thought that Bill and Leslie might be able to build on it; perhaps she thought that if they could recall some successes like this from the past, they could go home feeling confident that they could do it again.

As Berg and Dolan (2001, p. 13) described the process, discovering "*when the client has recently experienced even a little of the miracle day ... is crucial, because if a client has had even a half day of mastery over problems, he or she has the potential to extend the half day into a whole day, or into two days, and so on*". The problem is that, in this instance, Bill and Leslie could not think of any successes that resembled their imagined morning embrace. Asking them to recall the most recent time that they had shared this kind of affection forced them to acknowledge that they had not done anything like this in two or three years. That recollection, coupled with its open acknowledgement to each other and to Berg, changed their mood, and they soon reverted to the same kind of negative argumentative postures that characterized the beginning of the interview.

Berg tried to bring Bill and Leslie back to their future fantasy moments later by asking what their children would notice after the miracle, but the spell appeared to have been broken. Bill and Leslie did not laugh or share smiles for the duration of the session. Indeed, in the final minutes, Leslie revealed that she had seen a lawyer about divorce. That surprised Bill, and seemed to have a sobering effect on him, as suggested by his promise to become more invested in the marriage: "*I will try to make time. You know, I'm going to try to make time*". However, it soon became apparent that this promise may have been empty, since he almost immediately thereafter began pleading with his wife to understand that, for the time being, she had to continue carrying more than her share of the family workload: "*I have a vision and you need to help me with this vision, you know. And this vision calls for you maybe to do a little more now, then, you know, I guarantee that you'll do a little less later*".

de Shazer's Interview

The beginning of the de Shazer session, much like the beginning of Berg's, was characterized by negativity. Faye, the wife, barely looked at her husband Robert, nor did she smile when he talked. She also volunteered few words, suggesting she was neither hopeful nor motivated. When de Shazer asked her if Robert likes his job, she rolled her eyes slightly, and her answer, "*I really don't know if he likes it or not*", reflected frustration, even disgust, the same tone she displayed moments later when de Shazer asked her whether she had an idea what was bothering Robert. "*I don't have a clue*", she answered, without looking at him. Seven minutes into the session, de Shazer asked the 'miracle question'. To which Faye responded by revealing a tentative smile, her first smile since the session began.

Faye: I think he'd wake up and wish me a good day at my job which would be a first.

S de S: Okay ... ah, and what ... would be your reaction to that?

Faye [smiles again]: It would probably be a shock but it would be good to hear for a change.

S de S: Mmm ... hmm ...

Faye [still smiling]: ... because it would be an encouragement.

S de S: So how ... What would you do?

Faye [still smiling]: I would probably ... I probably would get up and start fixing his breakfast.

As the conversation continued, Faye's affect shifted. Her smile, the way she was looking at Robert, her bodily movements and gestures, all suggested that the miracle was beginning to feel real to her. For a moment, de Shazer, like Berg, wanted to shift away from these pleasurable fantasies by asking if Faye had experienced anything like this in the past ("*Is that sort of a rare event?*"), but Robert would not allow it. Apparently charmed by the idea of his wife fixing his breakfast, he jumped in to reinforce Faye's fantasy by saying how much pleasure he would get from a homemade breakfast. De Shazer then asked Robert how he would react to Faye's generosity, to which Robert, keeping the cycle of reciprocation going, said he would prepare dinner for her that evening. This pattern of questioning was similar to Berg's, in that de Shazer was not only interested in what his clients would notice after the miracle, he was interested in how each would react to those changes.

As noted earlier, where Berg and de Shazer diverged was in the amount of time and attention each devoted to their clients' miracle narrative, with de Shazer spending a total of fourteen minutes on developing his clients' miracle responses compared to only two or three minutes for Berg. A second difference is that Berg did not explore her clients' miracles separately. For Bill and Leslie, there was only the shared miracle of embracing in bed in the morning, while for Robert and Faye, de Shazer attempted to construct separate miracles, as evidenced by his next question to Robert:

S. de S [looking at Robert]: So, what about you? You wake up in the morning after this miracle, what's the first indication for you that, ah! maybe the miracle has happened?

Robert: Well, I can't remember the last time she's kissed me in the morning, or kissed me on the way out to work, or that type of affection. I can't even remember the last time we exchanged touchy-feely.

S de S: Mmm ... hmm ... Okay. So, she kissed you? What would your response be? What would you do?

Robert: I would surprise her and maybe send her some flowers at work to put on her desk. We're on a budget but I can at least do that. Faye, smiling, turns slowly toward her husband, making direct eye contact with him.

S de S [to Faye]: Would that be a big or small surprise?

Faye [still smiling]: Would be a big surprise.

S de S: Would be a big surprise, yeah? Okay [looking at Robert], so she kissed you? Then what? What happens?

Robert: We might go back to bed. I don't know [he looks at her and they exchange smiles].

After they discussed what else would be different between them for a few more minutes, de Shazer asked how their children and co-workers would recognize that a miracle had occurred. While Robert and Faye responded thoughtfully and responsibly, their answers had a perfunctory quality, with none of the shared looks and smiles that characterized their earlier discussion of how they would recognize signs of the miracle in each other. Their answers were also much briefer.

Perhaps because Robert and Faye's relationship had been identified as their chief issue, and perhaps because they were both present in the session, de Shazer devoted much more time to their after-the-miracle reactions to each other, resulting in a long list which included how they would fix meals for each other, greet each other differently, dress up for each other, kiss and embrace, and so on, a list which Berg might have accomplished with her clients, Bill and Leslie, had she not introduced "exceptions" questions so soon.

On the other hand, like Bill and Leslie, Robert and Faye's back and forth responses to the miracle question did give them a chance to think about their shared potential for positive, loving interactions, not only in the future, but in the present. As happened with Bill and Leslie, Faye's positive responses to her husband during the session appeared to trigger positive responses in him, which triggered even more positive responses in her, one partner's positive responses appearing to inspire a seemingly endless cycle of positive responses in self and other. This all had a hypothetical, fantasy dimension, but, as was true of Bill and Leslie, it also had a real, in the moment dimension, which perhaps explains why, once the miracle questioning commenced in the de Shazer session, Faye's emotional tone appeared to change almost immediately from hostility to affection.

Robert and Faye's session ended on a much happier note than Bill and Leslie's, with both Robert and Faye expressing optimism about their marriage, and both agreeing, at de Shazer's suggestion, to enact a variation of the 'miracle question' as homework. de Shazer asked them each to

toss a coin separately and secretly before going to bed, and if it came up heads, the next day they were supposed to act as if the miracle had happened. The catch is they could not tell each other. They had to keep it secret. They were each to do this twice before the next session. Their task was to figure out which two days their partner picked, and to watch carefully on the days they picked how their partner reacted to them, also how their children and co-workers reacted. They were then to return and talk about it in the session.

Conclusions

Unlike therapy approaches that identify their primary tasks as the direct provocation, exploration and reformulation of clients' emotional experiences (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999; Johnson, 2012), in the sessions examined here, Berg and de Shazer showed few signs of seeking positive or negative emotional reactions from their clients. They appeared mainly interested in the kinds of behaviour their clients would notice and perform the morning after the miracle. Nonetheless, the behaviour-talk which ensued was not passionless. It was not dry and intellectual. In both the Berg and de Shazer sessions, when the clients were asked to describe their behavioural reactions to the miracle, their words, gestures, and facial expressions revealed strong positive feeling.

Furthermore, in both sessions, the more specific behavioural detail that the clients brought to their descriptions of the morning after the miracle, the more intense and emotional those descriptions became. That de Shazer's clients managed to continue with the 'miracle question', with discernible positive results, while Berg's couple could not, with equally discernible negative results, suggests how important it is to sustain and develop the miracle fantasy with additional questions about "what else" would be different the morning after the miracle, and then to ask further questions seeking to clarify and amplify the details of each response.

While de Shazer *et al.* (2007) acknowledge the importance of emotional reactions to the 'miracle question', they only trace them to the ways clients imagine how they and others would behave the morning after the miracle. This article points to an additional emotional stimulus: the ways that clients in couple therapy experience each other – in real time – during the session. This article, in other words, suggests that emotional reactions to the 'miracle question' result from clients' imagining their own and others' loving reactions in the future, and also from their direct observation of their significant other's potential for loving interactions in the here-and-now. When partners explore the miracle question together, each has an opportunity to witness the positive actions their significant 'other' imagines seeing *in* them, as well as the positive actions their significant other imagines performing *for* them. They have an opportunity to directly witness the reservoir of kindness and generosity each may

still feel for the other (Bertrando & Arcelloni, 2014). This suggests that when therapists work with both partners on the ‘miracle question’ together, they have an advantage, over and above seeing partners separately, of helping them feel as though they are living through and experiencing their goals as partly or wholly accomplished—of experiencing a “virtual miracle.”

The sessions examined in this article represent two different couples. They may have some noteworthy similarities, but they also have a number of noteworthy differences. It would be unwise therefore to suggest that this comparison is anything more than preliminary and exploratory. Despite the fact that de Shazer’s couple’s continuation of their miracle fantasy was associated with spiraling positive feeling, and that Berg’s couple’s discontinuation of their miracle fantasy was associated with a resumption of negative feeling, we cannot say with confidence what accounted for the difference in outcomes. Obviously, more empirical research is needed, in particular, with regard to the question of how much time and attention to devote to developing additional questions about “what else” would be different the morning after the miracle. As Kim and Franklin (2015) noted, SFBT, while rich in its theoretical understanding of emotions, continues to need much more sophisticated and rigorous empirical investigations.

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Endnote:

¹ De Shazer's (1988, p. 5) original wording of the miracle question: "Suppose that one night, while you were asleep, there was a miracle and this problem was solved. How would you know? What would be different? How will your husband know without your saying a word to him?"