CHAT HELP
Conversation process
Based on the 8 step dance of solution- focused work

A translation and adapation of: Training Chathulpverlening: Gespreksverloop. Gebaseerd op de 8 stappen-dans van Oplossingsgericht denken van SAM vzw" to be used in the lessons Online Social Work of the Department Social Work of Artevelde University of Applied Sciences.

A chat conversation does not always follow fixed steps. Perhaps you start an informal Whatsapp or Messenger conversation with someone you are helping that turns into a chat conversation. Maybe you have made an appointment to have a conversation with a parent about a young person's counselling. Or maybe you have an open reception where you chat with people you don't know yet.

The eight-step dance is a free dance, you can shape it completely by yourself. Depending on how chat help is used in an organisation, certain steps will be more or less important. Some steps will not even be relevant to you.
The first step is always that of making contact, the first sentence, the entry. But what happens next you cannot put into a fixed structure.

This methodology is based on the methodology of solution-oriented thinking, we assume that there does not always have to be a connection between problem and solution. Without knowing causes completely and without analysing problems in detail, solutions are possible with which help seekers appear to be very satisfied.

Once you know what is going on, what the problem is, and how it is affecting the person, you can look for solutions together. Taking into account your own assignment. Solution-focused thinking is suitable for all forms of help and support.

'What is wrong, what is not working and how come?' Based on that, as an answerer, you start looking for solutions via solution-focused questions that are often based on exceptions. 'What is going well, what is working and what can contribute to (part of) the solution?', 'When do you feel okay?', 'When are you less bothered by the problem? And what's different then?'

You are not an 'expert' who passes on his knowledge to the help seeker, but an ally who joins the search for possible solutions on an equal footing. The help seeker is the expert of his life.

1. THE 8 STEPS OF A CHAT CONVERSATION

With the 8-step dance, you engage in targeted and expert chat support. It gives you the freedom to decide at your own discretion and depending on your dance partner which step is most useful at which moment and which step follows on from the previous one. Like in a free dance.
The only 2 steps that are fixed are logically the first step of making contact and the last of finishing.

"Your caller determines the music, you (responder) determine the dance" (Ringo Vandermeeren, CAW North-West Flanders)
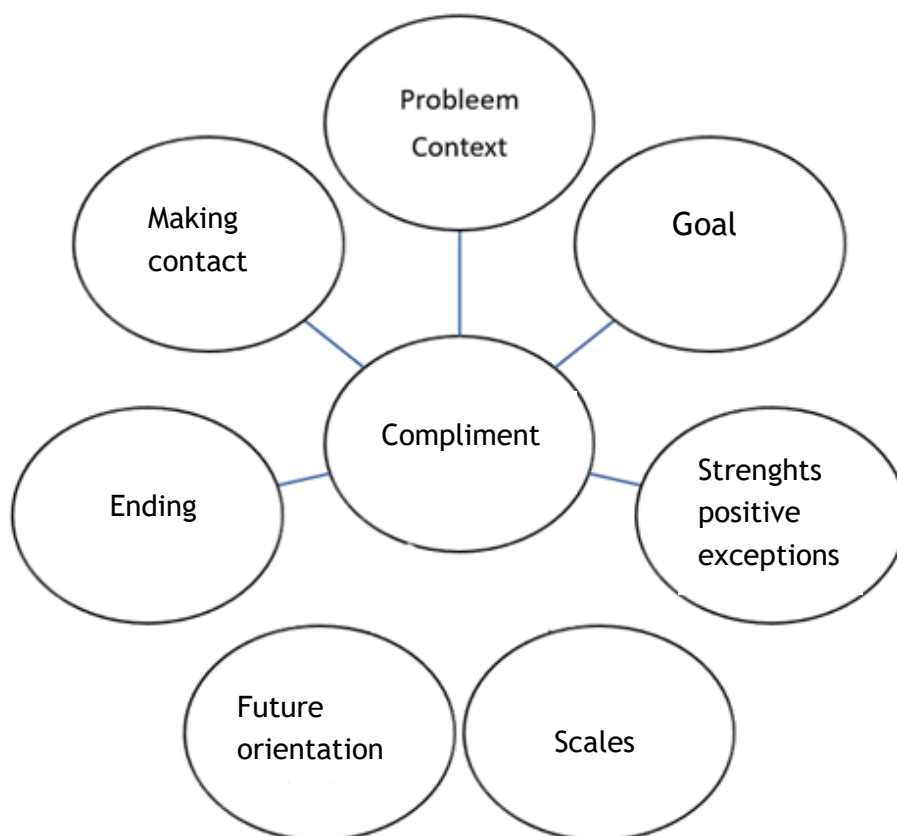
1.1. Making contact

However obvious: the engine of change is a good working relationship. Perhaps the help seeker is already known. Be attentive and interested in the person to get a good start to the conversation.

Someone who feels welcome is more likely to be at ease to tell issues in confidence and look for solutions.

Some specific tips for making contact online:

-   Take the initiative to start the conversation yourself

If you work with a chat box, it may already be a big step for the help seeker to make contact. If you already know the person, you can ask a question yourself to start the conversation and show your interest.

-   Create a safe atmosphere

And try to maintain the same. Have an open attitude and use easy language. Give the help seeker enough time to answer. Be cordial.

If you work with a chat box, pay attention to data the help seeker has already filled in, e.g. nickname, age, a subject...

-   The first question

Make sure your first question is inviting, simple and clear. Some examples:

> How are you today?

> Have you been on our chat before?

> What would you like to talk about?

> Would you like to ask or tell us something?

> What brings you here today?

Don't ask too difficult questions. Don't play back a help seeker's question immediately.

-   How do we talk to each other

You can agree on how the conversation will go. Eg "Would you prefer me to ask you questions?" or "We agreed to talk about difficulties at school. Do you mind if we talk about the argument with your boyfriend later?'

If you chat with several people (in a WhatsApp or messenger group), you can make agreements here about how you will talk to each other. Agree, for instance, who can talk first and who afterwards.

You can also agree on the duration of the conversation.

-   If the help seeker doesn't talk much

You can try to encourage the help seeker to say something about themselves.

E.g.: "What did you do this week?", "How is school going?", "What do you want to do in the holidays?".

If you work with a chat box , you can create extra safety by first telling something about your organisation. Someone chatting for the first time often does not know what to expect. Explain what your organisation does and what you can do there and what about confidentiality.

-   Make contact again

In the course of the conversation, you can sometimes "lose contact". The help seeker replies only with yes or no, or with short answers. Or says "there is no need anymore, no one can help me".

Then it can be good to go back to step 1 for a moment, and engage in meta-communication.

Eg: 'I have the impression that this is not helping you. I would very much like to be there for you and would be happy to make time to see what can help'.

1.2. Exploring problems and context

You try to get a hold of what the issue is about, what the question or problem is and how it is affecting the person. Paying attention to this provides motivation to change the situation and is therefore useful. Then you start focusing on (small) solutions that will help deal with the situation.

No problem takes place in a vacuum and it is important to get a good picture of the context in which the problem occurs. You do this not to analyse causes in depth, but to get a view of environmental factors. This may also be where solutions lie.

If you don't know the person yet, a question like 'Tell me something about yourself' can be a good starting question that invites the client to ask how they see themselves and what is important in life. Relationship questions "What does your partner/best friend/parents,...?" / "Who really knows how you are doing right now?" often provide relevant information and help the help seeker see themselves through the eyes of others.

1.3. Setting goals

- What does the help seeker expect from this conversation?

'What should this conversation be about, to be meaningful to you?' is a good start for help seekers who get stuck in problem descriptions or when there are many topics of conversation. Explicitly try to know what the person expects from this conversation.

- What does the help seeker want to do with the question or problem?

What does the person want to change? Remember that the only worthwhile goals are the help seeker's own. What will take its place when the problem is solved?

It is important to understand that a goal is not simply the absence of a problem but enables a new approach and increases freedom of choice and action. Efforts are made to broaden possibilities rather than simply striving to contain a problem.

1.4. Finding strengths, successes and positive exceptions

The trigger for someone to seek help is often that they are no longer able to use their own strengths.

- Everyone has their own strengths, ask questions about them and thus help the person (re)discover them: 'what are you good at?' / 'what can you already do, what are you proud of?' /'when do you feel good, and what do you do then'. This helps the person identify (their own) successes. What works well, well-lightly in other circumstances. What works despite the problems? Who do you find support or help from...?

- Zoom in on the positive exceptions, there may be solutions in there. Together with the help seeker, examine which behaviours and circumstances made it possible for the situation to be (somewhat) better. If the person themselves contributed to the exception, this increases the possibility of that exception being repeated more often.

Helpful questions might include: When did things go well? Describe the situation: what was different?

Note: do not minimise.

1.5. Compliment

Compliments are central to your conversation. They encourage cooperation, increase trust, can offer hope and shift attention from problems to solutions. You want to affirm the person's own strengths and create exceptions. This does not always have to be explicit, but can also be subtle (How did you manage to do that? Strong that you still started the conversation with me). Above all, be genuine when complimenting.

1.6. Scales (as a technique)

You can work with scales from 0 (the problem at its worst) to 10 (the goals have been achieved satisfactorily). 'On a scale of 0 to 10, how much pain are you in now?'

Also ask how the person managed to reach that point on the scale. If he/she is now at a 5, the counsellor might say: 'A 5? Great. What makes it a 5 and not a 3?' This helps the per-son discover what solutions he/she has achieved to get from 0 to 5. For a very low score, you could ask: 'How come it's not 0?'

And even if it is 0, a scale is useful. A good response could be:

'How do you manage to persevere even when your problem is at its worst? How do you do that?'

Scaling helps people rediscover what resources they already have at their disposal. Scaling can also help get out of black-and-white thinking and bring a little more nuance.

When scaling, be careful not to move too quickly from the current to the desired score. For number X, first ask what is present between zero and X, as these are strengths. Ask this in detail. Only when no more strengths are mentioned, the question 'How would you know you are one point higher?', 'What is the smallest step that would be feasible? What is the smallest change you could notice?'

1.7. Future orientation (as a technique)

Future projections of what life will be like when the problem does not occur, or occurs to a lesser extent, help the help seeker visualise the solution he or she envisions. A technique often used by solution-focused counsellors is the so-called **miracle question**. This technique is also particularly useful with people who can indicate what they want to get rid of, but do not know where they want to go. It helps to dare to dream back.

The help seeker is asked to describe in detail what the situation would be like if a miracle had taken place and the current problems had been solved. What is the first thing you notice about that miracle having happened? What do others notice about you? What would you do differently? Ask lots of questions about concrete things that would be different in everyday life. This increases the chances of a potential future image. Through scaling questions and inquiring about exceptions (Was there ever in your life a little bit of that miracle noticeable?), a first step towards miracle is designed.

Inviting the help seeker to visualise the situation without the problem often has an amazingly strong effect. It energises, provides hope for a better future and initiates a positive ket-ting response. An important part of at this stage of solution-focused work is to take small steps forward rather than big leaps.

It is often much easier to find the motivation to take a small step than a big leap. Aiming for a big step too often leads to doing nothing at all. Small steps work best and the more stuck you are in your problem, the smaller the step should be.

1.8. Ending a chat conversation

Announce the end of the conversation.

The start of the end is best done by the answering party, but the help seeker can also decide to end on their own.

Whether you work on a permanent basis, by appointment, with known or unknown people, the maximum conversation time is usually 1 hour. Both for the help seeker and for you. Try to respect this but be flexible if it can add qualitative value. This also applies when you know in advance that your time is limited. E.g. 'Our time is almost up'. 'I'm going to have to finish later'

Check whether the help seeker has any questions and make an appointment if necessary/desirable

Check whether the help seeker has any questions. You can answer these briefly or make an appointment to chat further at another time.

Provide information about your organisation and contact options if necessary

Provide information about your organisation or make arrangements for a subsequent contact and the various contact options. (Do not limit yourself to chat, other channels such as telephone, e-mail, physical visits, etc. can also be used. This is always tailored to the client).

Evaluation

You can do this by going back to the predetermined goal. "Do you feel relieved?", "Can you get on with this? Check that the caller has understood everything. Repeat if necessary. Repeat again the info or address of a referral.

Close

The last sentence may come from the help seeker. For example, you can say that the help seeker may close. Set yourself a time limit (e.g. 1 minute) and then close yourself if the person does not.

2. ANNEX: QUESTIONS AND TECHNIQUES

2.1. Questions

Making contact

- What would be useful for you to discuss?

- What would tell you that this conversation has been useful for you?

- What brings you here today? How did you get here today?

- What did you come here with today?

- What thoughts do you have about how to use this time usefully?

- For what purpose did you come here today?

- What would make this conversation worthwhile for you?

- Before we start, may I ask: what is already going (a little) better?

Explore problem and its context

- What do you want things to change?

- What do you want to change about?

- What should change as a result of our conversations?

- How can we best discuss this?

- How important is it for you to make this change?

- What do you have in mind for it?

- What would you like to discuss about it?

- What does your partner, friends, parents,... notice?

- Who can you turn to with these things?

- Is there anyone who now knows how you are really doing?

- You probably have a good reason to ....

- What do you want the outcome to be?

- What do you want to achieve?

- What do you want things to get better later?

Compliment

- How do you cope with such difficult situations every day?

- What helps you to keep it up?

- How can you explain to yourself how, given your difficult circumstances, you do it as well as you do it?

- How did you manage to keep it up before you passed out?

- How did you manage to....

- Given your story, what positive attributes belong to you....

- What compliments do you get from...?

- What makes you so good at.....

- When are you proud and satisfied?

Future orientation, defining goals

- Suppose the problem is solved. what will improve...and what else?

- What do others notice when the situation is resolved?

- What do you see yourself doing when the problem is solved?

- What do you want the situation to be like?

- What do you want in place of the problem?

- What would it look like at position 10 on the scale? What would be the difference?

- What would be the benefit if you could get that done?

- How will that be an improvement for you?

- How would it benefit others?

- How would it improve your relationship with others?

Naming positive exceptions

- What is already going well why is it a ... on the scale?

- What has helped so far?

- What of what works could you do more of?

- When is it going better?

- When is the problem less present?

- What does this have to do with?

- What do others say works?

- When did it go better? What did you notice that by?

- What was different then? How did you do it?

- What are you satisfied with? What is going well in your life?

- What do you want to keep from the current situation?

Finding and naming strengths

- What strengths have you used in...

- It is strong how you have been able to keep doing your work/studies under such difficult circumstances. How do you do that?

- What do you consider yourself good at, what are you proud of?

- What do others think you are good at?

- What things are still going well?

Monitoring progress

- What is already improving?

- What else?

- Where do you stand on the scale now?

- What did you notice that could help?

- How did you manage that improvement?

- What of what you tried worked, even if only slightly?

- What did the other person think went better?

- What else could you do?

2.2. Techniques

The miracle question

By formulating a 'suppose that' question, the counsellor puts his client in an imaginary situation in which his problem is completely solved at once. For example, the counsellor asks, 'suppose you go home right after our conversation and finish the day. You do what you normally do and then you go to bed. While you sleep, a miracle happens. The problems you are sitting here for now have disappeared. But you sleep, so you don't know that the miracle has taken place. When you wake up tomorrow, what will be the first things you notice that the miracle has taken place?'

The power of the question is that it shifts the client's attention very quickly from the problem to the desired future. In other words, a focus on the solution rather than the problem. The client already knows his problem ad nauseam, but for the solution he needs imagination. The Miracle Question thus focuses on the ingenuity, strength and wisdom that people already have in themselves, but which somehow they did not or could not get in touch with. You can represent that solution in a story or a drawing. This makes it easier for ideas to surface to actually reach the solution.

Probably the client has to think about it for a while at first, but once he gets images about his own Miracle Day, work on his own solution starts. In asking questions, it is important to let people think for themselves about possible solutions (their own strengths, wisdom and resourcefulness) and to ask precisely about them. Then you start making an action plan (with what, who and how) to come up with the solution. http://www.idenmaker.blogspot.be/2010/01/stel-jezelf-de-wondervraag.html

Scaling

As mentioned, there are many ways to use scale questions. The most well-known uses of the scale question are described below.

1.   The success scale: this is the most familiar application of the scale. This is the scale where 10 represents the desired situation and 0 represents the situation where nothing of the desired situation has yet been realised. The success this scale is about can relate to any goal you find relevant such as better communication, more skillful handling of setbacks, more efficient production, customer-focused working, and so on.

2.   The motivation scale: this scale is used to discuss and help strengthen clients' motivation. On this scale, for example, the 10 represents: "I have a lot to give to reach the goal" and 0 for "I have nothing to give. It may seem paradoxical, but by going through the basic steps of scale questions, clients can often develop a better grip on their own motivation. They often learn to better regulate their own motivation. They find out how they manage to motivate themselves. When they would notice that they have a motivation dip, they can do those things that helped them become more motivated again before.

3.   The confidence scale: this scale is used to discuss and reinforce clients' confidence that they will be able to achieve the desired change. A 10 represents, for example: "I am very confident that I can get this done" and a 0 represents, for example: "I have no confidence at all". As with the motivation scale, the confidence scale teaches learners to regulate their own confidence. This can have a strong stimulating effect. If a client has little confidence that he will be able to do something, it is not logical that he will do much to get it done. As soon as his confidence increases, the threshold to take action is lowered.

4.   The independence scale: An important principle in solution-focused work is that we want to prevent clients from becoming dependent on coaches. The independence scale can help. This scale is used to strengthen clients' independence. For example, a 10 on this scale represents: "I know how to get on independently and no longer need help with that" and a 0 can represent, for example: "I don't know how to proceed with this at all and need help". The independence scale is often used in situations where the client has some kind of choice problem, such as a career issue. The advantage of the

independence scale is that coaching programmes or therapies need not take longer than strictly necessary. While the pro- problem itself may not yet be fully resolved, this does not have to mean that the counselling needs to continue. The client can often move forward independently.

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