

# AT YOUR BEST: Single Session Performance Coaching

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BRIEF, London (Reproduced with permission)

In the early days of our Solution-Focused practice while still working in an NHS clinic we were asked to see Maria, a young woman who was thought to be a risk to herself and to her two-year old child. She had been sexually abused from the age of two by a group of men still living in the area. At sixteen she went to the police who said there was insufficient evidence to proceed against the men who were now promising her that her daughter would be next. Maria felt they were unstoppable. Her only recourse was to leave the area otherwise she would be better off killing herself and her child. As a council tenant on a run down and dangerous estate the chances of a move were close to zero. The many professionals who had been involved with Maria all thought highly of her and were at a loss about how to avert potential disaster without making things even worse. We too were at a loss but Solution-Focused enough to know that somewhere there would be a way forward. When Maria came to her second session she reported feeling a little happier in herself but still fixed in her idea that a move was the only solution. She had arranged a meeting with a housing officer to put forward her case but was realistic in expecting nothing. All the therapist could think of was to build the conversation around a possible future in which Maria's did justice to herself at the meeting but without stepping outside the harsh realities of social housing policies. At the time it seemed a poor response to Maria's distress and one born out of desperation rather than expectation.

Therapist: Let's imagine it's Thursday afternoon and you are on your way home from your meeting with the housing officer; you don't know the outcome but what you do know is that you couldn't have done yourself more justice at that meeting. So you are going home feeling that you had given it your best shot! What do you think you'd be remembering about the way you did that? What would you remember about the way you woke up that morning which was part of doing yourself justice at the meeting?

Maria: Maybe I wouldn't have woken up dreading it.

Therapist: So what would have replaced the dread?

Maria: I don't know. Possibly feeling I could do it — not looking forward to it as such but not dreading it. Saying 'you can do it!'

Therapist: And if you woke up with that thought in your head, 'you can do it!' what difference will that make?

Maria: I'd get straight up which I find really hard at the moment — and I'd pay more attention to Alexa.

Therapist: What might you be doing with Alexa?

Maria: I don't know that I'd do anything different because obviously I do everything for her anyway but I think I'd be able to concentrate more.

The conversation continued for several minutes until we reached the point when Maria walked into her interview.

Therapist: As you come through the door into the office what sort of young woman is the housing officer going to see — if you were at your best?

Maria: I won't look scared or nervous.

Therapist: How will you look instead?

Maria: Confident.

Therapist: How will it show?

Maria: I'll have my head up — and I'll make eye contact.

Therapist: And what will he or she notice about the way you walk into the office?

Maria: I'll be calm — not too fast — I'll look like I know what I want.

Therapist: And as you walk in with your head up, calm, confident, knowing what you want — how do you think you'd feel if you noticed yourself like that?

Maria: I'd feel strong. I'd still be nervous but it would be a good nervous, like adrenalin.

Therapist: And what do you think the housing officer will be thinking at that point?

Maria: Maybe that he's going to have to take me seriously.

A few days later Maria rang me having just got home from the meeting. She said she didn't know the outcome but she was very pleased with herself and she wanted me to know that whatever the outcome we did not need to worry about her. At our next meeting (by which time she had heard that her move had been approved) I asked her about this change of heart, this new belief that even if she had to stay where she was she and Alexa would be safe. She said something changed in her. Because she came away from the meeting very proud of the way she had handled it, she began to realise that the outcome was beyond her control. She had done her best and if they refused to move her it wasn't her fault. This seemed to open up a whole new understanding of her life and its shocking history.

Maria's move came very quickly and I did not see her again until coincidentally we bumped into each other about two years later in a part of town neither of us had been in before. Her life was blossoming and she had been just been offered a place at university. Alexa would start school at the same time.

This might have been just an interesting 'one-off' case if Tony had not referred himself at about the same time. He was the father of a boy I had helped overcome 'school phobia'. A high-flying executive in a US-based multinational, Tony's sparkling career had led him and his family through a number of capital city postings. Though financially well rewarded this was a tough life for a family whose hope was that a home posting would eventually be offered so they could return to the States. Tony had been invited to apply for such a job much earlier than expected. If he succeeded he would be the youngest vice-president in the company. And he had lost his nerve and even become afraid of flying.

We met once. Tony said he could overcome his fear sufficiently to board a plane but as to facing the interview he could not see a way. The interview was to be in his home city and he would be staying on familiar territory at his parents' house.

Therapist: Let's imagine it's the morning of your interview and during the night a miracle has happened and sorted out your fear! So you're ready for it — absolutely at your best. What's the first thing you'd notice when you woke up?

Tony: I wouldn't be dreading the interview!

Therapist: What would you be doing instead?

Tony: I'd be thinking it's going to be a tough day but I'm lucky to have the chance.

Therapist: And if you woke up with those thoughts and feelings what difference would that make?

Tony: I'd want to get straight up!

The similarity — close to identicalness — of these two conversations was too striking to go unnoticed. A disadvantaged, unemployed, teenage single mother living on a semi-derelict housing estate in a desperately poor city area and a high-earning, successful settled family man both having virtually identical conversations which led to their hoped-for outcomes. Tom and his family also moved to a 'real' home.

One of the great 'discoveries' of de Shazer and the Milwaukee team was that 'solutions' had more in common with each other than they do with 'problems'. Steve de Shazer's *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy* is a fascinating description of the cusp between problem focused and Solution-Focused conversations and where the idea that many different problems might have the same solution was first explored. Maria and Tom had virtually nothing in common and when it came to moving forward they had everything.

From these two interviews, and the discussions around them, came an idea that has stayed a part of BRIEF's thinking and practice ever since. When a person has an event coming up, especially an event that will have a substantial impact on his life and where his performance at the event will have a significant impact on outcome, then 'being at his best' during the event is likely to make a difference to his future life. One of the most common such events is a job interview but there are many more: board meetings, court appearances, presentations and pitches, meetings with housing officers, even first dates (not insignificant if the 'date' is an arranged meeting with a prospective spouse.). At stake might be future employment or income, whether or not you obtain a much needed resource, future relationships and, as in Maria's case, future housing. What became obvious was that Solution-Focused coaching at these critical points in life can make a major difference to their outcome. Less obvious but possibly more significant was the impact the coaching session had on Maria's view of her future irrespective of whether or not the hoped-for outcome was achieved. Maria's experience of 'being at her best' during her interview freed her from a sense of responsibility for the outcome, or more particularly a bad outcome which might otherwise have led her to blame the misfortune on herself. When Tom telephoned to say he'd got the job he reported a similar feeling — a sense that he 'gave it his best shot' and could do no more: the rest was out of his hands.

This format is especially useful for events involving strangers and containing unpredictable elements. In these cases it is not possible for the client to describe the event in great detail because there are too many unknowns. For key events with known participants, such as a team meeting, it is possible to build an 'at your best' picture of the event itself or even do both: begin the 'at your best' description from the start of the day, include the 'successful' meeting and perhaps finish with arriving home at the end of the day. In this way a key but isolated event is embedded in a wider life and thus a wider array of potential resourcefulness

Over the years we have used this simple 'at your best' framework for countless conversations: with homeless alcoholics, hopeful job applicants, with people attending crucial meetings (from child protection conferences to House of Commons Committees), with company directors and with young offenders. But of them all the most touching has been a series of conversations with our children's friends facing their first interviews for universities and jobs. Mentioning this on a coaching course one of the participants, whose daughter was following the same path as one of ours and faced an exceptionally difficult interview, asked if we could offer her an 'at your best interview'. In such circumstances how could one parent not help out another! Louise came for an interview and generously allowed it to be recorded. Here it is in its entirety.

Coach: What are your best hopes from this meeting, this 30 minutes or so?

Louise: I don't know. Mum just said you were really good!

Coach: So if it turns out to be really good for you how will you know?

Louise: I'll get an offer!

Coach: So if this meeting boosts your chances of an offer it will have been worth it??

Louise: Yes, absolutely!!

Coach: Okay, then I'll ask you some questions that might just do that. Louise: Okay!

Coach: Let's imagine then that it's the day of your interview and —

Louise: Tomorrow!

Coach: Tomorrow! So let's imagine tomorrow is one of those days when you are at your best and absolutely ready for whatever the day has in store for you! What's the first thing you'd notice when you woke up in the morning?

Louise: I wouldn't have that horrible sinking feeling.

Coach: What would you have instead? Louise: A positive feeling, maybe. Coach: What time is that likely to be?

Louise: About eight.

Coach: What difference will it make to be waking up at around eight tomorrow with a positive feeling?

Louise: I'd be in a more positive state of mind and have that feeling of being able to do it — of handling the day well.

Coach: What difference will that make to the way you get up?

Louise: I'll get out of bed straight away which I don't at the moment.

Coach: Who'll notice?

Louise: Only the dog — everyone else will have gone.

Coach: What's the dog called?

Louise: Ted.

Coach: How would Ted know you'd woken up with a sense of being able to handle the day well?

Louise: I'd talk to him more and have a positive tone of voice.

Coach: Would he like that? Louise: Yes and no. He'd like me talking to him but he wouldn't like having to get off the bed!

Coach: What difference would these feelings make to the way you got up?

Louise: I'd be walking around in a different way — more alert and things.

Coach: Would Ted like that? Louise: I think so. He picks up people's moods. Coach: What would his response to your mood be?

Louise: Oh, he'd be wagging his tail, barking, getting excited

Coach: So if you saw Ted wagging his tail, barking, getting excited that would be one of the signs that you were at your best?

Louise: *[Laughs]* Yes!

Coach: And then? Do you have breakfast, what's the usual routine?

Louise: I'd make some tea and look on the internet for the stories of the day that I might be asked about at the interview.

Coach: As you were waiting for the computer to open up what would you be noticing about yourself that told you you were at your best?

Louise: Maybe, I'd relax a bit first and read my book.

Coach: What are you reading?

Louise: A Jane Austen. 'Emma'.

Coach: So if you were reading your book, drinking your tea, feeling relaxed, how would you know you were ready for the day ahead?

Louise: I'd just be relaxing, not panicking, prepared to let the day unfold — and concentrating on the book.

Coach: And what time will you have to leave for the interview?

Louise: I'm getting a taxi to the station because I'm going back to uni straight after the interview so I'll have all my things with me. About 11.

Coach: Okay — what else in that couple of hours would tell you that you were ready?

Louise: Well, I'll have packed the night before so I'll have plenty of time to get ready.

Coach: So you're thinking about getting ready for this probably most challenging event in your life; what at that point would tell you that you really were at your best?

Louise: I wouldn't be putting it off, seeing it as a chore. I'd be enthusiastic and thinking 'you can do this!' Feeling positive about what I've got to offer and being able to impress and getting a place.

Coach: And so the taxi arrives. What sort of young woman will the taxi driver see?

Louise: A woman who is smartly dressed!

Coach: Wearing?

Louise: Probably white blouse with a black camisole top underneath and beigey trousers — quite conservative!

Coach: And how will you be feeling at that point?

Louise: Probably a bit sad because I'll be leaving home for a few weeks.

Coach: And what will you notice about the way you feel sad that tells you you're at your best?

Louise: I suppose because it'll be tinged with knowing that I'll soon be coming back, with my degree and hopefully with my place in law school. My life will be sorted!!

Coach: So what else will the taxi driver notice about you?

Louise: Smiling, confident, polite. All those sort of things.

Coach: And on the train. What will you notice then?

Louise: I'll be getting nervous then!

Coach: And what will you notice about your nervousness that tells you that you are at your best?

Louise: I think nervousness can sometimes be healthy; it can give you an adrenalin rush which means you can face things better. And I suppose it's tinged with excitement as well. That would be good!

Coach: And how will you know it's the right sort of nervousness?

Louise: I think it will just be a feeling within myself that I'm ready for this and can really make a good impression.

Coach: So, as you were sitting on the train feeling this positive nervousness, excitement, not just looking confident but also feeling it, what would you be remembering about yourself that gave you good reason for your confidence?

Louise: I want to be a lawyer and have the skills to be one.

Coach: What else?

- Louise: I'm willing to work hard and know that I can because I've worked hard for this degree.
- Coach: What else?
- Louise: I think it's important not to take too much on and I think I'm good at asking for help.
- Coach: What else?
- Louise: I'm capable, I've already got one degree, well nearly, and know I can do another one.
- Coach: What else?
- Louise: I've already got one offer so I know I've got what it takes.
- Coach: What else?
- Louise: I'll look the part and feel the part!
- Coach: What else?
- Louise: I don't know! I can't think of anything else!
- Coach: So what else do you think you might be remembering that was helpful?
- Louise: That I'm prepared to really work for something and prepared to take a risk — to go for it even though I might not get it.
- Coach: And what else?
- Louise: That I've researched this job and I'm going in with my eyes open.
- Coach: What else?
- Louise: I'm really, really enthusiastic about it. And have prepared. I've worked at a Citizens' Advice Bureau, I've had work experience shadowing a barrister, I'm good with people. I know I can do it!
- Coach: And eventually, you come out of the station and you're walking towards the college — what will tell you that you are still at your best at that point?
- Louise: It sounds silly but I'll probably be thinking about how my hair looks and if I'm still looking smart — despite my big backpack! And I'll be walking along thinking I can do this! I'm smart, I'm capable, I can do it!
- Coach: What do you think all the law students who pass you by would notice that suggests you are smart, capable and are ready for this challenge?
- Louise: My posture — I'll have my head up and my shoulders will be relaxed, not all hunched up.
- Coach: Will that suit you?
- Louise: Yes! In that situation it would!

Coach: What time is the interview?

Louise: 2.30.

Coach: And what's the format?

Louise: There'll be a questionnaire that takes about 30 minutes asking why this college, why law and what can you offer; then there'll be an ethical case scenario to look at and be asked about in the interview and then the interview.

Coach: So what will the other applicants notice about you as you arrive?

Louise: I'll be relaxed — hopefully!

Coach: And?

Louise: I'd get on and do the form, then I'd read the scenario and think about it for a while and then I'd probably chat with them.

Coach: About?

Louise: Probably about ordinary things, have they come far, what have they done before, that sort of thing.

Coach: Let's say someone started talking about the questionnaires you'd all just done and what they'd said made you feel a bit wobbly about what you'd put how would you react then if you were at your best?

Louise: I'd remind myself of my reasons for becoming a lawyer and that they were valid reasons and it didn't matter if other people had different ones and if I got in I wanted to get in for my reasons not someone else's. So I'd stick with my own ideas.

Coach: Okay. Let's just rewind the tape and have you coming out of the wrong station so you are going to be late!

Louise: I'd stay calm and I'd ring them to say I was going to be late and then I'd get there and get on with it.

Coach: What would they notice about your voice when you made this call?

Louise: It would be apologetic since it might have inconvenienced them.

Coach: And what would they notice about the way you apologized?

Louise: I wouldn't be panicky! My voice wouldn't be high and squeaky and I wouldn't be talking fast!

Coach: What would you be doing instead?

Louise: Just talking at a normal speed, remembering that the person I'm talking to is a person too and — not making too big a deal of it.

Coach: And getting back to the interview. Let's say you are reading your scenario and you think



oh dear, I've never even thought of a situation like that. How will you know then that you are at your best?

Louise: Yes! That's already happened to a friend of mine! I think it is just important to stay calm and look at all the angles: responsibility to the client, what is the central legal issue. And also the moral side. It's just being systematic and trying to cover everything. And sometimes there isn't a 'right' answer!

Coach: And now the interview itself is looming, you're going to be called at any moment! What will tell you at that point that you couldn't be more ready, that you're at your best?

Louise: I think at that point you have to realize that there's nothing more you can do about your preparation — you just have to relax so you can put your best foot forward in the interview.

Coach: And as they come out to get you what would you notice about the way you walked to the interview?

Louise: Relaxed, probably trying to talk to the person, keeping my head up and shoulders back — but not too far back!

Coach: So what sort of young woman would the panel see coming into the room?

Louise: A young woman smiling, going forward, shaking hands — not leaving all the first moves to them. Again smiling, being polite and open.

Coach: What else will they notice about you even before you speak that makes them think you are a potential barrister?

Louise: It sounds funny but it's something about the way you sit — not too upright and not slouched but concentrating on them and the questions.

Coach: Okay. Well, I think I've run out of questions!

Louise: *[Laughs]* Thanks!

Coach: I have to say that you come across as having given a lot of serious thought to this project and also that you seem to know yourself very well and I guess those are both things to be pleased about!

Louise: Yes.

Coach: So good luck!

Louise: Thanks.

During the interview Louise is asked to describe both her inner states and the outer actions which signify these states. She is asked to locate herself at specific places and specific times and attention is paid to the most humdrum details such as the period during which her computer turns on or sitting on a train. She is asked to think about what this will look like to others (and as Louise will not be seeing anyone who knows her these others will all be strangers) including her dog and how these others might respond. In the middle there is the opportunity to list some of the reasons why Louise might be justified in feeling confident and there is also a setback to include the vagaries of life.

Louise received and accepted her offer at her first choice law school.

Of the many ways a Solution-Focused conversation can be constructed this particular format has to be one of the most effective and economical. It is also a perfect example of how the client leaves with no more that she came with: she was asked to describe nothing that was not already within her experience of herself; no 'miracles', no imagining you can do something you've never done before, just simply a description of what she might ordinarily do on one of those days when she is at her best. Only a closer look reveals the extraordinariness of the questions and therefore the never-before-spoken answers. Louise is unlikely to have been asked what a taxi driver might notice about her so her answer is likely to be one that she has never heard herself say before that moment. At least half of her sixty-five answers will also be new to her and many of the rest, though not necessarily new, will have new meanings. Though almost all the content comes from Louise the coach, by the way he chooses to follow each of Louise's answers, is very much charge of the direction the session takes.

What is entirely missing from this conversation is the coach's own experience of being interviewed for and interviewing others for academic and employment positions. There is no place for this knowledge in a Solution-Focused interview and having it is unlikely to make a difference. When Louise speaks of her nervousness the coach might have shown a sympathetic face based on a memory of his own nervousness; another coach might show an equally sympathetic face based on her imagining being in a similar position. It is unlikely that Louise would either spot or be interested in the difference. Here again the simplicity of Solution-Focused coaching is clearly evident as is the challenge it presents: being simple isn't easy. To refrain from the desire to pass on the benefits of our own experience requires great discipline and continues to do so even for the most experienced Solution-Focused coaches.

### **Out with a whisper**

Anyone waiting for a high impact punchline, a final key to make sense of the Solution-Focused approach will be disappointed. A truly Solution-Focused conversation should be hardly more than a whisper and for the highest impact of all it should not even hint at future action but remain solely in the realm of description: what might be and what already is.