**Title**: A Phenomenological Study: Autistic Young Adult's Lived Experience in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

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**Introduction**: Research shows that nearly three out of four autistic adults experience mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety or depression (Linden et al, 2023). Furthermore, while there are numerous evidenced-based mental health interventions, very few are evaluated for autistic adults (Benevides et al., 2020). Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), an evidence-based intervention that focuses on exploring the person’s strengths and resources and setting goals, holds promise as a viable intervention for this population. In this study, we pilot SFBT as a behavioral health intervention and explore the expectations, goals, and the overall therapeutic journey of this experience.

**Method**: We convened a team of researchers, social work clinicians who had experience working with autistic adults, students, and an autistic adult researcher to adapt the SFBT protocol. We worked with a community organization that serves autistic young adults to recruit five participants. Participants were four female and one male, and their ages ranged between 18 and 29 years old.  We conducted four-weekly individual SFBT sessions with five autistic adults, followed by 45-to-60-minute post-intervention interviews that included open-ended questions. Using a phenomenological approach, we explored participants’ goals, expectations, and the realities of their therapeutic journey through semi-structured interviews. Three interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; two were manually transcribed. Thematic analysis identified key themes, supported by participants’ direct quotes. An audit trail documented the entire analytic process to ensure rigor.

**Results**: Participants’ self-identified goals included improving daily life skills for independence, exploring self-identity, enhancing social relationships, and expanding creative activities and special interests. Notably, most reported having no prior experience with therapy, stating not knowing what to expect during sessions. Some participants found SFBT exceeding their expectations, reporting increased self-confidence and deeper understanding of their self-identity. They expressed surprise at SFBT’s positive focus, because they previously expected therapy sessions to be centered on negative aspects or depression. Overall, participants described the experience as “helpful”, “hopeful”, and “made me feel happy”. They expressed a desire to pursue changes in various life domains, including career, hobbies, and social circles, inspired by the positive experience in therapy. Facilitators for goal achievement included opportunities for self-reflection, breakdown of the goal into smaller achievable tasks, and a strength-based approach drawing on participant’s existing resources. Challenges included difficulty understanding questions, inability to address structural issues, and logistical challenges, such as time constraints and transportation difficulties. For future improvements, participants suggested increasing the number of sessions, implementing more structured goals, and adopting a more individualized approach incorporating their special interests.

**Discussion:** Our study found that SFBT holds potential to be a viable intervention for autistic adults. SFBT’s strength-based and goal-oriented framework was found to support the participants’ exploration of self, a necessary step in effective mental health support. Further investigation on autistic adult’s lived experience in therapeutic process is needed to adapt and refine the SFBT intervention with this population.

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