



A Solution Focused Approach to MECC

January 2019

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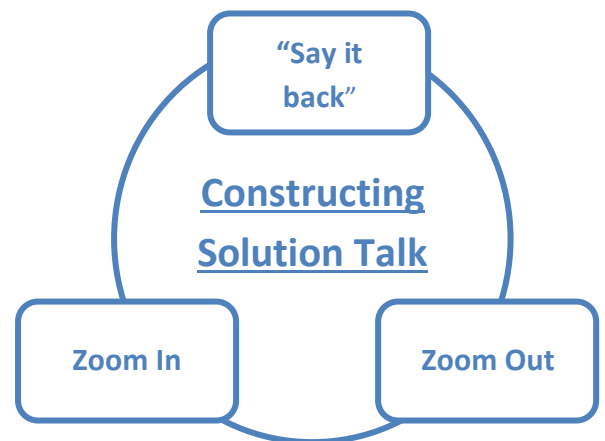
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Constructing Solution Talk Skills

At the heart of the solution focussed approach is the ability to construct conversations that are rich in solution talk.

To do this we use our everyday communication skills in a particular way:

1. Ask carefully chosen Solution Focussed Questions.
2. Listen with a constructive ear for examples of solution talk: times when we are at our best, when we are doing things well, when things are heading in the right direction.
3. “Say it back”: to show that we are really listening
4. Zoom In - asking a sequence of questions that illicit rich, concrete behavioural detail of these times, building a picture in the mind’s eye:
5. Zoom Out – move onto to the next piece of the picture or next part in the story by simply asking: **“What else”**



Zooming In – Zooming Out

We zoom in on solution talk whenever we hear it. We ask Detailing Questions to add as much detail to the scene being described as possible:

“How did that show up?”

“How did you manage to do that?”

We use Amplifying Questions to make the benefits explicit – using **“what else?”** to compile lists until all the benefits are exhausted.

“How would that be helpful to you?”

“What difference has that made?”

When we have completed the detail and listed all their benefits we now use **“What else?”** to zoom out taking advantage of the wider perspective to scan for the next thing to zoom in on at which point the process of detailing and amplifying starts again. Practitioners start to notice a simple repetitive process that is the rhythm and flow of a solution focused conversation.

Tip: Keep it simple! Don't be tempted to “ski off-piste” before you master the basics.

Relationship Questions

Relationship Questions allow people to see the world through other people's eyes. They are useful at every stage of a solution focused conversation for eliciting detailed descriptions of interactions that might be familiar or desirable to people:

“Who else would notice?”

“How would they see that?”

“What effect might that have on them?”

Opening Questions

Opening questions are often (but not always) used at the start of a solution focussed conversation as a “warm up” for both the practitioner and the client. They can also be used opportunistically for example as “fire breaks” when conversations appear stuck and you want to change direction. They almost always elicit solution talk which can be followed up with the Constructing Solution Talk skills described above. For this reason they are sometimes referred to as “The Keys to Co-operation”:

“How do you like to spend your time?”

“What are you good at?”

“What do you enjoy?”

The Solution Focused Process

A solution focused conversation asks the client to consider what they want, how they will know that they have got there and what they are already doing that is getting them there. It follows a four stage process:



At each stage Practitioners:

- ✓ Use specific open questions to illicit information that is useful to the client.
- ✓ Use their Constructing Solution Talk skills to add rich detail.
- ✓ Can encounter a number of common challenges.

Best Hopes

The practitioner asks questions in order to illicit a general expression of what the client wants as a result of the conversation. At the end of this part of the process the client and practitioner will have agreed a direction of travel; one that is based on “what matters to them” rather than “what is the matter with them”.

“What are your best hopes from our conversation/coming to see me?”

“Supposing this conversation today was useful, even just a little bit, what would be different as a result?”

“How would you know that this has been helpful for you?”

“What difference are you hoping this will make?”

“What would you notice about yourself if this turns out to be helpful?”

“How would you know that this was not a waste of your time?”

Tip: This can be a very quick step in the process lasting only a few seconds or could take longer than expected because of a number of common challenges (see later).

Preferred Future

The practitioner asks questions in order to identify how the client will know that their best hopes have been realised and what difference might their realisation make?

At the end of this part of the process the client will have created a rich, detailed behavioural description of the future they desire – the presence of something rather than the absence of something. This forms the building blocks of their solution.

It is important to stay in this part of the process as long as possible using the Constructing Solution Talk skills described earlier to paint as detailed a picture as possible.

The Miracle Question: “If you woke up tomorrow and find that a miracle had happened so that your best hopes were already a reality, what would tomorrow be like? What would you notice? How would you feel? How could the day be different from a normal day? What would you do when you woke up? What would happen at each stage of the day? What would other people notice?”

“Imagine a time when your best hopes are realised. How would you know? What would you see? What would you be doing? Who notices? What do they notice?”

Tip: Start at the beginning **“What’s the first thing....”** and follow a logical sequence adding as much detail as possible as you go.

Instances

The practitioner asks questions in order to draw attention to or identify progress the client is already making towards their best hopes. Bringing attention to times in the present when the behaviours identified in the preferred future are already happening both empowers and opens up possibility.

There are three ways of doing this:

- 1) When you hear a client describe an instance follow it up using Constructing Solution Talk skills to really make the most of it.
Tip: listen out for a subtle change in tense from future to present.

- 2) Ask specifically about instances:

“Are there times, even now and even just a little bit, when the future we’ve been talking about already happens?”

Tip: The more detailed the description of the preferred future the easier it will be for the client to answer this.

- 3) Use a (two part) Scaling Question to form a bridge between the described future and the present: connecting Preferred Future with Instances:

“If we were to form a scale between 0 and 10 where 10 is the Preferred Future you have just described and 0 is as far away from that as you could possibly be... where on that scale would you put yourself now? What is happening even now that makes you this score and not 0?”

Tip: Again it is important to spend adequate time exploring the “space” between zero and the current score by using Constructing Solution Talk skills.

Signs

The practitioner asks questions in order to help the client consider how they would notice things improving. This can then be followed up using Constructing Solution Talk skills.

Example Questions:

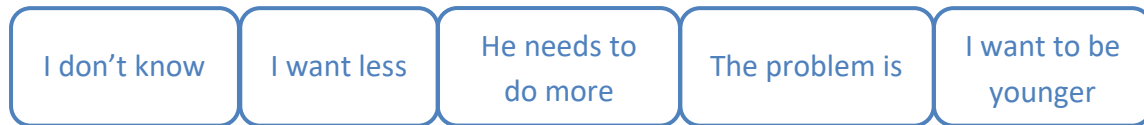
“From your perspective what might be the next small but meaningful sign that you were heading in the direction of the future we have been talking about?”

“What might you notice that tells you that you have moved from this score to just a little bit higher? “

Tip: Notice that we are asking about signs not steps.

Common Challenges

There are five common challenges that can occur during the solution focussed process:



“I don't know”

The client struggles to answer the question as it is asked.

“**I don't know**” is a common scenario and can actually mean “**I am thinking**” so practitioners are encouraged to initially respond by holding the silence for a mental count of six. If the client continues to struggle there are four additional strategies to try:

1. Hold silence for a mental count of six (can be used in combination with each of the others)
2. Empathise: “**this is a tough question isn't it**”
3. Soften the question: “**if you had to guess**”
4. Re-phrase the question: “**if this conversation was to be useful even just a little bit, how would we know?**”
5. Use a Relationship Question (Phone a Friend): “**if we asked someone you trusted and cared about you, what could they say?**”

“I want less of”

The client focuses on negatives such as what they want less of or what they don't want. For example “I want less stress in my life”, “I don't want to argue”, “I want less worry”, “I don't want money troubles”.

Clients will often find it easier to focus on negatives: things they want less of: “**I want less stress**” and things they don't want: “**I don't want to argue all the time**”. The practitioner simply invites the client to describe an alternative using a Refocusing Question:

“**What do you want more of instead?**”

“**What do you want instead?**”

Tip: The use of “instead” signals the change in focus.

“He needs to do more”

The client's Best Hopes involve other people changing, for example wanting a child to get up on time, to get a partner to be more supportive.

Talking about what you want from others is easier than talking about a personal change. However the only thing we can actually change is ourselves. The practitioner gently invites the client to consider this with a Personalising Question:

What would your part in that be?

What would it take from you for that to happen?

How would you contribute to that?

“The problem is...”

In response to solution focussed questions the client talks about the problem or problems that they are facing.

Problem Talk is a common response to questions at any point in a solution focussed conversation, particularly at the start of the process. The solution focus is determined by the questions we ask not by the answers we receive. Problems are often at the forefront of the client’s mind and there may be a cultural expectation of where to start: people often expect to be asked about their problems.

It is important that the person feels listened to whilst not “digging into the problem” evoking problem talk. Listen, acknowledge in general terms, and offer a compliment before inviting a change in focus:

“I can see that things are pretty tough at the moment and that you really want the best for your family...what are your best hopes for our conversation if it is to be helpful for you?”

“I want to be younger”

The client has a Best Hope which is impossible such as wanting to be 10 years younger, to have an extra day in the week or to be cured of arthritis.

A common worry when starting a solution focussed conversation is that the client asks for something impossible, unethical or outside the gift of the practitioner. This is actually relatively uncommon. When it does occur a practitioner can use gentle humour and empathy before clarifying the limits of the conversation:

“What are your best hopes from this?”

“I want to win the lottery!”

“Wouldn’t that be great! Unfortunately I haven’t got the numbers. No what I mean is what are your best hopes from talking to me.”

Sometimes an unrealistic hope is a way to achieve something else that is possible i.e. they are describing the process not the outcome. Gently investigating this with an Amplifying Question is helpful:

“What are your best hopes from this?”

“I want to turn back time to before I had arthritis”

“I’d make a fortune if I could turn back time! However if we could do that how would it help”

“I’d be more active, able to do more with the kids”

“So perhaps we could talk about you being more active even now?”

Working Close to the Problem

Whilst unusual it can be that people are struggling to such an extent that they score themselves at zero on the rating scale or express that they are at rock bottom in some other way.

At such times our instincts may pull us towards problem solving and asking questions that illicit a rich, detailed description of the cause of the client's distress.

When using a solution focussed approach whilst we don't dig into the problem we can work closer to it when the situation demands.

There are some simple dos and don'ts for working close to the problem:

Do:

1. Listen with a constructive ear
2. Acknowledge how bad things are in *general terms*:
 "So things are incredibly tough at the moment"
3. Ask Coping Questions:
 "How are you keeping going?"
 "What is it that is helping you get through?"
 "How are you managing to hang on in there?"
 "How have you stopped things getting even worse?"
4. Try Relationship Questions
 "If we asked X what score on the scale would they put you on?"
 If the score is higher follow up with:
 "What is it that they see or know about you that you don't yet?"
5. Enquire about "exceptions":
 "When was the last time you were higher up on the scale?"
6. Follow Up any "Glimpses of light" with Constructing Solution Talk skills

Tip: The use of "at the moment" and "yet" are important additions as they hold open the possibility of improvement in the future.

Don't:

1. Be Solution Forced! (being a positive cheerleader)
“Things can’t be that bad, look on the bright side”
2. Invite problem talk (but don’t shut it down if it emerges).
3. Create a false difference (introduce negative numbers)
4. Go too fast

Closing

There are just three steps involved:

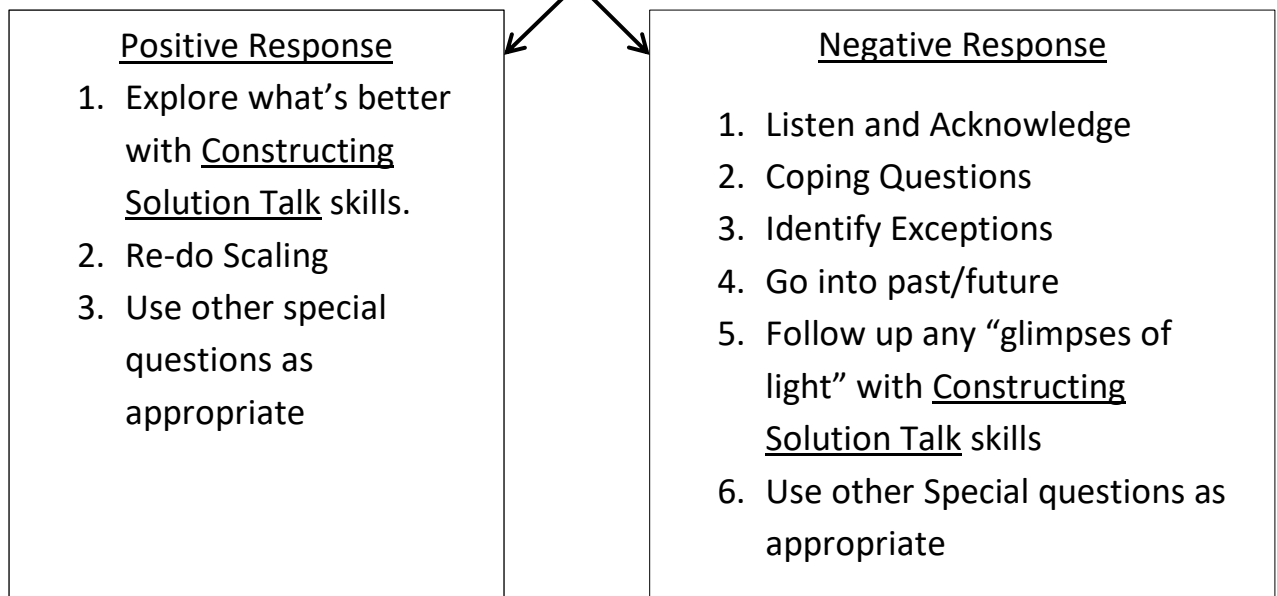
1. Summarising
2. Agreeing if there is to be a next time
3. Negotiating Homework

“Between now and next time I’d like you to notice times when your preferred future is happening – make a list of as many things as you can”

Following Up

Start every follow up with this fantastic question and implied compliment:

“What’s better?”



Great Solution Focussed Questions

Best Hopes

What are your best hopes from our work together/talking/coming to see me?

How would you know that this has been helpful for you?

What difference are you hoping this will make?

What would you notice about yourself if this turns out to be helpful?

How would you know that this was not a waste of your time?

Preferred Future

If you woke up tomorrow and your best hopes had been met, what is the first thing you would notice about yourself?

Imagine a miracle happens tonight while you are asleep, and (your best hopes are met) but you are asleep when this miracle happens, so you do not know it has happened. What is the first thing you would notice about yourself, that would start to tell you that this miracle has happened?

How would this be different from a normal day?

What would you be noticing instead?

What would you notice about yourself that would tell you that?

How would that show up in what you were doing?

How would that be helpful to you?

How would you feel as a result of that?

What else? What is the next thing you would notice?

Who else would notice? How would they see that?

What effect might that have on them?

What would you notice that was different about them?

What effect might that have on you?

Instances

Are there times, even now and even just a little bit, when the future that we've been talking about already happens? Is that something you want to continue?

How did you manage to do that? What did it take?

What skills or strengths did you draw upon?

What does it say about you that you were able to do that?

How did you think about doing that? Where did you get the idea from?

What difference has that made? What difference is it making?

What are you thinking/feeling/doing differently since you....?

What pleased you most about being able to do that?

Who else has noticed?

How have they been able to?

Scaling

On a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 is the preferred future you have just described and 0 is as far away from that as you could possibly be, where are you now?

What is happening even now that puts you there and not at 0?

What is different?

What have you noticed/are noticing that is different now you are at this point?

What have you done to get to this point? What has it taken?

What difference has it made?

If X were here where might they say you were on the scale?

(if lower) What is it that you have noticed that they haven't noticed yet?

(if higher) What is it that they have noticed that you haven't noticed yet?

Signs

What might you notice that tells you that you have moved from this score to just one place higher?

Special Questions

<p>These special questions are used at different stages of Solution Focused conversations. They are used as strategies to manage common scenarios, to keep the solution focus and to thicken the client's descriptions. They often appear as inter-connected sequences.</p>			
1	<u>Details</u>	<p>Helps to zoom in, particularly on concrete actions, thickening descriptions that can be recognised and reproduced.</p> <p><i>Used in all stages.</i></p>	<p>How would that show up in what you were doing?</p> <p>How did you manage to do that?</p> <p>What did it take?</p> <p>What have you done to get to this point?</p>
2	<u>Amplify</u>	<p>Helps to reinforce the benefits of the details described, reinforcing a sense of progress and movement.</p> <p><i>Used in all stages.</i></p>	<p>What difference are you hoping this will make?</p> <p>How would that be helpful to you?</p> <p>What good would come of this?</p> <p>What difference has that made?</p> <p>What difference is it making?</p>
3	<u>Widen</u>	<p>Helps the client consider further possibilities. Often used in conjunction with all the questions above.</p> <p><i>Used in all stages.</i></p>	<p>What else?</p> <p>What next?</p>
4	<u>Relationship</u>	<p>Helps the person see things through someone else's eyes. This can help people get unstuck and consider how they interact. <i>Used in all stages.</i></p>	<p>Who else would notice?</p> <p>How would they see that?</p> <p>What effect might that have on them?</p> <p>Who else has noticed?</p> <p>What effect has that had on them?</p>
5	<u>Refocus</u>	<p>Helps bring the conversation back to the solution focus, gently inviting the client to substitute problem talk with solution talk.</p> <p><i>Used in all stages.</i></p>	<p>What would you want more of?</p> <p>What would you be noticing instead?</p> <p>What would you be doing/thinking/feeling instead?</p> <p>What would you be doing/thinking/feeling more of?</p>
6	<u>Personalise</u>	<p>Helps bring the focus back to themselves rather than apportioning change to others.</p> <p><i>Used in all stages.</i></p>	<p>What would your part be in that?</p> <p>How would you contribute to that?</p> <p>What would it take from you for X to.....?</p>
7	<u>Checking</u>	<p>The only closed questions. Checking in about if and how to follow up progress.</p> <p><i>Used in Instances</i></p>	<p>Is that something you want to do more of?</p> <p>Was that something that was hard to do?</p>
8	<u>Identity</u>	<p>Helps to change how the client views themselves and their abilities to change.</p> <p><i>Used in Instances and Signs</i></p>	<p>What does it say about you that you were able to do that?</p> <p>How did you think about doing that? Where did you get the idea from?</p>
9	<u>Coping</u>	<p>Helps hold open the possibility that change is possible whilst empathising with the client's current position.</p> <p><i>Used when working close to the problem.</i></p>	<p>How are you keeping going?</p> <p>How are you getting by at the moment?</p> <p>How are you managed to stop things getting even worse?</p>

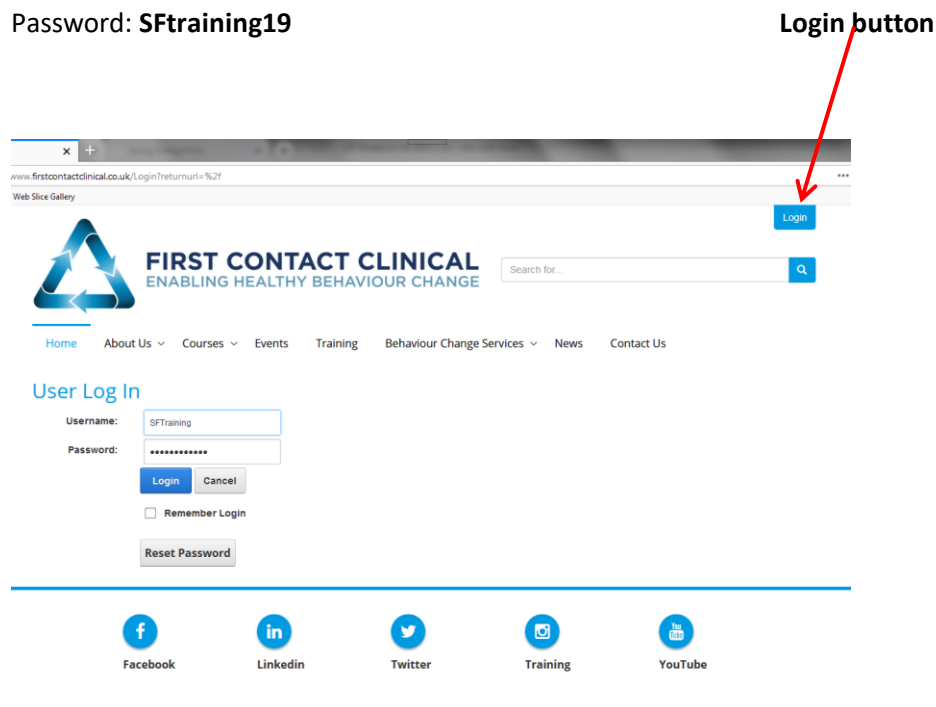
Resources

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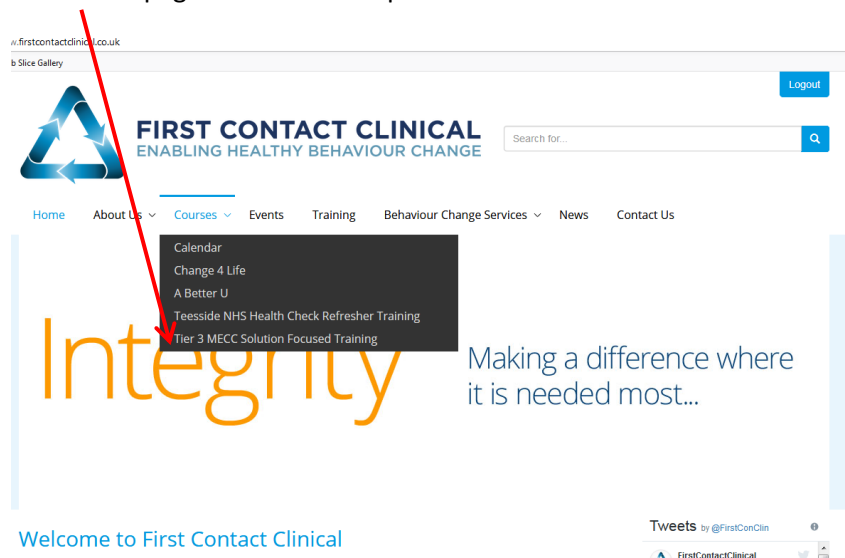
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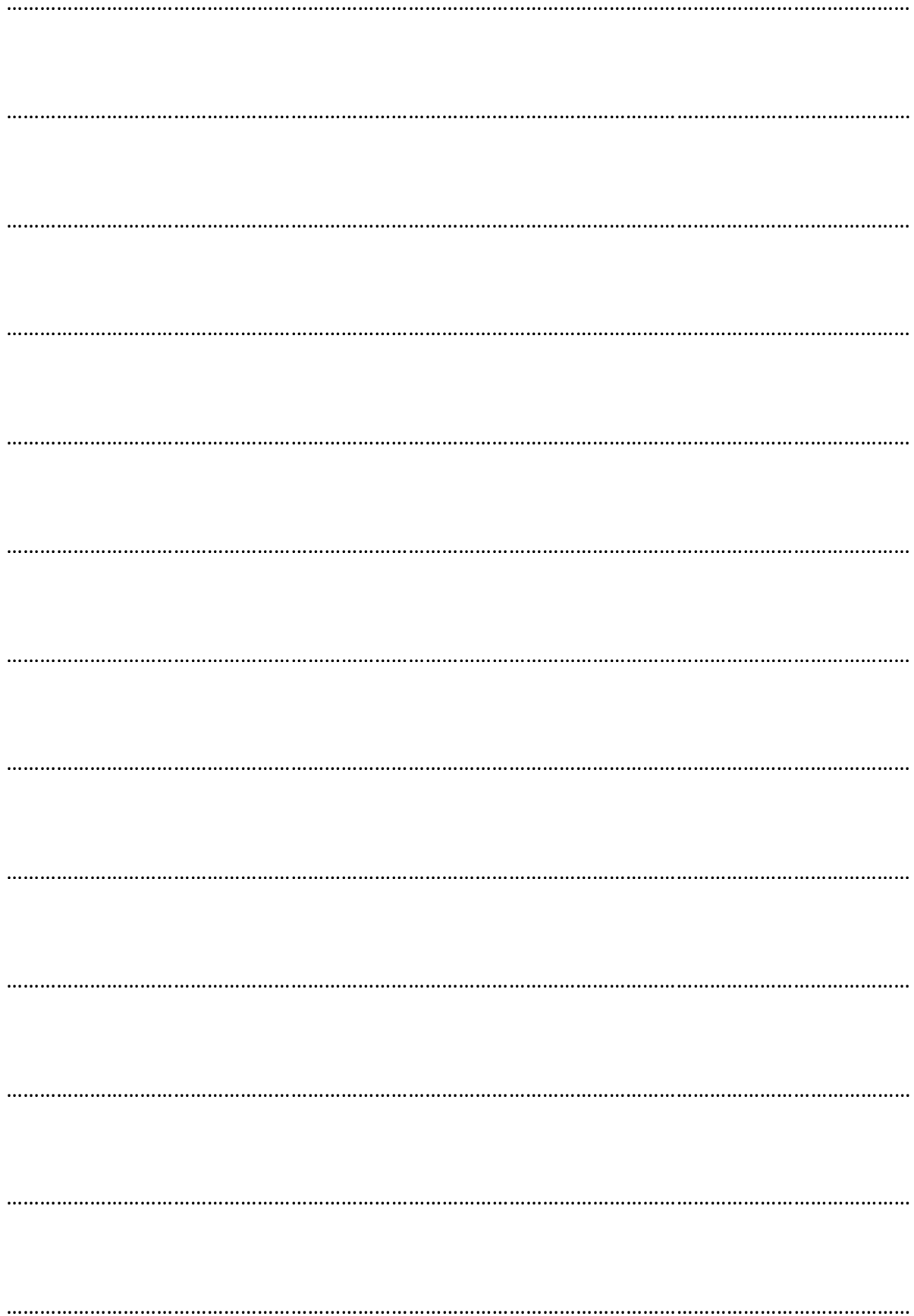
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