

Working with Strengths



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A Strengths Approach

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What is it all about?

Working with the belief that everyone, regardless of their history and the problems they experience, have abilities, personal qualities, achievements, wants, wishes, dreams and aspirations

In order to help people move on with their lives we need to spend more time working with their ‘capabilities’ and less time focused on their ‘inabilities’ (i.e. work with *what they can do* rather than *what they can't do*)

Sometimes it can be a challenge to dig deep in order to find the strengths; and to work with them at all times, including when a person is experiencing a crisis

Problems are not to be ignored, but working with strengths are the best way to try to tackle the problems. Working with strengths also provides the buzz and joy in the work, getting you occasionally out of the preoccupation with all that is not working

It is about how we focus on the positives... the opportunities and hope for the future, as well as maintaining what is good in the present. Through focusing on personal strengths people may feel more empowered rather than controlled; they can be helped to create a better and more fulfilling life as determined by people themselves

MORE THAN JUST *IDENTIFYING* PEOPLE'S STRENGTHS

Recognising a person's capabilities and personal qualities is only the first stage towards encouraging and supporting them to make the maximum use of their personal strengths; to build on what they already have, to think about how they may achieve what they want, and to overcome problems and difficulties they experience

Working with strengths underpins many of the other concepts that have emerged within mental health, learning disability and older persons services in recent years...



Recovery

Best seen as a deeply personal journey, whereby people are encouraged to exercise the power to tell their own story, and express where they want it to go... it is the real life experience of overcoming the challenges of a condition or disability, and finding a personally satisfying and meaningful life

Personalisation/Self-Directed Support

Recognising that people know best regarding what they need and want, but also in identifying how their needs and wants can best be met... it will grow out of people feeling confident in their abilities, aware of what choices they have, and being supported to make their own decisions

Person-Centred Planning

A concept developed within learning disability services that emphasises the importance of reflecting the unique circumstances of the individual person in assessing needs and organising what needs to be done within and between services... communication should reflect the person's preferences (e.g. verbal, written, by pictures, sounds or social events)

Re-ablement/Re-enablement

Challenging people to keep thinking what they may be capable of moving-on to in their lives; where there can be less reliance on the need for contact with services, and more reliance on personal strengths and resources... but pressure to change can also become a source of stress and instability

DELIVERING PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT

In order to deliver a genuinely person-centred approach a number of questions need to be kept in mind when planning routine contacts with people:

- Am I (the worker) routinely providing information and explaining the whole process of care and support, from the service provider's perspective?
- Where does the person feel most comfortable talking with you?
- When does the person feel most comfortable talking with you?
- Who does the person want around them when discussing personal priorities and progress?
- What are the person's current expressions of needs and wants (in their own use of language)?
- What is the current assessment of the person's strengths, not just problems?
- How do they feel about progress with the current/recent priorities?
- Does the person understand why the concept of *re-ablement* challenges them to think about the capability to move on beyond continuous service support?
- What do they feel about 'meetings' arranged by services for discussing what is happening to/for them?
- If they are uncomfortable about service meetings, are they ok about having their views represented at service meetings by someone else?
- Are they ok about me (the worker) keeping in regular contact with all other people involved in providing them with care and support?
- Does the person understand the role and want an advocate involved?
- Does the person understand the opportunities and ways of making advance statements about their wishes regarding how care and support are to be provided in the future?
- Does the person understand why services would like them to have a copy of their own care plan (and the option not to have one or to draw up their own)?
- Does the person understand why services encourage them to sign their care plan (and the option of not doing so)?

WORKING WITH RISK

A life of meaning and value will always be based on taking decisions that involve some risk, and it is important that staff do not adopt an over-protective approach... working with risk is about being aware of risks, aware of the need to occasionally take risks, and always aiming to minimise the harm that could be associated with risk



The word *risk* can often be interpreted or experienced as something threatening or dangerous. So, it may often be more useful and engaging to use language that reflects what we really mean by asking people *what helps them to feel safe* or in *what circumstances do people feel unsafe*

However, the term *risk* is deeply embedded in our language, so it remains important that any risk information about a person is not looked at in isolation, it needs to be balanced against strengths-based information about the person as well as the detailed context in which previous risks might have happened

Protective factors (things about the person that help to reduce a risk) are equally as important as *risk factors* (things that might increase a risk)

Risk questions to consider:

1. Who is at risk?
2. What is at risk?
3. Will the person benefit from doing what they intend to do?
4. If there is a benefit what is it?
5. Does the situation relate to any known risks in the person's history?
6. What are the person's own feelings and wishes regarding the possible risk?
7. Can an alternative course of action be found that has more acceptable degrees of risk?
8. How can the risk be minimised?

Remember: taking risks is perfectly acceptable as long as they are thought through and reasoned!

Q&A ~ Practice Based Tools

What is the ‘*Personalised Support Assessment*’?

At the point of referral it is important for any service to gain good quality information on which to make a decision as to whether the services provided would be suitable for the needs of the person being referred. It is about building up a picture of a person’s strengths, needs, views and aspirations

Why do a ‘*Strengths Assessment*’?

It helps to build a unique and full picture of a person... identifying what they have achieved and enjoyed previously (what has worked in the past); what qualities and resources they have in place (what is working for them now); and what their priorities are (what they want to do in the future).

Thinking about and discussing strengths should be a positive, hopeful and enjoyable way of working with people... it is separate from but not instead of thinking about problems and difficulties people experience!

How does it link to ‘*Strengths-Based Care/Support Plans*’?

When strengths have been recognised and identified the next task is to think about how they are to be used for the benefit of the person. This can be through applying them to what the person wants to achieve, but also to ways of managing problems and difficulties. As the first part of *support planning* it is a discussion that can then be represented creatively in words or pictures

What do we mean by ‘*Managing Concerns*’?

Not everything in a person’s life can be about strengths & positives, we all have concerns and risks that we need to manage in some way. As the second part of *support planning* it is about giving people a voice to express what troubles or concerns them; it can also be a means by which staff express concerns they may have about potential risks in a person’s life, even where there may be disagreement about perceptions

Why focus on ‘*Risk History*’?

We can not ignore previous risks, but neither can we misrepresent them. So, this is about producing an accurate time-line of risks, but more importantly the detail of what caused the risks. Wherever possible this should engage the person’s own perspective of what happened and why

What is ‘*Positive Risk-Taking*’?

We all take risks, most usually to gain something. So this concept is literally *taking risks for positive outcomes*... it is carefully considered and reasoned decision-making, and the *positive* relates only to the outcome identified, not the risk itself



OUTCOME MEASURES

Everybody measures the progress of their lives in different ways, but involvement with services requires that this should be done in a more formal way to help people move through and out of services as quickly as is appropriate to their needs

Being involved in services should be a temporary thing for most people, and to focus on progress and success we need some way of prompting us to think about what we want... we should also be open to measuring our progress towards what we want in as simple a way as possible

Service users have helped to shape a measure that links to the framework for *Steps to Re-ablement*. It sets out measures within the broad categories of:

1. Looking after myself
2. Gaining confidence & skills
3. Being involved & making decisions
4. Respecting myself & others
5. Being treated fairly
6. [Locally identified optional measures]

Each category is measured simply on the basis of feeling:

- * Stuck
- * Accepting help/believing
- * Learning/moving forward
- * Self reliance/achieved/maintained (i.e. status quo is wanted and seen as positive)

Recording of progress should be at set intervals, and should be seen as a basis for conversation on progress against what a person wants to achieve, and what they need to do in order to move-on positively in their lives

What are the 'Steps to Re-ablement'?

This is a model based on service commissioners requirements to see people achieve their maximum potential moving-on beyond service support. It is a way of linking levels of need and risk to identified strengths and appropriate service responses. It is a means of helping people reclaim their skills to achieve their personal optimal level of independence

The use of timescales needs to be carefully interpreted, they should be more about keeping people focused, so as to reduce the potential to just accept things as they are now

All of the information in this document is elaborated in detail in the 'Working with Strengths Guidance' & 'Working with Strengths & Risk Policies'

Quotes from service users (Feb 2010)

- *“I like to feel valued and to have my own plan.”*
- *“I can make myself better understood.”*
- *“I didn’t like the old ones, they took too long, the new ones are quicker.”*
- *“You get to write where you want to live (on the Strengths Assessment).”*
- *“Sometimes I don’t like doing forms.”*
- *“They help me be more confident with my finances.”*
- *“Every time I see you I have to sign another bit of paper.”*
- *“Managing my concerns were now much clearer understood.”*

Quotes from staff (Feb 2010)

- *I enjoyed working with a system that was positive, dynamic and had a real point; leading to real achievements for clients and myself*
- *Much easier to engage tenants; have all seemed to find it more meaningful and useful*
- *Easy to use, easy to understand; not a trawl to fill in*
- *I like the way the paperwork is informed by team discussion which leads to a broader view of needs. I also like the way the paperwork is continuously changing if needed, in order to match changing needs*
- *Encourages the worker to view the tenant as being in control of their lives and requirements. The keyworker is an enabler in this process, which minimises dependency and responds to changing needs. It fits into the tenant’s lifestyle, not the tenant fitting into the keyworker’s views, values or beliefs*
- *A progressive approach, which breaks down old working patterns*
- *Tenants find this more participatory and get involved with their positive side of things. We have added a tenant thumbnail sketch to the package*
- *Initially time-consuming, as on floating support not much office time and a lot of service users*
- *Time-consuming. Difficult to get team input in a lone-working environment such as floating support*