

The Strengths Perspective

A philosophy and practice model generated within the field of social work, the strengths perspective builds on the idea that client groups are untapped resources of energy and momentum in their own lives (Cowger, 1994; DeJong & Miller, 1995; Saleebey, 1992; Saleebey, 1996). An alternative to viewing clients as “pathology units,” the strengths perspective directs all persons working with clients to guard against allowing negative labels to dictate or constrain the course of treatment that a given client or client group might receive.

Clark (1996a, 1996b, 1997) and Nissen (1998a, 1998b) have explored a working model of working with juvenile offenders specifically based in this philosophy which emphasizes solution-focused interviewing, goal setting, and assisting a youth in identifying and mobilizing strengths that may be useful in their own therapeutic process. Bazemore & Terry (1997) suggest that for too long, juvenile justice systems have been constrained by a lens problem—seeing youth as either victims or villains—failing, in each sense, to recognize and mobilize the capacities they bring for change and growth in becoming potential resources to their communities. He suggests that a widening of system “lenses” is necessary for the system change required to being focused on positive youth development, strengths and sustained change throughout the juvenile justice continuum. Clearly, these models build on the important and seminal work of Hawkins, Catalano and associates in describing risk and protective factors (1986, 1988, 1992); however, the strengths approach specifically seeks to use targeted counseling and intervention techniques to not only identify, but build, reinforce and mobilize those qualities, attributes and aspirations that have the greatest potential to contribute to positive outcomes with the express goals of building resiliency through a THERAPEUTIC and solution-focused, rather than prevention-oriented, process.

Concepts such as respecting and looking for client strengths, engaging client motivation for change through strengths, being a collaborator with the client in therapeutic work, avoiding victim mindsets, and seeing the environment as full of resources are some of the key principles in the strengths approach (Saleebey, 1992). Other important strengths-oriented models gaining popularity and visibility include the Asset model—focusing on those internal and external characteristics of youth that serve as protective factors through the process of growing up. Key to the model is the implication that youth, families, communities, and even systems can become “asset builders,” taking a proactive role in the positive development of future generations (Benson, 1997).

This approach is an important alternative to many of the traditional models that operate throughout the substance abuse treatment and juvenile justice systems. It is not currently uncommon to shuffle through juvenile offender client records inches thick, literally containing sometimes thousands of dollars worth of notation, evaluations, assessments, and find little in the way of anything positive, strengths or potential focused regarding the youth. The strengths approach challenges program models that do not include a search and role for strengths of clients and families as resources to bring about lasting change. It is noteworthy that MST, which is one of the most rigorously evaluated juvenile justice treatment programs ever set forth, has strong strengths-based components as part of its foundation (Henggeler, 1997).

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