

Strength-based Strategies for Working with Clients

It is important to address the potential challenge between setting and maintaining high expectations for a youth, while also recognizing that change can be slow. Solution-focused interviewing allows the worker to amplify small successes and movements forward.

You will notice that some of the strategies used to engage clients in the strengths-based approach, often during an initial interview or assessment, will also be helpful in your ongoing work with them. The first three strategies can be used at any point in your work with clients. The final strategy is most relevant to ongoing case monitoring.

Exceptions

Exceptions are those occasions in the client's life when the client's problem could have occurred but did not. Solution-focused questioning focuses on the who, what, when and where of exception times instead of who, what, when, and where of problems. The consequence is a growing awareness in both workers and clients of the clients' strengths relative to their goals, rather than the clients' deficiencies relative to their problems. Once these strengths are brought to awareness and thereby made available, clients can mobilize them to create solutions tailor-made for their lives.

Scaling

Scaling questions are a clever way to make complex features of a client's life more concrete and accessible for both client and worker. They usually take the form of asking the client to give a number from 0 through 10 that best represents where the client is at some specified point. Almost any aspect of a client's life can be scaled, including progress toward finding a solution, confidence about finding a solution, motivation to work on a solution, severity of a problem, the likelihood of hurting self or others, self-esteem, and so on. Once the client answers with numbers greater than 0, the worker can follow up with questions that uncover, affirm and amplify the client's strengths.

Coping

It is realistic to say that some clients will have difficulty with this positive approach and may be feeling hopeless and seem able only to talk about how horrible their present situation is and how bleak their future looks. By accepting the client's perceptions and then moving on to ask how the client is able to cope with such overwhelming circumstances and feelings, the worker helps the client uncover coping strengths.

What's better?

"What's better?" Questions are not so much a distinct set of questions as an approach to beginning later sessions by continuing the work of building solutions and uncovering client strengths. Instead of beginning later sessions with a review of homework tasks assigned or even the client's estimate of progress, a solution-focused worker simply asks, "What's happening in your life that's better?" This is done for two reasons: First, it optimizes the chances of bringing to light exceptions that have occurred since the last visit with the worker. Second, it recognizes that the lives of clients, including their goals,

are in process, not necessarily being the same today as yesterday. Consequently, the “what’s better?” approach increases the chances of uncovering exceptions and associated strengths that are most meaningful and useful to the client at the present moment.

Adapted from *How to Interview for Client Strengths*, by Peter De Jong and Scott D. Miller, November 1995. *Social Work*, Volume 40, Number 6, pages 730-731.