



Understanding Strength-Based Language

What is a Strength-Based Approach?

The strength-based approach has its foundation in social work. The strength-based approach is a “work practice theory” which focuses on an individual’s self-determination and strength. This type of approach builds the clients on their strengths, specifically seeing them as resourceful and resilient when they are in adverse conditions. Another unique characteristic of this approach is that it is client led and centered on outcomes in the future individual’s set of strengths.

It should be noted that when a strength-based approach is used in any field outside of social work, it is referred to as the strength-based approach.

An interesting aspect of the strength-based approach is that it is about getting people to affect change in them. Change happens using positivity and affecting each person and how they handle their own:

- Attitudes about their dignity
- Capacities
- Rights
- Quirks
- And similarities

The strength-based approach is so successful because the client is the actor or agent of change by providing the right environment for controlling change. This approach is highly dependent on the thought process and emotional and information processing of the individual. This approach allows for open communication and thought process for individuals to identify value and assemble their strengths and capacities during change.

The strength-based approach allows for habitable conditions for a person to see themselves at their best, in order to see the value, they bring, by just being them. Then moving that value forward to capitalize on their strengths rather than focusing on negative characteristics.

The strength-based approach not only examines the individual but also the individual’s environment. For example, in the strength-based Approach, it looks at how systems are set up, especially where power can be out of balance between a system or service and the people it is supposed to serve.

In addition, the strength-based approach identifies any constraints that might be holding back an individual’s growth. These constraints can be when the individual has to deal with social, personal and/or cultural issues in organizations that cannot be balanced fairly (McCashen, 2016).

Rapp, Saleebey and Sullivan (2008) suggest six standards for determining what is a strength-based approach. If in agreement, practitioners can use the list when considering what method they will use when practicing the strength-based approach.



1. **Goal orientation:** It is crucial and vital for the person to set goals.
2. **Strengths assessment:** The person finds, and assesses their strengths and inherent resources.
3. **Resources from the environment:** Connect resources in the person's environment that can be useful or enable the person to create links to these resources. The resources could be individuals, associations, institutions, or groups.
4. **Different methods are used first for different situations:** In solution-focused therapy, clients will determine goals first and then strengths. In Strengths-Based case management individuals first determine their strengths using an assessment.
5. **The relationship is hope-inducing:** By finding strengths and linking to connections (with other people, communities, or culture).
6. **Meaningful choice:** Each person is an expert on their strengths, resources, and hopes. It is the practitioner's duty to improve upon choices the person makes and encourage making informed decisions.

Principles of the Strength-Based Approach

There are 9 guiding principles that serve as the foundation of the strength-based approach.

1. Everyone possesses a uniqueness that helps him or her evolve and move along his or her journey. These unique characteristics can be either:
 - a. Potential
 - b. Strengths
 - c. Capabilities
2. What receives attention or focus becomes what we (or the client) strive(s) for and eventually becomes a reality.
3. Be careful with your words and language. Our language creates our (and our client's) reality.
4. Accept change, life and our world are ever-evolving; don't resist.
5. Support others as authentically as you can. You will see that your relationships are deeper and more meaningful.
6. The person or client is the story-teller of their own story.
7. Build upon what you know and experience to dream of the future.
8. Capacity building has multiple facets and organization. Be flexible.
9. Be collaborative. Be adaptive and value differences (Hammond, 2010)



4 Examples of a Strength-Based Approach

Given the definition and principles of the strength-based approach, let's review some examples.

1. In the corporate world, many Human Resource (HR) managers will conduct performance appraisals on the employees. These appraisals are to hopefully benefit the employees, their supervisors, and the overall flow of the organization. Some of the key benefits can be improved performance, communication opportunities, and data on decision-making (Coens & Jenkins, 2000).
2. Each of us has those times that are really hard. We are in crisis mode and the last thing we want to think about are our strengths. However, when these trying situations arise, we need help in identifying our strengths. For health care professionals working with people going through these crises, it is vital for them to listen and identify strengths, and resources.
3. For certain clients, pursuing support and attending an appointment is a big task, and it should be recognized as a strength. For instance, if you are helping someone who does not have housing that is safe and secure. It is important to empower the person to build strong relationships with their family and friends. Another great way to empower your client is to remind them to utilize their resources and use their [resilience](#) and strength to tackle any challenges.
4. A great part of going through this conversation is that people's strengths will crop up. It becomes natural for the client to share their strengths, and in giving back to the client – acknowledge and validate their strengths.

A distinct attribute of the strength-based practice is that it is mutual between the client and the practitioner (Duncan and Hubble, 2000). The relationship between the practitioner and the client is heavily dependent on the quality of their relationship (Duncan and Hubble, 2000).

Using the Approach in Counseling

Counseling uses strength-based therapy as a way to introduce positive psychotherapy. The practitioner is focusing on the internal strengths, resourcefulness, and not as much on weaknesses, deficits, or failures (Basic Counseling Skills, n.d.).

Doing so, helps the person build a mindset which helps to set their intention and focus on positive capacity building. As well as, understanding that they are [resilient](#), and make more reasonable expectations not only of themselves but of others too (Basic Counseling Skills, n.d.).

Strength-based therapy is a form of talk therapy where the client is the story-teller. The story can include traumas, pain, and any stressors (past or present). The practitioner guides the person to have the mindset of a survivor rather than a victim. Doing so gives the person understanding and control of the skills and strengths they possess (Basic Counseling Skills, n.d.).

These skills and strengths enable them to survive and flourish no matter how tough life gets.



What are the Benefits of this Approach?

- Focusing on strengths rather than problems offers control to the person and a new mindset (Hammond, 2010).
- Resilience is improved as well as the overall function of the person in their family and community (Hammond, 2010).
- Offers a shared language and precautionary philosophy (Hammond, 2010).
- Resilience is the goal, which offers a theoretical map to lead the person to make efforts for prevention and evaluation, respectively (Hammond, 2010).
- Intervention tactics are client driven and relationship-minded, which in turn has these additional benefits:
 - Distressed people are engaged with respect and compassion (Hammond, 2010).
 - Respects that in order to build someone up, including their capacities, it takes time and there is a process of evolvment (Hammond, 2010).
 - Sees people as creating and rebuilding, rather than broken or failing (Hammond, 2010).
 - Focusing on strengths of a person also introduces and molds a person into being resilient. With resilience there are some added benefits, like feeling special and valued, optimistic, understand life is a journey (Hammond, 2010).
 - Learn how to set goals and expectations (Hammond, 2010).
 - Learn how to cope in a productive method that can foster growth (Hammond, 2010).
 - Learn that when faced with a challenge it is better to confront than avoid (Hammond, 2010).
 - Awareness of vulnerabilities and weaknesses, but focus on strengths (Hammond, 2010).
 - Builds self-esteem and competence (Hammond, 2010).
 - Learn effective interpersonal skills in order to look for assistance and support when needed (Hammond, 2010).
 - Understand what can and cannot be controlled (Hammond, 2010).
 - Understand supporting others and giving time to those that we care about (Hammond, 2010).
 - Encourages connecting to a person's social support like family, or community to spur on his or her own transformation (Hammond, 2010).

Are There Any Disadvantages to the Model?

Possible disadvantage actually lies with the main focus of the strength-based approach. Dr. Jason Jones (2017) explains this very well by asserting that while it's great to focus on strengths, there should not be utter neglect of the weaknesses. If weaknesses are poorly or not managed at all they can be unmonitored, and can eventually influence the individual to where they are less effective in whatever the scope of work is in (Jones, 2017).



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Jones is not the only one to carefully and constructively point out some flaws in the method, researchers (McMillen, Morris, Sherraden, 2004 and Staudt, Howard, & Drake, 2001) pointed out that the strength-based approach is not really offering anything novel, nor is it based on evidence of efficacy.

Can it Improve Mental Health?

The strength-based approach can improve mental health but only if it is fully embraced. The biggest determination to know if this approach will be effective is the person. If a person has any type of mental health issues, these will have to be taken into consideration. However, this approach can still be effective as it has a strong focus on recovery and positive psychology (Petersen and Seligman, 2004).

***Credit – Positive Psychology*