

Research in Brief

Strength Based Practices

Vol. 3 of 4

Source Document: Strength-Based Practice: The ABC's of Working with Adolescents Who Don't Want to Work with You, Michael D. Clark, 1999

Key Words: strengths, solution-focus, juveniles, case plans, case management, behavior change

Summary/Conclusions

Most practitioners were trained in problem solving methods. This has led them to an over-emphasis on what is wrong, not working and negative. The result is often resistance in clients and discouraging results. In 1989 a "strengths perspective" was introduced. This model is a "mindset to approach clients with a greater concern for their strengths and competencies and to mutually discover how these personal resources can be applied to their concerns...combined with the techniques of the solution-focused therapy model." This approach consists of six principles labeled the ABC's: Accountability-Action, Believing-Brief, and Cooperation-Competency.

Limitations of Information

The focus of this article and the work of the author, Michael Clark, is limited to adolescents. Nonetheless, application to an adult population is possible and Mr. Clark is an experienced juvenile probation officer and clinical social worker. His work provides one perspective of strength-based case management. Other valuable perspectives exist and should be considered.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Believing-Brief

The second set of the six principles of a strength-based approach for working with clients is **Believing-Brief**.

Believing: Strengths can only be identified and used if probation officers believe that clients have them.

√ Strengths may seem obvious until you are tasked with identifying and using them in everyday case management activities.

√ Once you believe that clients have strengths, you can look for them and use them to facilitate behavioral change.

√ Expecting change will influence clients' behavior. Consider this: Albert Einstein suggested that our theories and beliefs determine what we can see.

√ Pessimism is seldom useful and often leads to feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and depression. In contrast, optimism feeds a sense of efficacy and motivates coping and adaptive behavior, even in the face of difficult odds" (Brendtro, L., & Ness, A. (1995). Fixing Flaws or Building Strengths? Reclaiming Children and Youth, 4(2), 2-7).

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Albert Einstein

Brief: Focus on the presenting problem—not every problem and not the causes.

√ Be careful not to set goals that are too difficult; set small achievable goals to build on. Create success.

√ Find practical ways to solve the problem. Incorporate these strategies into the case plan.

√ Because a strengths-based focus emphasizes solutions, the future is far more important than the past. Rather than asking about the past contributors to the presenting problems discuss what behavior is different today and tomorrow and how to make that happen.

√ Using the case plan worksheet, make it the client's responsibility to identify strengths and behaviors that reflect positive behavioral change.

If you do not believe offenders have strengths, you are not likely to find them.

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303.866.1111; www.courts.state.co.us August 2007