

# A STRENGTHS APPROACH - PRINCIPLES AND FREQUENT REACTIONS

'Strengths based practice' challenges the inherent negativity engendered through a traditional problems-orientated way of working encouraged through the training, expectations and work experience of all professionals. Problems and difficulties are not ignored, but the way of trying to resolve them is managed by shifting the emphasis to developing a collaborative, trusting working relationship between service users and practitioners, which prioritises a focus on the achievement of the service user's own aspirations, and building upon their own strengths and resources. The strengths approach emerges within a set of positively framed principles, which clearly guide practitioner values and attitudes towards their own practice.

## PRINCIPLES

The focus of the helping process is upon the service user's strengths, interests, abilities and capabilities, not upon their deficits, weaknesses or problems.

All service users have the capacity to learn, grow and change.

The 'service-user assertive outreach' relationship becomes a primary and essential partnership.

The service user is viewed as the director of the helping process.

Continuity and acceptance are essential foundations for promoting recovery.

The helping process takes on an outreach perspective.

The local neighbourhood is viewed as a source of potential resources rather than as an obstacle. Natural neighbourhood resources should be considered before segregated mental health services.

See also <http://www.practicebasedevidence.com/strengths/strengths%20based%20practice.html> for further details of these in practice.

## FREQUENT PRACTITIONER RESPONSES TO THE 'PRINCIPLES'

The types of comment from practitioners in response to these principles have generally ranged between two extremes. **Negative reactions include:**

- I/we already do it
- It represents nothing new.
- It is all too obvious.
- It is far too simple.
- It is just positive re-framing, without any change in the fundamental delivery of services.

It is difficult to challenge deep-rooted attitudes with only a few words. The real test of these challenges is for an experienced 'strengths' practitioner to spend a longer spell of time working alongside the doubters to demonstrate the differences of approach; or to closely monitor and constructively critique the practice of those who believe they already do it in their work. I felt this way in my own practice, when Charlie Rapp and Wally Kisthardt first introduced it to the service I worked for in 1991. My suggestion to those who feel they already practice a strengths approach to their work is: *You might think you do... I thought I did, until I did... then I realised I wasn't... so you aren't either!*

Furthermore, one of the authors has co-hosted strengths workshops with an experienced service user consultant trainer, where the audiences were encouraged to be equal numbers of service users and their care coordinators. A number of practitioners alluded to practicing this way early on in the workshop, only to have the claims unanimously refuted by the service users. One outcome of the workshops was a much stronger mutual understanding of how to take the ideas forward in the working relationships.

**Positive reactions include:**

- This is how I like to think I should work, but how can I work with this approach more completely?
- How can these principles become more integrated into the wider team/service?

The 'principles' outlined above are considered to be a set of rules governing the consistency by which a range of practitioners may apply a strengths approach to their work. Their application in practice also requires adherence by individual service providers to the intrinsic 'attitudes' of assertive outreach staff. These would include attention to the quality of the working relationship, through acceptance of 'difference', commitment to individual needs and wants, collaborative and friendly styles of working that cross the artificial boundaries commonly favoured by most mental health services; patience to work with the often slow incremental pace of change, creativity and optimism.

Application in practice also requires practice-based tools, such as a specific format for Strengths Assessment ([http://www.practicebasedevidence.com/strengths/strengths\\_assessment.htm](http://www.practicebasedevidence.com/strengths/strengths_assessment.htm)), and Guidelines ([http://www.practicebasedevidence.com/strengths/strengths\\_guidelines.htm](http://www.practicebasedevidence.com/strengths/strengths_guidelines.htm)) to its use in practice.