

Research in Brief

Strength Based Practices

Vol 2 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.

Accountability—Action

The first two of the six principles of a strength-based approach for working with clients are **Accountability-Action**.

Accountability occurs when the client admits guilt. It is *necessary but not sufficient* to assume responsibility for one's actions. Admission of guilt does not cure the client. The client must *do* something—exhibit behavioral change—for true accountability to occur.

Action is defined as efforts (first steps) that help clients change. The goal is not to garner insight to why the client did what they did but to determine what the problem behavior is and then do something to change it. Consider the suggestions below:

- √ If your focus with clients has been more about why they have the problems they have, let it go.
- √ A problem oriented focus can result in too much emphasis on what is wrong, making the problem too complex to address over the short duration of probation. It reduces already limited time and resources that can be used to promote positive behavioral change.
- √ Identify those behaviors that are most troublesome and make agreements about how the behavior will change.
- √ Use compliments to help the client identify their strengths and to foster behavioral change. Incorporate these

into the case plan.

- √ Use compliments appropriately. Be sincere and compliment those behaviors that you want to reinforce (e.g. "you've had 3 clean UA's in a row" rather than "most of your UA's have been dirty").
- √ Do not be satisfied with apologies. Expect behavioral change and communicate this expectation to the client.
- √ Identify and acknowledge small behavioral changes to encourage and reinforce success.
- √ Use motivational interviewing techniques to engage the client, reduce defensiveness, and increase ownership in behavioral change.
- √ Asking the right question is more important than having the correct answer. Drop the lecture and get the client to come up with the answer. The client will be more likely to implement what feels like his/her idea.
- √ Reframe questions to be more optimistic and to encourage the client to identify strengths and/or what IS working. Rather than asking "How did you become involved in this crime?" ask "How have you survived thus far?"
- √ Ask "questions for change," emphasizing solutions, not prob-

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Accountability—Action

“If you want to monitor problems and/or compliance, you need to look at risks. If you want to see a change in behavior, you need to identify strengths or assets that can be used to build on.”

Michael D. Clark, MSW, CSW

lems (e.g. “What will you need to do to get to school/work this week?”).

√ Examples of questions that can be used early on in supervision to help identify strengths and begin behavioral change are: “After being arrested and petitioned, many people notice good changes have already started before their first appointment here at [probation]. What changes have you noticed in your situation? How is this different than before? How did you get these changes to happen?”

√ Ask “exception questions” to identify what is going on when the problem behavior is not present. Use these to reinforce that the problem does not *always* exist and to identify and reinforce strategies that work. Examples: “Have there been times when the problem did not occur?” “When was the most recent time when you were able to (perform the desired behavior)?” “What is different about those times?” “When did this happen?” “Who was involved?” “How did this happen?”

√ When you can't seem to stop clients from focusing on what the problems are, help them define what life would be like without the problems by asking “miracle (outcome) questions.” These questions pose an imaginary situation where all of the client's problems are removed from their life when they wake up the next morning and then inquire about what they would notice about their life if this actually happened. “What will be different in your life now that your problem is solved?”

√ This main “miracle question” can lead to the development of small behavioral goals and can be followed up with questions such as: “What will be the smallest sign that this (outcome) is happening?” “When you are no longer (skipping school, breaking the law etc.), what will you be doing instead?”

√ Separate the person from the problem. Instead of thinking of your client as a thief, think of him/her as someone who steals things. This slight modification to your framework changes your problem as the probation officer. You no longer have to “fix” this person. You have the simpler task of facilitating how the client can change how s/he acquires things.

√ Use “scaling questions” at different points in time to quickly assess the client's progress. Try this: “Numbers help me understand better. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is your problem solved and 1 is when it was at the worst, where are you now?” Follow up with questions that will help the client figure out what they need to do to continue up the scale towards a 10. “You said you were at a 3, what would it take to move to a 4?”

√ Only after several strengths and past successes have been identified and reviewed, try a “How did you?” question to emphasize the client's ability to stay out of trouble and/or resolve their problems. With an incredulous tone you can ask “How did you get into this?” to suggest your disbelief that someone like them has wound up where they are and that they most certainly can move past it.