

Title slide

The idea of working with strengths... as a way of thinking, as a way of working... was introduced to me in a team that I was a part of back in 1991. We were part of a UK research project into implementing case management into mental health services, and the Strengths Model of Case Management was one that had gained a lot of traction in the US over the previous decade. As a practicing occupational therapist, it made absolute sense to me as a way of working, and it's really become the main theme of much of what I've been doing since. It was the platform from which I was able to develop the idea of positive risk-taking.

Next slide (quote)

Let's start off with a quote, one which I feel captures the essence of working with strengths... *If human beings are perceived as potentials, rather than problems as possessing strengths, instead of weaknesses, as unlimited, rather than unresponsive, then they thrive and grow to their capabilities.*

So, I'm talking about... working with strengths... and that quote really does highlight the shift from thinking about problems... of being unresponsive... and shifting over to this idea that is so much more constructive in its message.

Next slide (Language of strengths)

Following on from the mindset of Module 1, we need to pay particular attention to making a change in our predominant language when thinking of and communicating with the people we serve. Traditionally in health and social care we are expected to think and talk about the deficits and challenging circumstances that bring a person into contact with our services in the first place. Nothing intrinsically wrong with that... we need to be fully aware of this information. Just don't think this is the full description of who the person is... and certainly don't try to help people resolve their issues when the whole conversation is rooted in everything they can't do, aren't doing, would rather not be doing, or have forgotten how to do!

The image on this slide begins to offer a range of words that we should be paying more attention to... alongside the difficulties and disabilities. It is from this style of conversation that we will have a better chance of engaging a trusting working relationship... as well as sourcing the kind of resources within and around the person, that could help them to take more control of their own circumstances, and plans for their next steps forward.

Next slide (What is a strengths approach?)

Following on from the previous quote and introduction to the language of strengths... here's the first question you should probably be asking. It's ultimately challenging what I would suggest is a negative focus that emerges from the way I've just described a problems-orientated approach... Just solely focusing on the negative... is not going to inspire a great

deal of hope and confidence in people. So, we want to challenge that in some way... we want to work with it, but we don't want it to dominate everything that is in our thinking, and in our approach to people, in our response to people... our response to this whole idea of trying to take a risk... how are you going to do that if all you can see is problems?

The strengths approach recognizes that whoever you are... myself, yourself... whoever you're working with... Everybody has talents. Everybody has abilities, interests, achievements, capabilities, wants, dreams and wishes... all those positive characteristics of us... and at certain stages in our lives... and for certain people... these are not that obvious. It takes a lot of digging to try and find them.

But for the vast majority of us, this is who we are... this is the essence of us as people... So as a result, it's very much a person-centred way of thinking... it's a person-centred way of working. It's really getting to the essence of people and drawing from them, and drawing from us ourselves, when we're applying this to ourselves... this sense of what can inspire hope, the sense that we can move on and achieve.

Next slide (qualities image)

Here is a nice brain-sized image to prompt you if you're a little lost as to what personal qualities could I observe in the people I'm working with! The language of positivity links so well to the Module 3 focus on individual engagement... conversations focused on these qualities are so much richer when conducted from this perspective.

What's more... these are the qualities that get to the essence of who a person is. We shouldn't be looking to defining them primarily by their problems and difficulties.

Next slide (What is a strengths approach... continued)

Staying with this question, what is a strengths approach? Well, it's a process. It's not a one-off event... it's continually happening. We should be continually listening and learning, listening to ourselves, listening to the person that we're working with, the person that we're focused on... It's a continuous listening so that we learn those cues... as to what's important for them... both now in the current situation and in helping people to reflect on a future, a desired future. What is it that's important to them? What would they like to achieve? However grand that might be... it's still important that we have those dreams... and that we can focus our attention, focus our approach, on helping people step by step, towards moving, towards achieving those dreams.

As for this whole issue of resources... it's acting in alliance with people, with the resources within them and around them... including their family and friends. So, from a perspective of being a practitioner working in health or social care, and the types of disabilities encountered... it's about seeing the ability in the person, but also seeing those resources around the person, the supports that they have, that they can rely on. So, we're supporting people to develop their real personal resources... focusing and tapping into their own resourcefulness. It's moving away from any unrealistic notion that we are the experts, and we hold all of the answers.

If we're focusing on this word 'resources'... which I think is crucial... when we think of strengths, think of it as always being about resources... those are the things that can open up opportunities. So, it's about thinking... what are the options? What are the risks we could take? Well, the opportunities open up when we're aware of the resources we've got.

Opportunities in themselves will give us confidence. We know that we've got resources to take on the challenge. We can take that risk. We can really move forward with this confidence... that we could achieve our desired wishes... and that confidence then breeds success and achievement.

Next slide (Resources & Opportunity)

This image helps us to think about resources we can tap into... and resources we may be able to encourage others to explore. We need to adopt an open mind to opportunities! I'm sure you already see a common theme developing in this module 4 presentation... it's a language of strengths... a language of positivity that helps to underpin a shift in mindset.

Next slide (How... in practice?)

At a superficial level, we're often asking people how are you coping... what do you want to do? And that's as good a starting point as any. Those are important messages... rather than just getting straight on in with the... how are you not coping... and what are you struggling with, or unable to do... what are your problems? These are questions we probably already hold most of the answers to... so why repeat them? The questions heading up this slide represent a shift... a shift in language... a shift in terminology... which is an important shift... and shouldn't be underestimated in terms of how these different questions are received and experienced.

But it's not enough... if we're talking about a strengths approach... I'm talking about something very much more, very much more detailed. This is very much about who we are, a personal attitude, it's a value base... How much do we reflect and think about why we're doing the work we're doing... how we go about doing that work. How we think about the service users, the clients, that we're working with.

And again, I emphasize this is about applying values and principles, but in a real sense, not just thinking of those as academic terminology belonging to a different person, not me... I'm challenging you to really think about how you respond to situations, and people, and challenges. Do we all-too-easily get drawn into those negatives and those cliches... just because that's the way it's always been, or that's what we think we're expected to do?

Or can we stand back, and ultimately see another point here... that I refer to as thinking strengths as a default... So even though somebody might be presenting to you with a set of problems... there's something about this being deeply ingrained in us... embedded in us... if we're recognizing the problem, but instantly becoming alert to... aware of... and inquiring about... the potential for strengths in and around the person and the situation... this is what

I mean by it becoming a default position... Not something that you'll come back and revisit just once in a while when you have time.

I want to emphasize this last question... where does this fit with appreciating people's problems? It's not an either or... we are offering a counterbalance... the whole picture of me as a person is... what I can do, what I want to do, what I'm interested in, my achievements, my desires for the future... all that strengths side of me... But there's also the problems, the ageing, the creaking back... and the times that I don't connect with people... various things that I'm not very good at doing... all of that is a picture of me. And if I'm working with people as a practitioner... then clearly, they present with problems. But I'm looking at strengths as being resources to direct towards those problems, to support people, to manage their own problems... through recognition and application of their own strengths.

So, these two things go hand in hand... they are not an either or!

Next slide (What's the story?)

There's a good image in a sense... or message... It's, what's your story? That's essentially what it's about in practice... How do we put it into practice? It's about encouraging people to tell their story.

Next slide (How... continued)

It's primarily about what you do in your interactions with people. So again... you can build up that formalized assessment... but the 'what's your story' is also a more informal approach. It happens... when? Well... from the very first point of contact... again, if it's a default position, we're always alert to strengths information... seeking out strengths' information. So, in our first contact, our discussion with people... or if you work on a referral basis... the information that comes through in written referrals or whatever... you will be demanding, inquiring, and searching for strengths, as well as problems information... right from the outset.

'The how' does involve degrees of paperwork... though I always want to keep that to an absolute minimum... a bureaucracy busting approach is another of my personal default positions! It's there to underpin and support what you're doing... because, ultimately, we're remembering... and this goes for risk as well as for strengths equally... that reality is dynamic... It's constantly changing. So, the documents, the paperwork that we would be using also needs, as best as possible, to capture and reflect that change... that dynamism.

But there is the dilemma... it could never be an exact replica of real life... life is dynamic, and with the best will in the world... paperwork is a static picture. So, the design needs to be minimal and manageable, if we are to update it on a regular basis.

Next slide (Strength's quote)

This brings me to another strengths quote... from Tom Rath... who's an author working within the Gallup organization which has produced the most research and literature into

strengths working... StrengthsFinder 2.0 in particular, comes to mind... and in it Tom reminds us that... *if you spend your life trying to be good at everything... you'll never be great at anything...* There is something about the mediocre... just being good enough at everything... is not as satisfying as... knowing, feeling, experiencing and delivering something great... something that's focused.

I include this quote at this point to remind us we are focusing on helping the people we work with (and ourselves!) to find those passions that excite interest... those dreams of 'if only'. It is not an exercise in trying desperately to find strengths and positive changes in every aspect of someone's life... as wonderful as that might be. Doing a strengths approach is very much about keeping it real and keeping it focused!

Next slide (Appropriate tools)

Good practice doesn't emerge out of nowhere... it may be triggered by our personal values, and adherence to a set of carefully crafted principles... But, it still requires tools to guide us, and provide a degree of consistency in implementation... We also don't always operate in splendid isolation... we more often than not function within teams... So, I'll address these two areas.

It's about accessing the appropriate tools, not just any tools... and from the early days of my awareness, going back to the early nineties through connection with Professor Charlie Rapp... they'd already... in the University of Kansas... developed a strengths assessment... I've adapted that slightly... developed it a bit more in a UK context over the intervening years. So, at one level we are talking about service users... clients and strengths-based practice... I'm talking about the development of a strengths assessment tool that helps us to pick up on this positive picture for the individual person.

And it's exactly the same approach that can then be adapted and applied to individual staff members strengths. Which challenges you to think about... how do you build up that picture and help them to work with their own strengths... within the context of their job role? I've also developed a version of the same approach in terms of tools that help teams... to reflect on their achievements as teams... their resources as teams... their priorities for the future as teams. So again, there'll be consistent themes that underpin the development of each of these tools... so that they do follow a very similar approach.

A strengths assessment itself is a way of building up this positive picture over time... It's a process, not an event... not a one-off in order to just get it done quickly. It builds up over time... gathers together different sources and types of information... but it's also a brief tool... so it's only about capturing specific words or very brief phrases. Visibly, it's important that the tool you'd be using acts as a good prompt... to help you to inquire into areas that maybe we're not so aware of, in terms of where strengths exist... either historically, currently, or in terms of future wishes.

