**The Strengths Based Approach**  
Principles, Techniques & Application

**Questions Which Help Clients Think & Talk about Their Strengths**

1. **Coping Questions**

You can help clients think about their strengths and resources by asking them how they are able to cope with the difficulties they are facing.

* + *How have you managed to cope with all this and keep going?*
  + *What helps you to keep going even though things are really hard?*

1. **Exception Finding Questions**

Another way to move to a strength-based discussion is by asking exception finding questions. Focusing on the “who”, “what”, “when” and “where” of exception times can help the client focus on his strengths and resources and be motivated to create his own solutions.

* + If a person living with HIV tells you how hard it is to disclose his status to potential sexual or romantic partners, you might ask him to tell you about a time when the client had a successful disclosure experience, and what was different about that particular time.

1. **What’s Better Questions**

One way to begin sessions, after the initial assessment you have done together, is to ask, *“What’s better?”* or, *“what progress do you see?”* This is similar to exception questions in that it helps clients think about positive movement toward their goals. This technique can work better than starting out with a question like, “So how’s it been going since our last meeting?” Such a broad question may bring up and focus the conversation on problems and set-backs, with a discouraging effect.

1. **Scaling Questions**

You can help clients recognize their strengths and establish goals by having them look at their current “problem” or situation.

* One technique is to use scaling questions. You can present a scale and follow it up with a series of questions. You are scaling a problem the client identifies not a motivation or an intention.
* *“ In considering the problem we have been talking about (e.g. your concern in continuing to have a healthy sexual life with your partners if 0 is the worst the problem could ever be and 10 is the best this situation could be; what number would you give to your current situation*

When they respond with a number greater than zero, you can follow up with questions that uncover and affirm strengths, for example,

* *“What keeps you from slipping down to a lower number? Or when you have been a higher number, what was contributing to it, or what would a (one number above what they mentioned) look like? How would you know you are moving up the scale?” What number is good enough for you as a goal right now”*

1. **The Miracle Question**

This technique aids the client to imagine how the future will be different when the problem is no longer present. This question also helps to establish goals. The following is an example of how the miracle question can be articulated:

*"Suppose our meeting is over, you go home, do whatever you planned to do for the rest of the day. And then, sometime in the evening, you get tired and go to sleep. And in the middle of the night, when you are fast asleep, a miracle happens and all the problems that brought you here today are solved just like that. But since the miracle happened over night, you don’t know that a miracle has happened when you wake up the next morning. How are you going to start discovering that the miracle happened? ... What else are you going to notice?"*

1. **Survival Questions**

How have you managed to survive (or thrive) thus far, given all the challenges you have had to contend with? How have you been able to rise to the challenges put before you? What was your mindset as you faced these difficulties? What have you learned about yourself and your world during your struggles? Which of these difficulties have given you special strength, insight, or skill? What are the special qualities on which you can rely?

1. **Support Questions**

What people have given you special understanding, support, and guidance? Who are the special people on whom you can depend? What is exceptional about what they give you? How did you find them or how did they come to you? What did they respond to in you? What associations, organizations, or groups have been especially helpful to you in the past?

1. **Possibility Questions**

What now do you want out of life? What are your hopes, visions, and aspirations? How far along are you toward achieving these? What people or personal qualities are helping you move in these directions? What do you like to do? What are your special talents and abilities? How can I help you achieve your goals or recover those special abilities and times that you had in the past?

1. **Esteem Questions**

When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say? What is it about your life, yourself, and your accomplishments that give you real pride? How will you know when things are going well in your life –what will you be doing, who will you be with, how will you be feeling, thinking, and acting? What gives you genuine pleasure in life? When was it that you began to believe that you might achieve some of the things you wanted in life? What people, events, and ideas were involved?

1. **Perspective Questions**

What are your ideas or theories about your current situation? How do you understand, what kind of sense do you make of your recent experiences and struggles? How would you explain these to yourself, to me, or anyone else?

1. **Change Questions**

What are your ideas about how things –thoughts, feelings, behavior, relationships, etc. - might change? What has worked in the past to bring about a better life for you? What do you think you should or could do to improve your status, your affairs? How can I help?

1. **Meaning Questions**

What are the primary ideas and values of your system of meaning system: those things that you utterly believe in and value above all? What are those transcendent, iridescent beliefs that give you a sense of purpose beyond the self? Where do they come from; experience, spirituality? What part do they play in your everyday life?

Questions 1 through 5 were adapted from: Peter DeJong, and Scott D. Miller. “How to interview for client strengths,” Social Work 40 6 (1995). 731. Questions 6 – 12 were adapted from: Saleebey, D. (2009). The strengths approach to practice. Beginnings. In: D., Saleebey (Ed.), *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (93-107). Boston, MA: Pearson.