

Chapter 1

STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY



Strength Quotes

- “Find your strengths and act on them with focused attention, and the world will beat a path to you.”—Elsie Jones-Smith (2011a)
- “People develop strengths as part of part of their driving force to meet basic psychological needs, such as belonging and affiliation, competency, feeling safe, autonomy, and/or finding meaning and purpose in life.”—Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000)
- “I need not know the entire journey for me to take one step toward my purpose.”—Unknown



STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY: A NEW PARADIGM

I stood mesmerized in front of the television as I watched a major network mourn Steve Jobs’s death and summarize his life. There was so much about Steve Jobs that I loved—his beautiful smile as he introduced his latest product to the world, his very simplicity, and his almost always wearing of his mock black turtleneck sweater with Levi’s jeans. Although he may have been adopted as a child, he had adopted the world as his family. I could sense the absolute joy he felt when he brought out a new product, a new gadget to make the lives of his global family easier than before. It was if he were saying, “This is what brings me joy—making your life easier and more fun, helping you to connect with the ones whom you love.”

Steve Jobs is important to me—not just because of the magnificent iPhones and iPads that he created, but because he is a shining example of what happens

when a person uses his strength to the fullest to make life meaningful for himself and for others. Like Bill Gates (developer of Microsoft and the world's second richest man), Steve never earned a college degree. Both dropped out of college to follow their strengths and passion. Both made incredible advances in the area of computer technology, and both had companies that have earned billions of dollars.

For about the fifth time, I listened intently to Steve's commencement address at Stanford University, one of our nation's premier universities. He talked about his bout with cancer and his feelings when he thought death had come knocking at his door for him. He exhorted the Stanford graduates to follow their strengths and passions, and happiness and success would show up in their lives. "Each day I wake up," he said, "I ask myself: 'Am I doing what I would be doing if I knew that I only had this day to live?'" Steve answered his own question. He affirmed that he was doing what he loved and what he would want to be doing if this were his last day on earth. He cautioned the Stanford graduates about "settling" for life.

Life is not all about amassing college degrees or whatever symbols—cars, houses—one has adopted to represent success. Happiness and the good life come from using your strengths in meaningful ways. The lesson that Steve Jobs has taught me and the world goes way beyond his inventions of the iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad. A meaningful life is about applying your strengths—not burying them to use at some later time in life that may never come.

As I mulled over the lesson that Steve was teaching the world about the importance of using your strengths and not settling, my mind turned to my work with clients. Each one of us begins life at a different starting point. While some of us are born into wealth, others are born into poverty or scarcity. What really matters is not what we are given but rather what we do with what we have. Some clients start off with many challenges. Life is not always fair. Some people have greater numbers of strengths than do others.

Our strengths constitute our wealth in life—much in the same way that Steve Jobs's creativity and technological savvy formed his talents. We are stewards of our strengths. We all have choices in life. We can bury our strengths or our talents out of fear, or we can develop them and strive to create increase for all. For instance, Steve Jobs's strengths led to his amassing billions of dollars that were partly used to hire more than 4,000 people who used their income to provide for their families. Creating abundance in our lives requires us to move beyond fear. If we are too fearful or too distrustful, then we are going to bury our talents. Our talents are not just for ourselves and our own individual increase. We have to move beyond the sentiment "what's in it for me?" When we bring increase for others, we bring happiness into our own lives.

HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY

Each theoretical approach to psychotherapy has its own story, its contributing cast of characters, and its zeitgeist. Some of the contributors to the strengths movement in psychotherapy are described briefly in this section.

Contributions From Donald Clifton: Father of Strengths Psychology

Over a 50-year career, Donald Clifton worked at the University of Nebraska, Selection Research Incorporated, and Gallup, where he specialized in the study of success (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Clifton's research was focused on the question "What would happen if we studied what is right with people?" Clifton cofounded Selection Research Incorporated, which acquired part of the Gallup Organization. After acquiring a part of the Gallup organization, Clifton used the name Gallup for all of his material on strengths.

For years, Clifton studied what made people successful at work and at life. As a result of his work, he developed a tripartite model for studying strengths: strength, talent, skill (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). In 2002, the American Psychological Association presented Clifton with its Presidential Commendation for lifetime contributions as "the father of strengths-based psychology and the grandfather of positive psychology" (Rath & Clifton, 2004). Clifton has developed the *StrengthsFinder*, which is designed to measure 34 talents individuals may possess. Clifton is best known for his book *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, which was written by Marcus Buckingham and him in 2001. The authors stated, "We wrote this book to start a revolution, the strengths revolution" (p. 5).

Contributions From Social Work

The strengths perspective in social work can be traced most directly to the 1980s at the University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare. In 1988, the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas hosted a 2-day seminar for 20 educators, researchers, and practitioners interested in using a strengths approach. From this seminar came the first edition of *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (Saleebey, 1992).

Subsequently, the school was awarded a \$10,000 scholarship to provide case management services to people with persistent and severe mental illness (Saleebey, 1992). In a benchmark article, Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kisthardt (1989) coined the term *strengths perspective*. Saleebey (1992) identified the basic assumptions of the strengths perspectives for social workers and challenged practitioners to

change how they worked with clients. He asserted that members of the helping professions must know what clients have done, how they have done it, what they learned from their experiences, and what resources they used in their struggle to surmount difficulties. Other social workers (Maluccio, 1981; Rappaport, 1990; Weick et al., 1989) asserted that if practitioners focused on the client's mental disorder or diagnosis, clients may become discouraged and feel they are victims of a disease over which they have little control. The goal of helping should be to empower clients to discover their own individual and family strengths (Lee, 2001; Simons & Aigner, 1985). Social workers have assumed a leadership role in identifying family strengths and in working with youth who face a number of challenges in life.

Contributions From Positive Psychology

Abraham Maslow first used the term *positive psychology* in his book *Motivation and Personality* (1954), the last chapter of which was titled "Toward a Positive Psychology." Maslow's vision for a positive psychology stressed such concepts as promoting positive self-esteem among youth, peak experiences, and self-actualization. Seligman borrowed the term *positive psychology* from Maslow and spearheaded a new movement in psychology.

The seeds for positive psychology can also be found in Seligman's early work on learned helplessness and optimism. In his studies of learned optimism, Seligman (1991) found that pessimists respond to adversity with helplessness; they give up early instead of persevering. In contrast, optimists persevere. Seligman concluded that optimism rather than pessimism pays off when people are faced with a life problem or a setback. An optimistic thinking style helps one to maintain hope, increases one's resilience, and improves one's chances of a successful outcome.

Seligman (1998, 1999) has challenged psychologists to learn more about the influences of optimism and positive thinking on human development. Do positive thinkers learn better in school? To what degree might one's learned optimism or pessimism affect one's progression through childhood and adolescent developmental stages? Can we impact adolescent suicide rates by teaching adolescents to become learned optimists? Do positive thinkers experience less depression or anxiety?

Contributions From Counseling Psychology

The professional history of counseling psychology is interwoven with the vocational guidance movement in the United States, the return of veterans after World

War II, and the need for job counseling and placement (Meara & Myers, 1999). Counseling psychologists stress patterns of normal development, even though they are also trained to recognize patterns of abnormality and pathology (Brown & Lent, 2000). A major goal of counseling psychology is to facilitate human growth by focusing on individuals' "sturdy roots." According to Gelso and Fretz (1992), counseling psychology has traditionally adopted preventive, educative and developmental, and remedial roles. Furthermore, Gelso and Fretz identified five unifying themes on which the profession has focused: (a) intact personalities, (b) people's assets and strengths, (c) relatively brief interventions, (d) person–environment interactions, and (e) educational and career development and environments.

Counseling psychology's contribution to the strength perspective is threefold. *First*, it has historically focused on individuals' assets and strengths (Brown & Lent, 2000). *Second*, it has emphasized the importance of cultural diversity and the impact of culture on the expression of individual strengths. Counseling psychology has traditionally focused on youth and the cultural strengths of ethnic groups (Brown & Lent, 2000; Gelso & Woodhouse, 2004). *Third*, it has traditionally been in the forefront of promoting social change (Brown & Lent, 2000; Walsh, 2004).

Contributions From Solution-Focused Therapy

Solution-focused therapy has also contributed to the strengths movement and to the development of the strengths-based therapy model. The primary emphasis of solution-focused therapy has been to find solutions to clients' issues rather than focusing on their problems. The solution-building theory was pioneered through the efforts of Steve de Shazer (1985, 1988, 1994), Insoo Berg (1994), and their colleagues, who noticed a dramatic change in a family's functioning when they asked the question: What is happening in your lives that you want to continue to happen? The practitioners observed that focusing on a problem and finding a solution were not necessarily connected. Two counseling techniques that strengths-based therapy borrows from solution-focused therapy are the miracle question and the exception situation.

Contributions From Narrative Therapy

Michael White and David Epston, two family therapists, introduced narrative therapy to the helping professions. These therapists observed how their clients were affected by the meaning they ascribed to life traumas and otherwise stressful life events. Clients' stories typically involved descriptions of themselves as victims rather than as survivors. Soon, White and Epston (1990) encouraged their

clients to retell their personal stories of pain and rejection in new ways that liberated and empowered them. Similarly, strength-based counseling asks clients to retell their stories emphasizing their strengths. The contributions of narrative therapists are highlighted in Stage 2 (presented in Part II) of my theory of strength-based therapy, in which clients are asked to narrate their life stories from a position of strength.

CLINICAL DEVELOPMENT AND EVIDENCE FOR STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY (SBT)

The author of this text's involvement with strengths-based therapy (SBT) began during the 1980s when she focused on identifying the strengths of ethnic minority students. She was interested in the healing aspects of culture and maintained that youth need a sense of belonging and connection to a cultural or ethnic group (Smith, 1985, 1991). She also embraced the social constructivist movement in psychotherapy. In January 2006, *The Counseling Psychologist* published "The Strength-Based Counseling Model."

Clinical evidence for Dr. Smith's strengths-based therapy developed gradually. In the beginning, she was guided by the fact that clients became animated and smiled when she asked them about their strengths. During therapy, her goal was to have clients see themselves primarily in terms of their strengths rather than in terms of their weaknesses. Asking clients about their strengths gave them a sense that they could take control of their lives.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Dr. Smith developed a strengths-based assessment toolkit that contained instruments she used with clients (Jones-Smith, 2011a, 2011b). In addition, she began constructing strengths-based questions related to a number of areas of clients' lives, including their personal strengths, family strengths, friends and peer strengths, spiritual strengths, cultural strengths, and so on.

Dr. Smith became convinced that the focus on clients' strengths had to continue throughout the process of therapy. Clients changed for the better when she encouraged them to use their strengths to deal with difficult situations. Gradually, she began to identify specific stages of strengths-based therapy and clinical interventions that were helpful for those stages. Soon, she developed strengths-based clinical techniques.

Empirical evidence for SBT. One limitation of strengths-based therapy is that it lacks empirical studies to assess its efficacy. Hopefully, as more individuals become acquainted with the strengths-based therapy model, empirical studies

will follow. Dennis Saleebey (2006, p. 291) has addressed the question: “Does the strengths model work?” Saleebey answers this question in the affirmative. He states:

We can argue about what constitutes evidence but given our usual methodological appetites, both quantitative and qualitative research shows that the strengths perspective has a degree of power that would suggest its use with a variety of clients. . . . The most current research summary compiled by Rapp (1998) does imply that the strengths model, when evaluated on its own or compared to other approaches, is efficacious in working with people with severe and persistent mental illness.

. . . In another four experimental or quasi-experimental studies, statistically significant results were found for positive changes in independent living, symptoms, a variety of quality of life/social functioning outcomes when compared to standard practices (Macias, Farley, Jackson, & Kenney, 1997) . . . A recent non-experimental study (Barry, Zeba, Blow, & Valenstein, 2003) compared the outcome of veterans who received assertive community treatment (ACT) versus strengths-based models. Both groups reduced inpatient days and were “clinically improved” but people getting strengths-based case management (SBCM) services were significantly better in terms of symptoms. . . . Whatever else it might be, however else it might be construed, the strengths perspective, like other perspectives, is a matter of thinking about the work you do. The test of it is between you and those with whom you work. Do they think the work has been relevant to their lives? Do they feel more adept and capable? Have they moved closer to the hopes, goals, and objectives that they set before you? . . . Do they have the sense that you will be with them and for them as they try to construct a better life for themselves? (pp. 291–292)

STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY AND THE METAPHOR OF FINDING ONE’S STRENGTH

Carl Jung (1912/1971) once maintained that metaphors and fairy tales provide a reference point for psychotherapy. He believed that people’s lives mirrored the cultural aspects of the fairy tales that were prevalent within that culture. The metaphor and fairy tale that comes to mind for strengths-based therapy is *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and the yellow brick road. L. Frank Baum wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900.

STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY, THE WIZARD OF OZ, AND THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

Summary of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. The story begins with a young orphan girl named Dorothy Gale and her dog Toto, who live with Uncle Henry and Aunt Em in a farmhouse in Kansas. Dorothy is experiencing a sense of wanderlust and dreams of “going somewhere over the rainbow.” When a tornado strikes the house, Dorothy and Toto do not make it into the safe cellar. Dorothy is knocked unconscious, and the house is lifted into the air. She awakens to find herself in the magical Land of Oz.

With a kiss from the Good Witch of the North, Dorothy puts on the **ruby slippers** and begins her journey on the yellow brick road to the Emerald City. Along the way, she meets a talking Scarecrow who believes that his problems will be solved if he has some brains. Soon they meet a woodcutter who has been under the spell of the evil witch and now all that remains is a body made of tin. The Tin Woodsman wants a heart so that he can love again. The last sojourner is a Cowardly Lion that tries to scare people by roaring loudly but, when confronted, is very fearful. The group meets the Wizard of Oz, who sends them to get the Wicked Witch of the West.

Because of their faith in the Wizard’s powers, the Scarecrow, Tin Woodsman, and Lion believe that their wishes have been granted. Therefore, they feel differently about themselves. Dorothy clicks her heels and returns home to Kansas, where she is happily reunited with her aunt and uncle. The Scarecrow becomes the ruler in Emerald City, while the Tin Woodsman becomes ruler for the people in the West and the Lion reigns in the jungle as King of the Beasts.

Importance of Believing in Your Strengths

The power of belief in oneself and its antithesis, self-doubt, is a major theme in strengths-based therapy. The major characters in *The Wizard of Oz* were filled with self-doubt and feelings of weakness and inferiority. In the beginning of the story,

the Scarecrow is hanging on a pole and living a life totally unsuited to his strengths. He cannot scare crows away in the field, much in the same way that some people spend a great deal of their lives working at a job that they do not like and performing at a level just slightly above mediocre.

Although he protests that he does not have a brain and cannot make up his mind, he tells Dorothy how to take him off the pole and in

Strengths Reflections

What makes a client a hero in his or her own life?

To what extent do you see your clients as heroes on a life journey?

which direction they should proceed. He demonstrates his brilliance when he tricks the apple tree into throwing apples for Dorothy to eat. The Scarecrow shows his kindness when he indicates his willingness to help Dorothy: “I’ll see you get there whether I get a brain or not.”

The Lion represents the fear that holds most of us back when we want to go forward, to begin a new relationship, to start a family, to launch a business, to end a job. Although the Lion believes that he should be afraid of nothing, his good sense makes him recognize danger. The more that the Lion senses things to be afraid of, the more cowardly he behaves until he finally says, “I’m even afraid of myself.”

THE PHILOSOPHY OF STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY

Strengths-based therapy asserts that we are the heroes of our own lives. Clients in SBT also undergo their own monomyth hero journey. They have to decide if they will accept the call of the adventure or if they will refuse conquering whatever storm is unsettling their lives. Each one of us must embark upon a yellow brick road. Life presents a different test or a supreme ordeal for each one of us.

At the heart of SBT is the idea that whether people succeed in life, fail miserably, or have frustrating lives of muddling through and quiet desperation depends a great deal on if they have a strength or a deficit mindset. Individuals with a deficit mindset focus on what is missing in themselves and in other people. They emphasize what they don’t want instead of what they do want. Learning to look for another person’s strengths—be it your partner, child, or friend—involves a process of noticing what’s there.

Nora is an attractive woman in her late 50s. As we renewed our friendship over lunch, Nora began to provide me a report on each of the important people in her life and to indicate how they were not meeting her needs and expectations. One of her longstanding friends had not invited her to a housewarming party, and she felt slighted. Her son and daughter-in-law had stopped coming over on Sundays, and therefore she did not see her grandchildren as much as she used to see them. Worse yet, her son sent her a Mother’s Day card two days late. Her husband only remembered her birthday when nudged by Nora’s friend.

Nora has pictures in her head about what a good son, a good friend, a loving husband, and so on should say, think, feel, and give to her. Each day, she searches her experiences for instances wherein those with whom she comes into contact fail to meet her ideal pictures. She has mastered the recipe for the deficit mindset, for depression, and for lifelong disappointment—if she does not change the lenses that she uses to view the world. Those with a deficit mindset focus on what they lack rather than on what they have. They notice what’s missing rather than what is there.

When we narrow our vision to focus on only the gap between what we want and what we have, we lose. The deficit mindset misses out on quite a bit because it fails to notice what is there. It fails to acknowledge life's gifts that lie amid our pain. An important concept and technique in strengths-based therapy involves helping clients to direct their attention so that they "notice what is there for them." Nora was so hurting from not getting her Mother's Day card on time that she failed to notice that her son had remembered her. A strength mindset generates a positive energy field, while those who maintain a deficit mindset generate a negative energy field. Those who are closest to us can influence our strengths and energy fields.

Strengths-based therapy adheres to the belief that even the most challenging life stories that clients bring to therapy contain examples of their exercise of strengths in their struggle with adversity. For instance, the addict's or substance abuser's maladaptive responses may also contain within them the seeds of a struggle for health. Oftentimes when clients report their pain, they mention healthy things they have done to help them through their addiction. For instance, Gail's struggle with alcoholism revealed a destructive pattern at work and in other areas of her life; but when she was granted visitation rights with her son, she did not drink. I call this phenomenon the *client's struggle perception* (Ward & Reuter, 2011).

It is in a client's struggle with the presenting problem that practitioners search for strengths (Smith, 2006). What internal strength allowed Gail to refrain from drinking both prior to and during her visitation with her son? If a practitioner can help a client to see and understand the strength that allowed him or her to obtain some reprieve, however brief, from the painful struggle with the problem that brought him or her to therapy, this can create an opportunity for him or her to learn how to muster that source of strength in other areas of his or her life.

The strengths-based therapy model and diagnostic systems can live in relative harmony. The strengths perspective does not ignore or minimize diagnoses or diagnostic skills. Instead, it emphasizes balance in viewing and treating clients. The strengths-based clinician may very well make a clinical diagnosis of a mental disorder (alcoholism, substance abuse, comorbid disorder, etc.), but he or she takes steps to ensure that the diagnosis does not become the cornerstone of all subsequent interactions with the client.

- Strengths-based therapy focuses on what is working for the client rather than on what is not working.
- Strengths-based therapy accentuates what clients have rather than what they don't have.
- Strengths-based therapy emphasizes strengths in a client's struggle.

CORE CONCEPTS IN STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY

The various contributory streams (positive psychology, social work, narrative therapy, etc.) led to the gradual emergence of core philosophical and theoretical concepts for the strengths-based therapy. The next part of this chapter develops a definition of strength and the contextual process in which strengths develop; it also discusses 12 strength characteristics.

Definition of Strength

Aspinwall and Staudinger (2003) have noted the difficulties involved in defining human strength. According to these researchers, one reason that psychology was entrenched in the predominant medical model of repair and healing was that defining the desired or adaptive direction of change is easier if the goal of such a change were to return to a prior state of normality. *Strength* may be defined as that which helps a person to cope with life or that which makes life more fulfilling for oneself and others. Strengths are not fixed personality traits; instead, they develop from a dynamic, contextual process rooted deeply in one's culture. Our strengths are the lenses we use to process information, to experience others, to view time and structure, to accommodate or to make change in our lives, and to communicate with others.

Strengths Development as Dialogic Conversations in Our Inner and Audience Worlds

Strength development and strength recognition take place within our inner and outer conversational worlds. We engage in internal dialogues about our strengths—for instance, how proficient we are in certain areas of our lives. We say to ourselves, “I’m really good in music,” or “Math is not my best suit.” Everyone engages in strength dialogues with oneself. Our internalized stories are essentially *strength dialogues* with the self. The internalized stories we tell to ourselves about ourselves can lead us toward either strength recognition or weakness recognition. When our inner strength dialogues are positive and we act on our strengths, we experience a sense of self-satisfaction—possibly even happiness. When our inner dialogues are plagued by repeated surveillance and recognition of weakness, we can become discouraged.

Moreover, each of us engages in *strength surveillance*. Strength surveillance is a two-prong process consisting of internalized self-dialogues and audience dialogues. Our internalized self-surveillance—that is, the process of monitoring and judging ourselves—leads to either our recognition, minimizing, or unawareness of

our strengths. We are the dominant character in our inner world, while parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and others form the substance of our outer world. Strengths development is essentially relational. Almost inevitably, other people are involved in our strength progress. People serve as part of the audience that comments to us and that helps to judge our abilities as strengths. Chapter 3 of this book details the relational part of strengths development.

Strength dialogues may also come from external sources. In this instance, they are said to be audience oriented. Usually, the audience consists of the significant people in our lives—our parents, siblings, extended family members, friends, teachers, coworkers, and neighbors. The outer world forms the *strength audience*, which reflects to us how we are perceived by them. Sometimes the audience gives us praise in the form of positive hand clapping, while on other occasions, it boos our performance as poor or inadequate. The audience may also treat us with an air of indifference or apathy, thereby leading us to feel invisible or disposable as a person—as if we do not matter, do not belong where we are.

Characteristics of Strengths

Strengths possess a number of characteristics. They may be internal or external; they may be valued intrinsically or extrinsically; and they are usually culturally bound, contextually based, and/or development and lifespan oriented. Strengths also have characteristics involving adaptability and functionality; they have a normative quality because they exist in comparison with other states, and each society tends to establish both enabling and limiting structures that permit individuals to move from one strength level to another. Strengths are characterized by a certain transcendent quality; they often develop out of polarities and are associated with good life outcomes. A strength does not have to possess all characteristics listed below.

Culturally bound strengths. Strengths are almost inevitably culturally expressed. Characteristics regarded as strengths in one culture may be viewed as weaknesses in another culture (Smith, 1985). Ethnic groups may be said to have particular cultural strengths (Chang, 2001). A strength for one culture may be its emphasis on the family, whereas the strength of another culture may be its ability to save and to engage in profitable commerce. The importance of strengths differs among cultures. For example, in cultures labeled as individualistic, autonomy is highly valued (Smith, 1985). Conversely, in cultures described as collectivist, relational skills may be emphasized more. Helping professionals are faced with the challenge of learning and understanding both individual and cultural strengths so that they can address the needs of diverse clients.

Contextually based strengths. Human strengths have contextual dependencies (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003), as they involve interaction with a material environment or with human contexts (Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995; Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2000). Strengths are developed within a given situation containing certain contextual characteristics that may either promote or retard the human strength. During war, for example, certain character strengths, such as courage or cowardice, may be exemplified. Therapists must consider the contextual situation confronting clients. A client's behavior might be considered a strength in one setting and a liability in a different social context. For instance, studies have found that clients who evidence internal control beliefs and problem-focused coping may become highly dysfunctional under conditions of high constraints, such as poor health (Staudinger, Freund, Linden, & Maas, 1999). Furthermore, in some non-Western cultures (Chang, 2001), pessimism is adaptive rather than dysfunctional because it increases active problem solving.

Developmental and lifespan-oriented strengths. Strengths are developmental in that they require a certain level of cognitive, physical, and emotional maturity or experiential development (Lyons, Uziel-Miller, Reyes, & Sokol, 2000; Masten & Reed, 2002). Strengths are age related because young children's actions cannot be interpreted in terms of strengths such as courage (Benson, 1997). Strengths are both malleable and changeable. They can be learned or taught. An individual's strengths may unfold or blossom over his or her lifespan (Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1995). Strengths are also incremental, so that one strength provides the foundation for achieving another.

Adaptability and functionality. A person's ability to apply as many different resources and skills as necessary to solve a problem or to achieve a goal may be considered a human strength. Charles Darwin's (1859) work on the origin of species first highlighted the importance of a person's ability to adapt to change. Darwin stated that individuals' ability to adapt to change equals their chances of survival. Strengths may be conceptualized as part of the human adaptational system (Masten & Reed, 2002). From this perspective, people are biologically prepared to develop strengths (Watson & Ecken, 2003). Researchers have characterized human strengths as critical survival skills that allow people to right themselves (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Strength develops as individuals move toward external adaptation. Humans are self-righting organisms engaged in an ongoing adaptation to the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). More recently, researchers have begun to study the critical significance of a person's ability to apply in a flexible manner as many different resources and skills as required to solve a problem or to work toward a goal (Staudinger et al., 1995; Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2000).

Normative quality and enabling environments. Strengths also have a normative quality because they exist in comparison with other, often less developed, states. For example, the strength of courage exists in contrast to cowardice. Each society develops norms for what are considered human strengths. Individuals' violations of strength norms may cause societal sanctioning and rebuke. Moreover, cultures or environment contain enabling and limiting conditions that assist or thwart individuals in their progress along the strength hierarchy (Smith, 1985). Social class structures may prevent individuals from achieving particular strengths (McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1993). Each society tends to establish situations, events, or structures to help individuals move from one strength level to another. Cultures provide role models and parables that indicate the desired strength (e.g., Jackie Robinson, patience and skill; George Washington, truth and honesty). Some Asian cultures have priests or Buddhist levels for wisdom, expertise, or warrior skills.

Environments have physical and social attributes that affect our well-being. Some social, cultural, economic, and political environments exert a negative effect on a person's strength development, while others have a positive influence. Studies have found that some environments have restorative qualities (a sense of getting away), which promote relaxation and alleviate stress (Kaplan, 1995; Korpela & Hartig, 1996). Other environments or places are imbued with symbolic meanings related to an individual's personal or group identity (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Such shared meanings of place historically represent the continuity of people's attachments to particular places and support their feelings of belonging to an ethnic group, thereby leading to a sense of "shared placed identity" (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983).

Transcendence. Human strengths can also have qualities of transcendence, as they can be used to resist a force or attack, whether mental or physical (Aspinwall, 2001). Many studies on resilience emphasize the importance of a person's ability to transcend life circumstances. Strengths help one transcend and improve personal circumstances (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). Strengths may develop from a need to find meaning and purpose in our lives so that we seek people, places, and transformational experiences that help us to feel a sense of connectedness with the world.

Polarities. Strengths often develop from polarities. Human existence is characterized by polarities such as happiness/sorrow, autonomy/dependency, and health/sickness (Riegel, 1976). Human strengths may develop from the co-activation of negative and positive human states. Youth, for instance, is a time of physical

prowess; thus, young individuals work hard to compete athletically, but they are not typically wise. A shift in polarity occurs as we age, so that age is associated with a loss in physical functioning but a gain in wisdom.

THE CONCEPT OF STRENGTH ZONES

Every person has strength zones, areas in which he or she has some natural talent to perform well (Jones-Smith, 2011b). Strength zones are pockets of potential excellence for each person. Your strength zones emit signals both to you and to others that this is an area in which you perform well. Your belief in your strength zones increases the signal that you emit. Focus directs your strengths. If you want to be successful, you have to focus on what you do well rather than on what you have difficulty doing.

People will compliment you or praise you for your performance when you are in your strength zone. You know you are in your strength zone when you are so engrossed in and happy about what you are doing that you forget the time. You love to encounter challenges in your strength zone to test your performance or your skill level. When you are in your strength zone, you experience what Csikszentmihalyi (1991) has called flow. That is, you are engaged in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile and enjoying every minute of it. Your optimal life experiences are based on your strength zones. I have identified 11 strength zones that have emerged from the literature.

11 Strength Zones or Categories

Scholars are in the initial stage of defining, isolating, and categorizing the human strengths that cut across cultures. Eleven categories of strengths that have emerged from the literature are described briefly below. These categories are presented to assist human service professionals to assess clients' strengths. They are not exhaustive categories and must be used with the client's culture in mind. The strength categories are (1) wisdom; (2) emotional strengths; (3) character strengths (such as honesty, discipline, courage); (4) creative strengths; (5) relational and nurturing strengths; (6) educational strengths; (7) analytical and cognitive strengths; (8) economic and financial strengths; (9) social support strengths; (10) survival skills; and (11) kinesthetic and physical strengths. Survival strengths help people to provide for their basic physiological and safety needs (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten & Reed, 2002).

Individuals may possess strengths in several categories simultaneously. Few individuals possess strengths in all categories, simply because each individual has

limitations and weaknesses. Researchers theorize that several factors may cause individuals to move from one strength category to another, including gender, life developmental stage, life experiences, exposure to and survival of adversity, and the ability to reflect on life experiences (Anderson, 2005, Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Strength Estrangement

Strength estrangement may be defined as the lack of awareness of one's talents and strengths, or, if such awareness exists, the lack of direction (or floundering) in using one's strengths to achieve desired goals or to bring about happiness. It is also defined as an individual's alienation from his natural talents such that a disruption of the bond between these talents and the individual takes place. One goal of therapy is to help individuals locate the source of the strength alienation and to

help them restore it to a desired place in their lives to deal effectively with everyday life issues. Strength estrangement may cause some people to experience a state of unspecified unhappiness. "Why am I unhappy?" they may ask themselves.

Strength Indicators

Notice your yearnings.

What do you enjoy doing the most?

Describe a successful day in your life.

Describe key achievements in your life.

Look for rapid learning—what comes easily.

Watch for "flow" or time you achieved excellence without conscious thought or trying hard to do so.

Significance of Our Strengths

Why should therapists examine clients' strengths? Our strengths convey a great deal of information about us. They reveal what we value in life, what we have spent our time on, our preferences for the manner in which we engage our environment, what we do well in life, and, consequently, part of what traditional psychotherapies label as the fabric of our personality. The significance of understanding clients' strengths can be summarized as follows:

- ***Our strengths provide internal consistency regarding who we are.*** Strengths tend to develop early in life and continue throughout our development. Therefore, we form a concept of who we are based on our strengths perception. A person might say, "I've always been a nurturing person." "I fell in love with playing the drums at an early age." Conversely, our weaknesses may indicate who we are not and what we are not. One might say, "I'm not comfortable dealing with gadgets and technology."

- ***Our strengths give meaning to our lives***, and they also help us to construct meaning out of life.
- ***Our strengths unite our various relational selves***. They provide a launching point for our core selves.
- ***Our strengths indicate the kinds of relationships we have been able to form in life with others***. Strength development is rarely a solitary journey. It takes others to recognize and nurture our strengths. You can trace the significant people in a client's life by examining his or her strength development pathways.

There are a number of sound, research-driven reasons why clinicians should consider adopting a strengths-based approach to therapy. As pointed out several times in this chapter, the strengths approach is not all about “fluff and meaningless feel-good dribble.” The work of scholars such as Fredrickson (2001) points to potentially long-lasting results of emphasizing positive emotions with people. Using Fredrickson's research as a foundation, strengths awareness contributes to positive human emotions, which in turn causes individuals to broaden their thinking, build enduring personal resources, and transform them to produce upward spirals in productivity.

When people become aware of their strengths and they learn how to apply them to goals and other aspects of their lives, they experience a personal sense of achievement. As individuals recognize the strengths in others and how their strengths function in interpersonal relationships, they begin to acquire a sense of community and connectedness with others. When clients learn how to apply their strengths to new situations or challenges, they broaden their coping skills and they are better able to resolve the problems that brought them to therapy in the first place. Focusing on clients' strengths motivates them to excel, and it provides new pathways to hope and achieving positive goals.

There is a great deal to be gained by using a strengths-based rather than a pathology-based therapy approach. Even if the medical model is able to help clients eliminate their outward symptoms of a diagnosed disorder, there is little research to suggest that there will be positive carry-over in other areas of a client's life. In contrast, research on positive emotions suggests that positive emotions correct or undo the aftereffects of negative emotions—what Fredrickson (2001) and her colleagues call the “undoing hypotheses.” Positive emotions result when clinicians emphasize clients' strengths. Positive emotions help people place the negative events in their lives in a broader context, thereby reducing the resonance of any given negative life event. Clinicians can help clients by cultivating within them positive emotions at opportune moments to cope with negative emotions.

COMPARISON OF THE STRENGTH PERSPECTIVE AND THE DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE

Strengths	Pathology
Person is unique with talents and resources to be tapped for counseling.	Person is a “case” or a “diagnosis,” such as bipolar, schizophrenic.
Counseling intervention is possibility focused.	Counseling intervention is problem focused.
The therapist comes to appreciate the person through personal narratives. Counseling is a collaborative process.	The therapist is the “expert” who interprets the individual’s personal narrative for the purpose of arriving at a diagnosis.
Childhood trauma may contribute to a person’s strengths or weaknesses.	Childhood trauma predicts later pathology.
The focus is on what is right about the person and on the person’s strengths.	The medical model focuses on client’s deficits and emphasizes what is wrong or abnormal.
Individuals, families, and communities are viewed as the experts and their input is valued.	The professional is the expert on clients’ lives. Input from clients may not be sought.
A client’s strengths, skills, and abilities are resources for the work to be accomplished.	The knowledge and skills of the professional are the resources for the work to be accomplished.
The person’s behavior is viewed as the problem.	The person is viewed as the problem.
Therapy focuses on strength development and on finding one’s place in the family and communities.	Therapy involves reducing symptoms and consequences of problems.

STRENGTHS AND “FLOW”

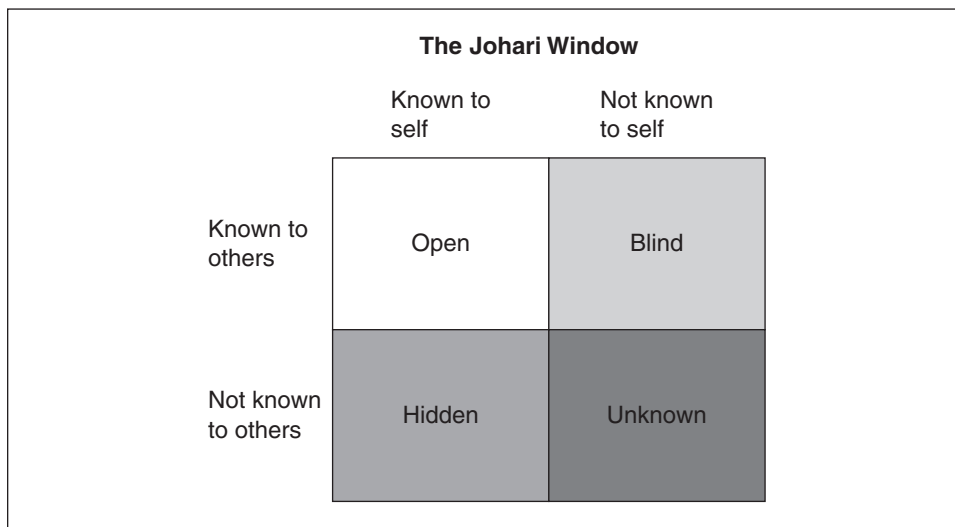
The concept of “strengths flow” has been borrowed from the research on flow, especially the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991). People who are in a state of “flow” achieve a state of consciousness that is in harmony with their surroundings and feelings. Typically, they do not make sharp distinctions between their work and play. When in a state of flow, people experience an inner state of being that brings them peace and fulfillment that is separate from their external environment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). People in a state of flow are focused; they believe that what they do is meaningful and has purpose; and they experience a sense of connection with their inner self and also with others. Both the sense of time and emotional problems appear to dissolve as individuals experience an exhilarating feeling of transcendence. While in flow, people typically feel strong, alert, in effortless control, and at the peak of their abilities. Flow can be increased by setting challenges for ourselves that are neither too difficult nor too simple for our abilities.

What is the connection between flow and strengths? “Flow” takes place only when we use our strengths. It does not occur when we are engaged in performing our weaknesses or limitations. What we experience in flow is the absolute joy of using our strengths. We become engrossed in what we do well rather than in what we do poorly. To increase flow, develop your strengths, for they are the source of flow. The repeated use of our strengths paves the way not only for flow but also for our feelings of happiness. Ultimately, our development and use of our strengths is critical for our sense of happiness and satisfaction with life. Strengths provide the fuel for flow. Without the use of our strengths, there can be no flow.

THE STRENGTHS WINDOW

During strengths-based therapy, clients are introduced to the strengths window, which is based on the earlier Johari Window. Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (1955) created the Johari Window in 1955 to display graphically a model of interpersonal awareness (Luft, 1969). The window consists of four basic quadrants. A four-panel “window” as illustrated below divides an individual’s personal awareness into four different types or panes: (1) open, (2) blind, (3) hidden, and (4) unknown. Quadrant 1 is the *open* quadrant, and it represents things that I know about myself and that you know about me. Quadrant 2 is the *blind* quadrant, and it represents things that you know about me but of which I lack awareness. Quadrant 3 is the *hidden* quadrant, and it contains

Illustration of Johari Window

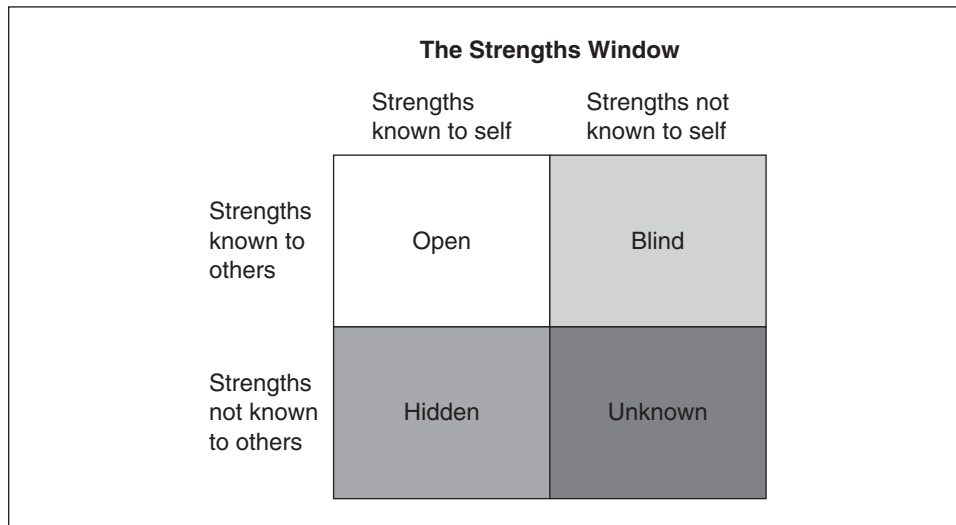


Source: From <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/psy/johari.html>

things that I know about myself; however, you lack knowledge or awareness of these things. Quadrant 4 is the unknown quadrant, and it represents things that neither you nor I know about myself. The process of enlarging the open quadrant involves self-disclosure, a sharing of information between me and another person. A client reveals that he likes sailing, and the therapist also shares that sailing is his favorite sport.

I have modified the Johari Window to conceptualize an individual's awareness of his or her strengths and a therapist's awareness of a client's strengths. The Strengths Window can be used to help conceptualize the communication process in therapy between the client and therapist. Although I have specified therapist, the other individual could be a parent, teacher, partner, colleague, or friend. The strengths discovery process used during therapy can help to open windows for both the client and the therapist. Chapter 4 details strengths-based questions therapist can use to make blind, hidden, and unknown strengths known to therapist and client.

The Strengths Window



Source: © Elsie Jones-Smith.

MANAGING WEAKNESSES

The mantra for strengths-based therapy is to promote strengths and manage weaknesses that may sabotage our strengths. The goal is to learn how to use your strengths to manage your weaknesses. The strengths perspective maintains that spending most of your time in your area of weakness will only improve your weakness to a level of average (Buckingham, 2007). It will not produce excellence. According to Gallup's 30-year research, the highest achievers:

- spend most of their time in their areas of strength
- focus on applying their strengths and managing their weaknesses
- use strengths to overcome obstacles
- invent ways of capitalizing on their strengths in new situations
- have learned to partner with someone to tackle weaknesses

Focusing on weaknesses blocks our goal achievement. Managing our weaknesses includes partnering with others, delegating to others, and developing new techniques to use our strengths in positive ways. We often focus on improving our weaknesses, as if fixing what is weak is actually going to help us to become excellent. Instead of trying to make our weaknesses our strengths, we should bring the area of weakness to one of functional competence. We bring our weak math skills to functional competence, rarely ever to a level of excellence. Weakness fixing generally leads to average performance.

Strengths Reflections

“Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.”

—John R. Wooden,
Basketball Coach, Author

THE PARADOX OF ADVERSITY AND STRENGTHS

Most people will face adversities at some point in their lives. Why do some people stumble or falter in the face of adversity, while others leverage it to reach great success? Very successful people (Oprah Winfrey, Thomas Edison) often attribute their success to the challenges and obstacles that they faced and overcame during their journeys. Such individuals point to sometimes heart-wrenching childhoods that involved sexual abuse or physical abuse and neglect, while others describe the horrific impact of discrimination. Yet few would exchange their difficult journeys for an easier path.

In *The Adversity Paradox: An Unconventional Guide to Achieving Uncommon Business Success* (2009), Barry Griswell and Bob Jennings described the importance of overcoming adversity and how it can actually lead to a person’s success in life. The authors began to wonder why some of the candidates with the flawless resumes and top grade point averages at the best colleges sometimes proved to be disappointing employees, while the candidates who didn’t look so good on paper sometimes turned out to be invaluable employees. The authors concluded:

Strengths Reflections

“Nobody trips over mountains. It is the small pebble that causes you to stumble. Pass all the pebbles in your path and you will find that you have crossed the mountain.” —Unknown

“It was experience in overcoming adversity. . . . With few exceptions, if you compared two people with similar educational backgrounds and work experiences, those who’d demonstrated the ability to overcome adversity had a much better chance of succeeding down the road” (retrieved from <http://www.adversityparadox.com/excerpts.aspx>).

Typically, however, clients do not come to us with their adversities all behind them. In most cases, the challenges that they face send them into a therapy office. Instead of viewing their adversities as strengths-eliciting opportunities, they may feel overwhelmed. A great deal depends on how the therapist helps the client to conceptualize his or her hero’s journey and the dangers, demons, and obstacles along the way.

STRENGTHS-BASED THERAPY AS “BUCKET FILLING”

Tom Rath’s and Donald Clifton’s (father of strengths psychology and grandfather of positive psychology) book (2004) provides an excellent metaphor for viewing strengths-based therapy. In their *New York Times* #1 bestseller book, *How Full Is Your Bucket?*, the authors put forth the theory of the dipper and the bucket. According to them, each person has an invisible bucket that is constantly emptied or filled, depending on what significant others do or say about us. When the bucket is filled with compliments, encouragement, and positive recognition and comments about our strengths, we feel good about ourselves. When the bucket is empty, people tend to lose their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Each of us also has an invisible dipper that we can use to fill other people’s buckets by either saying or doing things to augment their positive emotions. We can fill our own buckets; however, when we use a dipper to dip from others’ buckets by saying or doing things that decrease their positive emotions, we diminish not only them but also ourselves. Bucket dipping also hurts the other person. If you believe that you have a tendency to engage in bucket dipping, try to catch yourself doing it for a week—then stop it. Think about your most recent interactions with a loved one—a parent, child, or partner, or even a work colleague. Did you poke fun at them in a hurtful manner and cover it all up by saying that you were just joking? Did you touch on one of their insecurities, or did you repeatedly take it upon yourself to point out everything that the person did wrong? In contrast, bucket filling involves showing love and respect for others. What would it take to fill the buckets of your family, coworkers, or friends?

The stories of our lives rest in the dynamic interplay between bucket filling and dipping. While some of our buckets are full, others are empty. Rath and Clifton (2004, p. 15) state:

Like the cup that runneth over, a full bucket gives us a positive outlook and renewed energy. Every drop in that bucket makes us stronger and more optimistic.

But an empty bucket poisons our outlook, saps our energy, and undermines our will. That's why every time someone dips from our bucket, it hurts us.

So we face a choice every moment of every day: We can fill one another's buckets, or we can dip from them. It's an important choice—one that profoundly influences our relationships, productivity, health, and happiness.

Strengths-based therapy can be framed in terms of bucket filling, whereas therapy that is deficit or pathology based (emphasis placed on client's "mental disease") tends to be oriented toward bucket dipping. Therapy that is balanced may involve both bucket filling and dipping. Therapists help fill their clients' buckets when they compliment them, honor their struggle, or help them identify strengths.

Strengths-based therapists help clients to examine the types of leaks they have in their buckets. Leaks in a client's bucket are those things that drain him or her both physically and emotionally. Examples of leaks include toxic relationships, addiction, a difficult home life, and conflict on the job. If our bucket leaks cause us to run on empty, we become exhausted and less able to navigate successfully the challenges of everyday life. Rath and Clifton (2004) suggest that people should shed light on what is right about themselves and others. After each interaction with another person, a person should ask himself or herself: "Did I add to or take away from the person's bucket?"

Strengths Reflections

Are you a bucket filler or dipper for yourself and others?

In what ways do you attempt to be a bucket filler for those who are closest to you?

What do you do when you are a bucket dipper for yourself and for others? How full is your bucket right now?

THERAPY, A STRENGTHS-BUILDING ENVIRONMENT

Therapy should create a strengths-building environment for clients rather than one that focuses on their so-called pathology. To achieve this goal, therapists must first recognize and value their clients' strengths. They might also consider constructing experiments that will aid clients in recognizing and appreciating their strengths. Our strengths play a critical role in maintaining or increasing our sense of well-being. When we use our personal strengths in personally satisfying ways, we promote feelings of having a life well lived. Happiness involves the use of our strengths.

The following brief questionnaire is intended to help you decide whether you are burying your talents or strengths or developing them.

STRENGTHS QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: Using a scale of 1 to 5, indicate how often you participate in the described activity or behavior: 1 = not at all; 2 = very infrequently; 3 = sometimes; 4 = most of the time; 5 = daily.

On a scale of 1 to 5, how often do you . . .

1. ____ use your strengths at work?
2. ____ use your strengths in your relationships?
3. ____ focus on your strengths every day?
4. ____ develop your strengths through practice?
5. ____ allow your strengths to play a major role in your life?
6. ____ use your strengths to help you achieve your goals in life?
7. ____ improve your life by focusing on your strengths?
8. ____ use your strength(s) to overcome obstacles?
9. ____ use your strengths to help others?
10. ____ determine how to build on your current strengths?

There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. You can add your total score. If your score is toward the low end of the scale, you may be burying your talents. If your score is toward the high end of the scale, you have implemented Steve Jobs’s commencement message of using your strengths daily to bring happiness to your life and to the lives of others.

SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined the goals of the book and introduced the reader to strengths-based therapy (SBT). A brief overview of the contributory streams for STP was provided. These contributory forces were Donald Clifton (father of strengths psychology), Dennis Saleebey, developer of the strengths perspective in social work, Martin Seligman and positive psychology, solution focused therapy, and narrative therapy.

The Wizard of Oz was used to illustrate core principles of SBT, including the search for hidden strengths within us. A comparison and contrast was provided for strengths-based therapy and pathology-based therapy. Basic concepts in strengths-based

therapy were explored, including a definition of strength, characteristics of strengths, strength categories, strength flow, weakness, and strengths engagement.

STRENGTHS ENGAGEMENT EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Identifying Your Strengths

Strength 1	Goal
Strength 2	Goal

List two strengths you have. You might consider using the partial list of strengths provided below.

State how you have used these two strengths to help you achieve a goal in life.

Spend 3 minutes discussing with the person sitting next to you your two strengths and how they have helped you to achieve your goals or why they are important to you.

The Positive Qualities Checklist © by Elsie Jones-Smith

The table that appears below consists of a number of words that can be used to describe yourself or to identify qualities that you have. You will notice that the words are all positive. This is not an accident. We want to know more about your personal strengths and abilities and this is one way of quickly getting some information.

Please circle as many of the positive qualities as you believe you possess and then repeat this exercise for someone in your family.

Spirited	Loving	Compassionate	Self-Assured
Reflective	Nonjudgmental	Peaceful	Friendly
Thoughtful	Trustworthy	Perceptive	Persistent
Self-controlled	Energetic	Optimistic	Gentle
Caring	Insightful	Honorable	Broad-minded
Idealistic	Accepting	Intuitive	Honest
Brave	Merciful	Committed	Spiritual

(Continued)

(Continued)

Fair	Perceptive	Observant	Adventurous
Reasonable	Ethical	Appreciative	Sociable
Enthusiastic	Hopeful	Responsible	Prudent
Interested	Empathetic	Determined	Courageous
Reliable	Modest	Humble	Tuned In
Questioning	Nurturing	Strong	Grateful
A Leader	Prudent	Mild	Loyal
Tolerant	Careful	Humorous	Confident
Quiet	Kind	Altruistic	Playful
Imaginative	Creative	Curious	Generous
Self-Assured	Self-Reliant	Forgiving	Considerate

Strengths Engagement Exercise 2: Paradox of Adversity

List two adversities that have seriously challenged you in life. The challenges can be related to any part of your life—health, education, family, finances, or relationships.

Adversity 1	Life Challenge
Adversity 2	Life Challenge

On the bottom half of the paper, state how these adversities have helped you to become stronger.

Spend 5 to 7 minutes discussing with the person sitting next to you how each adversity made you stronger and what you learned about yourself.

Adversity 1	How you became stronger
Adversity 2	How you became stronger

What strength did you use to cope with each adversity?

What did you learn about yourself in dealing with each adversity?

Strengths Engagement Exercise 3: Reflections on Core Concepts of Strengths-Based Therapy

What are some of the core concepts of the model that you are most attracted to? Least attracted to? Why?

In your approach to therapy, how might you use the concepts of bucket filling and bucket dipping to work with your clients?

Should the emphasis in therapy be on what's right or what's wrong with a client? Why?

How well do you know your strengths as a person? As a therapist? List three strengths that you have as a therapist.

How does the Strengths Window apply to your life? How might you use the Strengths Window to help your clients discover or identify their strengths?

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