



The Strengths perspective and the Resilience Doughnut
Not just working on what works but working on where it works

by Lyn Worsley
Clinical Psychologist
Director of The Resilience Centre



The Strengths perspective and the Resilience Doughnut
Not just Working or what works but working on where it works

by

Lyn Worsley

Clinical Psychologist

Director of The Resilience Centre

One idea that helps me to maintain my commitment to and curiosity about solution focused and strengths approach work is the value of the process of looking for strengths. The process of looking for strengths uses four valuable components:

1. Thinking and actions that promote optimism
2. Prioritising what is already working
3. A change of perspective
4. Activating helpful resources.

Each of these components alone, are useful therapy techniques. The following chapter will explore each of these one by one and see how looking for strengths is more than just a task or simple set of questions but a dynamic therapeutic intervention that promotes change.

How does the Strength approach use positive thinking?

By initially, exploring the preferred future, people discover the changes they want in their lives. Using the solution focused miracle question and scaling; a framework is provided to acknowledge the smallest change in the positive direction. These changes are a result of strengths either within a person's life or from their relationship with supportive people. The process of finding these strengths opens thinking patterns towards optimism, opportunities and possibilities. Finding strengths also helps to keep people connected and inspired, as their strengths are most often linked to positive intentional relationships. Here are some questions that I find useful to promote positive thinking towards the preferred future,

Who would notice when you have taken the smallest step in the preferred direction?

Who would be on your cheer squad?

When else have you been this creative with your approach to difficulties?

How does the strength approach use prioritising to help build hope?

The process of looking for the most useful strengths involves prioritising which strength is greater than another. This involves thinking through what is working and which is working more than another strength. Here the action and thinking processes involve repetition and rehearsal of what is working in the past, the present and likely to work in the future. It has been shown that repetition and rehearsal are both associated with higher memory retention. (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005). It therefore makes sense to encourage prioritising of strengths in order to activate the memories of positive connections.

I find the use of strength cards here to be valuable, initially by asking a person to select which cards describe their strengths, and putting them into categories of strongest, sometimes strong and occasionally strong. I then ask them to rate the top 4 strengths for each category. This may take some time but the process is wonderful as they argue with themselves as to which is stronger and why.

How does the strength approach activate helpful resources?

Looking for strengths is not about finding extraordinary resources but rather finding what is already working and where it is working. It has been noted that resilience is from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, and in their families and relationships and in their communities" (Masten, 2001).

I constantly reflect on this quote as I work with the many adults, young people and organisation that we see at the Resilience Centre. This profound quote highlights the value of finding where the resources are currently in a person life, and to activate them to be more significant and intentional. So not only do we work on what works but also we work on where it works.

Working on WHERE it works.

Where do you feel most like your real self?

How does the strength approach change someone's perspective?

While the process of looking for strengths moves people towards activating relational resources already present, it also helps them to see the perspective of another person in their life. Most often it is a person who likes them and experiences them at their best. The strength resources can be through activities people or skills from either his or her own experiences or from others, and once these resources are found they can be referred to again. By asking what works and where this works, each person is given access to those who see his or her greatest potential and thereby begin to reflect this in themselves. Therefore the process of finding strengths helps each of us to see our own potential as others may see us.

Who do you feel most at home with?

Whose opinion would you value right now?

So how do I use the strength approach in therapy?

Most often I am presented with a family, parent or teacher who is overwhelmed with the problems they see in the young person in their care. Most often this caring adult will bring the child to me to "fix" them and they tell me what needs fixing by explaining the problem in detail.

So with a strength and solution focused approach, I am faced with two challenges. Firstly to help the young person to have some control over their lives and see their own preferred future and secondly to help the caring adult see they already have the skills they need to help move the young person in the direction of their preferred future.

The second challenge starts with the assumption that the caring adult wants the best for the child, but is overwhelmed with the problem and feels helpless as a result. This helplessness is often communicated to other adults in the form of anger, hostility and disappointment, and the adult seeks to justify the helplessness he or she feels. In other words, the helplessness is contagious, and can render everyone in the system, including the child, feel stuck and disabled.

My job as a therapist is to not catch the helplessness and also become disabled. So I need to gather information from the caring adult in a way that acknowledges their difficulties but enhances their desire for things to be different. Therefore my focus will be on finding what they want to be different. In simple words I need to find what works without being contaminated by the problem.

The main resource for the caring adult is the young person himself, and a helpful resource for the young person is the caring adult. The key to therapy is to activate a process where they communicate the preferred future and become team players toward that preferred future. In this process we juggle egos, expertise, hierarchies, systems, functions and ecological influences. It is not easy but it works.

Example:

Here is a quote from a young man at The Resilience Centre recently, which sparked my commitment and curiosity.

"If mum saw me like grandma does, then she would trust me more?"

From this quote we can make some assumptions. We can assume that grandma is a good resource for him and we can assume that he wants mum to be a good resource as well. We can also assume that he wants to be trusted, and this would be part of his preferred future. Some questions that come from his quote may be the following.

- *So what do you show grandma that you don't show mum?*
- *What could you do to change mum's mind about you?*
- *How did you enlist grandma for advice or support in the past? What do you do now to get her support and trust?*
- *If Grandma was able to tell Mum something about you what would she say?*
- *What would you have to do to prove that what she says is true?*
- *What would be different about mum if she saw you like grandma does?*
- *What would you like about her?*
- *When did you see her like this in the past?*
- *On a scale of 0-10 where 10 is, mum sees you like grandma does and 0, she doesn't? Where is she now??*
- *What do you show Mum at that number? What small thing can you show her to get to the next number on the scale?*

The answers to these questions may help the young man to see what he can do differently to gain the trust he wants from his mother.

From a theoretical perspective, he uses optimistic thinking towards the solutions, rather than being stuck on the problem, and he challenges his perspective of mum owning the problem towards him owing the solution. He also is prompted to activate the resources he has already in the relationship with his grandmother.

How does using a strength approach build resilience?

People who display resilience show they are in a process of sorting, prioritising and ordering their most helpful resources in order to activate recovery, sustain life or grow through trauma or adversity. Resilience is a process, not a fixed state. Ideally the process towards building resilience would use a solution focused and strength approach.

The Resilience Doughnut is a strength-based tool, based on an ecological framework of the resilience process, which uses solution focused techniques to activate existing strong resources in a persons life to help them towards their preferred future. Questions that activate resources to find strengths towards solutions are easy to ask when using the Resilience Doughnut (Worsley, 2006, 2009; Worsley, 2012).

The Resilience Doughnut framework helps find the resources a person has to help them through life. These resources are seen in the everyday ordinary relationships that exist at any point in time. Seven segments of the framework represent the external relationships that may be present to help people sustain, recover and growth through adversity. The seven segments are parent (or partner, for adults), skill, family, education, friends, community and work. To

simply use the Resilience Doughnut to find the strengths in a person's life, you ask them to prioritise which three strengths are higher than others. It can be useful to see if there has been some significant loss of a particular resource, or if there has been some changes to the current strengths. By seeing the changes in the strengths a person is able to activate or strengthen the existing resources to help them build their resilience.

Simple scaling exercises help to work out the relative strengths of each of the factors. For example:

On a scale of 0-10 where 10 is; This strength is the best it can be and everything is going the way you would like it to be, what number would you give this factor? Ask this same question for each of the seven factors and then prioritise them in order of highest to lowest to establish which are the top three strengths.

After sorting, prioritising and discussing the relative strengths of the various factors, each person is asked about how to combine the top three strengths in an action. This action will then contribute to building the persons resilience by connecting their strengths.

One of the exciting aspects of using the Resilience Doughnut framework is through the child and adolescent programs at the Resilience Centre. These programs seek to connect the three areas of strength in a young persons life through a kindness project over the course of five weeks. The kindness project involves doing something kind for another person or organisation while drawing on their strongest factors. The projects don't need to be difficult or exceptional, but take advantage of the everyday, ordinary magic that occurs in the children's lives.

An example of the Resilience Doughnut in action.

After attending one of the group programs at the Resilience Centre, a kindness project selected by Ben aged, 9-years, involved asking a boy at school who was often left out and had no friends, to come home to his house and learn to play handball with his dad and brother. Here Ben would use his three areas of strength, skill factor (handball), parent factor and family factor (his dad and brother). Ben thought this would help the boy to fit into the playground activities at school, which would help him fit in better with friends. So Ben asked him home and taught him the rules of handball and they played together in the driveway of their house for a whole afternoon.

What we didn't know in this process is that this boy had been picking on Ben at school and had been labelled as the "school bully". Ben's parents were taken back when he asked the boy home and were worried about the activity, however for the purpose of the kindness project went along with the activity. The result was a harmonious afternoon play, and a more harmonious school environment for both Ben and the "school bully".

While this appears as a simple project, the implications for Ben were great. The process of linking Ben's three strengths and activating them in a kindness project challenged his thinking and actions toward positive thinking, prioritising what was working, changed his perspective, and activated existing resources in his life.

There are many positive stories that come from the kindness projects by the children and young people who attend the group programs. Each project is unique as each young person has different strengths and processes. The challenge for any therapist, teacher, parent or counsellor has in using a strengths perspective is to enjoy the process and not concentrate on the outcome, as the process is where the value lies.

To conclude, it is not only effective but also stimulating and motivating as a therapist to concentrate on using a strength and solutions approach when working with people. By continually asking what is already working, and drawing on the existing resources a person brings, unique and interesting pathways emerge for each situation. Therapy moves away from a model of the expert “helping another” towards a model of curious collaboration. This curious collaboration sparks thoughts and actions towards positive thinking, aligns and activates helpful resources and challenges each person’s perspective. At times the perspective that is most challenged and changed is the therapist.

References

- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227-238. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227>
- Worsley, L. (2006). *The Resilience Doughnut. The secret of strong kids*. Sydney: Wild and Woolley publications.
- Worsley, L. (2009, January, 2010). The Resilience Doughnut. *The Resilience Doughnut*. Retrieved November 2009, from www.theresiliencedoughnut.com.au
- Worsley, L. (2012). *The Resilience Doughnut. The secret of strong adults*: Griffin Press.
- Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, J. B., & Behrendt, D. E. (2005). Natural Mentoring Relationships. . In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of youth mentoring* (pp. 143-157). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.