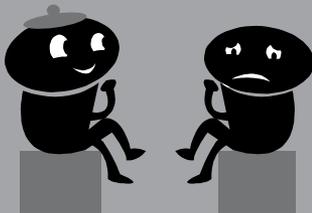


STRENGTHS-BASED COUNSELING: BASIC CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES

By Gustavo Campos



**Strengths-Based Counseling:
Basic Concepts and Techniques**

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My understanding of strengths-based counseling is the cumulative result of my experience working at *El Concilio of San Mateo County* in Burlingame, the *Child Abuse Prevention Council* of Sacramento, the *Adolescent Family Life Program* with Sutter Health, also in Sacramento, and the *California STD/HIV Prevention Training Center* in Oakland, all in California. These organizations believed--and still do--in exercising radical respect for the people they ultimately serve. What could be more strength-based than that?

My intention in putting together this booklet is to capture the essence of the strengths-based approach as I see it, in a way that is not only understood, but also felt, through images and colors. I hope that anyone who provides any kind of counseling or support services can use this book to continue to do the work in total awe of those who have been dealt the more difficult paths, as they are the real teachers and heroes.

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“If you change the way you
look at things, the things
you look at change.”

Wayne Dyer

BASIC CONCEPTS



STRENGTHS

WHAT ARE STRENGTHS?

We all have strengths. We all have the ability to overcome struggles and grow. As we succeed and fail, we learn, and as a result we develop strengths.

Strengths are the qualities or abilities that help a person cope with life and make it more fulfilling for oneself and others; resiliency, a cousin term, is the ability to withstand, recover or adapt in difficult conditions; or recover quickly from illness, trauma, change, or tragedy.

The strengths perspective in social work and counseling --also known as the strengths-based approach--is "a larger view, a paradigmatic shift, rather than a specific technique. It represents a fundamental change in the way we think about those we work with and ourselves." (Blundo, 2009, p.35)

This perspective requires that we radically believe that the people we provide services for have strengths. Only then, we can really reflect those strengths back to the person we are working with, and build a true partnership.





HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

This over-used metaphor is actually an interesting one. The strengths perspective does not focus only on the positive aspects of a person's life, but also on what is challenging or concerning. As strength-based counselors, we *choose* to first focus on what is working well, and then use those strengths to help address what is not.

Being strength-based does not mean simply focusing on positive aspects and ignore concerns, or make up strengths that do not exist. It means figuring out ways to recognize and utilize genuine individual strengths to allow the expansion of existing competencies to effectively address concerns.





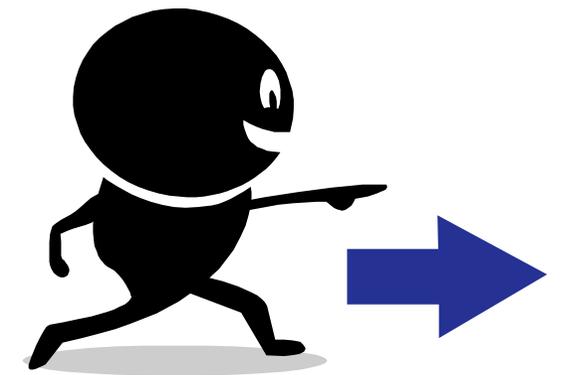
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO ASSUME?

Without buying into the strengths perspective principles, we cannot truly begin the work. Saleebey (2009) summarizes them into six main assumptions that are paraphrased here:

1. Every individual, group, family, and community has strengths.
2. Trauma & abuse, illness & struggle may be injurious, but may also be the sources of challenge and opportunity.
3. Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow & change & take individual, groups & community aspirations seriously.
4. We best serve clients by collaborating with them.
5. Every environment is full of resources.

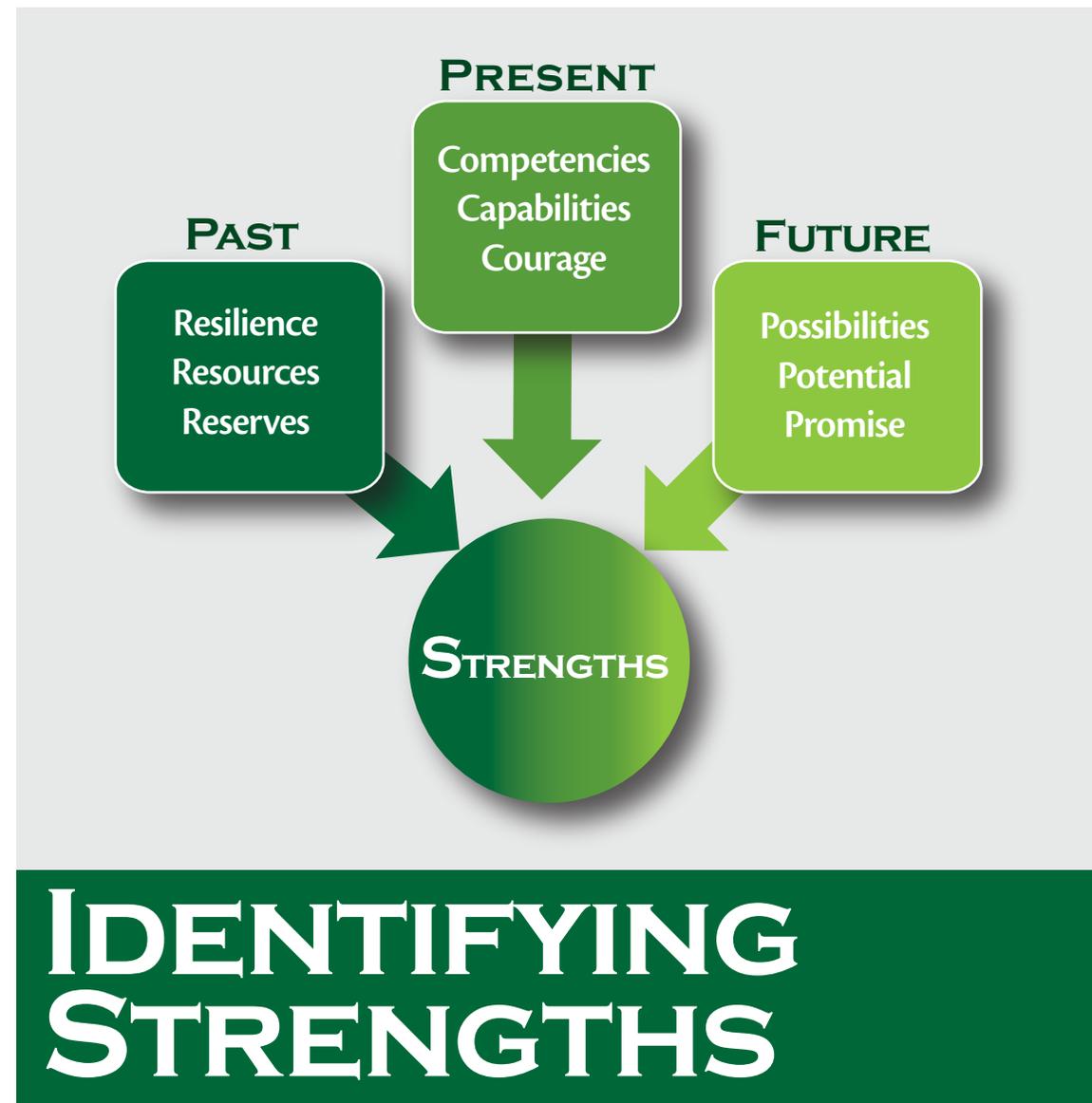
6. Everyone has the right to care for others, and those who need care have the right to receive it; caring for each other is the most basic form of civic participation.



“If all you have is a hammer,
you tend to see every
problem as a nail.”

Abraham Maslow

TECHNIQUES



WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS?

If someone asked you about your strengths, would you have a quick answer? Like most people, you may struggle a bit before you can recognize your own strengths. The people you provide counseling for may struggle even more when you pose this question to them. It is our job as counselors to be able to reflect those strengths back, so that those strengths can be harnessed and applied to current concerns.

Saleebey (2009) describes how strengths can be identified using the letters “R,” “C” and “P”, which stand for resiliency, capabilities, and possibilities, respectively. However, it seems easier to use a chronological framework and think in terms of past, present, and future and still talk about Saleebey’s R, C, and P: a person’s resiliency increases *after* overcoming difficulties, in other words, our resilience is born out of our *past* experiences; the *present*

refers to the capacities and competencies one *currently* has; our hopes and aspirations for a better life constitute our vision for the *future*.

Simply asking someone about his or her strengths usually is not enough to elicit them. Strengths-based social workers and counselors have developed different questions to achieve this purpose. Some questions will look into how a person may have surmounted difficulties in the past, like “*how were you able to do that and still take care of your family? It sounds like your family is really important for you.*” Other questions may address current capabilities or future goals, as we will see in the following pages.





THE PAST: RESILIENCY

THAT WHICH DOESN'T KILL US MAKES US STRONGER

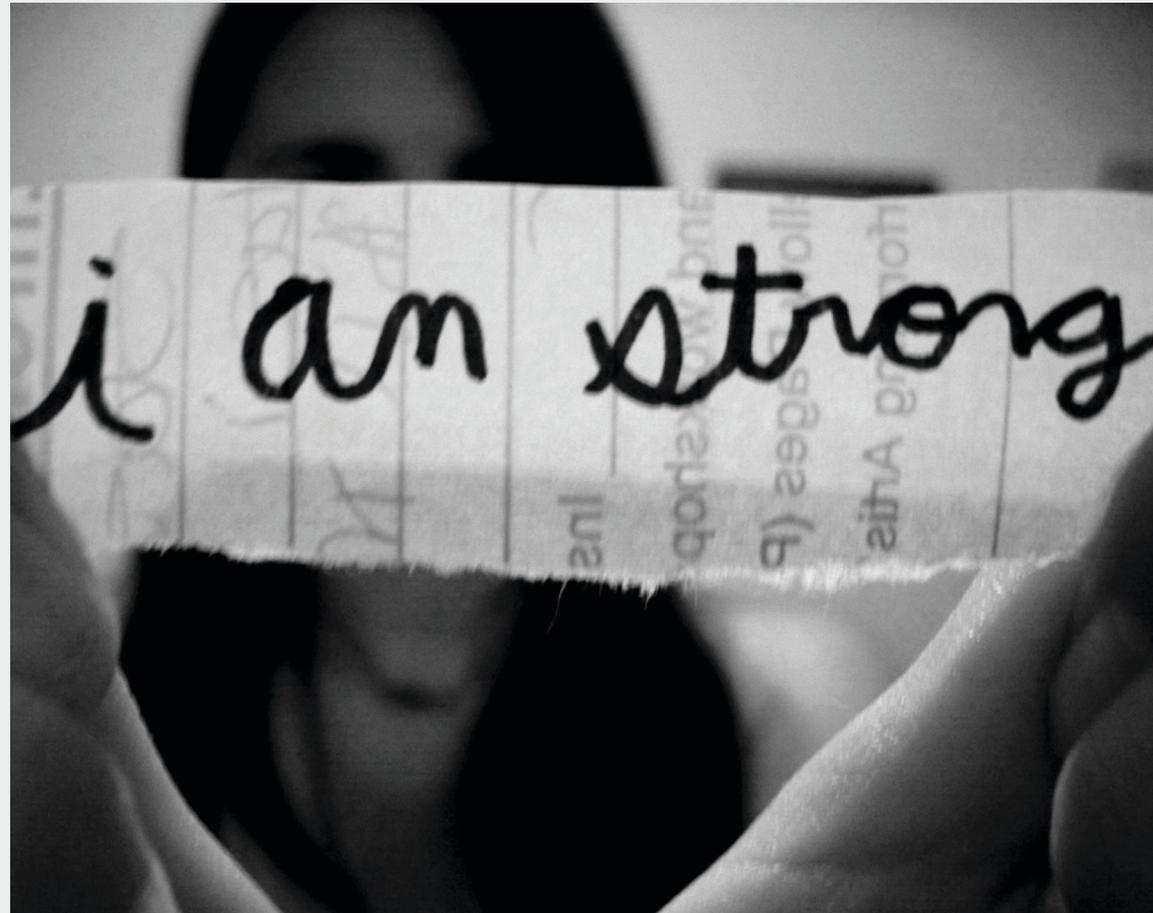
That is what Friedrich Nietzsche once said. In many ways, this statement summarizes the strengths perspective: if people have managed to survive difficult situations, there are strengths that were used to overcome those hindrances. Our task as counselors is to uncover the resources and experiences that the person effectively used in the past, which sometimes may go unnoticed.

Exception-finding questions focus on a time in the person's life where the problem being discussed did not exist. For instance, "tell me about a time in your life when you felt a sense of purpose; what else was going on then?" This type of question uncovers the context and conditions surrounding the person's strength. If the context can be recreated in the present time, then the related strength could be brought back to life.

Other questions address coping abilities and resources utilized:

- *How have you been able to thrive?*
- *What has worked in the past to bring about a better life for yourself?*
- *Which difficulties have given you special strength, insight, or skill?*





THE PRESENT: CAPACITIES

WHO ARE YOU NOW?

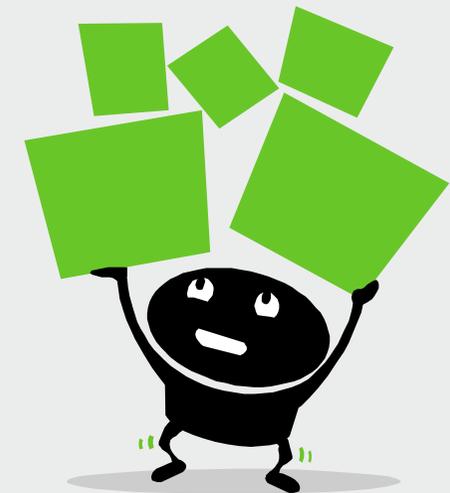
Questions in this category will elicit the capacities, abilities, competencies, values, interpretations and resources, that someone is currently using.

If people have been taught that speaking highly of themselves may be perceived as a sign of arrogance, then talking about their own strengths can feel uncomfortable, and some resistance may come up. Consequently, be prepared to ask about strengths in different ways.

Following are some examples of questions that can help reveal current abilities and motivation:

- *When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say?*
- *What gives you genuine pleasure in life?*
- *What are your most treasured beliefs and values?*
- *Who are the special people on whom you can depend?*

- *What are your ideas or theories about your current situation?*
- *What are you really good at?*
- *What roles do you have in your life? What strengths do you bring to each role?*





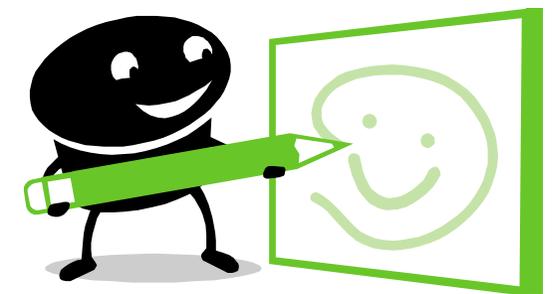
THE FUTURE: POSSIBILITIES

HOPE IS THE DREAM OF A WAKING MAN

For Aristotle, hope and self-knowledge are essential for goals to be formed. The hope of a better future is what intrinsically drives the counseling process. When the conversation about strengths becomes more normalized, then it is the time to explore what lies ahead. Clarifying goals becomes an easier task when we truly know our own powers.

Asking directly about someone's goals may not actually elicit a clear and well-organized response, particularly when one is feeling somewhat lost. Some alternative questions to spark a conversation about goals are:

- *If your life was better, what would tell you that things are better? What would you be doing? Where would you be? Who would be with you at that time?*
- *What are your hopes, visions, and aspirations? How would you like your life to reflect that?*



“Imagination is everything.
It is the preview of life’s
coming attractions.”

Albert Einstein

THE SCALING QUESTION



KEY STEPS

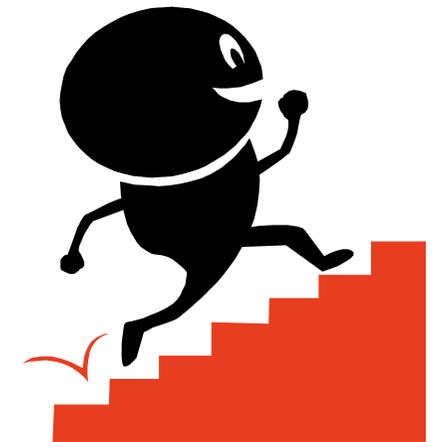
THREE STEPS AND JUMP!

The scaling question deserves a chapter of its own, as it really is the combination of the past, present, and future question types. The purpose of the scaling question is to uncover strengths and clarify goals.

There are three basic steps:

1. **Select a scalable problem.** A scalable problem is a concern that a person has some history with --my health, my relationship with my significant other, my professional life, my sexual behavior, my drug addiction, etc --and it must be broad enough.
2. **Scale the problem and the person's position in the scale.** Simply say, *imagine the problem we are discussing in a scale from zero to ten, where zero is the worse the situation could ever be, and ten is the best things could ever possibly be in regards to this situation. Where in this scale are you now?*

3. **Identify strengths and clarify goals.** This is the core of the scaling question, which is, in reality, a set of questions. The next page describes this third step in detail.



IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND CLARIFYING GOALS

Most people will usually locate themselves at a point higher than zero. Once that happens, we can ask different questions that are meant to reveal strengths, resources, sources of support, desires, and hopes. The following questions reveal strengths and resources used in the past: *What is stopping you from going one point below in the scale? What is the difference between three and four in your scale?*

Other follow-up questions in this step are designed to describe the topic being discussed in detail, so that each part of the scale can provide concrete milestones towards the yet-to-be-defined ultimate goal. For example, if the person said that she or he is at a five, then we can ask what six or seven would look like, and so on. We can even ask if the person had ever been at a higher number than their current position. If that is the case, then we may want to uncover the context of that higher number, and discuss the strengths used at that time. By re-creating that past context, room is provided for those strengths to resurface and be applied to new contexts.



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COUNSELING VIDEO

You can watch a ten-minute booklet companion video of a counselor using the scaling question effectively. The video was created by the author of this booklet, with the collaboration of colleagues. The video can be watched online at:

<http://youtu.be/7fCCOivZ9P8>



The strengths-based approach, or strengths perspective, has been around for years, and often misunderstood as a “Pollyannish” approach by some. In reality, the strengths-based approach aims to bring balance back to the client-counselor relationship by creating a counseling context where true empowerment can take place. Counselors do not empower their clients: clients empower themselves. The the strengths-based counselor simply facilitates that process.

