

## Introduction

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

NEXT SLIDE

As I often do... let's start off with a quote, just to get you into a frame of thinking around this whole idea... this concept... If human beings are perceived as potentials, rather than problems as possessing strengths, instead of weaknesses, as unlimited, rather than unresponsive, then they thrive and grow to their capabilities.

For me, these words really capture the whole concept very well... the whole essence of what this approach is about. And it comes from, you'll see there... Barbara Bush, who is the former first lady in the United States, going back, for those of you who can cast your memories back to the late eighties, early nineties, the matriarch of the, the Bush dynasty.

And I'm desperately trying to not to let politics creep into this... But one other thing for me about this quote is that something positive has clearly come out of that Bush dynasty... probably can't say a lot more beyond that, anyway, let's move on before the Republicans amongst you take offence, where none exists. So, I'm talking about... working with strengths... and that quote really did talk about the shift from thinking about problems... of being unresponsive... and shifting over to this idea that is so much more constructive in its message.

## What is a Strengths Approach?

Following on from that previous quote... here's the first question you should probably be asking.

NEXT SLIDE

What is it about problems? Why even think about making this shift? Well, here's a few thoughts that I put together when I reflect back on the experiences... discussions with people who are receiving services, particularly in mental health services. And I've tried to capture this notion that if we're applying a problems focused approach to people... and bear in mind, that is the majority of the way services are set up because people do have problems... so I don't want you to get the wrong impression... this is not an either or... I'm not anti-problems... but I want to really get into your mind... this need to shift the thinking.

So, what is it about problems? What is a problems-based approach? You'll see from this slide... it is a catalogue of what you aren't doing. You can't do. You haven't done, and you should be doing... That's in the present tense...

If we think back historically, it also adds on this detail of all the other times, you weren't doing what you should have been doing... And then if we project this problem's approach into the future, the focus will be on getting you to do the things that you should be doing, but actually you may not even want to do. So, you get this impression that the whole idea of assessment with people... it's about trying to identify all the periods of time and sources of deficit, difficulty, things that have gone wrong for them. Everything that's not in place, not coping, not working well at the moment... and in the future to be aware of all these problems and hurdles that are likely to be there. If we repeat our same patterns again.

And I found myself, in mental health services in particular... saying to people... if you weren't depressed at the point when you met with a practitioner... you certainly should be by the end of that assessment... because it will focus your attention entirely on... you at your worst. So, that alone is only going to build up a very limited picture of me, of you, of anybody.... It is not the whole picture of us...

NEXT SLIDE

So, what is the strengths approach? It is ultimately challenging what I would suggest is a negative focus that emerges from the way I've just described a problems-orientated approach... Just solely focusing on the negative... is not going to inspire a great deal of hope and confidence in people. So, we want to challenge that in some way... we want to work with it, but we don't want it to dominate everything that is in our thinking, and in our approach to people, in our response to people... our response to this whole idea of trying to take a risk... how are you going to do that if all you can see is problems?

The strengths approach recognizes that whoever you are... myself, yourself... whoever you're working with... Everybody has talents. Everybody has abilities, interests, achievements, capabilities, wants, dreams and wishes... all those positive characteristics of us... and at certain stages in our lives... and for certain people... these are not that obvious. It takes a lot of digging to try and find them. But for the vast majority of us, this is who we are... this is the essence of us as people... So as a result, it's very much a person-centred way of thinking... It's a person-centred way of working. It's really getting to the essence of people and drawing from them, and drawing from us ourselves, when we're applying this to ourselves... this sense of what can inspire hope, the sense that we can move on and achieve.

NEXT SLIDE

It's that light bulb moment... not always, but there's a good description in a way, or good capture in an image, that the strengths approach is about those hope inspired moments. When that light bulb comes on... characteristics about who we are and our abilities, recognizing those, puts us into the picture that's demonstrated by that image.

NEXT SLIDE

Staying with this question in a way, what is a strengths approach? Well, it's a process. It's not a one-off event... it's continually happening. We should be continually listening and learning, listening to ourselves, listening to the person that we're working with, person that we're focused on... listening to the client. If you're running a business, who are your clients? Who are your customers? How are you going to identify what's their resources, what's their strengths, what's their desires, what their wishes are? Well, it's a continuous listening so that we do learn those cues... that we're focusing on. What's important for them, both now in the current situation, but we all always want to be helping people to reflect on a future, a desired future. What is it that's important to them? What would they like to achieve? However grand that might be... it's still important that we have those dreams... and that we can focus our attention, focus our approach, on helping people step by step, towards moving, towards achieving those dreams...

As for this whole issue of resources... it's acting in alliance with people, with the resources within them and around them... including their family and friends. So, from a perspective of being a practitioner working in health or social care, and the types of disabilities encountered... it is seeing the ability in the person, but also seeing those resources around the person, the supports that they have, that they can rely on. So, we're supporting people to develop their real personal resources, focusing and tapping into their own resourcefulness. It's not necessarily that we hold all of the answers.

You bring me the problem. I'll give you the solution. It doesn't work as simplistically as that... it's far more nuanced, far more layered, far more complex... life is far more complex than that. And if we're focusing on this word resources... which I think is crucial, when we think of strengths, think of it as always being about resources... those are the things that can open up opportunities. So, it's about thinking... what are the options? What are the risks we could take? Well, the opportunities open up when we're aware of the resources we've got. Opportunities in themselves will give us confidence. We know that we've got resources to take on the challenge. We can take that risk. We can really move forward with this confidence... that we could achieve our desired wishes... and that confidence then breeds success and achievement.

This becomes a self-fulfilling circle, in a sense, that inspires more hope, more resourcefulness. So, in the whole the what... the why... the where... the when, the how... well, where is everywhere, when is all the time. And that those will be touched on in some of the other resources in this module... but I've been focusing more detail on the what... Now, I'll shift on to the why... and then the how of the strengths approach.

NEXT SLIDE

So why focus on this particular type of approach? Why don't we just focus on problems as they present, and just focus in on what the problem is telling us? Well, we should be focused more on strengths, largely, and simply, you'll see in this first point... because we don't do it with people or even with ourselves anywhere as much as we think we do, or we believe with do. And this is also a statement born out of my experience for many, many years, talking with people who felt they did work in this way... but it didn't take much in

terms of inquiry and observation to see that for the majority of people, it is quite a superficial, positive layer or veneer to their work. Whereas a strengths approach is very much more of an in-depth, thorough way of thinking. And I'll come on later to say, that it's a default way of thinking... If we truly want to develop an individual's potential... then we must resist what would be our natural tendencies... to focus on things that people themselves are less able to change, or that they see as less of a priority for themselves.

And that again is a danger... when we focus on our description of people as being problems, and we then try to encourage change... our tendency is to want to change those problems, and help them in that way. It doesn't necessarily mean that we're focused on what the person sees for themselves, or what the person sees as their own priority. And again, it will be difficult to take a risk if we're working on parallel tram lines that are quite apart.

If we're not on the same line... if we work in two slightly different directions even... that's not going to help.

NEXT SLIDE

What about this image? We're looking to transform ourselves, our situations, our circumstances... By and large, if we're thinking about taking risks, it's because we want to change today into a new looking tomorrow... There's some kind of transformation from this kind of puzzle... that's where we're at in the moment... but we want to get to that light bulb moment... when everything does become more clear, more illuminated.

NEXT SLIDE

And again, staying with that question... why focus attention on strengths approach? Well, it provides the basis for developing trust and engagement... and positive change. And those are important characteristics for people working within health and social care services, but even depending on the type of business that you might own and run, or field you're working in... it is about trust and engagement of employees, trusting engagement of clients or customers... being able to offer a good sense of the positive change that could emerge through things like positive risk taking. Well, this kind of approach will offer the basis to engage that trust with people. And it also helps us to make this quite simple choice... either we focus entirely on our problems or the deficits of the people we're working with... and if we're focused on them at their worst, at that basement level, then by tackling what is at the lowest level, we might be able to apply resources that lift the person up a few levels. So, we might come from very poor standards to a mediocre level.

Whereas if we focus in on the strengths and the abilities... what people can do... what they want to... what's giving them some sense of joy... that is more likely to motivate them. Then the likelihood is that we're already starting at a level for ourselves, or for that person, that is mediocre or above already... And we're focusing attention now, so we can lift mediocre up towards excellence.

And that will tie in very much with the earlier slide... when I was asking you to think in terms of confidence, opportunities, resources, levels of excellence. If we can achieve that, that's what is the success, the achievement that reinforces the whole resourcefulness.

NEXT SLIDE

The next question is... who's strengths are we talking about? Am I referring to myself, yourself, people, customers that you're working with? Well, it's an approach that can apply, and should apply, across the culture of let's say a whole organization... whatever business you're involved in. It's not something that we're thinking of applying just to one or two people. It's not a sticking plaster because one or two people have been identified as being problems themselves.

So again, depending on where you work, what you do, it could be that you're focused on developing the strengths of individual service users, patients, clients... in terms of the business that you run the clients, the customers of the business. But we should also constantly be aware of who the others are around that individual. So, who are the informal carers, who are the family members, who are the other supports... not just seeing them as strengths, but how do we tap in and support and amplify their strengths as well?

We should also then be thinking about ourselves... if we're in a position of being a practitioner or an employee within a business or the business owner, then it is about focusing on our strengths. What is it that we bring to the picture, to the venture?

And then there's the need to work in teams... by and large, we don't work in isolation. We could be in a very defined team, or we could be part of groups of people that come together, and form a team around a particular issue, a particular question, that particular person... and how do we identify and work with the strengths of that collective... the group of people functioning long-term or short-term as a team.

And likewise... thinking of a strengths approach as applied to the whole organization... and how that would be supported, underpinned driven by policy that reflect this way of thinking, and reflects how the organization develops... or by bringing in the appropriate practical tools that help to develop this whole way of working with strengths.

In summary... who does it apply to? All of us!

NEXT SLIDE

As I draw this particular presentation to a close, I would like to ask you to take a few moments to honestly reflect on how much of this content is actually playing out for you, presently, and for the team & organisation that you may be a part of.

You will also see two pdf documents are linked to this content... a strengths checklist, and a set of strengths-specific principles. I ask that you read both of these documents and use them as a basis for you, &/or your team's, reflections on changes you can implement to increase the level of a strengths approach in your work.

## Historical Context & Evidence Base

I just want to spend a brief period of your time reflecting on the historical context of, and evidence base for this approach... This should not just be seen as an important consideration for those of you who are more academically minded... it's important for any self-respecting worker to be aware of what underpins what it is they are putting into practice... where does it come from? How do we know it works?

NEXT SLIDE

So, in terms of thinking about strengths... the most significant work is being undertaken by the Gallup organization, which is based in the United States... maybe you've heard of Gallup polls, particularly in a political context... However, as an organization, it has a global reach... and it's been focused on strengths... the role strengths play... in a whole range of different types of businesses... thinking about what influences organizational development, leadership and management on a global scale. This has included a detailed analysis of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, economically as well as organisationally.

The focus on strengths research dates back to the 1970's... how strengths are identified and utilised... and I'll refer back to it again in later slides in other parts of this module...

From the perspective of mental health services in particular... the personal strengths model of case management was developed in the early 1980s, 1981, 82 from the University of Kansas... by social workers, led by Professor Charlie Rapp and his colleagues... It was Charlie and colleagues coming over to the UK in 1991 that was the big light bulb moment for me... introducing me to this whole idea... and how I could reflect on the degrees to which I was doing it in practice... in reality. I recognized that, even as an occupational therapist/case manager at the time, I was only delivering on this approach at a relatively superficial level... and learned how I could embed it much more deeply into everything I was doing... from client contact to staff development. So, my message to any occupational therapists who believe they are fully functioning in this method of practice is... think again... you will have plenty of room to develop it more. As OT's, we are still heavily invested in searching out problems, and consequently being drawn into a problem-orientated frame of mind.... Operating from a strengths approach as a default position is something else altogether.

In the mid-eighties, we see this concept of person-centred planning emerging... particularly for learning disability services. And again, the underpinning notions for this as an approach... as a way of working with a particular client group... is focused very much on the positives... the abilities, the capabilities of people.

Then as we moved towards the late eighties, Patricia Deegan in particular, is referenced and acknowledged for developing the concept of recovery... This has been picked up in mental health services in particular, and certainly became a blueprint for UK mental health services.

Common themes are emerging throughout each of the developments outlined on this slide... firstly, they each originated in the United States... and secondly, they each focus in on

the uniqueness of the individual. That's the important thing... we may be in the business of developing services for masses of people... but we must never lose sight of the uniqueness of the individual... and how we focus on their wishes, and their aspirations.

NEXT SLIDE

The academics amongst you will be asking... where's the evidence base. It's all well and good talking about working with strengths... but give us some evidence to work with as well.

In terms of Professor Charlie Rapp in the United States... going back to the early eighties in the University of Kansas... This was one of several models of case management that began emerging in the late seventies and early eighties... as an approach to de-institutionalization, as asylums are closing down and community services are emerging to replace them. And it quickly became one of the leading models of community mental health service across the United States in the following decade or so... with a result that now, there is a substantial amount of research conducted by Charlie Rapp and other colleagues.

They have focussed quite specifically on measuring levels of engagement... because, by and large, this was developed as a model to engage people who were struggling with the more traditional forms of service... and levels of engagement, both in the United States and in the subsequent UK services, have achieved very highly on this characteristic. So, a model that people who otherwise would disengage from services have found very much more amenable and they could connect with.

And then it's also about breaking down individual goals, personal goals, working with people's wishes, aspirations, but seeing the grand scheme of things, but bringing that back to very practical issues that we have to deal with today and tomorrow next week, next month on the journey towards achieving those big goals.

There's also plenty of research on the United States literature that focuses on the high levels of achievement of personal goals through this particular model.

Moving out of health and social care back to the Gallup organization... particularly focussing on worldwide business strengths research... What we find, for example, across 1999 - 2001 in the Gallup literature... you'll see that there was a database of 2.4 million items... largely made up of interviews with the great managers around the world. What do they know? What do they do? And again, I'll come back to some of those messages in a later presentation in this module... By 2007, it has been reported that this database was in excessive 10 million items... massively boosted because of the online questionnaires. The strength finder tool is a very specific one. That's helped to boost that database. The number of people, myself included having completed it on three occasions across 15 years... I can testify to its consistency and its validity because on each occasion, most of my top five strengths remain pretty much the same (Maximiser... Achiever... Responsibility... Focus... Self Assurance).

## A Strengths Approach in Practice

How is this approach applied in practice?

NEXT SLIDE

At a superficial level, we're often asking people how are you coping... what do you want to do? And that's as good a starting point as any... Those are important messages... rather than just getting straight on in with the... how are you not coping... and what are you struggling with, or unable to do? This represents a shift... a shift in language... a shift in terminology... which is an important shift, and shouldn't be underestimated in terms of how these different questions are received and experienced.

But it's not enough... if we're talking about a strengths approach... I'm talking about something very much more, very much more detailed. This is very much about who we are, a personal attitude, it's a value base... How much do we reflect and think about why we're doing the work we're doing... how we go about doing that work. How we think about the service users, the clients, the customers that we're working with... And again, I emphasize this is about applying values and principles, but in a real sense, not just thinking of those as academic terminology belonging to a different person, not me... I'm challenging you to really think about how you respond to situations, and people, and challenges... Do we all-too-easily get drawn into those negatives and those cliches?

Or can we stand back, and ultimately see another point here... that I referred to earlier as thinking strengths as a default... So even though somebody might be presenting to you as a problem... or with a problem... there's something about this being deeply ingrained in us... embedded in us... if we're recognizing the problem, but instantly becoming alert to... aware of... and inquiring about... the potential for strengths in and around the person and the situation... this is what I mean by it becoming a default position... Not something that you'll come back and revisit just once in a while when you have time.

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

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

NEXT SLIDE [IMAGE]

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

NEXT SLIDE

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

And if you look at the resources... and I hope you will... within this module... there is a strengths assessment, as well as a strengths-based support plan, and guidance. It's very minimal amounts of paperwork, which is there to guide and reflect on what you're doing in practice. It's not there to become the be all and end all. It's not your priority there just to fill in paperwork. It literally is the minimum... and I will outline those in detail in the next part of this module.

It's there to underpin and support what you're doing... because, ultimately, we're remembering... and this goes for risk as well as for strengths equally... that reality is dynamic... It's constantly changing. So, the documents, the paperwork that we would be using also needs, as best as possible, to capture and reflect that change... that dynamism. But there is the dilemma... It could never be an exact replica of real life... life is dynamic, and with the best will in the world... paperwork is a static picture... So, the design needs to be something that is minimal and manageable, if we are to update it on a regular basis.

NEXT SLIDE

Again, staying with the question about 'how'... it's about using the client's resources... I say clients... but of course that term will change depending on what field of work you're involved in, and what term suits who you serve, the best... whether it's in health or social care, or any other business... it's primarily about working with what is in and around the person... So, I'm repeating some of these messages... because they're well worth repeating... because they're important messages... working with what are essentially the resources that the person has themselves... or has close to themselves... Such as carers or family members, for example... friends may also help you access who the client is... help you to understand who the person is.

Let's take a classic example of dementia... where somebody perhaps in a more advanced state, is not so able to really give you that clear and honest picture of what's going on... any true reflections of their strengths... That's not to say they won't be able to, or they can't to

some degree, in some level... even it's more through your own observations... But we could well be looking at resources around the person... such as family members... who might be able to help to build up that picture... But again, they might be seeing just all the negatives that go with something like dementia, if I'm using this as my example... So, it's up to us... as the external person... to prompt, to guide people, to be thinking more about the person when they were younger in a different before the, or let's say, in the early onset of an illness or a condition... and help to build up a picture of what they look like, what they did, what was important to them in an earlier stage in their life... And you'll see as an approach, it can be good for getting to know who the person really is, beneath the dementia condition... bearing in mind issues of confidentiality, of course.

Dementia is a good example... particularly if we're minded to be aware of more recent service developments around the concept of, or initiatives for, building dementia friendly communities. In this instance... we can be thinking more widely... like the shopkeepers, the neighbours, the GP, the pharmacists, housing staff, and even specific members of the general public, in these types of forward-thinking initiatives. It becomes very important to have prompts as to how we can tap into resources around people... People need that kind of help... and we need to build it. If I remind you again... when we're thinking of strengths, we're thinking of resources... and those strengths and resources could lie within so many other people in the local neighbourhood.

We're ultimately trying to pick up on... what's the person good at, what are their strengths?

NEXT SLIDE

These are the kind of questions that we want to be continually referring to... It represents some change. So yeah, changing what, what change... we're in a world of constant change. So, what's this about? Well, I'm going to suggest to you, as you'll see from this slide... appreciating the focus on strengths involves... how it relates to service users... how it relates to staff members or employees in your organization... how it relates to the whole organization itself... It should be an approach applied equally at all levels... but it's a shift in thinking... the culture of thinking to get people and organizations thinking in this this way... which would tap in very much to one of the many messages from the Gallup organization... about how all of the most successful businesses in the world will have adopted, to a greater extent this way of thinking... this culture... this approach.

But it's also changing the focus on the tools that we're using... So, we need to develop the appropriate tools to prompt this kind of positive practice... We need to shift the focus from just training people, to developing people... and having the tools there to develop people... And again, you'll see some of that in the resources that are within this module... And thinking about how building up using those tools... we build up that picture of strengths... that picture of resources... that can then support us in taking the risk... putting positive risk-taking into real practice, with confidence... And in the world of measurement. Is it working? Can we create more evidence around each individual situation? Well, measuring that which has meaning for people, not measuring what the systems want to gain... this isn't about churning stuff out for the great world of audit... with a narrow and misdirected focus on just keeping auditors happy... We need to focus in on what is important to individual people.

And if we're going to support them to make change that's important to them... How do we measure that change? Well, we're gonna have to shift the targets... change the whole notion of expectations around measurement of what we're doing... That again, contributes to a very significant shift in the culture of thinking.

NEXT SLIDE [IMAGE]

It's summed up in this image, to an extent... it's shooting for the moon, occasionally... And again, I think in terms of that grand scheme, that grand design, that grand wish, that I, or you or anybody might have for themselves personally... it's also that grand wish about shifting the culture of thinking for the organization, that sometimes, I have to say, from my experience, working in alongside organizations and teams... does feel like quite often, we need to give ourselves collective permission to just try to shoot for the moon... Just once in a while... you might get there.

NEXT SLIDE

Change is something we resist... so why make the change... Well, positive risk-taking, with an understanding of personal strengths... supports that sharper focus on the needs of the individual... I refer to needs... but it could more importantly be the wishes of the individual, the dreams of the individual... So, we need to make the change if we're really gonna implement positive risk, taking with confidence. And again, as with all of the other modules across this whole course... it's about having that sharp focus on the person... for the person... supporting the person... because you'll see there... we all have dreams, have wishes... and taking a risk is often a prerequisite to actually achieving those dreams, those wishes. And there's a word of caution or phrase, of course, at the end... you deny anyone that opportunity to take risks, particularly for the positive gains and the dreams and wishes... then what you're likely to do is just raise the stakes... the danger is, that we might create more of the risk, by inadvertently depriving people from taking the risk.

NEXT SLIDE

Why take a risk? Well change is often accompanied by fear and anxiety... It's always easier to talk about this than it is to do it... So, talking the talk, many people can do that, but what is it about walking the walk?

And I, again, have to emphasize walking the walk, in positive risk taking... has to be underpinned by a strengths approach... I hope the messages beginning to come over here, that... we're talking resources... resources, boosting confidence. It's about this hopefulness that we're trying to instil for people... and their experience and their connection with us. In our business, whatever that may be... what are we offering staff in the organization, or as your employees... how do we help them to experience a more hopeful way of working? And certainly, I would always argue that the strengths approach and the focus on positive risk-taking raises hope... and it can generate a much more positive feeling in people about the work that they're doing... This raises the question about why take the risks for the organization... what expectations do they hold within themselves as senior managers, and of their employees, of their customers... and for their customers and clients.

There are a whole lot of reasons, why, at these different levels, again, why we should be taking a risk... but doing it from a strengths perspective.

NEXT SLIDE [EXERCISE]

Reflect back on the content of this presentation, and make your notes on how you're currently applying a strengths approach in practice... and thoughts about what you, and your colleagues, can change... in order to implement it in a deeper way. Also take a look at the pdf document 'interviewing for client's strengths'... to prompt different ways in which you might think of eliciting some of this information from the people you're working with.

In the next presentation, I'm going to focus in more detail on the tools I've just been referring to.

### **Strengths Tools & Teamwork**

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

NEXT SLIDE

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

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

Being equitable at all levels of working... we should also be reflecting on the strengths of the systems that we are developing and putting into practice... and the strengths of the organization itself. What is working well? What levels of communication work well? What types of management work well? The connections between different parts of the organization that work well? Well... perhaps it's human nature... but it's very easy to focus in

on the things that go wrong... In doing so... we always have to remember... in the wider context of risk... that they are the rare events... the vast majority of things go right... whether by accident or design... and, it's incumbent on us to spend more time reflecting on why things go right... and actually seeing the strengths in what it is we're doing.

NEXT SLIDE

So, staying with some of those tools... the strengths assessment itself is a way of building up this positive picture over time... It's a process, not an event... not a one-off in order to just get it done quickly. It builds up over time... gathers together different sources and types of information... but it's also a brief tool... so it's only about capturing specific words or very brief phrases... And it's okay to have gaps in the information... If you've got a form version of this... it's not about... so, why have you got a gap? Because it's a process... you will fill in gaps as and when relevant information emerges... Visibly, it's important that the tool you'd be using acts as a good prompt... to help you to inquire into areas that maybe we're not so aware of, in terms of where strengths exist... either historically, currently, or in terms of future wishes... You can then use an update sheet between different reviews.

You can come back and reflect, review, at periods of time whenever you've determined that that it's appropriate to review the whole picture... but in between time, we can just be capturing particular observations, additional strengths as they emerge, and record them on the structure of the strengths assessment itself.

If we look at how it's laid out... there is a right-hand column that will focus on the future priorities. There may well be loads and loads of things that a person wants to achieve... but we can only work on a few at any one time... sometimes only one or two at any one time... But it's still important to be aware of all of the future wishes they hold, in different aspects of a person's life... So, if they do want to accumulate lots of wishes for change... and what their future might look like... let's record that picture... but then help the person to prioritize which areas they're going to work on first... That way it becomes this idea of a dynamic working document... And as the assessments building up, it will also dynamically link in with emerging plans. Check out the Strengths Assessment tool, and supporting guidance, as additional resources within this module.

NEXT SLIDE

So yeah, we also have something I call strengths-based support plans... Another one of the tools that you'll see in the resources in this module, complete with guidance notes... The important message here, is that, each individual plan should link to a priority established at the end of the strengths assessment.

So again, bits of paper, or electronic versions, that link together... so that they become working dynamic documents. It provides prompts to develop the details of that plan... It enables you to document progress against the stages of that plan... but I'm not inviting you... through these kinds of tools... to spend all your time writing, and just be focused on a screen or on a piece of paper.

So, the significant bits of progress towards achieving whatever the overall plan is... lots of other stuff can be captured in other places... depending on what system you work with, and depending on what business you're working in... So, you might have other ways of capturing daily notes, daily reflections, or contacts... that doesn't all go on to the strengths documents... these strengths-based plans or the strengths assessment. There will be other space where you want to capture, if you need to capture, all of those other nitty gritty details, as required by your work and your organisation... Ultimately what you do document on the formats is your judgment call, but there is guidance that goes with that.

NEXT SLIDE

The tools in this particular module... coming back to the idea of not just applying this to clients, to service users... but to apply it to staff as well... For example, thinking about how we focus in on working with people around appraisal or through supervision? How do we ensure that the systems I mentioned earlier... will reflect on the strengths of the systems? Well, it's a strength-oriented system if it really does help us with our employees, or supervisees, to focus in on what they are interested in... personally or professionally... How do we help them to identify those desires, those wishes, those important things to them in terms of the nature of the work that they do... How can we support staff to learn from each other? We have these cliched phrases about learning the lessons... developing a culture of learning... Well, a strengths approach is genuinely interested in the detail, on the ground... what's happening for people... How do we do that? By really focusing on the practical level... And some of these tools are there to do that... to support us, to learn from each other... focus on each other... particularly through seeing the complementary strengths across the team.

What are the strengths of individual people when they're dealing with clients, or when they're in communication with other staff... and how can I make use of those... if I'm observing strengths in others... and whether it's appropriate, that's a first decision... if it's appropriate for me to adopt, or have I got the skill and the capability and the personal qualities to take on those strengths... It's about being aware of the strengths in others... and seeing how we can learn from them... Ultimately, it's about giving people time to talk, to reflect together, as well as reflect separately... and this importance of reflection... which has got lost in so many of the pressures imposed in a more bureaucratic world... but is so vitally important to retain and prioritise... It becomes very short-sighted to aim at just hitting targets for administration... and not allowing people time to really focus and think and reflect... it's a cliché in itself, but it's true, that if we spend that time in the short term, we will save so much more time in the long-term.

NEXT SLIDE

Staying with the idea of teams... this is a way that I've captured developing strengths within a group... particularly a group of assertive outreach teams in the UK... through work that I was doing between 2001 and about 2011... in a range of different teams... I actually published an article which captures seven of these projects... but there were also three other teams, in different cities, and rural areas, around the UK... or around England in particular.

But I also looked at a whole range of other teams where I'd been involved... perhaps not at the in-depth development stage... but certainly focused around training to do with strengths... And I did this... this isn't published research as such... this is more my way of describing different teams... about different levels of strengths working or acknowledging awareness within teams... What I see, is that the majority of teams, are what I would call strengths acknowledging teams... And what that means is, that when I raise a specific focus around strengths... they will acknowledge that that's an important thing to do... But there will be very little evidence that it is actually happening in practice... So, in a discussion, I may say... I think working with people's strengths is very important, because they're all parts of resources... And if that's the very first time somebody has heard that message, then the likelihood is they'll say, yeah, of course it is... Yeah, I think that's very important... But if we do question that a little bit further... we'll find that they might acknowledge the point, but they're not doing it much in practice...

If we go to the next level... they are strengths aware teams... and this is where training has taken place... From my observations... training has been a resource that is useful for raising awareness more than anything else... so, in this instance they become strengths aware teams... This means that they go beyond just a brief acknowledgement... and there's an understanding that, because the training has helped to identify the what, the where, the why, the background, the evidence... there's now a very significant level of thinking... that, in these kinds of teams, we should be doing this... we should be putting this into practice.

And there might even be an attempt by some members of the team, in following a training event... but it doesn't really translate into practice that well... it gets consumed by all the other day-to-day demands that are put on the team... So, for true strengths working teams... it has to go beyond training... and there needs to be attention to detail... and that can only happen in the workplace... And that's why my approach from 2001, for many years, was around practice development... the practice based evidence name... it's how do we get in alongside and support people to make the change? And then when they make the change... using the tools, and using the structures, and using the strengths of these systems in the organization... how do you get people to remain focused on strengths... working with a strengths default position... not allowing it to slip away, when other demands and other crises take over?

This slide provides my description of how I've observed strengths ways of thinking and working to happen within teams... the vast majority are strengths acknowledging... there are trained teams that become strengths aware... and there are very few teams, because it does take far more attention... that would be strengths working teams.

NEXT SLIDE [QUOTE]

Let's go back to another strengths quote, just for a moment... Mattie Stepanek, a US poet... Mattie says that... unity is strength... when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.

That's a very good reason why we need to focus on the teams, the teamwork... bringing people together... seeing strengths in a wider picture... not just something one individual worker does with one individual person.

NEXT SLIDE [IMAGE]

And here's an image that reflects that really well... Teamwork in action... There you go... I like that image. That really is one of teamwork. Strength in collaboration gives a much stronger, confident picture.

NEXT SLIDE [EXERCISE]

As I draw this presentation to a close, I want you to spend time looking at the tools and guidance provided in this module... the Strengths Assessment... the Strengths-based support plans... the staff strengths assessment... and the team strengths assessment.

How will you incorporate these into your working practice? Also, discuss as a team how you intend using these tools to help achieve strengths as a default way of working.

### **Organisational Context**

Then... let's take a few moments to think about organizations... the organization level where strengths ways of working is happening... or not happening.

NEXT SLIDE

And this takes me back to the Gallup organization, and thinking about their research.... Some of the many messages that have emerged are captured in the next few slides.

Here, they identified where organizations fail... And there are two flawed assumptions that they found in an awful lot of organizations, that really are not using a strengths approach. Firstly, that each person can learn to be competent in almost anything they do... There's a fabulous example of that within UK mental health services... as much as I believe in care coordination... because as a case manager... working with people with acquired brain injury, I coordinate complex packages of care... and it's a very skilled approach... it's an area of work I love... but there's a danger that's been seen over the years within UK mental health services, where, ultimately, everybody becomes care coordinator... Everybody does the basic mediocre same approach to their work... or at least, this is the way it's widely perceived... And, to a greater extent, I would say, this is the way it's experienced as well.

Within those organizations... they also fall into this other flaw.... that each person's greatest room for growth is in their greatest areas of weakness... We find what you're no good at... and we send you off on some training... where you find what you're no good at, and we focus a lot of resources trying to lift you from being rubbish, to being somewhere near mediocre.

Now, the flip side... what the Gallup organization found is that strengths-based organizations make the opposite two assumptions consistently... What emerged is that each person's talents are seen as unique and enduring in these more strengths focused organizations... Again, it's not that everybody's going to end up being the same and competent to do anything... no, it's really trying to focus in on each and every one's individual and unique talents.

And then the other assumption is that the greatest room of growth or for growth is in the areas of greatest strength... So, identify what people are good at... focus resources on that, because you already have high levels of motivation... and the idea is that we can teach people to go from good to being excellent... and that's got quite a strong attraction to it. And, that again, is what the Gallup organization have found consistently comes out of all of those very successful organizations... that they really do not ignore problems and weaknesses... but they put the very minimum of resources into those, at least to stop them bringing down the other achievements... and then focus much more attention and resources into what people are already good at... that they want to develop further... those unique endurance elements, which gets the most for them, and out of them. It's a classic win-win situation.

NEXT SLIDE

Again, staying with the Gallup organization and the great managers... having interviewed millions of them... There are consistent messages that again, emerged through the Gallup literature... The great managers are careful to look for talent in every role... So going back to those earlier assumptions on the previous slide... everybody has unique talents... The great manager knows that, and looks for those in each individual... focus people's performance on outcomes rather than overprescribing the process. Giving people a sense of where you want them to be, where you want them to be going to... and then not micromanaging them... If you've identified their talents and put them into the right place... it should be further down the slide, but it's important here... then let people flourish... They will find their way to those outcomes. The manager's job is to give them enough confidence and motivation to help them to find their own way to those outcomes... to be creative... to be flexible... The great managers treat each employee differently... they focus on their strengths... so it's not about seeing that everybody has been equally competent to do just about everything... each person is responded to differently.

The idea of supervision... the outcome of appraisal is not that everybody gets the same form, and everything ticked in the same way... It's nothing to do with completing forms... It's that everybody gets their own unique approach, that connects with their unique individuality... Great managers spend most of the time with their best people... They don't spend all that time at the weakest link... evidence shows time is best used when it is focused with the best people... to motivate them... so that the greatness emerges, and in itself can inspire others around them... Some people lift their own performance by what they see happening through others, and in others around them... success can become contagious.

I emphasize what I said earlier... weaknesses should not be thought of as the bottom level of the deck of cards... which, if we ignore them, the point comes when it collapses and the

whole deck comes down... but we also do not just focus all of our attention on the things that went wrong... the weaker people. The priority is to be aware of the weaknesses, and provide the support needed to shore them up... but we need to look at our unique people, and find the right fit for them as individuals. If we're thinking of them individually, thinking of them as people, as unique talent... it's how do we best maximize that talent within the overall framework of what the organization and the job's about?

NEXT SLIDE

What do the great managers know? We've looked at what they do, but what do they know? They know that people don't change that much... That's an important message. So, I could spend all this time in the world... throwing resources at people... but the great managers know not to waste a lot of resources trying to just take off those rough edges... That's not going to result in massive amounts of change.

And, as it says on this second point... don't waste time trying to put in what was left out... try to draw out what was left in... So again, the message is focused on the strengths... develop those... don't look for the weaknesses and try to fill holes that we don't even have enough resource material to fill.

The greatest indicator of success is when a person can answer yes to a range of questions they identify in their research... and you can find these in a pdf document in the resources in this module 'Strengths in the Workplace'... The most important question, from their research is... If any of us can say that at work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day? If I can answer yes to that... That's the greatest indicator of success for me as a person developing my strengths, and ultimately for the team, and the organization.

So that's an important question to always focus on at work... Do I, or do we, have the opportunities to do what I, or we, do best every day? It assumes we know what we do best... So that comes back to the discovering those natural talents... and then focusing on those... draw those out, help people to really work on those, and use those every day.

Another message from the Gallup research is... if you're not working to your strengths, you are six times less likely to be engaged in your job and actively enjoying your job.

NEXT SLIDE [REFERENCE]

There is a very recent Gallup publication that captures many of the messages I'm putting across in this, and the previous presentation.

NEXT SLIDE[QUOTE]

This brings me to another strengths quote... from Tom Rath... Who's an author working within the Gallup organization... StrengthsFinder 2.0 in particular, comes to mind... Tom reminds us that... if you spend your life trying to be good at everything... you'll never be great at anything.... There is something about the mediocre... being good and everything... is

not as satisfying as... knowing, feeling, experiencing and delivering something great... something that's focused.

NEXT SLIDE

It does take the shift of think... a message I hope is coming through in this presentation... A problems approach assumes that each person's greatest room for growth is in their greatest area for weakness... Whereas, a strengths approach assumes each person's greatest room for growth is in their areas of greatest strength... It's important to repeat that message, we need to shift that thinking... it's not a training issue... You can throw training at people... We can raise awareness, but are we really getting the most out of people? We need to access the appropriate tools, and the development that offers support... practice development has been the most important mantra for me... that is where I've seen the greatest amount of change in people... that's what has really brought about an impact for teams... change in teams.

NEXT SLIDE [EXERCISE]

Reflect back on the messages in this presentation. How does your organisation and management measure up to the significant Gallup research findings? How do you match up to the questions in the pdf document 'Strengths in the Workplace?' What can you and your colleagues try to develop from these messages into your practice?

### **Strengths & Recovery**

I now would like to spend a few moments reflecting on the concept of recovery... and how it connects with a strengths approach... I mentioned in a previous presentation that this is another idea emerging from the US, but it became widely adopted in UK services more recently.

NEXT SLIDE

Are these the same thing? Here are a couple of messages to consider.... Rachel Perkins from the UK says that... everyone's recovery is a different and deeply personal journey...

Throughout the recovery literature, worldwide literature, you will see that reference to it being about supporting people to tell a story... about inspiring hope... and about the personal journey... Patricia Deegan in the United States says that... recovery is the lived experience of people as they accept and overcome the challenge of the disability... lived experience being a key phrase... accept and overcoming... it's not about cure. It is much more about, I would say, focusing on what we can do with it... that's overcoming the challenge of disability and getting more focused on the ability.

So, my message there is... if recovery is a journey... a strengths approach provides the vehicle... It provides the details of the possible routes that may be taken... Strengths forms the practical, the day-to-day nitty gritty... The strengths approach is what delivers... whereas recovery to me, is an overarching phrase... it's an overarching approach... I'm more

interested in, what do you do day to day, rather than talking in bigger generalizations, perhaps.

NEXT SLIDE

Developing personal recovery is about helping the person tell their story, in their own time, in their own language... That equally goes for a strengths assessment.

Appropriate tools... well with recovery there are wellness & recovery action plans, wrap plans... which have been developed in the US, and are known variously in different parts of the UK... I would say alongside those, or to me more importantly, the strengths assessment is the tool that helps to build this picture... it helps the person capture that story... We're looking at rebuilding a life following devastating life-changing events.

And certainly, from my perspective, working as a case manager with people with acquired brain injury, we're looking at people where it is totally life changing devastation... but it's how do we focus in with people, to help them rebuild a life, a life that is a positive life, a life of strengths... It's finding a new sense of self... including a new sense in response to an illness or disability or a major problem.

Clearly, I'm talking here from that health care, and social care perspective... and some of you might be working from a very different point of view, that's not focused on this particular line... Well, again, whether it's ourselves, if we're thinking about ourselves in the field within which we are working... it's a question of how do we use this kind of approach to help the people we're serving to identify for themselves... their meaning... their purpose, within the context of our work... And these are elements that are important to have time, and effort, and resources devoted to them... because the payback from a motivated, clearer individual is massive.

NEXT SLIDE [QUOTE]

Another quote... Steven Pressfield, US author... all of us need to begin to think in terms of our inner strengths, our resilience and resourcefulness, our capacity to adapt and to rely upon ourselves and our families... So, there's another one, that kind of captures some of the messages across the overall presentation about working with strengths.

NEXT SLIDE [IMAGE]

It's finding that key to unlock the real us... who we're really about... what makes up the essence of who each and every one of us are... as unique individuals.

NEXT SLIDE

This is an idea I've used in presentations many years back... just thought I'd throw it in, as we're drawing to a close in this presentation... strengths is the ability to break a chocolate bar into four pieces... and then just eat one of those pieces... and that was something from the internet... I can't remember the source, but I added to it... bringing hope and strengths

together... Hope is believing that the other three pieces will still be there tomorrow... Do with that slide as you wish.

NEXT SLIDE [MY BOOK]

This has been based on the textbook that I published back in 2014... working with strengths and all of the messages about the Gallup organization... and all of the tools I've been referring to are widely developed in there in this particular book... I particularly focus your attention on that message or title working with strengths. That's the title of the module as well, because it's one thing to identify and develop the strengths assessment... develop the picture... but it's what we do with that picture is far more important.

NEXT SLIDE [EXERCISE]

Check out the pdf resource Recovery and a Strengths Approach for further reflections and summarising the messages in this presentation.

CONCLUDING MODULE VIDEO

We're not doing this just to have a nice picture that we can put in a frame on the wall. We're doing this because it's about resources. And we're applying this to the whole thinking of positive risk taking because in order to feel confident in taking a risk, as we've already identified in this overall program, we need to have that positive outcome, the clear picture,

taking the risk for the positive outcome. And then the confidence to make that leap of faith will come from the resources and the resources are the strengths, the capabilities, the abilities, the people around us, as well as what we have that will help us to make that leap, not leap of faith. And you will see in other resources in this particular module,

the practical tools to help you thinking about the kind of questions that identify strengths, information, the tools themselves in terms of strengths, assessment, and strengths-based plans, guidance on using those and have also looked at the tools that I use in terms of individual and teamwork in reflection that gets us focused on pulling strength, some positive risk taken together. So, with that,

I'll thank you for your time and energy, staying with me and enjoy the rest of the module.