

Strengths-Based Principles

- Groucho Marx is attributed the quote *“Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them... well I have others.”*
- The ‘Fayette Forward’ blog defines attributes of character, which serve as guides to behaviour in different roles: *“A principle is a positive attribute that serves as the foundation for the conduct of behavior individually with others. Principles are qualities that most people support, because they are viewed as socially appropriate and inherently valuable.”*

The strengths approach is guided by a set of principles that are designed to shape practice and promote a more balanced focus on strengths as well as problems. They were first developed by Charlie Rapp and colleagues at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare from 1982. Our values and principles will also be important guides when we approach the task of implementing a positive risk-taking approach. The following are a UK adaptation based on the work of Steve Morgan (*Practice Based Evidence*).

Principle 1: The focus of the helping process is upon a person’s strengths (i.e. abilities, achievements, personal qualities, interests, capabilities, motivations, wants, dreams, wishes and aspirations) not upon their deficits, weaknesses or problems.

‘Strengths’ and ‘problems’ are not to be seen strictly as an either/or option; the statement of principle refers to the focus shifting, not a shutting up of the shop and decamping to the other side.

Principle 2: Everyone has the capacity to learn from their experiences, to grow through new knowledge, and to make the changes they determine to be important in their lives.

This principle instills a belief that change is inevitable, that everyone regardless of their condition and experiences has the urge to better themselves in some way, to succeed in the things that are important to them, to explore the world around them in pursuit of new knowledge, and that most people want to make themselves of some use to others close to them. As a principle it is of equal importance and relevance to staff providing services as it is for people in a position of needing to use services, and is fundamental to the consideration of positive risk-taking.

Principle 3: Positive change occurs within a context of authentic relationships... engaging trusting working relationships is the key to effective support.

In a pressured system that requires increasing expectations to be met efficiently within finite resources it is easy to become distanced from the reality of the complexity of human interactions, and to set targets that have more meaning for bureaucratic systems than they do for real people with

needs and wants. People need to know that someone really cares about their circumstances, and will be there for them to guide and support them to the point where they are able to resume greater autonomy. The quality of the relationship is crucial to working effectively together and is underpinned by mutual self disclosure further developing the sense of trust.

Principle 4: The individual is viewed as the director of their own helping process, enabled through appropriate information to exercise choice through making informed decisions.

The idea of the person being the director of the helping process can seem controversial on face value, particularly when we are talking about the difference between someone who is experiencing difficulties and someone else who is trained to assess and manage difficulties. The real challenge is for more practitioners to shift their thinking about the concept of expertise... rather than playing the role of professional expert, it becomes a recognition of the person being an expert of their own experience supported by the practitioner whose expertise is more in terms of facilitating than directing.

Principle 5: Continuity and acceptance reinforces hope, and ensures that identified goals and plans belong to the individual and reflect their wishes and priorities.

We all experience frustration when we are seeking an answer but are being passed from one person in a service to another. The need to constantly repeat your story to different people can be particularly galling, and leave you with the feeling that you are playing an acting role in the film Groundhog Day. Accepting people for who they are through being non-judgmental is an admirable goal, but in reality none of us can be completely non-judgmental. The specific challenge to practitioners is to be aware of their own value judgments, how they may impact on their work and trusting relationships, and how they then manage that impact.

Principle 6: The local neighbourhood is viewed as a source of potential resources rather than as an obstacle... natural neighbourhood resources should be considered before the more segregated facilities developed by services.

Whilst we might often hear a discussion within a team where staff members recommend a good resource somewhere in the geographical area, the more frequent feeling about local communities is about the barriers they are more likely to present. The challenge is not just to attend to the strengths of the individual, but also to focus on building the relationships and identifying the strengths of the local environment.