RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Strengths based practice

The strengths perspective comes from social work, mental health and disability work (Dunst et al., 1988; Scott & O'Neill, 1996). It is about respectful practice and listening to what rangatahi tell us about their experiences.

Before we can be of use to rangatahi, we need to understand where the positive resources are in their lives. This means learning about:

- HOW THEY COPE AND MANAGE DIFFICULT LIVES
- HOW THEY DEFINE THEIR CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES
- WHO THE IMPORTANT PEOPLE ARE TO THEM

Our mahi is helpful when it adds to the natural ways of coping rangatahi have developed for themselves, and when it includes the things and people rangatahi see as most important. Sometimes we will spot their coping skills and their strengths in behaviours that other people might say are destructive or unhelpful. Using strengths ideas, though, we can see these behaviours as the things this rangatahi has needed to do to protect themselves and survive. While we might not agree with their actions or behaviours, we can see that they might be the best strategies they could use to keep themselves safe at the time.

Using strengths ideas, we might feel humbled by everything the rangatahi has had to do. We might feel amazed at how they have managed so far. Humility (see Humility PARTH in practice reflection sheet) helps us to look for strengths when rangatahi need support. One way to do this is to ask ourselves; 'if I was in this person's shoes would I make the same choices to keep myself safe and to get through each day as they have?'

Naming what has worked in the past, is a simple, practical approach to seeing strengths. This way rangatahi can see the positive parts of their lives and their actions and remember them when they need to take action in the future to protect themselves or make big decisions. Supporting rangatahi to reflect on what they have achieved, despite the circumstances, helps build trusting relationships where rangatahi feel respected. This provides a strong foundation for supporting rangatahi to engage in positive change and imagine different futures (see Positive youth development).

While we try to find the strengths and abilities of rangatahi, this does not mean we ignore risks or excuse poor choices and behaviours. A strengths perspective is about understanding why these actions were taken and about honestly spotting the risks. Once we understand the 'why' behind rangatahi behaviours, we can have courageous conversations with rangatahi about how they might start to change these things.

What is the evidence?

Building strong positive relationships has the biggest impact on change (Saleebey, 2006). This is why strengths ideas work well with RBP. Strong relationships are like scaffolding; they help make it feel safe for rangatahi to try to make big changes.
In the disability field, the fact that people did not 'get better' meant that kaimahi needed to help whānau to creatively and positively live with the disability. To do this kaimahi had to see and harness all the resources around their clients and their natural networks (Munford & Sanders 1999; Scott & O'Neil 1996).

This was important because until strengths ideas were developed, people with disabilities had been defined as the problem. Strengths ideas changed the focus to the natural capacities of people to grow, change and develop. It also changed the focus to creating environments and networks that support full participation in the life of the community. Interventions then focused on supporting these capacities and believing in the possibility of development (Saleebey 1997, 301). Success means kaimahi make spaces for clients to use their own resources and extend these resources, strengthening cultural and social networks in the process (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999, 433).

Strengths ideas are helpful in work with vulnerable rangatahi. They cannot change when the people around them define them as problems, failures, unmotivated, delinquent, or dangerous. Strengths mahi builds on the need we all have to feel competent, to have hope, and be given positive support to change.

Research evidence suggests that working on specific and more easily solvable problems first (such as supporting rangatahi to complete a C.V.) is a good way to start. This helps build confidence to tackle bigger challenges later (Berry, Cash & Brook, 2000; Kinney, Haapala & Booth, 1991; Lewis 1991a; 1991b). Feeling successful and skilful bolsters rangatahi confidence to keep on working on bigger challenges. Often the skills we need to solve small problems can also be used with these bigger challenges (Berg 1994; Friesen & Wahlers, 1993; Kinney, Haapala & Booth, 1991). Feeling judged as not good enough gets in the way of change. But seeing early success has the opposite effect – it provides a base for bigger challenges. Scott and O'Neil note a good place to start when working with a client is by:

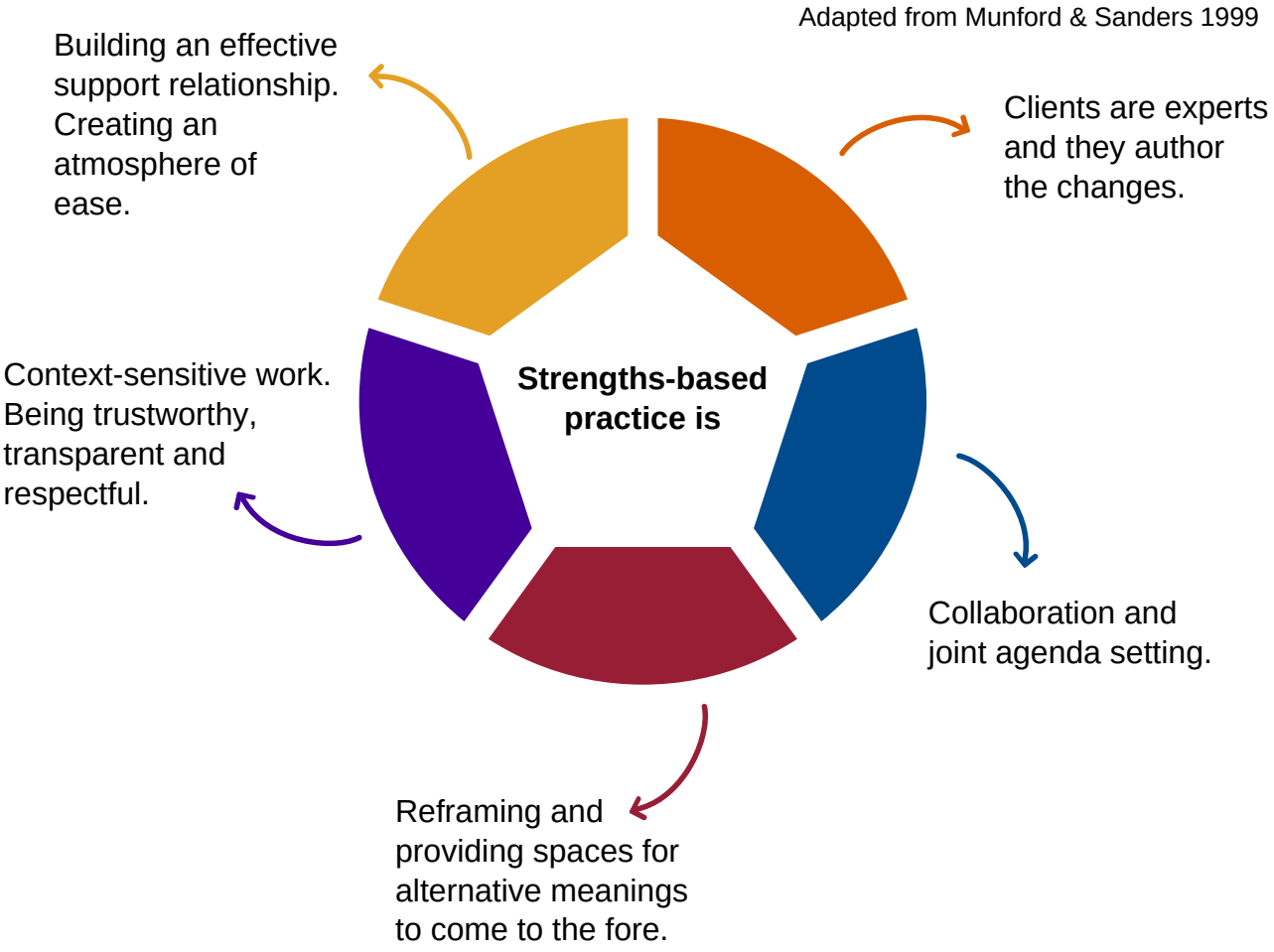
> "preferring to (define) actions as resourceful and useful rather than as annoying, manipulative, or passive- aggressive. A simple - but profound - change in basic standpoint; a different set of underlying assumptions about the people with whom we work."

What does the strengths perspective mean for our mahi?

The strengths perspective is a way of thinking about how to relate and respond to rangatahi. We start by listening to them, rather than defining what should be done and how the mahi should progress. It is not just about seeing everything in rosy terms and ignoring the hard stuff (Healy, 2000). Listening in a non-judgmental way to rangatahi stories about their life and their 'back story' is an important first step. Time should be given to this and the process should go at the pace that suits the rangatahi (see The importance of time).

The words we use to talk about rangatahi and the mahi is a way of checking we are using strengths ideas. By using the words rangatahi use to define and explain their situation we can show we have heard them, and we understand them. It also helps us to start to think about how life looks to them. This helps us suggest solutions that might work for them. Telling rangatahi when we see strengths and resourcefulness in them and acknowledging this (even when we disagree with their choices), helps us show them that we can see beyond the negative labels that others have given them.

Adapted from Munford & Sanders 1999



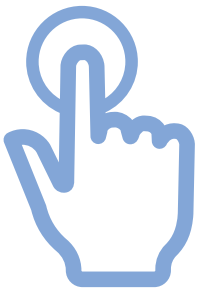
These are important in strengths thinking

Finding ways to show that we are trustworthy, and that we believe the rangatahi wants to and can change, are critical. We can do this by listening carefully to what they tell us. In this listening we can try to spot things that can be dealt with easily and early on. This helps build rangatahi confidence that change is possible, that we have heard and will work alongside the rangatahi to make change (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007).

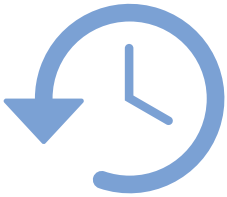
RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Having careful conversations that create hope are important. When the situation feels overwhelming we remind ourselves that if there was no hope the rangatahi would not be seeking our support. Help seeking is a sign of hope and energy for change (Kirk & Griffith 2004; Palmer 1996; Pierpont & McGinty 2004).

Seeing rangatahi as the expert, as the change-maker and working at their pace means:



We may feel the situation is chaotic and dangerous. That it is urgent that change happens now. But long-term change doesn't happen in a panic. Effective change happens when rangatahi get to do this themselves. Changes need to be chosen by rangatahi as they need to own them. It is difficult to achieve a change that is not relevant.



Rangatahi know what has worked for them in the past, and what has not. They know their own history best. We need to know this information. When we approach with a sense of respect for their knowledge, they are more likely to show us their skills.

We do not have to live with the consequences of the changes. This means we have to support rangatahi to do the hard work, we can provide resources and a safe space to practice change. We support rangatahi to bring other people into the change process, such as their whānau. These are the people who will stay with rangatahi once we leave.

Rangatahi have always been active experts and skilled copers. Sometimes they have been called manipulators or resisters. Strengths ideas help us understand their knowledge and to use it in our work. This means we do not have to be right all the time or to pretend that we have all the answers.

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

HOW DO I USE THESE IDEAS IN MY MAHI?

This example shows a kaimahi using PARTH and Tōu Ake Mana to build confidence to trust the process of supporting rangatahi to find their voice and draw on their strengths, and also of the importance of involving the supportive others around rangatahi in the process.

I work in an organisation that works with young people dealing with care and protection issues. Many of the young people I work with have been involved with our organisation for a long time. Their experiences with other services have left them with little confidence that kaimahi can be trusted. This is something I want to change and ensure that the young people I work with have a positive experience. PARTH and Tōu Ake Mana provided a platform for this to occur by reminding me to constantly build on strengths. When utilising a strengths-based approach, as kaimahi we need to genuinely believe in the ability of young people as experts in their lives. They have to want rangatahi to utilise their mana motuhake. We need to support rangatahi to feel good about themselves. This can sometimes push kaimahi out of their comfort zone.

One of my major learnings was to trust myself “let go and let rangatahi take lead”. In order to build trust. I had to be honest and ‘have the hard discussions’. This can be done by letting them know what was happening, “it’s about the good, the bad and the difficult”. I needed to be pono, true to my word – listen to them, let them know their rights, let them know the consequences, let them see you take action, follow through with what you say.

One particular rangatahi that I was working with had some big decisions to make. She told me that she already knew what was coming and that no one would trust her or even hear her suggestions. This was my opportunity to hear her opinion. We ended up unpacking all of her suggestions and came up with a really great plan for her. She said she felt empowered that someone believed in her. There were some challenging parts to the discussion but I had made a commitment to be honest with her, so everything was on the table. We called in her support network which consisted of her two best friends and her aunty. It was important that I also built a relationship with her whānau and friends circle. Part of our plan included me catching up with her weekly. A couple of times she missed our visits, but I knew I had to show up every time I said I would. This rangatahi began working on her goals and started to slowly reconnect with her whānau.

Utilising a strengths-based approach enables me to identify:

1. Who and what are the positive resources in their lives.
2. What are their coping strategies.
3. Who is important in their decisions.
4. What strategies have worked in the past.

Here are some places to look for more information

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