

Introduction

It may sound cliché, but . . . children and adolescents are so important to the future success and health of our world. They will be the parents, teachers, physicians, psychologists, policy makers, and world leaders of tomorrow. The future well-being of families and communities depends on the healthy psychological development of youth. Unfortunately, exposure to environmental stressors and biological, genetic factors can place youth at greater risk of developing behaviors that are destructive to themselves, their families, and their community. These youth are *not* beyond help.

Over the past three decades, I have been working with at-risk children, adolescents, and their families in a variety of settings, including schools, outpatient youth service agencies, an inpatient hospital, and residential and correctional programs. My past jobs have included direct care staff, tutor, therapist, school psychological consultant, psychologist, and clinical director. Through these experiences, I have had many opportunities to observe, participate, and learn about what works and does not work with children and youth. The use of a strengths-based approach is without question the most effective tool I have found for providing services that truly have a positive impact. The purpose of this book is to provide information about the many strengths-based concepts and interventions that can be employed in mental health and educational settings that serve youth and their families.

Defining a Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach (SBA) focuses on the identification, creation, and reinforcement of strengths and resources within individuals, their families, and their communities. It is an approach that focuses attention on what is right with youth rather than what is wrong with them.

Defining At-Risk Youth

The term *at-risk youth* is used throughout this book and describes children and adolescents who have been exposed to various types of environmental stressors (i.e., prenatal and perinatal problems; physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; neglect; chronic poverty;

loss due to death or abandonment; parental substance abuse or psychopathology) and/or have biological, genetic risk factors (i.e., family history of psychological disorders) that place them at higher risk of negative life outcomes. At-risk youth often struggle with behaviors that are destructive to themselves and others. These behaviors include truancy, running away, noncompliance toward authority figures, physical/sexual aggression, theft, destruction of property, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors, eating disorders, social withdrawal, depressed or dysregulated mood, and excessive fears and anxieties. The term *at-risk youth* also includes youth who are currently functioning well but are at increased risk of developing problems in the future. Although the term is an accurate description for the youth described in this book, it is also accurate to classify these youth as *at-promise*. They all have the capacity to develop into healthy, well-adjusted adults.

Organization of the Book

This book consists of 14 chapters, subdivided into two main sections, and a conclusion. Part 1, “Overview of a Strengths-Based Approach” contains the first seven chapters, which provide an overview and highlight the benefits of a strengths-based approach. Chapter 1, “Strengths-Based Approach: What, When, How, Where, Why?” provides information about what a strengths-based approach is, when and how it has evolved, where it is being utilized, and why it is important for working effectively with at-risk youth. Chapter 2, “Evidence-Based Support,” describes a wide array of empirically supported strengths-based concepts and interventions. Chapter 3, “Thinking Back to Childhood Experiences” focuses on the importance of providers’ remembering what it is like to be a kid when working with youth. Chapter 4, “Holistic Perspective: Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention,” highlights the importance of viewing at-risk youth as much more than their problems and directing services toward prevention, assessment, and intervention that encompass strengths and resources that impact healthy development. Chapter 5, “Promoting Resiliency in Youth,” offers information about protective factors commonly associated with resiliency that can enhance a youth’s capacity to overcome adversity and develop into a prosocial adult. Chapter 6, “Motivating and Engaging Youth,” provides information about human motivation and how to engage youth in educational and mental health services. Chapter 7, “Enhancing Youths’ Openness and Honesty” provides information regarding the when and how of effectively addressing youths’ problem behaviors and personal struggles.

Part 2 of the book, “Strengths-Based Interventions” includes chapters 8 through 14. Chapter 8, “Strengths-Based Interventions: An Overview” provides an introduction to the strengths-based interventions, which are broken down into six categories. Chapters 9 through 14 elaborate on each of the six categories. Chapter 9, “Relationship Development,” highlights strategies for forming positive relationships with youth and their families. Chapter 10, “Optimistic Attitude Development,” discusses interventions

that promote hope within youth, caregivers, and providers. Chapter 11, “Asset Development,” highlights several interventions that emphasize youth assets/strengths. Chapter 12, “Prosocial Development,” provides specific information for helping youth develop prosocial skills. Chapter 13, “Intellectual Development,” focuses on strengthening intellectual development as it relates to learning and acquisition of skills, as well as on the promotion of multiple intelligences, including emotional intelligence. Chapter 14, “Provider Development,” offers information about the healthy professional and personal development of teachers, mental health professionals, and other youth service providers.

The book’s conclusion, “Final Thoughts About a Strengths-Based Approach,” offers summary remarks about SBA and its importance within youth services.

Intended Audience

The target audience for this book is youth service providers from many disciplines who work with youth and families. The term *provider* is used to describe mental health therapists, teachers, psychologists, psychiatrists, direct care residential staff, caseworkers, probation and parole officers, judges, attorneys, police officers, and anybody else who works with youth. The term *provider* is also intended to represent the many courageous caregivers who provide love and support to at-risk youth on a daily basis. Much of the book’s content is relevant for caregivers.

This book is also intended for those who will soon be providers in the youth service field. This includes undergraduate and graduate level students who are pursuing careers in counseling/clinical psychology, social work, education, sociology, criminal justice, marriage and family, school psychology, and other human service professions.

Goals of the Book

Goal 1: To enhance interest in and knowledge about a strengths-based approach

The strengths-based approach is the underlying foundation for all the interventions described throughout the book. It is hoped that the content will assist youth service providers in better understanding and implementing a strengths-based approach in treatment and educational settings.

Goal 2: To promote hope and optimism about at-risk youth

Much of the developmental and neurological research, statistics, and case examples described in this book highlight the incredible capacity youth possess to develop into prosocial adults. The content will remind providers about the many reasons to remain hopeful about at-risk youth.

Goal 3: To provide a toolbox of strengths-based interventions

Although having a theoretical understanding of a strengths-based approach is important, the primary purpose of this book is to provide a multitude of specific, concrete interventions that providers can utilize in their day-to-day work with youth. Clinical case examples, treatment metaphors, and life examples are described throughout the book to illustrate strengths-based interventions.

Goal 4: To energize providers about the valuable work they do every day

Working with at-risk youth can be emotionally taxing. Exposure to issues of abuse, trauma, depression, anxiety, and various types of disruptive behaviors can increase a provider's risk of becoming pessimistic and overly focused on problems and deficits. This is a recipe not only for ineffective services but also for occupational burnout. The content of this book highlights how vital youth service providers are to the healthy development of youth and how important it is to maintain an optimistic, strengths-based perspective.

In order to ensure the anonymity and protect the privacy of the resilient youth and families described in this book, names and other identifying information have been modified.

TABLE 2 Strengths-Based Interventions

Category 1: Relationship Development

- SBI-1** Establish Positive Relationships with Youth
- SBI-2** Establish Positive Relationships with Youths' Significant Others

Category 2: Optimistic Attitude Development

- SBI-3** Promote Optimism and Tolerance by Providing Education About Developmental Research/Statistics
- SBI-4** Remain Optimistic and Supportive When/If Youth Lapse or Relapse
- SBI-5** Promote Optimism by Asking Solution-Focused Questions
- SBI-6** Distract Away from Victim-Stance and Deficit-Focused Talk and Selectively Attend to Strengths
- SBI-7** Educate Disempowered/Pessimistic Youth About Personal Control Versus Learned Helplessness
- SBI-8** Assist Youth in Identifying People and Life Experiences for Which They Are Grateful

Category 3: Asset Development

- SBI-9** Identify Youths' Interests, Talents, and Life Goals
- SBI-10** Provide Opportunities for Success Experiences
- SBI-11** Recognize Small Changes and Success Experiences Every Day
- SBI-12** Reframe Problems/Deficits as Strengths
- SBI-13** Label Survival of Past Adversity as a Strength
- SBI-14** Reinforce Effort and Perseverance, Not Just Final Outcomes
- SBI-15** Label the Ability to Delay Gratification and Tolerate Boredom as a Strength
- SBI-16** Label the Ability to Manage/Cope with Emotional Stress as a Strength (and Teach It)
- SBI-17** Label the Ability to Be Honest and Take Responsibility for Mistakes as a Strength (and Model It)
- SBI-18** Label Diversity as a Strength
- SBI-19** Educate About and Promote Developmental Assets
- SBI-20** Educate About and Promote Protective Factors Associated with Resiliency

Category 4: Prosocial Development

- SBI-21** Assess and Meet Youths' Basic Human Needs
- SBI-22** Facilitate Acceptance and Support from Prosocial Peers and Adults
- SBI-23** Model, Teach, and Reinforce Prosocial Acts and Social Skills
- SBI-24** Educate Youth About the Reciprocal Nature of Relationships
- SBI-25** Provide Opportunities for Prosocial/Philanthropic Acts of Kindness
- SBI-26** Interact with Youth in a Trustworthy and Dependable Manner
- SBI-27** Label the Expression of Hurt and Sadness as a Strength
- SBI-28** Facilitate Discussions on Topics That Increase Self-Reflection About Prosocial Behaviors
- SBI-29** Emphasize Positive Reinforcement and Bonus Response-Cost Interventions

SBI-30 Educate and Promote Good Character Qualities and Values/Life Goals

Category 5: Intellectual Development

SBI-31 Collaborate on Goal Development

SBI-32 Assist Youth in Being Informed Consumers with Use of Meta-Talk and Rationale for Services

SBI-33 Normalize Learning Differences (Rather Than Focus on Disabilities)

SBI-34 Make Learning Fun

SBI-35 Make Learning Novel and Multisensory

SBI-36 Make Learning Meaningful and Applicable to Real Life

SBI-37 Educate About and Promote Multiple Intelligences

SBI-38 Educate About and Promote Emotional Intelligence

Category 6: Provider Development

SBI-39 Maintain a Healthy Balance in Life/Good Self-Care

SBI-40 Be Strengths-Based with Colleagues

SBI-41 Self-Monitor to Prevent a Deficit-Based Approach

STRENGTHS-BASED INTERVENTION 8:**Assist Youth in Identifying People and Life Experiences for Which They Are Grateful**

SBI-8 encourages youth to identify people and life experiences that have had a positive impact on them. Studies have found that taking time to think about and show gratitude toward others is associated with heightened well-being in the form of increased positive and decreased negative affect (e.g., depression) and that these practices help youth build personal and interpersonal resources for coping with adversity (Bono, Emmons, & McCullough, 2004; Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Identify People for Whom Youth Are Grateful

We have all had people in our lives who had a positive influence on our development—people who showed an interest in us, spent extra time helping and supporting us. These people are sometimes family members (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents, extended family); school personnel (e.g., teachers, coaches, counselors); or others we have encountered in life (e.g., close friends, neighbors, employers, mentors, mental health professionals, clergy, probation/parole officers, caseworkers, direct care staff). Assist youth in identifying and thinking about these positive people:

- Ask youth to write down or tell you the names of family members, school personnel, or other people in their past and present life who have had a positive influence on them.
- Ask youth to write down or tell you about what these people specifically did that had a positive impact on them. What are youth grateful for?
- Ask youth about how their lives may have been different without these positive people and experiences in their life.
- Ask youth what attributes these positive people possessed that they can emulate in their own lives.

Identify Life Experiences for Which Youth Are Grateful

During the course of life, we all have experiences that impact us in positive ways. These experiences often influence how we think and feel about ourselves and others and how we interact with the world around us. Ask youth to write down or tell you about life experiences that have had a positive impact on them. These life experiences might include earning good grades in school, excelling in an academic subject, performing well at extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, art, theatre, debate, chess), earning a high school diploma or GED, having a passion that they pursued, attending a school or treatment program that improved their lives, spending time with an influential person, or having a positive job experience. Drawing a timeline can assist youth in identifying

various experiences during the course of life for which they are grateful. These life experiences are sometimes positive from the onset, but not always. Some life experiences are difficult yet result in positive outcomes over time. If a challenging life experience has enhanced a youth's resiliency or empathy for others, for example, that is something to be grateful for.

Express Gratitude

After youth have identified the people and life experiences that have had a positive impact, encourage them to share their gratitude and appreciation with these worthy people through letters, emails, or in-person meetings.

Summary

Optimism about at-risk youth is not just wishful thinking: It is rooted in empirical fact. A great deal of evidence exists regarding youths' capacity to develop into productive, prosocial adults. Possessing an optimistic attitude and sharing this optimism with youth and families can greatly augment the effectiveness of youth services. Optimism can be stimulated by sharing information about developmental research and statistics, remaining supportive when youth lapse/relapse and using these experiences as teachable moments, focusing on solutions and exceptions to problems, distracting away from chronic victim-stance and deficit-based talk, educating youth about personal power to reduce the risk of learned helplessness, and helping youth to focus attention on the people and experiences for which they are grateful. Promote hope!

Label Survival of Past Adversity as a Strength

Many at-risk youth have endured difficult childhood experiences, including incidents of neglect, abuse, and trauma. These life experiences are often perceived by youth as signs of inadequacy and weakness, which can result in problematic symptoms, including depression, anxiety, self-injurious and suicidal behaviors, verbal and physical aggression, and eating disorders. In order to help prevent these dysfunctional reactions, SBI-13 highlights the strength associated with the survival of past adversity. This specific type of reframing highlights the fact that overcoming adversity in life can make you stronger as a person, not weaker. Helping youth gain more control over their past negative experiences through the use of a strengths-based interpretation can be empowering and reduce the risk problematic symptoms.

Educate Youth About Posttraumatic Growth

The negative effects of adverse childhood experiences are well documented (see Anda & Felitti, 2003, and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, cosponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego, www.cdc.gov/ace/index.htm). However, being exposed to childhood adversity does not mandate a lifetime of negative outcomes. In fact, childhood stress that is manageable appears to act as a protective factor that may enhance youths' ability to develop into more resilient adults (Charney, 2004; Cooper, Feder, Southwick, & Charney, 2007). The process is analogous to getting a vaccination, which triggers your immune system to develop antibodies to fight off future exposure to disease. Similarly, experiencing some adversity in life can actually help inoculate you so you are not overwhelmed by future stressors. Even incidents in which individuals are exposed to unmanageable stress and adversity can result in some positive outcomes. In addition to the resiliency research, researchers have been studying what is referred to as "posttraumatic growth," "stress-related growth," or "benefit finding," defined as the positive outcomes youth experience in the aftermath of traumatic events (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Frazier & Berman, 2008; Frazier et al., 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Studies have identified several positive outcomes and areas of growth in the aftermath of adverse events, including the following:

- *Changes in one's sense of self.* Positive changes in one's sense of personal strength and maturity.
- *Changes in relationships.* Increased closeness to others.
- *Changes in spirituality or life philosophy.* Changes in life priorities, greater appreciation for life and living life in more fulfilling ways.
- *Changes in empathy.* Enhanced empathy and sensitivity toward others.

- *Changes in coping skills.* Enhanced confidence and ability to cope with life stressors.

As youth age and acquire more abstract thinking and executive functioning skills, their capacity to look back and reassess their childhood experiences is much greater. They are better able to correct childhood misperceptions and understand how their past adversity can strengthen them. Benefit-finding and positive reappraisal are coping strategies in which individuals attempt to look on the brighter side of things (Helgeson et al., 2006). These strategies have been linked to less depression and greater positive well-being, including more positive affect, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Affleck and Tennen (1996) explain, “Adversity can lose some of its harshness through cognitive adaptations—including finding the good in bad events—which can restore comforting views of ourselves, other people, and the world. These adaptations can even nourish the conviction that we are in some ways better off than we were before” (p. 900).

It is important to note that the study of positive changes following adversity is still young and providers should be cautious about how deliberately they intervene, as opposed to using nondirective interventions in response to growth that spontaneously occurs (Joseph & Butler, 2010).

Case Example: Viewing Adversity as a Strength, Not a Weakness

Jim (age 15) had a long history of disruptive and self-injurious behaviors. He had coped with significant adversity in life, including sexual and physical victimization, the suicide of his father, and his mother’s poor health and incarceration for drug possession and distribution. He received very little recognition for his positive attributes and viewed his life adversity as a weakness. Jim struggled with feelings of insecurity, depression, anger, and hopelessness. He was chronically on suicide watch and was regularly having conflicts with peers and staff.

I began meeting regularly with Jim to establish a positive relationship. I empathized with Jim about his feelings of unfairness that he had to cope with so much more than most people do in a lifetime. I began highlighting Jim’s strengths, including his ability to cope with so many stressors. I introduced Jim to the concepts of resiliency and posttraumatic growth. We talked about how his past adversity could strengthen his ability to cope with future stressors, pointing out that after all he had faced in life, it seemed there was little he could not handle. He began reading books about people who overcame adversity in life. I showed my admiration for Jim by making a general statement that when I compare my childhood experiences to his experiences, I felt like a real

wimp. Jim jokingly called me Dr. Wimpy. Jim began to understand that his ability to cope and survive such difficult life circumstances was a strength, not a weakness or something to feel ashamed about.

As Jim began to take pride in his ability to cope with such difficult life circumstances, his behaviors became more stable and his outlook on life more positive. I lost touch with Jim after he left the facility, but approximately one year later I was walking down the hallway and heard someone say, “Hey, Dr. Wimpy.” It was Jim, with a smile on his face; he was temporarily back at the facility awaiting his parole hearing. Jim was learning to take pride in his ability to overcome life adversity with the use of humor, knowledge about posttraumatic growth and resiliency, and strengths-based reframing.