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# How to Interview for Client Strengths

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*The profession is witnessing a growing interest among practitioners and educators in finding ways to discover and mobilize client strengths in social work practice. This article describes, explains, and illustrates several interviewing questions that a worker can use to uncover client strengths related to the goals of clients. The questions, drawn from a solution-focused approach to interviewing, include the "miracle" question, exception-finding questions, scaling questions, coping questions, and "what's better?" questions. The fit between these questions and the key concepts of the emerging strengths perspective is examined.*

**Key words:** clients; clinical practice; interviews; strengths perspective

Articles calling for a "strengths perspective" in social work practice have begun to appear in the professional literature. Although the roots of the strengths perspective reach deep into the history of social work, it was not until 1989 that Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kisthardt first incorporated the words "strengths perspective" into the title of an article. In their article, these authors addressed social work's past emphasis on problems and pathologies and the difficulties this emphasis created for practice, and they offered the ingredients of an alternative strengths perspective. In 1992 Saleebey published a collection of articles in which several authors explained, in considerable detail, the assumptions and principles of strengths-based practice with at-risk populations.

The strengths perspective rests on the following assumptions (Saleebey, 1992): First and foremost, despite life's problems, all people and environments possess strengths that can be marshalled to improve the quality of clients' lives. Practitioners should respect these strengths and the directions in which clients wish to apply them. Second, client motivation is fostered by a consistent emphasis on strengths as the client defines these.

Third, discovering strengths requires a process of cooperative exploration between clients and workers; "expert" practitioners do not have the last word on what clients need. Fourth, focusing on strengths turns the practitioner's attention away from the temptation to "blame the victim" and toward discovering how clients have managed to survive even in the most inhospitable of circumstances. And, fifth, all environments—even the most bleak—contain resources.

These assumptions are grounded in the poststructural notion that social workers must increasingly respect and engage clients' ways of viewing themselves and their worlds in the helping process. Or, to put it differently, the strengths perspective asserts that the client's "meaning" must count for more in the helping process, and scientific labels and theories must count for less. This shift toward a deeper respect for the frame of reference of a particular client is especially important in this era of practice with increasingly diverse groups.

The literature about applying the strengths perspective to practice settings contains philosophy, practice principles, and general areas to

explore for possible strengths. Notably lacking, however, are specific interview questions the worker can use to elicit client strengths. Authors who do address how to determine client strengths recommend using an inventory of potential areas of strength (Cowger, 1992; Rapp, 1992) based on a set of categories that the worker brings to the client. These categories may or may not reflect the categories the client uses to organize his or her experiences.

This article presents a set of interviewing questions that we believe are appropriate to the philosophy and practice principles of the strengths perspective, including the commitment to work within the client's frame of reference. These questions, collectively known as the solution-focused approach to interviewing, have evolved over 20 years of work by de Shazer and his colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (Berg & Miller, 1992; de Shazer, 1988; de Shazer et al., 1986). Although originally developed for use in individual, couples, and family therapy, the questions have evolved to the point where they are useful in a variety of practice settings and client concerns. Indeed, we are persuaded that they are useful alternatives in any practice setting previously calling for problem solving with clients. This article presents the two key concepts behind solution-focused interviewing, the questions themselves, and a discussion of how these questions fit with the key concepts of the strengths perspective.

### **Solution-Focused Interviewing**

Solution-focused interviewing turns on two practice activities. The first is the development of well-formed goals with the client within the client's frame of reference; the second is the development with the client of solutions based on "exceptions."

#### **Well-Formed Goals**

Berg and Miller (1992), drawing on their practice experience, identified seven characteristics of well-formed goals:

1. Goals are important to the client. Goals are well formed when they belong to the client and are expressed in the client's language; they are not well formed when, first of all, they are thought appropriate by the worker and are expressed in the worker's categories. This characteristic constitutes a practice principle that rests on the belief that clients whose goals are respected are more moti-

vated than those whose goals are overlooked. The principle is not compromised except in cases where the worker, after exploring for client strengths and coping capacities, is convinced that the client is overwhelmed or a danger to self or others.

2. The goals are small. Small goals are easier to achieve than large ones. For example, it is easier to "fill out one job application" than to "get a job."
3. The goals are concrete, specific, and behavioral. Goals so characterized help both client and worker know when progress is occurring. Accordingly, "going out to lunch with a friend twice a week" is preferable to "getting more involved with others."
4. The goals seek presence rather than absence. Clients, when asked about their goals, often tell workers what they want eliminated from their lives, for example, "feeling discouraged." Practice outcomes are improved when clients are helped to express their goals as the presence of something—for example, "taking walks"—rather than the absence of something.
5. The goals have beginnings rather than endings. Clients also tend initially to conceptualize their goals as end points, for example, "having a happy marriage." Workers, aware that achieving goals is a process, can help by encouraging clients to conceptualize the first steps to their desired ends, such as "asking my husband to pick a place for next summer's vacation."
6. The goals are realistic within the context of the client's life. This characteristic speaks for itself and is usually achieved automatically in the course of developing goals with the preceding characteristics. However, when uncertain, the worker can explore with the client what it is in the client's life that tells the client that this particular goal makes sense for him or her.
7. The goals are perceived by the client as involving "hard work." Encouraging clients to think about their goals in this way is both realistic and useful for protecting the client's dignity. It is realistic, because goals call for changes in the client, and change is difficult. It protects the client's dignity because, first, if the client achieves the goal, the achievement is noteworthy, and, second, if

the client does not, it means only that there is still more hard work to be done.

This conceptualization of well-formed goals implies that they are negotiated between worker and client. It suggests that clients rarely enter the helping relationship with well-formed goals and that workers do not have the right or the power to determine which goals are appropriate for clients. Instead, practitioner and client must labor together to define achievable goals within the client's frame of reference.

### Exceptions

Exploring for exceptions represents the second main interviewing activity in the solution-focused approach. Exceptions are those occasions in the client's life when the client's problem could have occurred but did not. For example, if a couple complains of a troubled relationship because of "constant fighting," the solution-focused worker asks the couple to describe those times when they were together during which they did not fight or, at least, fought less destructively.

Solution-focused questioning by workers is quite persistent, but it avoids in-depth exploration of client problems. Workers focus on the who, what, when, and where of exception times instead of the who, what, when, and where of problems. The consequence is a growing awareness in both workers and clients of the clients' strengths relative to their goals, rather than the clients' deficiencies relative to their problems. Once these strengths are brought to awareness and thereby made available, clients can mobilize them to create solutions tailor-made for their lives.

### Interviewing Questions

In a solution-focused approach, interviewing for well-formed goals and interviewing for client strengths go hand-in-hand to increase the chances of uncovering those strengths most appropriate to the client's goals.

### Interviewing for Well-Formed Goals

The relationship between client and social worker usually focuses first on the client's concerns or problems. Clients insist on telling their workers "what's wrong" with their lives. It is important for workers to listen to these concerns and then, once they have established that there is not an emergency, to turn the conversation toward developing well-formed goals. The "miracle" question is a good

way to begin the negotiation (de Shazer, 1988). The worker might ask the following:

Suppose while you are sleeping tonight a miracle happens. The miracle is that the problem that has you here talking to me is somehow solved. Only you don't know that because you are asleep. What will you notice different tomorrow morning that will tell you that a miracle has happened?

This question is the starting point for a whole series of satellite questions designed to take the client's attention away from difficulties and to focus it on imagining a future when the problem is solved. The following satellite questions might be used:

- What is the very first thing you will notice after the miracle happens?
- What might your husband (child, friend) notice about you that would give him the idea that things are better for you?
- When he notices that, what might he do differently?
- When he does that, what would you do?
- And when you do that, what will be different around your house?

The intent of these questions is to help the client formulate, in detail, what will be "different" in his or her life when the miracle happens. As the client struggles to describe these differences, the client also often develops both an expectation of change and a growing sense of the goals toward which to direct effort.

The satellite questions mirror the characteristics of well-formed goals. Thus, when a client responds to the miracle question, "I'd have a sense of peace," the worker might ask, "What might your husband notice different about you that would tell him that you are beginning to 'have a sense of peace'?" With this question, the worker is attempting to help the client develop more concrete goals that are more the beginning of something rather than the end and that respect the client's language. Or, to give another example, when a client responds to the miracle question with, "I'd cry less," the worker would ask, "What would be there instead of the crying?" recognizing that well-formed goals are the presence of something rather than the absence.

### Interviewing for Client Strengths

*Exception-Finding Questions.* Exception-finding questions are used by the worker to discover a

client's present and past successes in relation to the client's goals. Eventually these successes are used to build solutions. Examples of exception-finding questions are as follows:

You said that when the "miracle" happens, you and your husband would notice yourselves "communicating more about your days and hug each other more." Are there times now or in the past when the two of you were able to do that?

\* \* \*

Okay, if I remember correctly, you said you would know that you did not need to see me anymore when you were "drinking less and spending more time with your wife, kids, and nondrinking buddies." So, when was the last time you were "drinking less and . . . "?

Sometimes clients are not yet able to describe how their life will be different when the problem is solved; they can talk only about their problems. In these situations a worker can still explore for exceptions but must do so by working from the problem instead of from an answer to the miracle question:

I'm wondering, are there days when you feel "less scared about the future" [client's definition of the problem]? When was the last time you had a better day? What was different about that day that made it better? Where did that happen? Who was there with you? What might [those people] have noticed you doing differently that would tell them that you were doing better?

Once exceptions are brought to light—in easily the majority of the cases—the worker then explores how they happened. In particular, the worker attempts to clarify, as concretely as possible, what the client may have contributed to making the exceptions happen. Whatever contributions the worker and client together can bring into the client's awareness represent client strengths. Here is an example of a conversation wherein a worker and a client uncover a client's contribution to making exceptions happen:

*Worker:* I am curious about those days when you are "less scared about your future." What do you think you do differently on those days?

*Client:* I'm not sure [pause], maybe wash the car and rake leaves.

*Worker:* What else?

*Client:* Well, yesterday I did check the want ads for another job.

When a worker and client together uncover an exception along with the client's strengths that contributed to the exception, the worker affirms and amplifies those strengths in a way that is consistent with the worker's individual style and sense of proportion:

*Worker:* So on better days you do things like "washing the car, raking the yard, and checking the want ads for a better job." And those things help. They seem like a good idea. Where did you get the idea to do all that? [or: Was doing these things something new for you? Was it hard for you to do those things?]

**Scaling Questions.** Scaling questions are a clever way to make complex features of a client's life more concrete and accessible for both client and worker. They usually take the form of asking the client to give a number from 0 through 10 that best represents where the client is at some specified point. The worker usually designates 10 as the positive end of the scale, equating higher numbers with more positive outcomes and experiences. Here is an example:

*Worker:* At this point, I want to ask you to rank something between 0 and 10. Let's say that 0 was where you were at with this problem when you first made the call to come in and see me and 10 means your problem is solved. Give me a number that says where you are right now.

*Client:* Hmm. I guess about a 2 or 3.

Almost any aspect of a client's life can be scaled, including progress toward finding a solution, confidence about finding a solution, motivation to work on a solution, severity of a problem, the likelihood of hurting self or another person, self-esteem, and so on. Once the client answers with numbers greater than zero, the worker can follow up with questions that uncover, affirm, and amplify the client's strengths, as the continuation of the scaling question demonstrates:

*Worker:* So you are at a 2 or 3 right now. What's different that tells you that you're doing better now than when you first called?

*Client:* Well, I decided to come here, and I started thinking about how I might tell my boss that I need some time off.

*Worker:* [perceiving the client's sense of satisfaction] That's great. Was it hard for you to "decide to come here"? [also:] Where did you get the idea to "decide to come here"? Is that the way

you start to find a solution—"to start thinking about" what you need to do differently?

**Coping Questions.** In the authors' practice experience, more than 80 percent of clients are able to work productively at developing goals and identifying exceptions. However, like all workers, we encounter clients who are feeling hopeless and seem able to talk only about how horrible their present is and how bleak their future looks. Sometimes these clients are experiencing an acute crisis that gives rise to their hopelessness, and at other times the hopelessness represents a persistent pattern of self-expression and relating to others. In both cases, coping questions can be helpful in uncovering client strengths.

These questions accept the client's perceptions and then move on to ask how the client is able to cope with such overwhelming circumstances and feelings. For example:

*Worker:* [empathizing and responding to a client who is describing a long-standing depression and one discouraging event after another in her life] I can see that you have many reasons to feel depressed; there have been so many things that haven't worked out the way you wished. I'm wondering how you have managed to keep going? How have you been able to get up each morning and face another day?

*Client:* I really don't know.

*Worker:* I'm amazed. With all . . . [worker refers to the discouragements in client's terms], I don't know how you make it. How do you do it?

*Client:* I surprise myself sometimes, too; sometimes I'd just like to end it all. But I can't. Who would take care of my kids?

*Worker:* Is that how you do it—think about how much your kids need you? You must care a lot about them. Tell me more about what you do to take care of them [worker explores for parenting strengths and motivation].

As the worker helps the client to uncover coping strengths, the client's mood and confidence usually rise. Sometimes new ideas for coping emerge that the client has never thought of before. However, it is also common for the client to return to problem descriptions and associated feelings of discouragement. As this occurs, the worker respectfully listens, empathizes, and then gently returns the client to a focus on strengths exploration and affirmation.

**"What's Better?" Questions.** "What's better?" questions are not so much a distinct set of questions as an approach to beginning later sessions by continuing the work of building solutions and uncovering client strengths. Instead of beginning later sessions with a review of homework tasks assigned or even the client's estimate of progress, a solution-focused worker simply asks, "What's happening in your life that's better?" This is done for two reasons: First, it optimizes the chances of bringing to light exceptions that have occurred since the last visit with the worker. Second, it recognizes that the lives of clients, including their goals, are in process, not necessarily being the same today as yesterday. Consequently, the "what's better?" approach increases the chances of uncovering exceptions and associated strengths that are the most meaningful and useful to the client at the present moment.

Exploring for "what's better" is the same as exploring for exceptions. And, as with exceptions, clients may or may not have difficulty answering the questions. Therefore, workers will have to be more or less persistent, accordingly. The following is an example of an interaction involving a client seeking help with anxiety symptoms:

*Worker:* [first question of the second session] So, tell me, what's happening that's better?

*Client:* Well, I'm not sure; I mean, I still get the shakes. But maybe they're not quite as bad.

*Worker:* Oh, "not quite as bad." Some relief must feel good.

*Client:* Yeah, it does, but they still come back, and when they do, I'm miserable.

*Worker:* I'm sure you are—you've described to me how tough it can be for you to get through. [pause] Now, I'm wondering about when was the last time the "shakes" were "not quite as bad"? [also:] What was different about that time? How did it happen? What might [your friend] have noticed that you do differently that helped you [through that morning]? On a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 equal to "every chance," what are the chances of your having another morning like that in the next couple of days? What gives you that level of confidence? What's the most important thing for you to remember to increase the chances of having more mornings when the 'shakes are not quite as bad'?"

In solution-focused interviewing, it is customary for the worker to take a brief break before the

end of an interview and prepare feedback for the client. The feedback consists mainly of affirming the client's well-formed goals (insofar as they exist) and highlighting thoughts, actions, and feelings of the client (gleaned from the exploration of exceptions) that already are contributing to either reaching the goals or coping with life's hardships or traumas. These thoughts, actions, and feelings constitute the client's strengths on the road to client-devised solutions expressed in the client's categories.

### **Fit between Solution-Focused Interviewing and the Strengths Perspective**

There are six key concepts behind the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1992) to be operationalized in the worker-client relationship: empowerment, membership, regeneration and healing from within, synergy, dialogue and collaboration, and suspension of disbelief. Solution-focused clinicians must convey these concepts to their clients in practice.

#### **Empowerment**

Drawing on Rappaport (1990), Saleebey (1992) explained that empowering clients means creating a context in which clients can "discover the considerable power within themselves" (p. 2) to handle their own problems, rather than—even with the best of intentions—telling clients what they need or ought to do to overcome their difficulties. The matter of whose "definitions of reality" take precedence in this process is critical. Those who practice social work from the strengths perspective try to empower their clients by encouraging them to define their own worlds, problems, aspirations, and strengths to create more satisfying lives.

Solution-focused interviewing honors a worker's commitment to use client meanings. For example, when a client states that her problem "might be depression," the solution-focused worker responds with, "What is happening in your life that tells you that you 'might be depressed?'" Similarly, the same worker would encourage the client to work at defining her own goals, exceptions, levels of confidence and motivation to solve her depression, and eventual degrees of progress—all in her own language. The client is empowered by the worker's creating a context that requires her to draw on two of her most important and unique human capacities: conceptu-

alizing her own world and making decisions about how to live in it.

#### **Membership**

Frequently the clients of social workers are cut off from their cultural and geographic roots, feel vulnerable, experience discrimination, or are otherwise alienated; therefore, they lack a sense of belonging (Saleebey, 1992). In part because alienated people lack the sense of belonging, they are also out of touch with their strengths and possibilities. Consequently, in a beginning effort to foster a sense of membership in alienated clients, Saleebey (1992) wrote, "certain things are required of us [workers] at the outset" (p. 9): (1) working collaboratively with clients, (2) affirming client perceptions and stories, (3) recognizing the survival efforts and successes of clients, and (4) fostering client links to contexts where client strengths can flourish.

The solution-focused interviewing questions discussed earlier demonstrate how practitioners can meet Saleebey's first three requirements. Regarding the fourth, we have found that in our work with clients, the miracle, exception-finding, "what's better?" and coping questions all uncover useful possibilities for linking clients to affirming contexts.

#### **Regeneration and Healing from Within**

Regeneration and healing bring to mind wellness and how to achieve it rather than disease and how to overcome it. Although there is an undeniable reality to physical disease, many of the human difficulties social workers encounter in practice, including some physical diseases, are most effectively addressed by helping clients discover and apply "their own (inner and outer) resources for healing" (Saleebey, 1992, p. 10). Solution-focused interviewers concentrate on regeneration and healing from within. Because they ask clients to define their own goals and the exceptions to their difficulties, they help clients uncover their own resources for better lives and promote in them expectations of positive change. The latter, by itself, is a strong agent for change.

#### **Synergy**

A synergic relationship is one in which the participants, by virtue of their interaction, are able to create a larger, more beneficial result than either could have created alone using individual resources.

Such a relationship potentially can exist at or between any of the several levels at which people interact—from the level of individuals to that of large collectivities.

The strengths perspective asserts that both inner and outer human resources are expandable through synergic relationship. We believe that solution-focused interviewing increases the possibility of synergic relationship in two respects.

**Between Client and Worker.** First, in solution-focused work each party contributes differently to the interaction. The client provides content—a personal story, values, beliefs, perceptions, wishes, definitions of reality—expressed in his or her own way. The worker brings an understanding of the structure of the change process—the necessity of developing well-formed goals and building solutions from exceptions—along with the interviewing questions that reflect his or her understanding. The practitioner assists the client's participation by affirming the client's frame of reference and the strengths that emerge in the interaction. In the end, more often than not, the mix produces a synergic expansion of the client's inner resources.

**Between Client and the Client's Context.** Second, the strengths perspective is as committed to enhancing the relationships between clients and their contexts as it is to expanding the inner resources of clients (although the two often occur together). When solution-focused workers ask their questions, they always do so in relation to the social context of their clients. Satellite questioning opens up possibilities for different, more synergy-enhancing interactions between clients and their social contexts and thus contributes to creating "new and often unexpected patterns and resources" (Saleebey, 1992, p. 11).

### **Dialogue and Collaboration**

To truly hold a dialogue with a client is to explore and affirm the "otherness" of the client. Solution-focused interviewing does just this. In drawing out the client's perceptions and strengths, the worker is continually respecting and affirming the client's otherness.

To collaborate with a client is to negotiate and consult with the client, not to provide expert answers. When clients insist on returning to problem talk or asking for answers from the worker, the worker listens, empathizes, and gently returns them to defining their goals for a more desirable

future and examining the significance of exceptions in their lives.

### **Suspension of Disbelief**

Although suspension of disbelief may seem to have drawbacks in the short run, it offers great hope of a synergic, empowering relationship between client and worker over the long haul. This concept of the strengths perspective challenges workers to avoid the long-standing tendency in the profession to distrust the perceptions and statements of clients about themselves and their circumstances. Solution-focused interviewing, too, is premised on a belief that respecting the client's perceptions and statements is the best antidote to what the profession calls "client resistance" (de Shazer, 1984). Once the client experiences acceptance and affirmation from the worker, the likelihood of productive work increases.

### **Conclusion**

It is hard to imagine a tighter fit between philosophy and practice than that between the strengths perspective and solution-focused interviewing questions. This article makes a case for that fit at the micro level of work with individuals, couples, and families, the level at which the interviewing questions were first developed and applied. Recently, applications have been made in work with groups (Selekman, 1991) and organizations (Sparks, 1989).

Saleebey (1992) boiled the philosophy of the strengths perspective down to the following challenge:

At the very least, the strengths perspective obligates workers to understand that, however downtrodden or sick, individuals have survived (and in some cases even thrived). They have taken steps, summoned up resources, and coped. We need to know what they have done, how they have done it, what they have learned from doing it, what resources (inner and outer) were available in their struggle to surmount their troubles. People are always working on their situations, even if just deciding to be resigned to them; as helpers we must tap into that work, elucidate it, find and build on its possibilities. (pp. 171–172)

The miracle question, exception-finding questions, scaling questions, coping questions, and "what's better?" questions are invaluable resources

for meeting Saleebey's challenge in day-to-day social work practice. ■

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