

# Focusing and Building on Existing Strengths: A Strategy to Overcome Risks and to Prepare Adolescents to Be Their Best Selves

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## ■ Why This Matters

When we see and expect the best from young people, it reinforces for them that they have the seeds of success within them. It reminds them that they can become their best selves.<sup>1</sup>

It is critical to remember that one of the fundamental questions every adolescent seeks to resolve is “Who am I?” They search for clues around them about how they are defined. Knowing that young people live up or down to the expectations we set for them, we must surround youth with messages that we see them as good people and expect them to rise to their personal heights.

The truth, though, is that some young people have engaged in self-destructive or undermining behaviors, often to deal with harsh realities. As the adults who care for and about them, we must engage them in a behavioral change process to shift them away from harmful choices and toward those that will enhance their well-being.<sup>2</sup>

A first step in thinking about change is considering whether change is even possible. If a person does not believe she is capable of change, she will suppress thoughts of progress or even deny the existence of a problem to avoid frustration and powerlessness. It is sometimes easier to deny a problem exists than to meet with failure. This is especially true if a person has a history of failed attempts at progress. For these reasons, the first step toward positive behavioral change may be gaining the confidence that one can change.<sup>3</sup>



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## ■ Gaining Confidence: A Critical Step to Gaining a Sense of Control

A person gains confidence partially through receiving and believing feedback from others that he has demonstrated capabilities. He solidifies confidence when he experiences success.

A person's confidence is undermined when he receives and ultimately begins to believe messages that he is incapable. Sadly, it is almost routine for young people to absorb messages that they are impulsive, thoughtless, and even the source of problems. However, some of our adolescents are at greatest risk precisely because they have heard undermining messages their entire lives and have not had the positive feedback they need to build their strengths. They see themselves as undeserving and begin to see their destiny as out of their control. Some of them have tried to change their life circumstances and have met

with repeated failure. These young people may become demoralized and therefore particularly resistant to believing in the possibility of change. We must offer them a strength-based approach that helps them see themselves differently and recognize they can control their destiny. We must help them recognize they already possess strengths and skill sets they can build on to change their life circumstances.

It is a disservice to young people if they think we notice and build on their existing strengths only to help them shift away from worrisome behaviors—in fact, the main reason we do so is to reinforce and build on everything that is already good within them. This model is the most powerful when not enough people in the young person's life have previously seen him through a strength-based lens. The power you have to transform a life is monumental when you see a young person—finally—as he has always deserved to be seen, as a whole human being instead of as a problem.

The bottom line is you want to be a change agent. When young adults in their late 20s are asked what turned their lives around, they can almost always point to an adult who believed in them. “It was when Ms \_\_\_\_\_ made me understand I wasn't trash.” “It was when Mr \_\_\_\_\_ made me understand I was worth something.” “It was when Ms \_\_\_\_\_, who didn't know me from a hole in the wall, just stuck with me until I was ready to listen.” “It never felt like anybody was on my team until then.... It felt like they saw me before I was ready to see myself.”

Be the kind of adult who sees a young person for who they really *are*. This is a critical step for teens to gain a sense of control over their actions. And remember that a core principle of trauma-sensitive practice is “Giving control back to people from whom control has been taken away.”

## ■ How to Combat Demoralization

A person using a problem- or risk-focused approach with youth might begin by stating the problem and explaining why current behaviors are harmful or will lead to something terrible. This approach sometimes ignores the complexity of a young person's life and may leave him feeling as though he is seen only as a problem. This can reinforce a sense of shame, undermining the potential for change and the creation of a trusting relationship. On the other hand, when we see the very same problem amidst a sea of strengths, the young person is less likely to feel ashamed and, therefore, is more likely to be receptive to trusting that he is cared for and about by the person who hopes to guide him.

### Connect By Listening for Behaviorally Operational Strengths

The strategy of connecting by listening for *behaviorally operational* strengths may be even more effective when the strengths we recognize can be easily linked to the behavior we hope to promote. In other words, when we point out that a young person already has skill sets to access, it is much easier to guide them how to take the next step.

Too often, adults try to connect with young people by striking up a casual conversation about sports or noticing something about what they are wearing or how they do their hair. That might break the ice, but it doesn't initiate a real connection. Nor does it give you information that will position you to facilitate change. You want to listen for the strengths that are behaviorally operational. In other words, they can serve as starting points toward progress. Precisely because the young person possesses that strength, they have within themselves the seeds of progress. Resilience in the context of a life that would have destroyed many. Compassion. Insight. The desire to protect others.

Remember that one of our goals is to give youth control over their own lives. This is *always* developmentally appropriate for an adolescent. But it is core to trauma-sensitive practice. Our goal is for young people to realize that they possess the seeds of progress within them. As we enter and retreat from their lives, they must know that they will always have themselves. Much as Dorothy realized at the end of *The Wizard of Oz* that she never really needed the Scarecrow or even the Wizard himself; she needed only to access what was already in her possession. The goal here is to have all young people recognize and celebrate their own “ruby slippers.”

### Seeing Young People Through a Different Lens

Listen intently as a young person's story unfolds. Rather than focus on what you might say, give him the gift of full attention while you focus on what you admire about him, why you care, why you are on his side. Even a teen whose story deeply concerns you is being honest; otherwise, you wouldn't even know

why you had cause to worry. Many youth with the most traumatic histories have displayed tremendous resilience. They have been survivors: doing the best they can to deal with a world that wasn't fair to them. Older teens who have “been there, done that” are often able to display great insight into what fueled their behaviors. It is common for these very same youth who have had the roughest lives thus far to dream of becoming helping professionals so that they can help other children have smoother journeys—they are often overflowing with compassion. Allow yourself to be struck by the young person filled with compassion, although he has been shown little. Notice the person who is highly protective of himself, his family, and his friends, despite that he may not have been protected as a child. (See Chapter 38, Reframing Youth Who Have Endured Trauma and Marginalization.)

The following examples demonstrate these points:

- A young person smokes marijuana to relieve stress, to chill out, and sometimes to become numb. He may possess tremendous sensitivity and a real desire to improve the challenges at home. He may be smoking precisely because he cares deeply. He may pretend he doesn't care, but the opposite is likely true. He cares so much that he chooses to become numb. If we can applaud his sensitivity and help him use that gift while also helping him deal with the stressors he hopes to escape, we have a much better chance of getting him to move away from drugs than by scaring him about drugs' harmful effects. When we spew forth information like “Marijuana will fry your brains, make you grow breasts, and shrink you 'down there,” we may drive him toward drug use even though our threats are rooted in some degree of truth. Remember, he is smoking because he is stressed—stressing him more is not a good approach! A starting point of the conversation might be celebrating the depth of his caring while acknowledging that sometimes it is hard to feel.
- A young woman who wants to become a mother has the desire to be nurturing. Showering her with threats of long-term poverty may not speak to her as much as helping her understand she will be in a better position to raise children when she completes her education and holds a decent job. Therefore, the starting point of the conversation should be about her desire to be a good mother.
- A 16-year-old who deals drugs is also an entrepreneur who may be driven to contribute to his family. A focus on his sense of responsibility and his desire to care for his family is the starting point. Threatening him with prison may only make him put on his false mask of masculinity and bravado—reinforcing the facade that he doesn't care. Help him, instead, to understand that he will be able to contribute to his family for many years to come if he is able to make money in a way that does not put his freedom at risk.
- A gang member has a deep sense of loyalty and a desire to belong. Ultimately, he wants to feel protected from a dangerous environment. Assuming that he is a bad person who wants to terrorize the community will turn on the threatening facade he has learned to wear. Acknowledging that he has a “protector's brain” (see Chapter 38) is the place to start. Work with him to think about ways that he can protect himself and the people he cares about without putting his life at risk.

Recognizing the positive contexts that drive a negative behavior does not mean we support that behavior, nor does it lessen our intent to address it. The goal is to build on the point of strength and hope for a ripple effect that will diminish the teen's need to continue engaging in the maladaptive behavior. As above, a teen who uses drugs, but who is also recognized for her sensitivity, may be more receptive to other means to diminish stress as well as strategies to creatively and safely express sensitivity. Recognition allows us to deal with problems without instilling the shame that pushes youth away from us.

## The Active Listening Approach

The active listening approach recognizes, reinforces, and builds on strengths and then invites a collaborative problem-solving approach. It follows 7 steps that you'll make routine once you experience the transformation in your relationships with youth.

- **Step 1. Listen for strengths.** Listen for the context of the young person's life, and hear the strengths she has displayed.
- **Step 2. Reflect.** Tell the young person what you admire about her and what you see as her strengths.
- **Step 3. Pause.** Take a breath for a moment and allow the youth to absorb the genuineness of your reflection. It may be a rare or singular experience for the teen to be noticed for what she is doing right.

- **Step 4. Share what you may be worried about.** Ideally, tell the teen why you are concerned that the current behavior may get in the way of achieving her stated goals.
- **Step 5. Ask permission to discuss the issue further.** This may be an unusual experience for the adolescent, as young people are not usually asked whether they want to engage in a conversation.
- **Step 6. Partner with the young person.** Ask the youth what she thinks would work to move forward. After hearing her thoughts, ask whether you can add some of your own.
- **Step 7. Offer support.** Ask how you can best support the youth to become her best self.

Another way of describing this is the heart-belly-head-hands approach. This active listening style allows you to get out of your head for a moment. Your head has memorized what you *should* say. Instead, pay attention to your body. Actual visceral sensations tell you when you care and what makes you worried. Your heart sends you real feelings when you care, and your stomach often tightens when you are worried. Allow yourself to trust your instincts and share what you felt.

- **Heart.** Reflect to the young person all that you heard in his story that made you care. All that you see that suggests you know he is both deserving and capable of becoming his best self.
- **Take a deep breath.** You are reframing now, so show him you are pausing to reflect.
- **Belly.** Tell him why you are worried. Despite all the strengths you see in him, you fear that choices he is making will undermine his potential.
- **Head.** Ask him if you can come up with a plan together, recognizing that he has to drive the plan as the expert in his own life. That this is his plan is critical to being trauma sensitive. You are giving him control.
- **Hands.** Ask him how you can best serve or support him to move forward.

**CASE 1.** Maria is a 14-year-old girl whose grades have been dropping and is worried that they will prevent her from becoming the nurse she dreams of becoming. You don't launch into a lecture about the importance of good grades; you simply ask her why she thinks her grades have declined.

Maria explains that her mother relies on her pretty heavily to take care of her 3 younger siblings. She describes how much she loves her mother and understands she is overburdened, especially because she is working extra hours to make sure she will have enough money to send everyone to college.

Maria quickly jumps in, *"I really love taking care of my little brothers and sister!"* She helps them with homework, picks out their clothes for the next day, makes sure they take their baths, and even does bedtime prayers with them. *"They are my heart."* It's just that after she spends so much time helping them, there is very little time for her own homework, and she is worried about herself.

You comment that it sounds stressful and ask her how she manages that stress. *"To chill,"* she said, she smokes marijuana, *"only after they go to bed. I never smoke in front of my brothers and sister."*

Maria could be reprimanded or given 40 reasons not to smoke marijuana, but that would shame her and likely increase her stress, maybe leading directly to increased marijuana use.

Instead, you listen silently to her story without interruption or criticism. By listening to her intently, all that she is doing right becomes clear. When she finishes talking, you might say, *"We need you to be a nurse. Look how good you are with little kids. You get your brothers and sister dinner. You make sure they're safe. You bathe them and put them to bed. You're really responsible. You've already proven how good you are at caring for people and how much you love children."* After a short pause, you could say, *"I'm feeling worried, though, about how much marijuana you are smoking and I am concerned that may interfere with your future plans. More than anything, I'm worried it could decrease your motivation, which is one of your very greatest strengths. Can we talk about this?"*

It is so much easier for young people to deal with why we are worried if we first note their successes. When we get their permission to address the problem, we get buy-in and offer them the kind of control and self-confidence they need to be willing to consider taking steps to change.

This kind of active listening and reflecting takes on even greater importance for a youth who has been demoralized and may have little experience with a person seeing the best in them. Young people who have lived with low expectations for too long do not always see their potential to change or even see themselves as worthy of having good things happen to them. For them, it may be transformative for someone to notice something wonderful within them.

**CASE 2.** Joseph is a 17-year-old boy who has just been released from a youth detention facility. He grew up in a highly stressed, abusive household. He witnessed his father beating his mother when he was as young as 3 years old. He recalls trying to stand between them to protect his mother. His jaws clench as he tells you how his father would throw him against a wall and would reprimand him for his interference. Joseph learned not to cry because, when he did, he was told, “Men don’t cry,” and, “You want to be a man; I’ll show you how to be a man,” as his father would intensify the beating. His mother turned to drugs to forget about the pain, and she died when Joseph was 11 years old. His father has been in jail since he was 12, and he was sent to live with his grandmother. When he was too “disrespectful” to her, he was put into foster care. He has been through 6 placements and was maltreated in 2 of them. He turned to drugs himself and was arrested for possession when he was 15. Most recently, he was arrested for dealing, but that was found to be a case of mistaken identity.

Joseph is an artist who uses paper to release his feelings. He hasn’t used drugs since he was 15 years old except for one brief period when he was particularly stressed. He has a girlfriend who he cares about deeply and whom he would “never put my hands on.” He dreams of being a human services worker who could help children who have been abused. His eyes redden as he shares that someone like him doesn’t have a chance to have that dream come true, as he really isn’t good at school and made it only to the ninth grade.

The youth worker listens and notes how bright this young man is. He notices his sincerity and his genuine desire to become a youth service worker. However, he also notes that the teen does not believe in his potential and likely lacks the confidence to take even the first steps to returning to get his education. He also has no support structure in place to facilitate him through the administrative steps necessary for him to follow through on his vision. In essence, he lacks the confidence and the skills to move his dreams from contemplation to action.

He retells the young man his story, perhaps in a way that the teen has never experienced previously: *“WOW. You have been through a lot. More than anyone your age deserves to have been through. I wish I could say that your story shocks me, that I’ve never heard anything like it before. That you were the first young man who has had to experience abuse and see the tragedy of your mother being hurt and turning to drugs. But the truth is that I’ve seen it too often. But you know what? Most of those kids are seething with anger. I know you’ve been there, and that’s probably why you acted out earlier. Many of those kids turn to drugs themselves to deal with the pain. I know you’ve ‘been there, done that’ for a little while too, but you figured out on your own to stop. Instead, you turned to art to deal with your feelings rather than just smoke them away. Many of those kids take out their anger on women, but you know how to care for women. Many of those kids have given up hope and just dwell in anger, but you want to help kids. You want to take your experience and make the world better. Teach me about you. Teach me about how despite all that you’ve been through, you’re coming out as a caring man committed to protecting children.”*

*continued*



**CASE 2 (CONTINUED).** After a brief discussion when the young person becomes emotional and shares his insights, the youth worker continues one step at a time, allowing the teen to determine his readiness for each option: *“You deserve to have your dreams come true. Many children will benefit from your experience. You also deserve healing first, to help you get past some of the painful things that happened to you. Do you have any ideas about what will work for you? May I suggest some healthy ways that help people cope? You are so good at talking; may I arrange for you to have your own counselor who will listen to you and perhaps guide you as you take next steps? Does now feel like the right time to think about getting the education you need? If so, I would love to connect you to a community resource that helps young people return to school. Can we schedule a check-in for 2 weeks from today to follow the progress you’ve made?”*

## We Shouldn’t Be Afraid of the Word Love

The word *love* has so many meanings that we shy away from it. Perhaps we shouldn’t use the actual word with young people, lest it be misinterpreted as amorous or sexual love. But the love we have as one human to another should be something we don’t shy away from. We should be running toward this feeling, because it is the essence of healing and is the root of human connection.

I am lucky to have gained my footing about service from Covenant House. Central to our mission is to serve with “absolute respect and unconditional love.” Love! Love was not on any of my board examinations in medical training. Surely, then, it can’t be essential to healing.

I think love is about listening. Listening in a way that really hears the story in context and that looks for a person’s inherent strengths as they navigate their world.

Love is about hearing people’s stories and retelling them in a way they may never have heard before. It is about taking youth who felt demoralized and giving them the gift of realizing they are worthy of admiration.

It is worth noting here that nobody achieves the ability to uniformly see others with absolute respect and unconditional love. We are fettered by our own humanity. What makes us deserving of the honor of doing this work is that we struggle to get there. We wrestle within ourselves to overcome what might be getting in our way. What makes our organizations or service teams truly wonderful is when they consist of people who respectfully work with each other as we grow toward the idea of serving with absolute respect and unconditional love. We know the limitations of our humanity get in the way—but we get closer because we share this journey.

It is worth noting that, in some ways, it is easier to love another person than to like that person. Liking is more subjective. It may not be possible to like everybody. But seeing others as they deserve to be seen is possible for each of us.

Now I find myself preparing others to love. When my students present a teen to me, their opening line has to be “This is \_\_\_\_\_, and what I love about her is \_\_\_\_\_.” Nontraditional, certainly, but I encourage them to do the work of sitting with another human being with an open heart and seeing the best in her. Strength in the midst of adversity, resourcefulness in the midst of scarcity. Respect. This allows them a different view and combats the otherness that we use to separate ourselves from those we are meant to serve. It allows us to begin one of the most important conversations we can have with ourselves—how to love others while maintaining safe, appropriate boundaries. (See Chapter 24, Boundaries.)

**Love is seeing others as they deserve to be seen, as they really *are*, not according to a behavior they might be displaying, a label they might have received, or what they might be producing. Just as they really *are*.**

## ■ Remember That What Is Good for Our Most Vulnerable Youth Is Good for All Young People

Although the examples offered in this chapter focus on youth who are marginalized, the strength-based approach is good for *all* young people, whether you wish to reinforce existing positive behaviors or shift away from worrisome ones. Young people thrive on being noticed and on positive attention as much during adolescence as they did as toddlers. Remember that the most effective method of discipline when children are 2 years old applies to teens—“catch them being good, and redirect them when they’re not.” To drive this point home, remember what the word *discipline* really means. It shares the root with the word *disciple*. It means “to teach” or “to guide”—in a loving way. It does not mean “to punish,” nor does it mean “to control”—and it absolutely does not mean “to harm.” We teach best when we notice and reinforce the good that exists in every person.

### Related Video Content

- ▶ 44.7 Having Their Back: Helping Young People Know You Care Most about Them Including You in Their Lives. *Ginsburg*
- ▶ 44.8 Seeing All That Is Good and Right: A Strengths-based Empowering Behavioral Change Strategy. *Ginsburg*
- ▶ 25.0.1 An Introduction to Behavioral Change: Youth Will Not Make Positive Choices if They Don’t Believe in Their Potential to Change. *Ginsburg*
- ▶ 25.0.2 Addressing Demoralization: Eliciting and Reflecting Strengths. *Ginsburg*
- ▶ 25.1 Covenant House Staff Share How Recognizing Strengths Positions Them to Support Progress. *Covenant House Pennsylvania*
- ▶ 25.2 YouthBuild Staff Share How Recognizing Strengths Positions Them to Support Progress. *YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School*
- ▶ 25.3 Young People Speak of the Power of Being Viewed Through a Strength-Based Lens and the Harm of Low Expectation. *Youth*
- ▶ 25.4 The Depth of Our Caring Positions Us to Enter the Lives of Youth and to Be Change Agents. *Singh and Vo*
- ▶ 25.5 “Tell Me What You’ve Been Through—You’ve Been So Strong”: A First Step of Connection. *Feit*
- ▶ 25.6 Helping Youth With Chronic Disease Own How Adversity Has Built Their Resilience. *Pletcher*
- ▶ 25.7 Substance Users Often Possess the Gift of Sensitivity. *Pletcher*
- ▶ 25.8 Sometimes Youth Who Have Survived Adversities Have the Biggest Hearts and Largest Dreams. *Diaz*
- ▶ 25.9 Behaviors Must Be Seen in the Context of the Lives Youth Have Needed to Navigate. *Auerswald*
- ▶ 18.1 Maximizing the Yield From a Strength-Based Interview: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Using Only a Positive Lens. *Ginsburg*
- ▶ 42.2 Teen Testimonial: Survival, Resilience, and Overcoming Depression. *Youth and Ginsburg*
- ▶ 50.2 Sensitivity: A Common Trait of Youth Who Use Substances—A Blessing and a Curse. *McAndrews*

## Group Learning and Discussion/Personal Reflection

It is so easy to see risk. It is much harder to look beneath the surface to see strengths, yet it is key to positioning you as a change agent. It is an active choice to decide to see youth through a positive prism, and it may take practice before it comes routinely. It begins with letting teens describe the positive things they do and feel. Then, it is about listening for strength. For example, it may involve allowing yourself to be surprised by the compassion some people possess despite that they were offered little. It may be respecting the resilience they demonstrate. It may be admiring their plans to repair the world, so that it looks more like they wished it had been for them.

### Ongoing Exercise

#### Day 1

1. Share stories about some of the youth who you have cared for who maintained a positive outlook despite dire circumstances.
2. Practice the Active Listening approach in pairs, with one of you taking on the role of professional and the other that of youth.

### Ongoing Practice

Share inspirational stories within your practice. Share especially the stories of youth who surprise you. This will lead to different expectations for all youth.

- When you struggle to find the positive in a young person, talk it through with a colleague whose role will be to point out the strengths the youth may be showing in that situation.
- Share with each other how the tone and demeanor of your interactions with youth who have been demoralized changes when using this strength-based approach.
- Share with each other how the experience of seeing youth who are marginalized through a positive lens changes your work experience. Consider why it may help you prevent burnout within yourself.

### Reframe Youth

Think about what you can do in your setting and in your community to change low expectations of adolescents.

## References

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