

Section 5:

Help-seeking and being hopeful for the future

This section of the toolkit is designed to support you as you work with young people to reflect on their strengths and to encourage them to be hopeful for the future.

Being able to identify strengths and thinking about the supports which exist within their environment can help young people feeling able to cope with current and future challenges. This, in turn, supports their mental health.

What is a strengths-based perspective?

The strengths-based perspective was developed by people working in mental health services in North America in the 1990s (Saleebey, 1996; Rapp, 1998). They sought to challenge key ideas in medical and psychiatry services. The strengths-based perspective suggests concentrating on problems and the past can take up too much energy and resources and be fruitless.

Using a strengths-based perspective with young people means focusing on the positives of the young person's circumstances. The approach does not disregard the young person's difficulties but it draws heavily on the young person's expertise and potential to resolve their own problems.

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Concepts of a strengths-based approach:

- Adverse life events are not strong predictors of future capacities.
- Young people usually demonstrate resilience, not pathology, when faced with adverse life events. It is important to trust the young person's perception of their situation and it is critical that those working with the young person do not assume the upper limits of their capabilities.
- To support a young person using a strengths-based perspective, one must identify and mobilise the young person's strengths (talents, knowledge and capacities) with the aim of reaching their goals.
- The strengths-based perspective avoids pathologising and thus avoids unhelpful labelling.

Key features of a strengths-based approach:

1. Adopt an optimistic attitude.
2. Focus primarily on assets within themselves and their environment.
3. Collaborate with the young person.
4. Work towards the long-term empowerment of young people you work with.



5. Support the young person to identify community connections.

Do's and don'ts for promoting a strengths-based approach

Do	Don't
Acknowledge young people's pain and distress.	Focus so much on strengths and positives that you forget to listen to their pain and distress.
Encourage young people to think about their strengths. The 'identifying strengths exercise' will support young people with this.	Blame young people or other people in their lives. When you support young people with the 'Who can help activity', try to practice this.
Support young people to take action to deal with whatever they are facing.	Make assumptions about solutions.
Believe young people's experiences.	Ignore signs that something is difficult for young people.
Find out what the young person wants to happen. The 'Hopes timeline activity' will support young people with this.	Focus only on problems.
Collaborate with young people.	Tell young people what they should do.
Seek to discover what makes each young person unique.	
Support young people to identify external sources of support. The 'Asset mapping activity' will support young people with this.	

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