

The Essence of Strength-Centered Counseling

The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.

–Henri Bergson

S*t*rength-Centered Counseling: Integrating Postmodern Approaches and Skills With Practice provides a framework for the synthesis of postmodern theories of counseling. Our model can be incorporated effectively with the more traditional models of counseling, resolving the ambiguity about how postmodernism fits into everyday practice and results in more direct application of knowledge and skill sets for training in counselor education. We offer a practical and straightforward resource for a perspective and practice that elicits hope and provides clients opportunities to look at life from a context not only of problems and adversity but also of solutions, strengths, and possibilities. In addition, counselor educators and supervisors will find this book useful for guiding students and supervisees in learning the skills consistent with postmodern approaches under the unifying phases of Strength-Centered Counseling.

Traditionally, counseling theories have been considered accurate reflections of the human experience, contending that the problems individuals face result from deficits within themselves or their environments. Whether cognitive, behavioral, systemic, or psychodynamic in nature, modernist theories have been the primary influence on the training and education of counselors. Contrasting with these traditional, linear models of counseling, postmodern approaches to therapeutic change have developed over the past few decades. These theories highlight and utilize individual strengths, focus on developing solutions in concert with the individual and family, and view change as a dynamic and fluid process. Specifically, Solution-Focused Counseling, Narrative Therapy, and Motivational Interviewing share common principles for understanding and addressing interpersonal struggles; nevertheless, they have developed independently from one another, and for that reason, are not viewed as a single organized model of change. With the growing evolution of positive psychology and influence of wellness counseling as well as the demonstrated impact of hope and resiliency in overcoming life's challenges, an integrated postmodern counseling framework is needed for both counselors and counselor educators.

Strength-centered counseling is a set of perspectives and a practice that promotes change by recognizing the strengths inherent in every human struggle and reflected in adverse challenges.

This is also a book that encourages counselors to embrace the empowerment of hope not just with their clientele, but with themselves as well. If mental health practitioners have faith in the unique and surprising resources of people as they struggle for a better life, they will find such. If they do not, they will not, and over time, can be left with only a growing cynicism about the human experience of change, growth, and transformation. A strength-centered perspective assists counselors in remaining open to personal qualities that assist others and themselves with keeping illness at bay: a perspective that acknowledges that people are more than the sum of their symptoms and far more than the limitations placed on them by the experts sought out for help.

Richard Selzer (1976) reflected on the differing perspectives of the doctor–patient relationship in his book, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*. The following experience with a Tibetan healer illustrated Seltzer’s misgivings regarding traditional medical diagnostic practices and highlighted the impact contrasting healing perspectives can have on client experiences.

Yeshe Dhonden steps to the bedside while the rest stand apart, watching. For a long time he gazes at the woman, favoring no part of her body with his eyes, but seeming to fix his glance at a place just above her supine form. I, too, study her. No physical sign or obvious symptom gives a clue to the nature of her disease.

At last he takes her hand, raising it in both of his own. Now he bends over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robe. His eyes are closed as he feels for her pulse. In a moment he has found the spot, and for the next half hour he remains thus, suspended above the patient like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his. All the power of the man seems to have been drawn down into this one purpose. It is palpation of the pulse raised to the state of ritual. From the foot of the bed, where I stand, it is as though he and the patient have entered a special place of isolation, apartness, about which a vacancy hovers, and across which no violation is possible. After a moment the woman rests back upon her pillow. From time to time, she raises her head to look at the strange figure above her, and then sinks back once more. I cannot see their hands joined in a correspondence that is exclusive, intimate, his fingertips receiving the voice of her sick body through the rhythm and throb she offers at her wrist. All at once I am envious—not of him, not of Yeshe Dhonden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I want to be held like that, touched so, *received*. And I know that I, who have palpated a hundred thousand pulses, have not felt a single one. . . .

As he nears the door (to leave), the woman raises her head and calls out to him in a voice at once urgent and serene. “Thank you doctor,” she says, and touches with her hand the place he had held on her wrist, as though to recapture something that had visited there. Yeshe Dhonden turns back for a moment to gaze at her, and then steps into the corridor. Rounds are at an end.

We are seated once more in the conference room. Yeshe Dhonden speaks now for the first time, in soft Tibetan sounds that I have never heard before. He has barely begun when the young interpreter begins to translate, the two voices continuing in tandem—a bilingual fugue, the one chasing the other. It is like the

chanting of monks. He speaks of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he says. The last spending of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of her heart, long, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. Through it charge the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in the springtime, battering, knocking loose the land, and flooding her breath. Thus he speaks, and is silent.

“May we now have the diagnosis?” a professor asks.

The host of these rounds, the man who knows answers. “Congenital heart disease,” he says. “Interventricular septal defect, with resultant heart failure.”

A gateway in the heart, I think. That must not be opened. Through in charge the full waters that flood her breath. So! Here then is the doctor listening to the sounds of the body to which the rest of us are deaf. (pp. 34–36)

Strength-centered counseling is not the absence of solid graduate training in clinical psychodiagnosis, but a style of being with others that is not distracted by it. The severity of the woman’s condition was understood from two distinct perspectives. They are views of the same condition, unchanging and chronic, that provided differing experiences for the patient, and ultimately for the helper. In one, a diagnosis was likely “given” to the patient following a series of medical tests and exams; the other was an explanation that was “received” from the patient following a time together of being heard and understood. This then is the intent of strength-centered counseling: to assist individuals and families with understanding and embracing the pain of life from a perspective that recognizes the struggle, the unique and inherent personal qualities in confrontation of the struggle, and the potential of both the counselor and client to provide a relational context for eliciting hope, increasing a readiness for change, and mapping out action steps for change and life satisfaction.

Counseling practice toward this end embraces a set of nine core principles—the essence of strength-centered counseling. They illustrate change through a deliberate use of language to accentuate personal strengths inherent in every human struggle and reflected in each challenge of adversity. As Saleebey (2006) pointed out, a strength-based counseling is a style of helping in which, rather than focusing on problems, your eye turns toward possibilities. Possibilities may become lasting change through shared experience of understanding, respect, strength, resilience, dichotomy, language, wellness, hope, and authenticity.

PRINCIPLE 1: A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

People are understood by strengths, resources, and characteristics learned and brought to bear against life’s evolving challenges and not by the weight of their histories. Counselors share with others the unique qualities and strengths demonstrated in their efforts to stand up to life’s difficulties, promoting a hope for change. Strength-centered counseling demonstrates a sincere interest in the well-being of others and illustrates a *shared understanding* of who clients are and what they hope to become. Strength-centered counselors seek to understand not only how difficulties and problems impact people’s lives but also how they reflect the hopes and preferences people have. A *shared understanding* encourages counselors to collaborate with their clients in establishing goals that sustain people with the courage, optimism, personal

responsibility, interpersonal skills, perseverance, and purpose needed to overcome adversity. Rather than working as an expert labeler of individual deficits, it is far more helpful, and efficient, for counselors to build relationships with clients on a *shared understanding* of how clients experience their problem stories. Actively sharing the valor, loyalty, persistence, honesty, prudence, and acceptance inherent in confronting life's struggles allows clients to experience their stories and themselves differently, while building a personal knowledge necessary for change.

PRINCIPLE 2: SHARED RESPECT

Strength-centered counseling relies on respect for the influences of culture, gender, race, age, profession, financial and legal status, sexual orientation, religion, education, and the various roles people bring to their life perspective and personal understanding. By its very intent, strength-centered counseling is multicultural, and it is a collaborative discovery of those strengths, resources, perspectives, and activities in seeking “something different” in the lives of others. *Shared respect* is demonstrated when clients, rather than counselors, have the last word on what they need to improve their lives. The perception of reality is a unique experience that exists only in the eyes and mind of the beholder, and this requires counselors to accept and respect the worldview of clients, appreciate what they wish different, and remain curious about how language within and between sessions maintains despair as well as to how it can introduce hope, possibilities, and a readiness for change.

PRINCIPLE 3: SHARED STRENGTHS

Strength-centered counselors are competent in the skills necessary to elicit strengths often hidden by misery, protective strategies, and the failure to achieve goals set by others. It requires counselors to be trained in a language of strengths as well as in the skills necessary for cocreating action plans that offer the greatest hope to others for living optimal lives. The identification of strengths represents characteristics empathically understood by clients and counselors that confront threats to psychological wellness. They are central to effective goal setting because they ground a “preferred life” in familiar landmarks and contribute to the likelihood of successful therapeutic outcomes. Assisting clients and families with understanding their struggles through a context of strengths and possibilities, rather than personal deficits and problems, instills hope and the self-healing tendencies necessary for change. *Shared strengths* represent those qualities and characteristics reflected in every struggle to “right the ship” that often go unnoticed due to the urgency of life's storms.

PRINCIPLE 4: SHARED RESILIENCE

Strength-centered counseling seeks to build client resilience through a process of strength awareness and application. Counseling that recognizes and elicits personal strengths

increases the resiliency patterns needed to manage stress, cope with adversity, and develop actions that increase clients' satisfaction with themselves and others long after counseling has ended. Individuals' recognition of their own resiliency efforts in the face of life's struggles provides a route to authentic self-esteem. Understanding how individuals and families have been "stretched" by life's struggles provides a window into those strength characteristics that both support and distract in their fight for personal freedom. The intent of the counseling relationship, therefore, is to restore clients' belief in themselves and the control they have over events in their lives, leading to a *shared resilience* for the present and the future.

PRINCIPLE 5: SHARED DICHOTOMIES

Strength-centered counselors believe that people have the capacity to explore multiple sides of an experience. Where there are deficits, there are strengths; where problems arise, there are preferences; where there is resistance, there is also anticipation; where there is illness, there are opportunities for wellness; and where despair resides, hope lives also. Clients and families are influencing their lives all the time, even in the most dismal circumstances. It is not only that a client is depressed, but also how the client has been able to keep depression at bay. It is not only that a client is worried, but also how the client has been able to keep worry from taking over. Depression and worry are simply by-products in the pursuit of a better life, the hope for something more and different, and the efforts reflected in every struggle. A *shared dichotomy* is also insight into how the very strengths we so often engage to solve life's struggles may be precisely what stand in the way. Assisting others with understanding personal strength dichotomies can better support individuals and families by broadening their array of available strengths in order to address life's struggles.

PRINCIPLE 6: SHARED LANGUAGE

Strength-centered counselors depend on the strategic use of language to elicit meaning and cocreate possibilities with individuals and families. The dialogue between the client and counselor is deliberately shifted from a "problem saturated" worldview to one of hope, choice, and renewal. This *shared language* is at the heart of every technique and requires counselors to interact differently as well as think differently about clients. As the primary tool in therapy, language can elicit meanings that naturally occur in making sense of life challenges so as to assist others with perceiving themselves in ways that make standing up to these challenges possible. Within a trusting and empathic relationship, a strength-centered counselor seeks to shift how people describe themselves in relationship to the problems they wish resolved. It is not the removal of an irrational thought, an inappropriate behavior, or even how best to live with a personal deficit, but the addition of something else: possibilities, solutions, hope, and strengths.

PRINCIPLE 7: SHARED WELLNESS

Strength-centered counseling embodies a belief in personal wellness. Therapies that focus solely on problem resolution often fail to directly address lifestyle patterns that represent health beyond the absence of the initial concerns. The strengths needed to stand up to adversity are the same strengths needed to increase optimal health and well-being. By understanding human struggles through a perspective of strengths, counselors are able to identify those resilient life patterns and skills needed to address clients' initial concerns as well as lifestyle choices for increasing personal wellness. In addition, strength-centered counselors practice *shared wellness* so as to better withstand the professional struggles and fatigue that can accompany a career devoted to helping others.

PRINCIPLE 8: SHARED HOPE

Strength-centered counselors approach each encounter from a perspective of unwavering *shared hope*. Having faith in the unique and surprising resources of people as they confront insurmountable odds against a better life provides the greatest likelihood for recognizing the strengths in others and the often imperceptible movements of change. This is the cornerstone of personal resilience necessary for life satisfaction and fulfilled relationships. Assisting clients and families with understanding their struggles through a context of strengths and possibilities, rather than personal deficits and problems, instills a hope for change. It is therefore necessary that strength-centered counselors be competent in the skills and strategies for instilling hope in others.

PRINCIPLE 9: SHARED AUTHENTICITY

Learning the skills associated with strength-centered counseling is largely dependent on the willingness and ability of counselors to apply a strength-centered perspective in their personal lives. This involves developing equitable relationships, self-respect, and an appreciation that life choices different from one's own are equally valid. Personal and professional *shared authenticity* acknowledges the connection between a strength-centered counselor's choice of language and its influence on reality—discussing opportunities rather than limitations and challenges rather than setbacks. *Shared authenticity* also embodies a professional commitment to clients through a personal commitment to wellness and self-care.

These nine core principles (see Table 1.1) are the foundation of strength-centered counseling and support the interactions between clients and counselors, moving individuals and families from the possibility of overcoming adversity to realizing a preferred life. Counseling students and counselor educators should come to appreciate the integrated nature of these core principles as the essence of adopting a strength-centered perspective for work with clients, collaboration with colleagues, and their personal interactions.

Table 1.1 Essential Principles of Strength-Centered Counseling

| <i>Essential Principles of Strength-Centered Counseling</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|---|---|
| 1. Shared Understanding | Strength-centered counselors share with others the unique qualities and strengths demonstrated in their efforts to stand up to life's difficulties, promoting hope for change. |
| 2. Shared Respect | Strength-centered counseling relies on respect for the influences of culture, gender, race, age, profession, financial and legal status, sexual orientation, religion, education, and the various roles people bring to their life perspective and personal understanding. |
| 3. Shared Strengths | Strength-centered counselors are trained in the recognition and language of strengths as well as the skills necessary for cocreating action plans that are strength centered and offer the greatest hope to others for living optimal lives. |
| 4. Shared Resilience | Strength-centered counseling that recognizes and elicits personal strengths increases the resiliency needed to manage stress, cope with adversity, and develop actions that increase clients' satisfaction with themselves and others long after counseling has ended. |
| 5. Shared Dichotomies | Strength-centered counselors assist individuals and families with understanding personal strengths in order to broaden the array of their available strengths for better addressing life's struggles. |
| 6. Shared Language | Strength-centered counselors use language as the primary tool in therapy to elicit meanings that naturally occur in making sense of life challenges so as to assist others with perceiving themselves in ways that make these challenges surmountable. |
| 7. Shared Wellness | Strength-centered counselors are able to identify those resilient qualities and skills needed to address clients' initial concerns as well as lifestyle choices for increasing personal wellness by understanding human struggles through a perspective of strengths. |
| 8. Shared Hope | Strength-centered counselors believe that having faith in the unique and surprising resources of people as they confront insurmountable odds to a better life provides the greatest likelihood for recognizing the strengths in others and the often imperceptible movements of change. |
| 9. Shared Authenticity | The willingness and ability of strength-centered counselors to apply a strength-centered perspective in both their professional and personal lives allows them to experience shared authenticity with their clients and colleagues. |

Strength-Centered Counseling: Integrating Postmodern Approaches and Skills With Practice is presented in three sections. In Part I we continue with the fundamentals, describing how strength-centered counseling works as a synthesis of postmodern models of counseling, explaining the integral role language plays in moving people toward lasting change. In Part II we introduce the three phases of strength-centered counseling: Shared Understanding, Contracted Change, and Developed Lifestyle. Along with the descriptions of each phase, we will guide you in incorporating strength-centered counseling techniques and interventions with existing clients. In Part III we link the principles and application of strength-centered counseling to professional practice and personal life, including a Professional Plan for Hope and Wellness that outlines steps for continued growth as a strength-centered counselor.

We have presented the phases of strength-centered counseling as a linear model; however, we hope to convey the nonlinear nature of moving *among* the phases as you work with clients and colleagues. While the presentation of the phases suggests that the steps happen in chronological order, experience will show you that no particular order is necessary or even more effective than another. Competent strength-centered counselors experience an internal integration of the theoretical principles and the techniques while interventions emerge naturally during interactions with clients and colleagues.

The shift required in your theoretical perspective as well as the language necessary for working through the phases of strength-centered counseling can be difficult. To provide a “normalcy” to this learning discomfort, we have included quotes from counselors who have worked with us in strength-centered training, classes, and seminars. Hearing their voices may allow you to connect with the material in a more personal way.

The chapters also include learning and professional growth activities for anchoring strength-centered concepts and skills. Engaging in these activities with a learning partner is very effective; however, in the case that a learning partner is not available, working individually with the aid of a journal can also be both effective and personally rewarding. Throughout the chapters you will notice sun-shaped icons indicating that additional details and guidance for processing activities and descriptions are available on our Web site through SAGE Publications: www.sagepub.com/wardreuter or on the DVD that accompanies the book.

