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**Strength Discovery and**

**Needs Assessment**

**Techniques for Engaging Transition-Age Youth**

**and Young Adults**

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**Contents for this Practice**

* Outline of Essential Features
* Possible Questions for Youth or Young Adult
* Possible Questions for Family Members or Other Informal Key Players

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**Outline of Essential Features**

**What is Strength Discovery & Needs Assessment?**

* Strength Discovery is an alternative approach to deficit-based assessments.
* A *general approach* rather than a specific technique.
* Various formal and informal tools may be used..
* Guidelines for gathering information so that:
* Engagement of young people is promoted.
* A basis is provided for person-centered planning and other transition support to encourage youth goal achievement.

**Why do Strength Discovery?**

* Possible benefits:
* Enhances engagement of YP.
* Builds relationships between the TF and the YP.
* Demonstrates interest in YP and the people who are important to him/her.
* Helps the TF and, more importantly, the YP and others in the youth’s life to see him/her in a positive way.
* Increases collaboration & overcoming barriers by getting YPs input.

**Features of Strength Discovery**  
Identifies strengths and resources of youth, their families, and their support systems.

* Traditional assessments spend little time assessing strengths and resources.
* Strength Discovery assesses strengths and resources as a primary focus.
* This is because strengths are an essential ingredient in person-centered planning.
* Think about the strengths and resources of young people in your program.
* Focus on future, not past.
* Identify possibilities and options vs. limitations of YP or their environment.
* Focus on specific problems/needs vs. diagnosis, core conflicts, or other general descriptions.
* Identify informal supports (e.g., aunt, mother, girl/boyfriend, older brother).
* Don’t just rely on professional supports
* Identify formal key players (e.g., coach, teacher, therapist).
* Focus on identifying solutions.
* e.g., by reframing problems.

**Strength Discovery vs. Deficit-based Assessments**

* Deficit-based assessments of youth with EBD often frame the problem as being internal to the person.
* Focuses on “what is wrong, what is missing, & what is abnormal”
* Strength Discovery assessment views the YP and family as possible resources.
* YP is the source of solutions, not problems.

**Why is engagement of the YP important?**

* Forming working relationships with youth is challenging.
* Even the most experienced Transition Facilitators (TF) can find themselves “working without a customer” (Berg, 1994).
* It is important that the YP feel a sense of being in control of decisions.
* TFs who engage YP are more likely to be effective in working with them.
* When there is no engagement…
  + YP don’t participate in conversation
  + YP may not share important information
  + YP don’t follow through on agreements
  + YP drop out
* May mean that the YP is taking you seriously.
* Argument ***by TF***is usually not helpful.

**How is engagement created?**

* Patience.
* Qualitative features of interactions.
* The way in which TFs interact with YP.
* Content of interactions.
* Does content promote focus on strengths and self-determination?
* Broader engagement.
* Relationship w/TF is a springboard for increased participation of YP in relevant community settings.

**Signals of Disengagement**

* Displays of typical teen behavior.
* Silence.
* Changing subject, other expressions of boredom.
* YP too easily gives the “right answer”
* One way to judge this is if what the YP says doesn’t match behavior.
* Argument ***by******YP*** may not be a bad thing.

**Strength Discovery: Possible Topics**

* Interests and preferences.
* Values and traditions.
* Skills, abilities, and other helpful attributes.
* Goals and aspirations across transition domains.
* Strategies that have worked well in the past.
* Environments where things have worked well.
* Settings that are most comfortable.
* Informal supports in YPs life.
* Family members, relatives, friends, other people valued by youth (informal and formal key players).

**Qualitative Features of Interactions**

* Solicit youth’s input throughout interactions.
* Acknowledge youth’s input (active listening).
* Remain non-judgmental – don’t lecture.
* Pleasant & steady voice tone.
* Express enthusiasm where appropriate.
* Expression/ Eye contact/ Nonverbals to match.
* Expressions of empathy & encouragement.
* Offer assistance, as appropriate.
* Use positive descriptive praise.

**Opportunity to Practice the Practice: Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment**

**Practice Opportunities**

* Role play of initial interview with YP.
* Preferably break into groups of threes for this role-play practice.
* Roles:
  + Transition Facilitator, YP, Observer
* **TFs**
  + You may use Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment “Possible Questions” (These possible questions are after this outline section).
  + Be attentive to the qualitative features of your interaction.
  + Try to start conversation with a topic relevant to situation.
    - e.g., TF could ask who dropped the youth off, andthis could lead to questions about family.
    - e.g., “I see you’re wearing a ‘Cubs’ cap. Do you like to play baseball, or watch it?”
* **Youth**
  + You may base your role-play on someone you have worked with.
  + Or, you may base it on a daughter, son, niece, or even yourself as a youth.
  + Be realistic, but not a barrier! We want to have success in practice.
* **Observer**
  + Watch role-play interaction and be ready to provide constructive feedback.
  + Also, you may occasionally break role play to clarify a point, redirect, or discuss how it’s going.
  + Serve as the time keeper (i.e., break after 5 min. of role play).
* **Observer watches for whether Transition Facilitator is…**
  + Is warm and conversational
  + Seems interested in YP
  + Follows YPs lead
  + Reflects, validates, focuses, & summarizes
  + Focuses on strengths
  + Identifies key players
  + Reframes deficits, problems, and barriers
  + Using appropriate Qualitative Features of Interactions
    - Solicit youth’s input throughout interactions.
    - Acknowledge youth’s input (active listening).
    - Remain non-judgmental – don’t lecture.
    - Pleasant & steady voice tone.
    - Express enthusiasm where appropriate.
    - Expression/ Eye contact/ Nonverbals to match.
    - Expressions of empathy & encouragement.
    - assistance, as appropriate.
    - Use positive descriptive praise.

**How is Strength Discovery Done?**

* TF *does:*
* Have an ongoing series of conversations.
* Keep the “interview” conversational.
* Keep conversations open-ended, and follow the lead of youth.
* Ask secondary questions.
* Reflect, validate, focus, and summarize youths’ observations and thoughts.
* TF *does not:*
* Ask a series of questions from a form, as in a formal interview.

**Strength Discovery & Futures Planning Work Together**

* Both are core competencies for TIP TFs.
* Both promote strengths and YP driven futures planning.
* Both facilitate collaboration and breaking down barriers.
* Both demonstrate interest in YP and the people who are important to them.
* Both help YP to be seen in a more positive way.

**Strength Discovery: When is it done?**

* Should happen ASAP to “set the stage” for futures planning.
* Initial interviews are one-on-one with YP.
* Context is a “chat”, not an interrogation, so usually occurs in multiple brief interviews.
* Later, other key players identified by YP as important in his/her life will be interviewed.
* Either one-on-one or w/YP.
* Also depends on YPs preference at the time.
* Ongoing assessment chats with YP.
* After a chat, the Transition Facilitator should add any additional strengths or refinements to the Strengths Listing and to the Needs Listing.

**OARS**

**Further Expansion of Qualitative Features of Interactions**

* Using OARS from Motivational Interviewing
  + Open-ended Questioning
  + Affirmations
  + Reflections
  + Summary Statements

**OARS:Open-Ended Questions**

* Cannot be answered with a simple yes or no
* Encourage the young person to talk more descriptively
* Helps you avoid premature
* judgments
* Keeps communication moving

Examples:

Not: How much did you drink this week?

Rather: Tell me about your drinking.

Not: Do you like to smoke weed?

Rather: What are some of the things you like about smoking weed?

**OARS: Affirmations**

* Sincere compliments or statements of understanding and appreciation
* Validates young person’s feelings and experiences
* Lets them know you hear them and you understand
* Promotes self-efficacy
* Helps young person feel confident about using their inner resources to act and change

Examples:

“It must have been very hard to come here. You’re taking a big step.”

“So even though you felt stressed, you decided not to smoke weed this morning – that really took strength!”

“You said that with a lot of conviction.”

“In spite of many other stressors, you’re working very hard at this!”

**OARS: Reflections**

* Show that you have heard accurately by restating the young person’s meaning
* A way of checking rather than assuming
* Builds empathy
* Reduces resistance, strengthens alliance, and reinforces motivation

**OARS: Simple Reflections**

* Essentially the Transition Facilitator (TF) is repeating the essence of what young person (YP) has said
* YP: “My parents are giving me a hard time.”
* FT: “So things haven’t been going well with you and your parents.”
* YP: “Sometimes I think about quitting, but it would be really hard because everyone I know smokes weed.”
* TF: “I guess it’s hard to even imagine how you’d be able to quit when all your friends do it.”

**OARS: Double-sided Reflections**

* Shows that TF understand both sides of the YP’s dilemma
* YP: It would suck to lose my housing over a stupid policy, but I don’t want to quit partying.
* TF: So on the one hand you enjoy drinking with your friends, but on the other hand, you value having a nice place to live.
* Ending on the change side can help emphasize it

**OARS: Summary Statements**

* Restate and reinforce what has been said
* Shows that you are listening carefully
* Double-checks that you “got it right”
* Prepares the young person to move on
* Can be used anytime, but particularly valuable at the end of a session, to “gather up” details and return them to the young person

Examples:

“What I’ve heard you saying is…”

“So let me check if I’ve got this right…”

“…is there anything I’ve left out?”

**Opportunity to Practice the Practice: OARS & Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment**

**Using OARS within a Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment chat.**

* Role play of an interview with YP with whom the Transition Facilitator has known for a while.
* Preferably break into groups of threes for this role-play practice.
  + Roles: Transition Facilitator, YP, Observer
* **TFs**
  + You may use Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment “Possible Questions” (These possible questions are after this outline section).
  + Be attentive to the use of OARS in your interaction.
  + Try to start conversation with a topic relevant to situation.
* **Youth**
  + You may base your role-play on someone you have worked with.
  + Or, you may base it on a daughter, son, niece, or even yourself as a youth.
  + Be realistic, but not a barrier! We want to have success in practice.
* **Observer**
  + Watch role-play interaction and be ready to provide constructive feedback.
  + Also, you may occasionally break role play to clarify a point, redirect, or discuss how it’s going.
  + Serve as the time keeper (i.e., break after 5 min. of role play).
* **Observer watches for whether Transition Facilitator is…**
  + Using OARS from Motivational Interviewing
    - Open-ended Questioning
    - Affirmations
    - Reflections
    - Summary Statements

**Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment:**

**Possible Questions for Youth or Young Adult**

**Ongoing Assessment:** These questions and items are NOT to be used as an “intake”, rather these are ideas about topics that the transition facilitator may use as relevant in ongoing Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment chats.

**People Who Are Close to the Young Person**

**(e.g., family, extended family, relatives, and other informal key players)**

Who would you define as your family?

Who in your family do you admire the most and why?

When do you feel the closest to your family?

What are your happiest memories with your family?

What do you like most about your mom, dad, sister, brother, aunt, grandmother, etc.?

What do you think they like most about you?

Who would you define as your friends/social network?

What are some of your happiest times with your friends?

Who are you closest to?

What do you admire the most about them?

What are some ways that your friends have helped you?

Who else is an important part of your life?

Is there anyone else who ever helps you or your family?

What services that you receive do you or your family feel help you?

What services/resources have you received in the past that helped you or your family?

What obstacles do you face to have the relationship you want with family/friends/formal supports?

With whom would you like to have a better relationship?)

**Young Person’s and Family’s Strengths and Interests**

What are some of the things you think you are best at?

What does your family think you are best at?

What do you like to do in your free time?

What groups and activities are you involved in or would you like to be involved in?

What are your dreams/goals?

What are the interests/dreams/goals of your informal key players? (e.g., mom, dad, sister, brother, grandmother, uncle, aunt)

What activities and interests do you share with your family? With friends?

What keeps you from engaging in the activities/interests that you enjoy?

**Values, Culture, and Natural Resources of the Family**

What traditions do you have with your family? (If spiritual beliefs are shared, discuss areas of strength around these.)

What would you say your family’s values are?

What areas do you wish you could strengthen as it relates to your values? Your culture?

**Vision and Needs of the Young Person Across Life Domains**

Employment/Career

What types of jobs/volunteer opportunities have you had?

What types of jobs/volunteer opportunities would you like to have?

What might get in the way of you reaching your employment and career goals?

Educational Opportunities

When do you do your best educationally?

What educational goals do you have?

What could get in the way of you reaching your educational goals?

Living Situation

What types of living situations do you do your best in?

What is your ideal living situation?

What skills do you need to learn to obtain your ideal living situation?

Personal Effectiveness/Well-being

Who do you help?

How do you help other people?

How do you keep up your relationships with the people who are close to you?

What do you still need to learn about keeping up relationships?

How do you deal with stress?

What do you do to relax?

What dangers do you face? How do you deal with these dangers?

When do you speak up for yourself?

When you want to find out something, where do you get information?

What do you do to take care of your health?

How do you get the medical and dental services that you need?

If the young person is pregnant or a parent:

* + How do you take care of the health of your child (children)?
  + Who gets (will get) medical attention for your child (children)?
  + Who does (will) rear your child (children)?
  + Who does (will) discipline your child (children)?
  + Who does (will) pay for your child’s (children’s) needs?

Community Life Functioning

How do you get around your neighborhood?

What community groups do you take part in?

What dangerous situations do you see in your neighborhood?

How do you avoid these dangerous situations?

What do you need to avoid dangerous situations?

Where do you go to have fun or get entertained?

Who do you usually go with to have fun?

What services would you like to see offered in your community?

How do you manage your money?

What do you need to learn about managing your money?

Where do you find spiritual comfort?

**Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment:**

**Possible Questions for Family and Other Informal Key Players**

**Ongoing Assessment:** These questions and items are NOT to be used as an “intake”, rather these are ideas about topics that the transition facilitator may use as relevant in ongoing Strength Discovery and Needs Assessment chats.

**Note:** Questions are presented with alternate wording so that they may be asked of a family or extended family member or of someone who is not a member of the young person’s family. The words occurring first within each parenthesis are used with family or extended family. The words occurring last within each parenthesis are used with non-family key players.

**Young Person’s and Family’s Strengths and Interests**

What are your dreams and goals for the young person?

What are some of the things you think the young person is best at?

What are the young person’s interests?

When and in what situations is the young person most successful?

Who is part of (your / the young person’s) family?

Who do you admire or respect among (your / the young person’s) family? Why?

What do you think (your / the young person’s) family is good at?

Who are the young person’s friends?

What do you like or respect about the young person’s friends? Why?

Which of these friends are you closest to?

Who else is the young person close to?

Who helps the young person and his or her family?

What services do (you / the young person and his or her family) receive that helps the family or the young person?

What do you need to support the young person in his or her journey to adulthood?

When do you feel the closest to the young person?

When does the family seem to pull together?

What do you think the young person likes best about his or her grandmother, mom, dad, brother, sister, etc.?

What do you think they all like most about you?

What are your interests?

**Values, Culture, and Natural Resources of the Family**

What family traditions do (you / the young person’s family) have?

How do these traditions affect how (you /the young person’s family) live (your life / their lives)?

What do (you / the young person’s family) value?

**Vision and Needs of the Family Across Life Domains**

Employment/Career

What types of jobs/volunteer activities has the young person had?

What strengths did the young person demonstrate when doing these jobs/volunteer activities?

What needs did the young person have when doing these jobs or activities?

What types of jobs/volunteer opportunities do you think would be best for the young person?

What could get in the way of the young person reaching his or her employment/career goals?

Educational Opportunities

When does the young person do his or her best educationally?

What educational goals would be best for the young person?

What could get in the way of the young person reaching his or her educational goals?

Living Situation

What types of living situations does the young person do best in?

What is the young person’s ideal living situation?

What skills does the young person still need to learn to obtain and maintain the ideal living situation?

Personal Effectiveness/Well-being

Who does the young person help?

How does the young person help other people?

How does the young person keep up relationships with people who are close to him/her?

What does the young person still need to learn about keeping up relationships?

How does the young person deal with stress?

What does the young person do to relax?

What dangers does the young person face?

How do you help the young person protect himself/herself from these dangers?

What skills does the young person need to advocate for his or her needs and wants?

Where and how does the young person find information?

How does the young person take care of his or her health?

How do (you and the young person / the young person and the family) get needed medical and dental services?

What do (you and the young person / the young person and the family) need to take care of (your / their) health?

If the young person is pregnant or a parent:

* How does the young person take care of the health of his or her child/children?
* Who gets/will get medical attention for the child/children?
* Who does/will rear the child/children?
* Who does/will pay for the child’s/children’s needs?
* What skills does the young person need to take care of his or her child/children?

Community Life Functioning

What dangerous situations do you see in the young person’s neighborhood?

How does the young person avoid these dangerous situations?

What does the young person need to avoid dangerous situations?

What community groups or services does the young person belong to or use?

What community services or organizations would you like to see the young person belong to or use?

How does the young person manage his/her money?

What does the young person need to learn about managing money?

Where do (you / the young person and family) find spiritual comfort