

A strengths-based approach...

... a simple phrase that has different meanings for different people but an approach that when done right, opens up many possibilities.

A strengths-based approach can be used in any intervention, in any setting, with any client group, including carers, and by any social or health care member of staff.

The Care Act puts a strengths-based approach at the centre of any intervention, placing the individual, and not only their problems at the centre of the process and highlighting “what is strong, rather than what is wrong”, identifying the resources someone has within themselves as well as who and what support they have around them.

This ensures that all their strengths and talents are identified and considered in all interventions; not just their needs and personal outcomes such as what is important for them or what would they like to achieve.

At the end of the day the core duty of the Care Act is to promote individual wellbeing which is broader than ‘meeting eligible needs’!

Interventions become holistic, person-centred and outcomes focused, which are key elements for a strengths-based approach, and will result in better outcomes and lives for individuals.

As individuals we are all different, and the Care Act recognises this. As individuals we have multiple skills, knowledge, talents, character traits, relationships and abilities. Social care interventions should consider all of those rather than a ‘one size fits all’ based on the catch-all labels such as ‘disability’, ‘dementia’ or simply ‘old’.

When we look beyond these labels amazing potential is revealed.

Anne is a 67 year old woman who speak two languages, has a wide knowledge of international affairs, politics and environmental concerns. She speaks confidently, is very organised, reliable and is witty. She loves interacting with people, learning and teaching.

Anne is NOT just an elderly, lonely person with hearing and sight loss who is finding it very difficult to manage around the house and unable to go out on her own.

See what we just did there? We unfolded Anne, by asking the right questions and talking to Anne we found out about her, beyond her needs, illness or impairment.

Rob is a 75 year old man who lives with his wife in a first floor flat and he has one daughter who lives in another city. Rob has difficulty communicating and up to now his wife and daughter have spoken to professionals on his behalf. Rob has a care package to support him and his wife as a carer.

Rob had a fall and a re-assessment has to take place, the practitioner commissions an independent advocate, Lianne, to maximise Rob's involvement in the process. During the conversation we discover that Rob loves being outdoors and is a very sociable person with a current difficulty in expressing himself verbally, but he has many manual abilities.

Does it sound familiar?

And the unfolding of possibilities and strengths doesn't stop with the individual. Their many facets, needs and talents can and do integrate with their wider world. Carers, friends, family, community and professionals are all actual elements in their life texture and wellbeing.

Through a strengths -based approach we support the individual to identify their personal outcomes, their needs and their strengths, including social and family networks and other universal resources available to them.

We can then work together to identify how the strengths – individual and community resources, can support them to improve their lives. This may be, for example, the local council, their skills or knowledge, a friend, library, neighbour, health club or a social group.

And for practitioners? A whole lot of extra work during an intervention? No!

When we talk with individuals we have to create relationships based on a collaborative process that will enable us to explore together what their strengths, needs and personal outcomes are.

We need to move away from asking questions on a form to having a conversation and building a relationship. Move from 'what problems are you having preparing a meal or getting out of the house?' to 'what does a good day look like for you?'

It is generally not easy to identify one's strengths, and adults and carers can find it difficult. There are useful tools, for example, asking the right questions, strengths mapping, motivational interviewing, recovery model, three houses and so on. These can support practitioners and individuals in identifying strengths. They are all different and there isn't a 'one size fits all' as individuals are different.

Using these tools people can discover assets and strengths they have or could have access to and that may be through local facilities, professionals or their own talents or those of a friend or family member.

Strengths and assets come in many shapes, sizes and ages!

When we, practitioners and individuals work collaboratively, we open up that apparently simple 'circumstance' of each individual and unfold a whole world of possibilities.

So what about Anne?

The practitioner supported Anne to contact the nearby university. There are many overseas students there who need help with their English conversation skills and now Anne is visited twice a week by students and really enjoys the company and the teaching.

Anne now has something to look forward to which helps increase her overall sense of wellbeing.

And Rob?

The strengths-based approach has helped to identify Rob's interest and knowledge in gardening.

Rob lives in a flat with no garden, but his first floor neighbour has a garden and doesn't know how to take care of it. So they agree to work on it together once a week or so and Rob is delighted with this idea.

His wife, who had not thought of this is also very happy and will get a break on a weekly basis from her caring role.

Sometimes individuals need support to get involved in the process and we must look at how we can do this by changing times for meetings, locations, bridging gaps in communication needs, providing an independent advocate and so on.

So when we take a strengths -based approach, we look at the wide array of skills and assets of and around the individual. We can involve and link with family, community, organisations, practitioners, local authorities or facilities and services in working out the best way for their wellbeing to be promoted
And most important of all, we work together towards achieving the best possible lives and outcomes for individuals.

A strengths based approach - unfolding great lives and outcomes.