

**Strengths**

Exercise



30-60 min



Client



No



Strengths Spotting by Exception Finding

A key technique in solution-focused therapy is first to identify and then analyze the times when a client's presenting complaint or problem did not happen. The practitioner invites the client to consider what was different when the problem was absent (Molnar & de Shazer, 1987). Rather than focusing on the who, what, when, and where of problems, exception finding focuses on the who, what, when, and where of exception times. Consequently, clients become aware of their strengths relative to their goals, rather than their deficiencies relative to their problems.

Goal

The goal of this tool is two-fold. First, it can be used to assess a client's ability to deal with challenges and problems. Second, focusing on exceptions can increase the client's awareness of and confidence in his/her own ability to create solutions for him/herself. This process can, therefore, help increase the client's sense of self-efficacy and generate hope for the future.

Advice

- If the client is unable to answer the questions in step 2 (he/she does not see pieces of the goals happening yet), the practitioner should communicate respectful recognition of the fact that this is indeed a difficult situation. Moreover, the practitioner may encourage the client to be curious about where change will emerge first.
- When the practitioner assists the client in translating his/her actions to strengths, it is advisable to explore/apply each strength at a time to the presenting problem. Clients often have a hard time synthesizing too many strengths and applying them all at once.
- When the practitioner has reason to believe that exceptions are happening but that the client minimizes or denies their presence, it is advisable to select the wording for the "exceptions inquiry" that assumes that change is occurring. Instead of asking, "Are there times that pieces of this are happening?" the practitioner may deliberately ask: "Tell me about the times when pieces of this are happening these days."
- It is possible that a particular exception is not related to the problem. This is important information because focusing on using the strengths that underlie this exception may waste time and effort that would be better spent on searching for more relevant exceptions and strengths. To determine the importance of an exception of the solution, the practitioner can ask, "If this were happening more, how much difference would it make?"



References

- McQuaide, S., & Ehrenreich, J. H. (1997). Assessing client strengths. *Families in Society*, 78, 201-212.
- Molnar, A., & de Shazer, S. (1987) Solution-focused therapy: Toward the identification of therapeutic tasks. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 13, 349-358.



Strengths Spotting by Exception Finding

Instructions

Step 1: Exceptions in the past

Was there a time when this problem was not a problem, or when it presented itself with less severity?

What was it like at that time?

What were you doing at that time?



If you have faced this problem before, have you successfully overcome it before? If so, what do you suppose you did to make that happen?

If the client is unable to answer this specific problem-related question, the practitioner may decide to proceed with more general questions:

When faced with an overwhelming obstacle, what's your "go-to" way to overcome it?

What was the most successful project you ever tackled, and what made you successful?

Dealing successfully with challenges or difficulties can be considered a strength. Which of your strengths did you use to address the current difficulty or other problems in the past?



These are the strengths my client employed in the past to deal with the problem:

Strength #1

Strength #2

Strength #3

Strength #4

Strength #5

How can you use these strengths to get closer to your desired goal and cope with challenges that may arise?

Step 2: Exceptions in the present

Let's focus on the things you would like to change. Are there any aspects of them – no matter how small – that are already happening these days?



How exactly did you make this positive change happen?

What were the specific steps that you took? Walk me through your thoughts and actions...

Which of your strengths did you use to make this positive change happen? Together with the practitioner, translate the current actions to strengths.

These are the strengths my client currently employs to move closer to his/her goals:

Strength #1

Strength #2

Strength #3

Strength #4

Strength #5



How can you use these strengths to get closer to your desired goal and cope with challenges that may arise?

Step 3: Exceptions in the future (homework)

Between now and the next time we meet, pay attention to those times when the problems are nonexistent or when they appear to be less severe. Specifically, pay attention to what is different about these times. How did your thoughts or behaviors differ, leading up to them?

Next time, I would like for you to describe to me what was different and what actions you took. You may use the form on page 8 to describe the situation and the action you took.

In addition, try to name your actions in terms of strengths. For instance, if you were able to honor your personal needs by saying “no” to an offer, you may add the strength “self-care or self-compassion” to this action.



Description of time when the problem was not happening or less severe. What was different?	What did I do to make this happen? What kinds of actions did I take (or not take)?	What strength was I possibly using here?