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“Positive Choices:  
Strengths Based Approaches  
to Working with Young People”

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## Helping young people to tell their story (A workshop with peter Slattery)

At its most basic, working with a young person means listening (attentively and creatively) to that young person, making some sense of what we hear, and then responding in some useful way. Quite straightforward really. And yet...

It often seems to be the case that the young person does not know just how they think and feel about lots of things; they may not be terrific at talking; or may not want to talk; they may not trust us; they may not be super at reading and writing...*and* they may be grumpy as hell. So it's our task to:

- Do 'something' to get their attention in a meaningful way
- Do 'something' which includes those who may be less verbal
- Do 'something' which includes those who are imperfect at reading and writing
- Do 'something' which creates intrigue, interest or hope that what happens next in life can be a very good thing.

Useful allies in such conversations are the ideas of optimism, resilience, and a strengths-focus, which overlap and blend beautifully, to collectively offer a meaningful background against which to listen; a framework against which to make sense of and ask about a young person's life.

### Optimism

Optimism is about seeing the best, having realistic and positive views of self and the world, hoping for the best and working towards it. It is a way of thinking and seeing, of describing and discussing. It makes sense for us in how we approach those we counsel. In the conversations we have with them and in how in turn view, think and talk about their own lives.

An optimistic approach reminds us too that very often, when something goes wrong:

- It is just a moment (as big as it might be). It will pass
- It only applies to *this* moment, event, situation
- There are reasons why it happened
- There is always something we can do about it.

### **A strengths approach**

A strengths-focus in working with people means just that. Looking to people's triumphs, abilities, qualities and strengths as a way of approaching life. And of dealing with the difficult stuff...including the less-wonderful aspects of ourselves. It is a realistic and optimistic approach to people.

- What are the interests that this young person has?
- What talents, qualities and skills?
- What might hold them back from using these talents?
- What might help them develop?
- Where are the stories of victorious struggle in their life?
- Where are the successes? The triumphs?

Some young people ('disengaged'; or 'youth at risk') have been defined by their mistakes and shortcomings. This hardly brings out the best in them. Our challenge and their's, is to acknowledge past actions and yet not be limited by them

- What is it that this person has that they can work on/develop/apply so that they can a live a good life? (in whatever way 'good life' is defined)
- What role can I play in helping them do this?
- How do I as a worker, balance honesty with optimism and a sense of being positive?

**All strengths and qualities are open to effort.  
They can be enhanced, developed, strengthened.**

**Just as it makes sense to work to the strengths of young people, it makes equal sense to work to our own strengths and make sure these are present in how we work**

## Resilience

Resilience is the process of growing strong and bouncing back from hard times. There are many ways of thinking about this idea. Here are some ideas that stand out over and over in the research, and in people's lives:

- **Meaning in life.** Having a sense of purpose and belonging
- **Good loving relationships.** Having people who we care for and who care about us
- **Being an active part of life.** Being actively involved in our lives
- **Control or personal power.** Having some control and believing we have some control over what happens to us
- **A positive sense of self.** A clear sense of self, where we 'belong', who we relate to, who we are and our sense of worth
- **Positive expectations.** If people expect the best of us, they may well see it emerge. The reverse is also true
- **Hope.** A sense of being able to survive, to get through, continue.

## An engaging process

To work directly with a young person and apply the ideas suggested above, we need to engage with that young person. Not always easy, especially if the young person has found themselves on the 'outer' for some time.

### What are we trying to do?

- Catch a person's attention in a *meaningful* way...
- So that we can form a relationship, or process, or conversation...
- To find out who this person is, what they are concerned about, interested in, afraid of, excited by...
- So that together we can work on those things
- Engagement is about developing a 'working relationship'.

Of course this simple process is often not quite so simple in the doing.

### Engagement is always:

- Conditional. It can disappear at any time
- Contextual. Who is this person? Where are we? How much time do we have? What is my purpose?
- Ongoing.
  - In terms of the developing relationship
  - In terms of the content...that is, what we are able to explore
  - In terms of the process...it can be more in depth, more challenging, more intimate

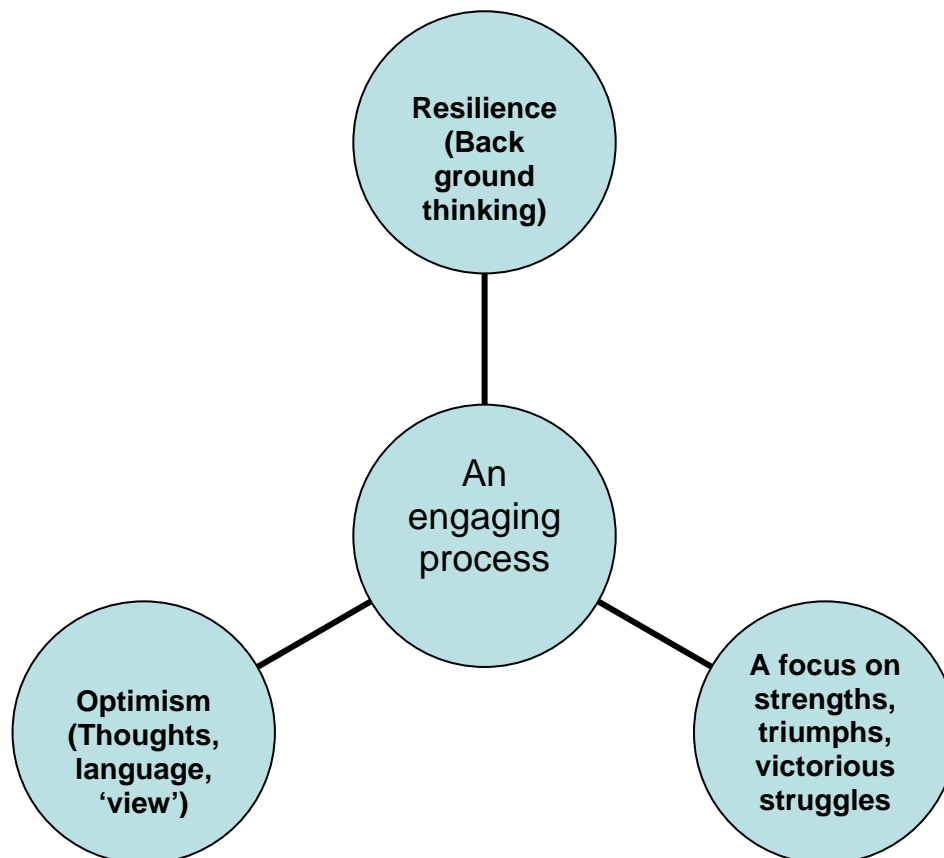
## Developing a conversation

There are many ways of thinking about a conversation. Here are a few key ideas.

- **Interest.** A conversation does not need to be non-stop laughs but it does need to have meaning and interest for the young person
- **Something unexpected.** This is one way of making a conversation interesting. This doesn't mean clever...just a little unusual. As strange and sad as it is, for some young people, simply being genuinely listened to, is a new experience.
- **Style:** We each have preferred ways of communicating, preferred ways of simply being present in the world. Of all the styles, attending to the physical/less physical and the verbal/less verbal preferences really helps. Which might mean having a conversation on the move; literally walking about somewhere. Or using the physical environment as props. Point at the object which at this moment most accurately represents how you feel. Or for the less verbal, encouraging writing, drawing, reflection and simple one word or one phrase answers to questions.

## Putting it all together

Nothing is fail-safe but collectively these ideas can establish a framework to guide how we work with individuals, families and communities. Paying attention to resilience suggests where we might focus our attention, for example on relationships, or on this person's sense of self, or what meaning they find in life, what they hope for? We can explore these ideas through a strengths lens; noticing the triumphs, victorious struggles and qualities of a person's life. We can think and speak with genuine and realistic optimism about these things; a person has survived and flourished and can continue to do so. And we can be mindful of our language and how we communicate our concerns, care, hope, challenge, and faith in this person.



## **All this in action**

This is all just a guideline of course and lots of things come into play to affect what might happen and despite this integrated approach, things don't always go the way we hope. But even with that caveat, it is still a very useful approach, and I will try to get it past being just words. So with that in mind let me try, through the limitations of the written word (at least when I'm writing), to give you some sense of all this stuff in action.

### **Dylan**

I'm talking with Dylan and I say to him that I would like to ask him some questions about his life; about living, loving and learning...he kind of laughs...we have started our conversation already. And so using these three ideas we start to talk. Is he living the life he wants? What kind of percentage would he give it? He says 80%, and this is very cool because, he says, it used to be about 20%. So what happened to make that shift? And we start to explore what 'really living' means to him. In terms of resilience we are really looking at Meaning. When it comes to loving, both incoming and outgoing, we start to explore relationships. Looking at learning takes us into a discussion of his growth as a person and how he has managed to do this. Which gives us a sense of his struggles and his victories, his strengths. It also takes us into a discussion of hope. That is, where he is now, which direction he is facing and where he is headed. Now our conversation was not as good as take-away pizza and vids but I think we had a useful conversation anyway. Good!

### **A group**

I'm talking to a group of young people and I say that I'm going to ask them some questions about who they are as people....I say: 'I would like to do the whole person complete health check. I would like to see how you are with your body, with your heart, with your mind and with your spirit.' I give people sheets with the following pics on them.



*Body*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



*Mind*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



*Heart*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



*Spirit*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I take them through a quick process about these questions and make sure they understand what I am asking. And during this part they have complete privacy and choice to think about their responses. I tell them that in a moment they will have a chance to answer these questions publicly. After a minute or two, I ask everyone to get up and I ask them to physically move across a scale on the floor. And if they want...to LIE! A playful way of reminding people that they can keep private things to themselves if they want to, and put into the public arena ONLY those things that belong there.

From a rating from 'Needs work' to 'Perfect' people place themselves along the scale. Several things are happening in this conversation. People are thinking about themselves and they think about the relationships in their lives, what they care about and what they want for themselves. Secondly, this is all done with others, and this in itself develops relationships albeit brief and probably temporary. The discussions which follow ask people to explore with each other where they are in life, if this is how they want things to be, and where they want to be and how they might get there. Hope and spirit of confidence (hope) that people can move in those directions.

**Jaylie**

I'm talking to Haylee generally about where she is in life and she tells me some history which includes being surrounded by drug-affected people, sexual abuse, her own struggles with drugs and self-harm. And yet here she sits; talking really about her triumphant life. My interest and my questions are not about the difficult things but about how she got from 'there' to 'here'. How did she access her own strength to take that journey? What help did she get along the way. She says a marvellous thing of someone who gave her a hand. 'She believed in me and when someone believes in you it makes you

believe in yourself.' A beautiful comment on the power of a strong sense of self, being in charge of yourself and the help a person gets along the way.

### **The tuff stuff**

This approach does not avoid the painful, the difficult, the disturbing. On the contrary, a strengths focussed optimism in relation to the important parts of a person's life (ie resilience elements), has confidence that people can prevail; that by noticing and harnessing their own talents and qualities, that by noticing their own successes and victories, and with the support, challenge, humour and affection of others, they can and will prevail.

### **So...**

These ideas collectively can be a helpful guide. The resilience framework is a backdrop which directs our attention the elements of humanity that we know help people grow strong. A strengths-focus guides how we approach the elements of resilience, looking for the best, the exceptions, the triumphs, the victorious struggles. A strengths-focus suggests to us what to notice and how to describe what we notice. Optimism suggests how we might think about and talk about ourselves, the world we live in and the people we work with.

And in attending to each of these in our work we automatically, through the questions we ask and the conversations we have, encourage a similar approach in the lives of those we work with.

And particularly with those of our customers who are unhappy punters, we do all this by creating a process which is interesting, challenging, supportive and intriguing. All too easy really!