

# Strength Based Counseling



*Strength-based counseling represents a paradigm shift in psychology from the deficit medical model to one that stresses clients' strengths. The model will hopefully encourage the profession to act on its espoused commitment to strength development for individuals across the life span." Elsie J. Smith*

I have been working with addicts since the mid-60's and I continue to be impressed by their creativity, charm, camaraderie and courage. An addict with the disease of drug addiction will use all of these laudable strengths though, to obtain money and/or goods in order to maintain an ever increasing habit. He or she may be an urban street addict or a suburban housewife. The disease will take all addicts down to a level that often compromises their human dignity, their closest relationships and even their lives. I have said before that the burgeoning suburban addiction to pain killers is now morphing into a major suburban heroin epidemic. I will be discussing this trend in a future blog.



Now the question still is, what to do about it? Prevention efforts have fallen short but data now coming out about the potentially dangerous outcomes of subscription to pain killers may wake people up and slow the epidemic. The immediate problem is what kind of treatment is best for these suburban and urban heroin addicts?

The key to recovery for helping addicts is support often from others who have been there, encouraging a strong sense of self worth, positive friends and abstinence from heroin. Naturally abstinence is essential and positive friends are also critical. These two aspects of recovery are easy to see and measure; but what about *self worth*? I have not found that addicts, often with low self esteem, respond well to the standard *Medical Model* of assessment, treatment and counseling. This seems more like a problem oriented approach and although a persons strengths are part of the assessment, the recovering addict will often be more inclined to believe that he/she is "messed up" and that his/her strengths are just tacked on; no more than window dressing. Therapists sometimes attempt to give some hope in their balanced assessment. "...look at the bright side, you're a handsome young man with much potential..." and on and on with positive but patchwork remarks.

This kind of feedback is often not viewed by the recovering addict as either positive or in balance. The other misconception of the recovering addict is that "my counselor will fix me.." In other words, "it's the counselor's responsibility if I don't get well."

Upfront questioning of a recovering addict, with nothing recorded, about his/her past behavior, is often a more realistic approach as compared to the traditional often negative written assessment followed by a label (emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted etc.). The counseling session should focus on the recovering addict's understanding and use of his/her own strengths. The recovering addict usually knows his/her problem but at the same time has little confidence that change is possible. Frankly, the disease of addiction will be with him/her for a lifetime but it can be kept in remission with the right approach. The disease is similar to diabetes in that it is always there but the right treatment and/or support can keep it under control.

In my opinion, strength counseling is the right approach. The "strength counseling" that I am describing is not about ignoring the past or the disease of addiction. It's about a focus that will have the best potential to help addicts to help themselves, one day at a time for the rest of their lives. It's not about denying the past or trying to turn the negative past experiences into something wonderful or even therapeutic. Yes, addicts in recovery need to learn from their mistakes but what about their strengths and learning how to stay clean and sober or how to build an attitude and a lifestyle based on improved self-worth?

Like most behavioral and attitudinal changes, this new positive lifestyle has to be practiced to be internalized. That's the way drug use becomes drug addiction – day by day, month by month, year by year with practice. The same formula must be used to allow for a new positive drug/alcohol free lifestyle to emerge and this also will take time – years! This is called "recovery." Many if not most in recovery must remain abstinent to stay in recovery but a small number, with daily awareness and often spiritual support, might learn to control their drinking. This positive change of abstinence or controlled drinking will often require a major lifestyle change but many can do it and maintain it, one day at a time, year after year.

"Strength counseling" is an approach that compliments an addict's needs in recovery. I am inclined to support Elsie Jones Smith, PhD in her thoughts, opinions and published papers listed below for referenc