

*from the field of gerontological social work practice*

## THE STRENGTHS BASED PERSPECTIVE IN A PROBLEM CENTERED WORLD

The practice world of the gerontological social worker asks us to assess and address problems in the older adult's life. It is a world in which the Strengths Based Perspective is often cited but difficult to follow. For good reason—recording requirements seek documentation of the worker's efforts in bettering the life of her client rather than the client's work on her own behalf. And the concept itself lacks clarity: How do we recognize strengths when we see them? And how do we integrate this recognition into daily problem-solving practice?

It is easy, of course, to recognize strengths in older adults who have courageously met earlier life tragedies and continue to face challenges with good sense and equanimity. We may also recognize admirable strengths in older adults who have lost all confidence in their own efficacy. Empowering such clients to help themselves; putting them in touch with their own inner resources, sharing the work, and watching them take hold is always gratifying.

Harder to recognize are client strengths that show themselves as resistance, anger, or inability to recognize the needs of anyone but themselves. Viewing difficult behaviors as strengths requires that we appreciate them as coping strategies—some honed over a lifetime, others acquired in response to the assaults of late life. The "right of refusal" (of food, of baths, of care itself) may be the only right that an older adult feels is still open to her. Angry outbursts and unending demands may be the only means of control over her situation that seem possible. As maladaptive as these behaviors may be, they can be seen as strengths. The older adult has not given up. She is doing the best she can to cope. Understanding the roots of the difficult behavior, validating the struggle, and helping her re-direct her energies into more productive channels is the challenge of the Strengths Based Perspective in a problem centered world.

**We look forward to your comments and experiences.**

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