



# Advancing Social Work in Mental Health through Strengths-Based Practice

*Edited by*

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## Advancing Social Work in Mental Health through Strengths-based Practice

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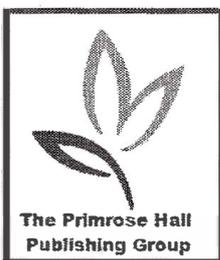
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## **Disclaimer**

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This publication has been brought out by the editors only with the aim of enhancing the development of literature on strengths-based practice in Social Work and showcase the significance of this approach for a wider audience in mental health. Every effort has been made in preparing this book to provide accurate, up-to-date and relevant information that is in accordance with the accepted standards of practice at the time of publication. The authors of the chapters are responsible for the opinions, criticisms and factual information presented by them. As editors we have carefully reviewed, formatted and made necessary changes in the manuscripts and disclaim liabilities direct or consequential as a result of any errors or conclusions that may have arisen due to individual efforts of the authors of this collection.

## Acknowledgements

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This book celebrates the ideas of *Strengths-based Practice*. The authors of this book come from various countries, diverse backgrounds, and practice contexts. But, they all have shared their ideas and practice wisdoms through their unique writings. We thank all our authors of this book for their significant contribution to the discourse on strengths-based practice in relation to mental health.

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*Abraham P. Francis, Venkat Pulla, Michael Clark, E. Susana Mariscal, Ilango Ponnuswami*

(Book Editors )

## Dedication

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- We dedicate this book to all those social workers who believe in constant improvement in their practice of social work
- As editors of this volume we dedicate our combined efforts to all authors and their communities of practice
- We dedicate this book to all those who allowed us to gain practice wisdom- our clients; groups and communities with whose parallel thinking we have emerged with this collection of writings

*Abraham P. Francis, Venkat Pulla, Michael Clark, E. Susana Mariscal, and Ilango Ponnuswami*

(Book Editors)

To My teacher and Guide Dr James M.L. for his great support, guidance and blessings in my life; and to my loving wife Mini, Children Abhijith and Alka, the source of my strength and the inspiration for all that I do.

*Abraham P. Francis*

To Dennis Saleebey, humanist and teacher in strengths based practices for his belief and blessing that "my life and practice be predicated on what's right, strong and good with people"; to my spiritual mentor Srinivas Arka for his continued guidance; to hundreds of Brisbane Institute of Strengths based Practice conference, colloquium participants across the world and to many ardent students of mine who are able to see that searching for solutions from within is the central mantra of strengths approach to our lives and that of our clients.

*Venkat Pulla*

For my greatest strengths, my faith and my family, Frances, Rebecca, Brian, Steven and Molly; these abiding resources have shown me the path of Love.

*Michael Clark*

To my parents, Carmen and Angel, my mentors, Dennis Saleebey and Charlie Rapp, my husband, Daniel, and my son, Joaquin whose support and love inspire me, nurture my strengths, and allow me to pursue my dreams.

*E. Susana Mariscal*

To the entire fraternity of social workers worldwide, the clientele we serve and the individuals, groups and communities of people who display awesome resilience in the midst of their sufferings.

*Ilango Ponnuswami*

## Preface

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# Strengths-based social work practice in mental health

Some 20 years after Charles Rapp and Dennis Saleebey promoted the strengths-based approach to social work practice it is time to revisit the concept and explore the relevance and application of the ideas to contemporary social work practice. Strengths-based approaches to mental health work emerged as a challenge to the pathology saturated discourses to mental illness and gave social work a distinctive and refreshing paradigm for practice that anticipated the broader recovery movement that has since developed. The idea that we engage with people around their strengths, rather than their illness, was radical and attractive. Like recovery theory more broadly, strengths-based work relies on an holistic approach to practice, emphasizing the complexity of the person's life and social context. It invites a more positive basis for engagement, and a multi-layered approach to setting goals and evaluating intervention. The concepts are deceptively simple. Applying the ideas in practice is more challenging. Concepts like choice, empowerment, agency, and mutuality are much harder, it seems, to put into practice than more clinical prescriptive approaches. You need time, and you need a commitment to working with individuals, at their pace, and towards their individual goals.

This book seeks to help us to understand how we apply the fine principles of the strengths perspective in a range of practice settings. It helps us to make the transition from good principles to good practice. As such it is a valuable contribution to the knowledge base for social work practice. The contributors bring an international perspective that is rich and engaging. The principles of strengths-based work apply equally, but perhaps differently, in Mumbai, Manhattan, or Melbourne. The diversity of practice areas in the various chapters of the book emphasize the universal themes of the strengths-based approach. The book helps to retain the challenge of the theory to adapt to the demands of time and place, and strengths-based work remains fresh and relevant, even after 20 years.

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## Introduction

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### Abraham P. Francis and Venkat Pulla

Strengths-based practice refers to the identification of strengths within an individual, family, or community. These strengths are then employed to aid in promoting self-fulfilment and healing in a client. This practice demonstrates a deliberate shift away from language and practice based on a client's deficits or pathology, a widespread approach that has dominated many fields within social science for some time. Focussing on strengths is not, however, a new idea and can be found in the writings and practice of many of our past great philosophical leaders and individual practitioners. The use of strength based practice in the social work context has been extensively researched and promoted over the last thirty years and is becoming formalised as a method of best practice across many disciplines and countries, with global cooperation adding depth to ongoing discussion and practice guidelines. Sharing of knowledge, from both researchers and practitioners, has become an important foundation for the growth of strength based practice, and throughout this book it will be evident that the strengths of individuals and groups employing these methods are also celebrated and shared, as a further example of the utility of identifying and benefiting from the strengths of others. Together we can all become stronger.

This book is organised into four sections, representing theoretical perspectives, implications for practice, case studies, and research analysis and future direction for practice. As such it can be read from start to finish. The book introduces the concept and thereafter evolves to increase the reader's understanding of the model and its implementation in practice. Alternatively, practitioners and researchers can easily identify sections or chapters as stand-alone resources.

**Section one** addresses theoretical perspectives of strength based practice and in chapter one Professor Charlie Rapp and Dr Rick Goscha introduce the reader to the contemporary development of the model over the last 30 years. While celebrating the spread of strengths-based practice across a wide range of professions and disciplines, and its acceptance across the globe leading to insightful contributions from many cultures, the authors also address the challenges that lie ahead. In chapter two, Dr Venkat Pulla elaborates upon the importance of the client – facilitator relationship when using strengths-based practice in the field of mental health. Dr Pulla elaborates on the importance of recognising the expertise (strengths) of the client, as well as the need to attend to the attitudes, beliefs, and language employed by the facilitator. He further expresses the importance of the leading principles of partnership, mutuality, and empowerment and how these can be used to build hope, and recovery, based on the lived experience of the clients and their families and carers. Chapter three is a timely reminder of the importance of cross discipline collaboration and developments in science. Richard Hill discusses the scientific evidence to support the efficacy of the strengths-based model. Based on neuroscience perspectives, the latest research and literature from the field is used to discuss demonstrated outcomes. In chapter four, Felicia White-Meyers uses the Complex Systems Leadership Theory (CSLT) to examine the importance of creativity as an essential skill to be developed among leaders in strengths-based practice. Felicia White-Meyers explains how traditional leadership methods need to be augmented to better cope with the increased complexity of working within social and mental health services. White-Meyers elucidates how creativity can act as a strong catalyst for growth, change, and innovation within a strength based social work setting. To round off this first section, in chapter five, Dr Susana Mariscal examines the need for both theory and practice models to work alongside and complement each other. From the perspective of

aiding recovery in people with psychiatric disabilities she examines the use of the strengths perspective in social work practice as a theoretical model, together with the Strengths Model of Case Management (SMCM), the practice model. From this discussion, she further explicates the need for effective methods and tools, as well as the 'heart' required to aid a person on their own path to recovery. In chapter six Dr Steven Onken examines the importance of strength based practice in the process of recovery from mental illness. He provides a unique insight into the importance of indigenous ways of being, as well as the necessity of incorporating basic human rights into the recovery process. He also explicates the high incidence of trauma among those seeking recovery and suggests that their symptoms can be more usefully viewed as adaptations. He iterates the importance of relationships - with facilitator, peer-to-peer, and interdependence within the community, as well as the need to assist in a clients 're-authoring' of their lived experience.

The **second section** of this book is concerned with examining how strengths-based practice can be applied in a variety of situations while retaining its core values and embracing existing knowledge in specialised fields. Dr Shreedevi A.U., Dr Diana Ross and Dr s. Kalyanasundaram, in chapter seven discusses the use of the model to facilitate psychosocial rehabilitation, with specific reference to the work undertaken by the Richmond Fellowship Society in Bangalore, India. In chapter eight, Dr Wendy Li and Daniel Miller investigate the use of positive psychology to improve the mental health of older people. They promote the building of mental capital, including the use of proactive coping strategies and psychological resilience, to encourage mental and physical wellbeing in older age. Gerard Moloney and Dr Abraham Francis, in chapter nine, highlight the importance of using the strength based model, not only with clients, but also between social work practitioners, specifically in the role of supervisor. Chapter ten is concerned with helping families change their perspective when dealing with children, by recognising the strengths already employed within the family. Amanda Kruger and Dr Abraham Francis clarify the importance of moving away from the 'problem saturated perspectives' that are commonly employed. They iterate that this allows a family to experience a sense of control, allowing them to take a holistic approach to their family situation, rather than focus on a narrowly defined 'problem area'. Prospera Tedam and Ines Zuchowski in chapter eleven advocate the use of strengths-based practice in the education of social work students from diverse backgrounds, with an emphasis on what has now become the "Mandela model- developed to support students of black African origin in UK". This model emphasises the importance of getting to know the student, their culture, educational background, and life experiences; thus identifying strengths that will enhance the learning process. In chapter 12, Birrigubba elder Dorothy Savage and Dr Susan Gair discuss working genuinely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They reiterate that it all begins with listening, hearing and recognizing the incredible strengths and inspirational struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples against the impact of colonization, and recognising that ongoing discrimination, and the public's blindness to past atrocities and contemporary racism has contributed to the mental ill-health of these Indigenous Australians. The authors recommend that hearing and respecting the impact of the past, and building relationship that strengthen the future will contribute to the sustained mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

In **section three** authors share the lived experience of using the strengths-based model in practice, across a variety of sub-disciplines. Dr Lakshika Liyanage, from Sri Lanka provides the first contribution, in chapter thirteen, with a focus on their work aimed at reintegrating clients with mental health problems into the community based on a study conducted in Sri Lanka. Dr Liyanage explains the importance of identifying strengths in the client and their family to encourage reintegration into the family setting where possible, while overcoming the stigma and financial problems experienced by many of the families concerned. In chapter fourteen Dr Rameela Shekhar, Dr Ilango Ponnuswami, and Dr Abraham Francis

concentrate on the efficacy of the strengths-based approach when applied to children with behavioural problems. The focus is on the method of assessment and service provision, and includes a specific strengths-based assessment model contributed by Dr Shekhar. Rohena Duncombe, in chapter fifteen describes and evaluates the use of the strengths-based model in anxiety management in a group setting. The model is utilised across a series of self-referred meetings that discuss a variety of anxiety management techniques, with the desirable outcome being that the participant will develop their own self-management regime, this being a cost effective and accessible intervention. Chapter sixteen sees Dr Michael Clark question how strengths-based practice may be considered in justice settings, an inherently problem focussed area of practice, despite evidence suggesting alternative methods are needed to change a propensity towards criminal behaviour. The support of female survivors of the Mumbai Terror Attack is the focus of chapter seventeen, with Dr Jacquleen Joseph and Dr Surinder Jaswal noting that the emphasis on fixing problems with security and governance in countries suffering from terrorist activity has left many victims (or survivors) marginalised and unable to access help in terms of their recovery and well-being. Dr Meliha Bijedic and Dr Venkat Pulla round off this section with chapter eighteen on the use of strengths-based interventions in challenging behaviours from a European perspective, with a focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina. We believe that sections two and three demonstrate strengths-based practice that can be used across a variety of disciplines and diverse settings.

**Section four** embraces the possibilities of further extension and diversification of the model. Dr Sonny Jose and V. A. Vijayalekshmi introduce us to an adaptation of the strengths-based model developed in Trivandrum, India, in chapter nineteen. The 'Trivandrum Model' is explained by the authors as an extension of the National Mental Health Program, developed in response to high rates of poor mental health in the area. They examine the collaboration with local networks, NGO's, and use of local resources to improve service delivery. In chapter twenty, Dr Melissa Petrakis examines the compatibility of the strengths-based model with existing state and federal government mental health plans. She further examines the implementation of the strengths model in Melbourne, Australia and stresses the importance of ongoing evaluation in the successful implementation of the model. Dr Lakshmi Sankaran, Dr D. Muralidhar and Dr Vivek Benegal, in chapter twenty one investigated protective factors against intergenerational alcohol dependence in an Indian context. Their findings describe protective factors being positively aligned with the assumptions presented by the strengths-based model, supporting its use in intervention programs for families at risk of dependence. In their concluding chapter twenty two Dr Abraham Francis and Dr Venkat Pulla offer a discussion on strategic directions of strengths-based practice and important considerations as the model is poised for extensive deployment in human services, social work and mental health practice.

The chapters of this book have been peer reviewed and are research based contributions from academics and practitioners. It can be used both as a reference book and a text book for social work education. We hope this book will be useful for social work practitioners, students, and researchers to further explore the approach of strength-based practice that we believe has a high potential to touch the lives of people with whom we interact in our practice. With this hope in mind, we present this book to the readers.