

Strength Based” - What does it mean?

Wesley Community Action’s commitment to a ‘Strength Based’ framework is playing a major role in the provision (and success) of its work - but just what does ‘Strength Based’ mean and how does this commitment set Wesley apart?

Traditional approaches to the treatment of illnesses and behaviour (both psychological and physical) have often concentrated on identifying the nature of the problems or illnesses, labelling them, and then prescribing treatments or pills to carry out the treatment and create a cure.

Thus people coming to Wesley for assistance will often come accompanied by a mountain of paperwork that lists their mental, behavioural and medical problems, and (in some cases,) a long list of their criminal activities or anti-social behaviours.

By contrast a Strength Based approach works with the client to explore their unique strengths and facilitates their abilities to move them towards positive solutions. Strength Based practice emphasises people’s abilities to be their own agents for change and helps them to mobilise their strengths and capacities towards positive change.

At the risk of over-simplification, a gardening analogy helps to explain the Strengths Based approach. When plants get sick you can apply fertilizers, or chemical sprays as remedies, but it is much better to get to know your plants, know the conditions that favour their growth and to make sure that they are healthy and can withstand diseases on their own.

In the words of Wesley’s client Amy (15) the Strengths Based approach, *“makes me feel good about myself, makes me aim further and have more goals for myself. Not praising me.... makes*

me think that I’m a failure or I’m not doing anything good – but when people.... say how well I’m doing.. it makes me feel good.”

Strength Based practice is not, however, simply a case of mouthing meaningless platitudes. The process is one where a client’s inherent strengths and skills are mobilized towards positive outcomes and achievements through a series of conversations based on a respectful and transparent relationship between worker and client.

Progress can be as simple as breaking negative thought processes, and replacing them with positive thought processes. People have within them a wealth of resources - both known and unknown to them. The principle of *‘empowering the individual’* is at the heart of Strength Based practice.



Another Wesley client, Caitlin (16) sums up her thoughts regarding Wesley’s Strengths Based practice,

“Wesley helped me with my self confidence and with the way I saw myself ... the way I saw my life.... where my life was going.... I never thought I had the ability to achieve anything. But I achieved a course and that was big for me. That was just an example of how they helped you see yourself outside of what you thought you were.”

Transparency and the sharing of information is also a key to Strength Based practice in assisting the process of empowerment. Former Wesley Caregiver Donna notes, *“there are no secrets, everything is talked about ... she (Donna’s former client,) feels part of the process; she feels that you are not standing over her making decisions for her.”*

The benefits are reflected in the words of 15 year old Amy, *“I feel involved because Wesley is a team organisation and includes me in deci-*

sion making, (they) support and stand by me.”

In essence, Wesley’s Strength Based approach to working with all people, is a solution focused, constructive approach where the problem itself is seen as the problem and importantly, the person (client) is not seen as the problem.

This distinction is important, because when the problem is isolated and discussed in this manner, it becomes more productive to focus on developing solutions and moving forward – rather than becoming bogged down in what caused the problem. Concentrating on problems can create a negative cycle of dependency, and can prevent people from noticing their strengths.

However, by focusing on solutions and future opportunities, people are then invited to apply their strengths in a positive manner that will in turn build their self esteem thus breaking the cycles of despair that once engulfed them. From that point, alternative possibilities can be seen and acted upon.

A young ex-school drop-out and ex resident of Wesley’s Te Whare Whakapakari residential home sums up what Strength Based practice meant to her, *“if it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be at Porirua College, and I wouldn’t have a lot of friends... I just want you to know that I’ll always remember you.”*

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The Essence of Wesley’s Strengths Based Practice

(Note the following principles were originally developed by St Lukes, Bendigo, Australia.)

- Respect for people’s dignity, uniqueness and rights
- Clients drive the process of change as much as possible
- Clients define issues and goals
- Practices and processes are made transparent and accessible
- The process is one of sharing not telling... a journey shared.
- People are their own best experts
- There is more than one truth, ie there is no ‘black or white.’ Different people see things in different ways.





Wesleyhaven polar plunge draws crowds

A forecast strong southerly wind laced with sleet and rain severely tested the resolve of the hardy Wesleyhaven team and caused the Hutt City Council to postpone the annual polar plunge and midwinter carnival by one day. It proved to be a wise decision as the alternative day dawned clear, sunny and calm, much to the relief of the Wesleyhaven team, and over a thousand people joined in on the fun.

Hot soup cooked by the residents of Wesleyhaven, hot coffee supplied by our generous sponsors Caffe L'Affare, and a BBQ cooked by Wesley staff drew the hungry crowds and raised almost \$400 for the Wesleyhaven residents. In addition, several of Wesleyhaven's intrepid staff joined the 100 plus mid winter swimmers, many wearing fancy dress to brave the chilly waters.

This winter the Hutt City Council had made an extra effort to expand the Winter Carnival, and the programme featured a 'have-a-go' circus skills workshop, ice sculpting, pavement art and musical acts culminating in a \$40,000 firework display. The fireworks were a fitting and spectacular finale, watched by hundreds of cars lining the Petone foreshore.

Grant for Historical Project

A project to record the oral history of Wesleyhaven has received welcome support in the form of a grant from the Methodist Communications Fund.

It is planned that the grant will go towards an Historical Research initiative involving;

- Oral history recordings and associated transcripts of those identities involved from the outset of Wesleyhaven
- A historical booklet recording and promoting key aspects of the research. The booklet will feature the many historical photographs and documents which are held in Wesley's archives and to date have not been widely disseminated
- A planned exhibition to launch the booklet will portray key aspects of the history via visual display-boards, recordings and videos (or film.)
- It is envisaged that the exhibition will in turn go on public display in various venues around Wellington and the Hutt Valley

For the next stage of the project, Wesley Community Action is working with Dr Conal McCarthy, Director of Victoria University's Museum and Heritage Studies Programme to select a suitable post-graduate student to complete the earlier work initiated by researcher Meena Patel.

Wesleyhaven Achieves Certification

Following a recent Ministry of Health Certification Audit verifying Health and Disability sector standards, Wesleyhaven achieved renewal of their certification status for the maximum period of three years and successfully passed a District Health Board audit which was undertaken concurrently.

In a separate ACC audit of Workplace Safety practices, Wesleyhaven achieved tertiary level compliance in recognition of the 'high level of Health and Safety practised.'

The success in both these independent audits reflects very favourably on the high standards set by Managers and staff. Congratulations Wesleyhaven!

Residents Discretionary Fund to be Established

A generous donation of \$10,000 from the Irene Baker Foy Charitable Trust is to be utilized as a discretionary fund to benefit the residents of Wesleyhaven.

The fund will assist those residents who are not eligible for other means of support, and will be used to fund extra activities and care related needs.

