



EXPLORE:

Focus on strengths

The following are “worst case” scenarios, in which the practitioner says all the “wrong” things. These are simply to provide examples of strategies that make thinking about strengths difficult. Suggestions for a more positive approach are provided below.

Worst Case Scenarios:

1. MAKING ASSUMPTIONS.

Practitioner says: “So you’re homeless because you weren’t able to pay the rent?”

Practitioner thinks: You must be one of those homeless people who think the world owes them something.

Practitioner feels: I am so overwhelmed by your problems.

Parent says: “Yeah, the landlord kicked me out.

Practitioner thinks: You won’t even take responsibility for the situation. Like, it’s the landlord’s fault...

Practitioner feels: I can’t think of any way to fix them for you.

Actual: The parent has a serious behavioral health condition that requires her to go to many treatment appointments; therefore, she is not able to hold a job or to pay the rent. However, she prioritizes her treatment and manages her illness well.

2. ATTRIBUTING BAD INTENTIONS OR TRAITS.

Practitioner says: “You need to do get your kids off to school on time.”

Practitioner thinks: You’re not going to ‘trick’ me or anyone else into taking care of things for you.

Practitioner feels: I have too much of my own work to do. And I'll get in trouble if you don't do a better job of parenting.

Parent says: "I just can't get everything done by the time the bus comes."

Practitioner thinks: You're just too lazy to get out of bed in the morning.

Practitioner feels: There are plenty of days when I don't feel like getting out of bed in the morning.

Actual: The parent takes medication for her depression that makes her quite groggy in the morning. She could stop taking her medication to meet her children's needs, but that would compromise her treatment plan. She is in a bind.

3. DISQUALIFYING OR MINIMIZING WHAT THE OTHER PERSON SAYS.

Practitioner says: "So, you really believe that using drugs today helps you cope with being sexually assaulted by your uncle 20 years ago?"

Practitioner thinks: You would come up with any excuse to use drugs or alcohol.

Practitioner feels: I could use something to help me cope!

Parent says: "When I'm by myself, it's all I think about—what it felt like, what he said to me."

Practitioner thinks: That was 20 years ago—how could that still be such a big deal to you now?

Practitioner feels: You want to hear about problems? You should know what I'm going through!

Actual: The Parent "self-medicates" with drugs and alcohol to ease the pain she feels about her sexual assault. While this is not a healthy strategy, it was available to her when there was no one or nothing else to comfort her. Meanwhile, she has managed to keep herself alive for 20 years.

4. FEELING CRITICIZED BY ANOTHER, OR CRITICIZING THE OTHER PERSON'S POINT OF VIEW.

Practitioner says: “You say your boyfriend takes your food stamps and sells them to buy drugs...”

Practitioner thinks: You must think I'm stupid if you think I believe that!

Practitioner feels: No one appreciates the work I do.

Parent says: “I give them to him so he'll let me use the car.”

Practitioner thinks: Well that's really stupid, to give up food in exchange for a car ride.

Practitioner feels: Why do these parents keep making bad decisions? It's so frustrating.

Actual: The parent needs her boyfriend's car to visit regularly with her children who are in foster care. She understands that her children need her to keep her commitment to them.

Strategies for Encouraging the Identification of Strengths:

1. ACKNOWLEDGING OR VALIDATING WHAT THE OTHER PERSON TELLS YOU.

Example: “*What happened to you was wrong and painful, but you were very brave to “hang in” there.*”

2. WANTING TO KNOW MORE.

Example: “*What did you do then to solve the problem?..... That was pretty resourceful of you!*”

3. GETTING SPECIFIC.

Example: “*Well, you say you're not smart enough to get your GED. What makes you feel that you're not smart? But in a different situation, you do very well!*”

4. ENCOURAGING THE OTHER PERSON TO COMMUNICATE IN ANY WAY POSSIBLE.

Example: *“Look, I know it’s hard for you to talk about this, but maybe you could take this little notebook and write down things you feel good about as you notice them during the day.”*