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**Dependable Strengths:  
Socodynamic Counselling Procedure**

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for

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*What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. Oliver Holmes*

## **SOCIODYNAMIC COUNSELLING PROCEDURE: DEPENDABLE STRENGTHS**

### **Theoretical Background**

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is a technique used to help clients to uncover their strengths and assets that they have minimized or that are out of their awareness. These strengths and assets, referred to as Dependable Strengths, are defined as "skills, talents, and other qualities that have been developing over one's lifetime, from childhood to the present, and which, when used in combinations, enable one to do certain things well, with a sense of satisfaction and pride" (Forster, 1989). The procedure relies on the client's ability to recall past experiences and to describe them to others. Initially developed by Haldane, Haldane and Martin (1984) and Haldane (1988), it was then expanded upon and further research by Jerald Forster at the University of Washington.

The Dependable Strengths process is founded on the observation that individuals often focus on what is wrong instead of what is right as a result of their socialization. From this premise, it is further assumed that this so-called "negative tilt" to society has detrimental effects on people who fail to meet the standards that collective society has determined for achievement and excellence. The DSAP was developed based on the following assumptions (Forster, 1989, p. 7):

1. Individuals are complex and unique because of the wide range of possible qualities of self and the many ways these qualities can interact with each other.

2. Modern society is also complex and offers a wide variety of environments which support diverse types of people. In other words, people can vary widely and still be successful in a complex society.
3. Individuals who are different from each other can thrive in a common environment where diversity is acknowledged and cooperation is fostered. In these environments, individuals can concentrate on using their strengths and supporting others whose strengths may be based on different skills and qualities.
4. A person's self-identity depends upon the particular qualities attended to by the person when the individual is aware of his/her self. These qualities are perceived through the lens or filter of the individual's personal constructs.
5. The qualities that are valued most become those used by the person to evaluate self. Self-esteem is related to how positively the person evaluates self in relation to these valued qualities.
6. If a person rates self poorly on valued qualities, that person will have low self-esteem and will strive to change with respect to those qualities. However, if the person makes little progress evolving in the desired direction, that person may change the qualities that are valued, or come to accept self as a person who is failing or at least doing poorly. If this sense of failure is accepted and becomes the person's primary self-identity, the individual is likely to act in ways that are self-destructive, counterproductive or antisocial.
7. If the person rates self highly on valued qualities, that person will have high self-esteem and continue to seek growth and mastery in known as well as new areas. A person with high self-esteem has energy for extra efforts and therefore seeks challenge and self-improvement.

Based on these assumptions, Forster recommends that as counsellors it is preferable: 1) to emphasize actualization of potential rather than deficit, 2) to

participate with the client in the construction of self-knowledge through experiences rather than imposing on the client a "curing of pathology" and finally, 3) to encourage clients to experiment with novel behaviours in keeping with newly discovered ways of knowing rather than adopting a linear problem-solving approach.

The Dependable Strengths Process has broad applicability for diverse populations such as adolescents seeking employment, women returning to the workplace, and various other individuals experiencing worklife transitions. Increased self-esteem was reported for a variety of clients following the DSAP (Forster, 1992).

The full DSAP can be delivered in a number of formats; for example, eight weekly sessions or a two day workshop. For the purpose of counsellor education, the method has been abbreviated and altered. The abbreviated version that follows focuses on the application of Dependable Strengths in counsellor education. In educating counsellors, the process helps learners: 1) to listen to the client's story; 2) to listen for themes and patterns; and 3) to listen for the alternate story (one that is strength-building and not problem-saturated); and 4) to facilitate the empowerment of clients.

### **Learning Activity**

#### **Rationale**

Often clients seeking career counselling have difficulty drawing on their strengths and assets while: 1) determining career goals; 2) writing resumes; and, 3) preparing for job interviews. If they have been unsuccessful in the past in any of these endeavors, they tend to be particularly reluctant to promote themselves. The Dependable Strengths Process helps them to uncover their taken-for-granted strengths and assets by telling their story of a "good experience." In training situations, participants have opportunities to practise listening to "client's" interpretations of good experiences; thus engaging in processes of building and identifying strengths.

## **Purpose**

To introduce the learners to a process through which they uncover their own strengths and assets.

To enhance the learner's awareness of the listening required to engage in the client's story.

## **Learning Focus**

Learners practise attending to the client's story by listening for phrases, metaphors and themes.

Learners experience the benefits of building on strengths instead of deficits.

Learners reflect on the applicability of the Dependable Strengths Process in various settings.

The version of Dependable Strengths presented here consists of three steps: 1) Introduction, 2) Role-Play, and 3) Sharing "good experiences". "Facilitator directions" describe the process of implementation. "Facilitator dialogue," in italics, describes instructions to the participants. It is important to remember that the version presented here is relatively brief compared to the original design of the program. For strengths and assets to be dependable, they need to be drawn from more than one "good experience." However, this abbreviated version acts as an introduction to the fuller program as well as a method for teaching various competencies.

# **Step 1 Introduction**

## **FACILITATOR DIRECTIONS**

By posing the following questions, learners have an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of helping clients to build on strengths. Some learners will have a lot of experience in this area; others will have very little.

Acknowledging experiences of the learners will 1) validate their own experience in working with clients; and 2) help them to relate this approach to others they may have used.

## **FACILITATOR DIALOGUE**

*I am going to introduce you to the Dependable Strengths Process. The process takes approximately three hours. Before beginning, have any of you worked either individually or in group settings where you concluded that the participant(s) needed to enhance their self-esteem? Or where participants felt incapable of writing a resume because they were convinced they had no skills or strengths? Or felt incapable of pursuing a job because of lack of confidence? What strategies did you use? What were some of the specific skills you utilized?*

## **FACILITATOR DIRECTIONS**

Using the information presented at the beginning of this section, briefly introduce the program to the learners covering the major points as follows:

- Purpose of the process.
- Background information.
- Assumptions of the counselling process.

Define and discuss the following terms by writing on the board or flipchart.

### **Dependable Strength**

A "dependable strength" is a skill, talent, or quality that has been developed over a lifetime, from childhood to the present, and which, when used in combination with other strengths, enables one to do certain things well.

**Good Experience** A "good experience" is defined as a time when:

1. You did something well.
2. You enjoyed doing it.
3. You felt proud of it.

Some discussion of the definitions may occur. An important point to emphasize is that the participant should be encouraged to reflect on experiences that he/she perceived as "good" and not how others might have perceived the experience.

## Step 2 Model Interview

### FACILITATOR DIRECTIONS

Ask one of the learners if they would be willing to volunteer for a brief interview. Have them recall an experience they had when they enjoyed doing something, did it well, and felt proud of it. Instruct the volunteer to be as detailed as he or she can and be prepared to spend about fifteen minutes describing the experience. Ask questions which facilitate the telling of the story in order to model this process for the learners (as demonstrated in the following interview). Before the volunteer begins his or her story, instruct half of the class to listen for positive strengths, qualities, and skills that she or he would have used immediately preceding the "good experience." Suggest to the learners that they may want to record some of the strengths. Instruct the other half of the class to observe and record the kinds of competencies used by the counsellor during the interview.

**HINTS:** Reflective listening, attending behaviour, and various kinds of questioning all help the volunteer (client) to describe the experience. In order to gain more information, encourage the client to be as specific as possible. Elaborating the details of the experience will not only help the client to re-live the experience but will also help the listener (counsellor) to draw out the strengths.

The following transcript of a counselling interview is for facilitators to review prior to engaging in a live demonstration with learners. It is helpful to get a sense of how the "client's" story unfolds by posing specific questions.

Counsellor: Can you tell me about an event in the past which you would label a "good experience?"

Client: Anytime in my life?

Counsellor: Any time in your life. You can go back fifteen years or you can go back to last week or whenever you would like. If you can just

describe an experience for me and try to give me as much detail so that I can get a clear picture of what that experience was like for you.

Client: The experience I'm thinking of happened when I was about 8 years old. What I did was I wrote a stage version of Alice in Wonderland's Mad Hatter's Tea Party. In other words, I scripted it from the book and I sort of blocked it and I drew in the other kids from the neighborhood and produced it. We sold tickets and invited all the other neighbors and families from around. We then lined up all the chairs and put on this production for everyone.

Counsellor: That sounds wonderful. So you actually wrote out the script and did all the planning. (Pause) I wonder if you can recall some of the steps you went through to get this off the ground?

Client: Well, I was very excited about theatre at that point. I had seen a number of productions by the time I was eight years old. I had actually had a few roles in amateur theatre productions and so theatre was part of my life. I was wild about theatre so what I did was I got this inspiration to adapt a story that I had read. There was quite a bit of dialogue in the story so it was quite easy to do but I sort of added and elaborated some of the dialogue and made it more interesting, at least I thought so. So that's the first thing I did is that I took the unit out of the book and more or less filled in more of the dialogue according to my vision of what it would look like and sound like on the stage.

Counsellor: So first of all you had an idea or a concept of what this production would look like and then you started to write out the script.

Client: Yes, a concept of what it would like like to begin with. I wrote it out in a little notebook with all the physical movements they would

have to use because I knew about blocking and what they would have to do. I can just remember the feeling so vividly about being wildly excited about the whole endeavor. So the next thing I remember was trying to get the other kids to be as excited as I was and trying to convince them about how much fun it would be. We could all work together and rehearse and work on the costumes together. I convinced them that working together could be so much fun.

Counsellor: So you began by trying to get them just as excited as you were?

Client: Yes, I even told them that we could probably make a little money.

Counsellor: That's always a good incentive! (laugh)

Client: So we had several rehearsals and one of my best friends, Shirley, played the part of Alice. She was just perfect. She even looked just like Alice in Wonderland with her long honey-coloured hair. She was pretty and all that kind of stuff. There weren't that many characters actually. There was Shirley, the doormouse, and there was . . . help me out here I can't remember.

Counsellor: I'm amazed that you can remember as many as you can.

Client: And there were the other kids who weren't in the production but were there to build things. I made a list of things that had to be done like building things and scrounging things from their parents and I would assign kids to try to run around collecting these things.

Counsellor: So once you got to that stage, then what happened? What about the actual performance? Can you describe some of the details?

Client: Um...let me see. Well once we felt we knew our lines, and we rehearsed it several times. We did a lot of drilling to learn the lines. I was really central to the whole thing. I had to keep everything going it seemed (laugh).

Counsellor: So they'd fall apart without you.

Client: Of course, they were just kids and at times they would want to just play Cowboys and Indians, but I was committed to the show going on. And then we sent out invitations and explained that they would be charged admission at the door (laugh). So we divided up the neighborhood and tromped around delivering all these invitations by hand and then quite a few people came. We borrowed chairs and some people just sat on the grass.

Counsellor: So, quite a few people came. It sounds like it was a great success?

Client: Well I don't think the production was nearly as successful or not nearly as fun as the whole process of doing it . . .that is planning it and so on.

Counsellor: So you really enjoyed the build up and all the planning.

Client: Yes, that was it. The planning and the creating. Watching something come together, the creative process. Watching something come together out of nothing was quite exciting for me.

Counsellor: Yes, I can tell by the way your face lit up that the creative process is what you really enjoyed. So after the production the excitement was still there for you.

Client: Yes, after that I got into musicals and variety shows. I did a Christmas variety show that was really exciting.

Counsellor: Well thank you, Sharon, for sharing your good experience with me.

Once the volunteer is finished relating his or her experience, ask the learners to brainstorm for strengths the client would have revealed. Write these on the blackboard or flipchart. If a strength is mentioned more than once, put a check mark beside it. (This affirms the strength for the client in that he or she can see that more than one person identified that particular strength). When the class is finished identifying strengths, ask the client to share what it was like to hear some of the feedback. For example, did she feel embarrassed, encouraged, proud? Encourage the client to share feelings, reactions, and thoughts about doing the exercise.

### **FACILITATOR DIALOGUE**

To the client:

*What was it like for you to relate a previous "good experience"? What feelings, thoughts, or reactions do you have to telling your story?*

To the class:

*I would like you to brainstorm for skills, strengths, and abilities that the client used during his or her "good experience" and I will list them on the board. If a strength is mentioned more than once, I will put a check mark beside it to indicate to the client that the strength was identified by more than one person.*

#### **Strengths Used During the Experience**

organizational skills  
creativity  
responsibility  
perseverance

knowledge of theatre  
application of knowledge  
ability to improvise  
people skills

sustained enthusiasm  
thoroughness  
focussed  
attention to detail

ability to inspire others  
motivational skills  
leadership skills  
verbal and written ability

**HINTS:** Once the strengths have been listed, it is important to process the experience with the volunteer client to provide some closure to the exercise. Following is an example of a debriefing process.

## FACILITATOR DIALOGUE

### To the client:

*How do you feel right now?*

*What its like for you to see all of your strengths and assets listed in front of you?*

*If you could put all your modesty aside for a moment, how would you say those qualities fit for you right now?*

*In what ways do some of the strengths and assets feel familiar to you?*

*In what ways do they feel alien to you?*

**HINTS:** Sometimes "clients" experience a sense of loss for unfulfilled dreams and perhaps potential. These feelings may come up and should not be minimized. Comparing what they were then with what they are now can be upsetting. Be prepared to deal with some of these issues and allow for time to process some of the feelings that surface for the storyteller.

To the class:

*What competencies did you observe the counsellor using?*

*In what ways did the counsellor contribute to the "telling of the story?"*

Some of the kinds of competencies used by the listener or "counsellor" will be:

**Specificity:** Encourage the client to be specific by asking questions such as:

*Can you tell me exactly how you planned the event?*

*What were some of the circumstances which led up to the good experience?*

*In what ways did you contribute to the experience being "good"?*

**Encouraging:** I can tell by the look on your face that it was a very exciting time for you. Can you tell me more about it?

**Recording strengths:** When a strength is mentioned, it is alright to reflect it back to the client; however, try not to become preoccupied with identifying strengths at this time. Listen, instead, to the client's story. You may find it helpful to jot down some of the strengths and assets on a piece of paper.

**Listening:** Convey to the client that you are truly understanding her experience by helping her to elaborate and produce more details.

**HINTS:** Some learners or clients may have difficulty recalling "good experiences". If this occurs, encourage them to choose events that perhaps were not extraordinary but were actually quite normal. As long as they meet the definition of a good experience, they are appropriate. For example, planning on a camping trip, making a soccer team and so on.

## Step 3 Preparing Learners to Share Experiences

### FACILITATOR DIALOGUE

*I would now like you to relax and find a comfortable position. Close your eyes if you feel so inclined and begin to centre yourself. Recall a time in your life when you had a good experience. This may have happened in early childhood, in your teens, or some other time. A "good experience" is defined for our purpose as a time when you did something well, enjoyed doing it, and felt proud of it. Do not think about how someone else might have perceived your experience either in the past or right now. This is your "good experience" and belongs to you alone. We are not here to judge one another but to share some of our positive experiences. You may want to scan a few of your good experiences before deciding on one that you would like to share with other learners. Once you have selected a good experience, you may want to sketch a picture that reminds you of your experience or jot down a few notes to hold it in your memory. Use whatever you need to do to remember. I'll give you about five minutes to relax and remember before regrouping.*

*Now that you have selected your "good experience," get into groups of four. One person will be the storyteller or "client", one will be the "counsellor" and the remaining two will be observers. Each learner will have approximately 25 minutes for his or her turn (15 minutes to relate the story and 10 minutes to receive feedback).*

To the client: *Be prepared to be as descriptive as you can while relating your good experience. Allow for about fifteen minutes to tell your story.*

To the counsellor: *Remember to ask the kinds of questions that will encourage the client to elaborate his or her experience.*

To the observers: *As observers, you will need a separate piece of paper to record the emerging strengths and assets. Your paper will be given to the*

*client at the end of the session (after observations have been discussed as a group).*

### **HINTS**

If the learners are inexperienced in interviewing, you may need to give examples of the kinds of questions that facilitate elaboration of stories. For example:

Tell me more about...?

How did you feel at the time?

Who were you with?

How old were you?

What were you thinking at the time?

How exactly did you do this?

They may also need to be reminded to ask questions in a non-obtrusive way so that the questioning does not detract the speaker from his or her experience.

*As observer and counsellors you will be required to write down skills, aptitudes, and strengths the clients would have used during his or her experience. Being able to listen and take notes at the same time can be distracting but with practice this will become easier.*

*Once you have listened to the first "client's" good experience, each group member will have a chance to report the strengths that stood out for him or her. Once all the group members have had an opportunity to report on strengths they identified, each participant will give his or her list of strengths to the client so that they can leave the class with their own list.*

### **LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION**

Once each learner has been a counsellor, client and observer, bring the large group back together and pose the following questions:

*What was it like for you, as a client, to talk about your "good experience"?*  
*As a counsellor, what did you find was helpful in encouraging your client to tell his or her story?*  
*How did you feel when you were given your list of Dependable Strengths?*  
*Was it easier to identify someone else's strengths rather than your own?*  
*In what ways could you use this process in your counselling practice?*  
*What other implications for counselling can you identify?*

### **SUGGESTED READINGS**

Haldane, B. (1988). **Career satisfaction and success.** Seattle: WA: Wellness Behavior (N.W.)

Haldane, B., Haldane, J. & Martin, L. (1984). **Young people's job finding guide.** Washington, DC: Acropolis Books Ltd.

Forster, J. (1989). **Rationale of the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process.** Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development, March 15-18, Boston, Mass.