

Utilizing a strengths perspective in parole supervision with women

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In my work as a Parole Officer with the Women's Supervision Unit in Toronto, I found that it was often easy to become focused solely on the "problems" presented by my assigned cases. This made sense since women parolees are usually assessed as having multiple "needs". Over time these labels have the potential to alter how an individual will see themselves. For many women who have come through the child protection and juvenile justice systems prior to adult corrections, they have become accustomed to seeing themselves as having numerous faults that need to be "fixed". Over the years I found this approach to be extremely negative and it frequently led me to have pessimistic expectations of the parolees. As a result I began to search for a different approach to my parole supervision.

Background

Somewhere along the way I was introduced to an alternative approach — the idea of building on a client's strengths. In corrections work it is easy to ignore the fact that every individual also possesses some strengths, no matter how tenuous. By incorporating a strengths perspective you can actually build on the positives the women already possess. Given that many of the women I supervise come from a context of abuse whether it be sexual, emotional, physical and/or societal, each woman needs to be viewed from that frame of reference. Most of the women are so used to talking about their problems that when you first ask them to speak about their strengths they are somewhat taken aback. In order to utilize this perspective it is necessary to suspend the belief that the woman may never "amount to anything". This means that you have to assume that the women know something and have learned from their life experiences. The parolee also needs to believe that you respect them and think that they can build something out of their lives.

Method

In order to discover the strengths the woman possesses the following types of interview questions have been recommended. "Survival questions — eg. Given what you have gone through in your life, how have you managed to survive so far? Support questions — eg. What people have given you special

understanding, support, guidance? Possibility questions — eg. What are your hopes, visions, aspirations? Esteem questions — eg. When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say? Exception questions — eg. When things were going well in your life what was different?"² For instance, while working with a woman with a substance abuse history, I can find strength in speaking with her about the exceptions to the times when she was abusing drugs. In other words to seek out those times in her life when she did not use and how she did that.

Fortunately, I have found this approach to be refreshingly positive and that it often opens the door to new possibilities. Granted I do not use this perspective in isolation, as I combine it with a women centered model, while incorporating brief solution-focused interventions, and relapse prevention techniques, amongst others.

Regardless, when utilizing a strengths perspective, out of the parolee's pain and suffering comes hope that they can begin to change and plan for brighter futures. This does not mean that I negate the contributing factors that led to the offence(s) nor excuse any of the negative behaviours in which the women have engaged. Rather I have consciously tried to draw out what makes each woman a unique individual by utilizing strength-based interviewing questions in a collaborative process. This seems to allow the women to discover their own strengths, and empowers them to make more of their own choices.

I view many of these women to be extremely resilient. Many are actually survivors, who have overcome major life obstacles in order to stand where they are today. Although they have committed a criminal offence enroute, they still have a legitimate voice. A strengths perspective allows me to help them find that voice and in the process seems to lower the risk of re-offending. Other Parole Officers may find strength in utilizing this perspective in their own work. ■

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² Saleebey, D. (1997). *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*. White Plains, NY: Longman, p. 53-54.