

Analysing Environmental Strengths

Strengths

Exercise

15-30 min.

Client

No

Typically, strengths are considered to be the individual's characteristics that enable positive functioning and effective coping. However, strengths can also be considered from a social perspective. To use McCashen's words: "Resources in people's environment such as family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and so on, are also considered strengths" (McCashen, 2005, pp. 7–8). Consequently, identifying the strengths of a client not only requires a perspective that focuses on the individual qualities of the client, but also focuses on the qualities of the client's social network (Saleebey, 2011). Utilizing a strengths perspective in practice therefore also includes assessing these environmental strengths: the people and their strengths that help the client realise goals and aspirations, offer support in difficult times, and contribute to the fulfilment of basic needs (autonomy, relatedness and competence).

An abundance of research has revealed that a supportive social network is essential for maintaining physical and psychological health. For example, perceptions of availability of social support have been associated with better outcomes during times of stress (e.g., Sarason et al. 1997; Wethington and Kessler, 1986). Moreover, the quality of social relationships has been identified as one of the most consistent predictors of subjective well-being (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2002). Individuals who have satisfying relationships report feeling happy more frequently and sadness less frequently, and report being more satisfied with their lives than those who do not have satisfying relationships.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to increase awareness of the strengths of client's social environment. The insights that result from this exercise can be used to help the client cope with difficulties and/or realise goals.

Advice

- In this exercise, four different types of social support are addressed. When explaining the meaning of these types of support, the practitioner may use concrete examples of each type of support in order to clarify the meanings of the types of support and their differences.
- When a client has a high quality social support network, a possible by-effect of this exercise is the experience of gratitude. Clients may become aware of and grateful for the fact that they are rich in terms of social contacts. It can be valuable for clients to take some time to reflect on this experience and discuss it with the practitioner.
- When a client has a low quality social network, this exercise may increase the client's awareness of a need to invest in more positive and supportive relationships. In this case, the practitioner may look for ways to support the client if he/she wishes to deepen and/or expand his/her social network.
- It is important to note that each member of the client's social support network usually does not provide all types of support at all times. Practitioners should therefore not focus on people in the social network of the client who offer all types of support. Whether an individual offers one type of meaningful support is more important than whether this individual offers all types of support.



Suggested Readings

Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 3, 81–84.

Sarason, B. R., Sarason, I. G., & Gurung, R. A. R. (1997). Close personal relationships and health outcomes: A key to the role of social support. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships* (2nd ed., pp. 547–573). New York: Wiley.

Wethington, E., & Kessler, R. C. (1986). Perceived support, received support, and adjustment to stressful life events. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 27, 78–89.

McCashen, W. (2005). *The strengths approach: a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. Bendigo, Victoria: St. Luke's Innovative Resources.

Saleebey, D. (Ed.). (2011). *The strengths perspective in social work practice* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Allyn & Bacon.

Uchino, B. (2004). *Social Support and Physical Health: Understanding the Health Consequences of Relationships*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1: Identify the problem or goal

Identify a goal that the client is currently aiming to achieve or a problem that he/she is trying to deal with. Briefly describe the goal/problem in the Social Network Analysis Form, on p. 6 under “Goal/Problem Description”.

Step 2: Analyse the supportive social network

Next, try to find out which people in the client’s social network can be considered as environmental strengths: people who can offer emotional, instrumental, informational and/or companionship support. The four types of support are listed below, including a description of each type and possible questions that can be posed by the practitioner to identify people in the client’s network who offer each type of support.

On the Social Network Analysis Form, use Table 1, “Social Support Network Analysis” on p. 7 to list the names of people who can offer one or more types of support.

A. Emotional support

Emotional support are the people in your social network who offer empathy, concern, affection, love, trust, acceptance, intimacy, encouragement, or caring. They provide warmth and nurturance and let you know that you are valued.

- With whom can you share your most private worries and fears?
- With whom can you totally be yourself?
- Who is genuinely interested in you?
- When you feel lonely, who can you talk to?
- Who do you feel really appreciates you as a person?
- Who can you really count on to help you feel more relaxed when you are under pressure or tense?
- Who will comfort you when you need it by holding you in their arms?
- Who accepts you totally, including both your worst and your best aspects?
- Who can you count on to listen openly and uncritically to your innermost feelings?
- Who do you feel truly loves you deeply?
- Who can you really count on to care about you, regardless of what is happening to you?

B. Informational support

Informational support are the people who provide advice, guidance, suggestions, or useful information to you. The information they provide can help you to solve your problem or reach your goal.

- Who can you turn to for advice about handling problems?
- Who can you turn to for advice about how to reach your current goals?
- Who can you really count on to give you useful suggestions that help you avoid making mistakes?
- Who may share useful insights that can help you reach your goals? This might, for example, be a person who has already reached this goal.

C. Instrumental support

Instrumental support are the people who provide financial assistance, material goods, or services. This form of social support encompasses the concrete, direct ways in which these people assist you.

In order to achieve your goal or solve your problem, there may be practical things that need to be taken care of. For instance, you may need ride to the hospital or need help fixing your computer or you may need financial assistance to realise a plan.

- Who can you turn to for help with these practical issues?
- Consider the practical issues that you find difficult or burdensome to do yourself. Who can help you with this?

D. Companionship support

Companionship support are the people who give you a sense of social belonging. These people are your companions: you can engage with them in shared social activities.

- Who do you enjoy spending time with?
- Who are the people with whom you (regularly) go out and do things?
- Who are the people you can have fun with?
- Who do you share a passion or interest with?
- Who are the people who enjoy the same things you do?

Step 3: Discuss how the social network may positively contribute to the problem or goal

- Together with the client, analyse the current problem/goal. Try to identify as many aspects of the problem/goal that the client feels need attention.
- List these aspects in the first column of Table 2, “Contributions of the social network to the problem/goal” on p. 8 of the Social Network Analysis Form.
- Next, consider each aspect of the goal/problem and identify what type of support is needed to deal effectively with this aspect. Use the second column of Table 2 for this purpose.
- Then, use the names in Table 1 to select people in the client’s social network to whom he/she may turn for this type of support. List the names in column 3 of Table 2.
- Finally, briefly discuss how each person may specifically assist the client in dealing with each of the aspects of the problem/goal and list the answers in column 4 of Table 2.

Imagine the goal of a client is to start his own business. An example of step 3 is provided below:

<i>Aspect of the goal/ problem</i>	<i>Type of support needed</i>	<i>Who can help me with this?</i>	<i>How can he/she help me?</i>
I tend to get stressed easily	Emotional support	brother	My brother is calm and emotionally stable. I can call him or visit him when stressed.
I don't feel I am well informed about the financial risks of running a company	Informational support	Marianna Silsbee	She has been running her own company for years. She can tell me how she managed the financial risks.

Step 4: Actively involving the social network

Now together with you client, take a look at Table 2. Discuss what concrete steps the client can take to involve these people more actively in order to deal more effectively with the problem at hand or to reach the goal. List these concrete action steps in the Social Network Analysis Form on p. 9. The following questions may help to generate these action steps:

Which elements of the problem/goal are most compelling for you to address?

What can you do to involve one or more individuals in your social network in the next week, that will move you (more) towards your goal/help you solve your problem?

What would help making the first step easier?

Appendix: Social Network Analysis Form

Goal/Problem Description

Client Name:

Goal/Problem:

Table 1: Social Support Network Analysis

A) Emotional support <i>People who provide love and care for your client.</i>	B) Informational support <i>People who provide information or advice needed to solve problems or reach goals.</i>
<p>Names:</p>	<p>Names:</p>
C) Instrumental support <i>People who provide financial assistance, material goods, or services.</i>	D) Companionship support <i>People who engage in shared social activities.</i>
<p>Names:</p>	<p>Names:</p>

Table 2: Contributions of the social network to the resolution of the problem or to the achievement of the goal

[illegible]

Action Steps

The following action steps will be taken to actively involve my social network in order to help me resolve my problem/reach my goal: