



# Introducing Strengths

Having Authentic Conversations  
About Strengths with Young  
People



Portland State  
UNIVERSITY



## Introduction: Activity

Instructions: Pair up with someone at your table. Take turns doing a “strengths exploration” or “inventory” on each other, using any methods or strategies you commonly use with young people. If you don’t have any standard methods, simply do your best to elicit a list of your partner’s strengths. Take about 5 minutes each being the interviewer and interviewee.



NWIA

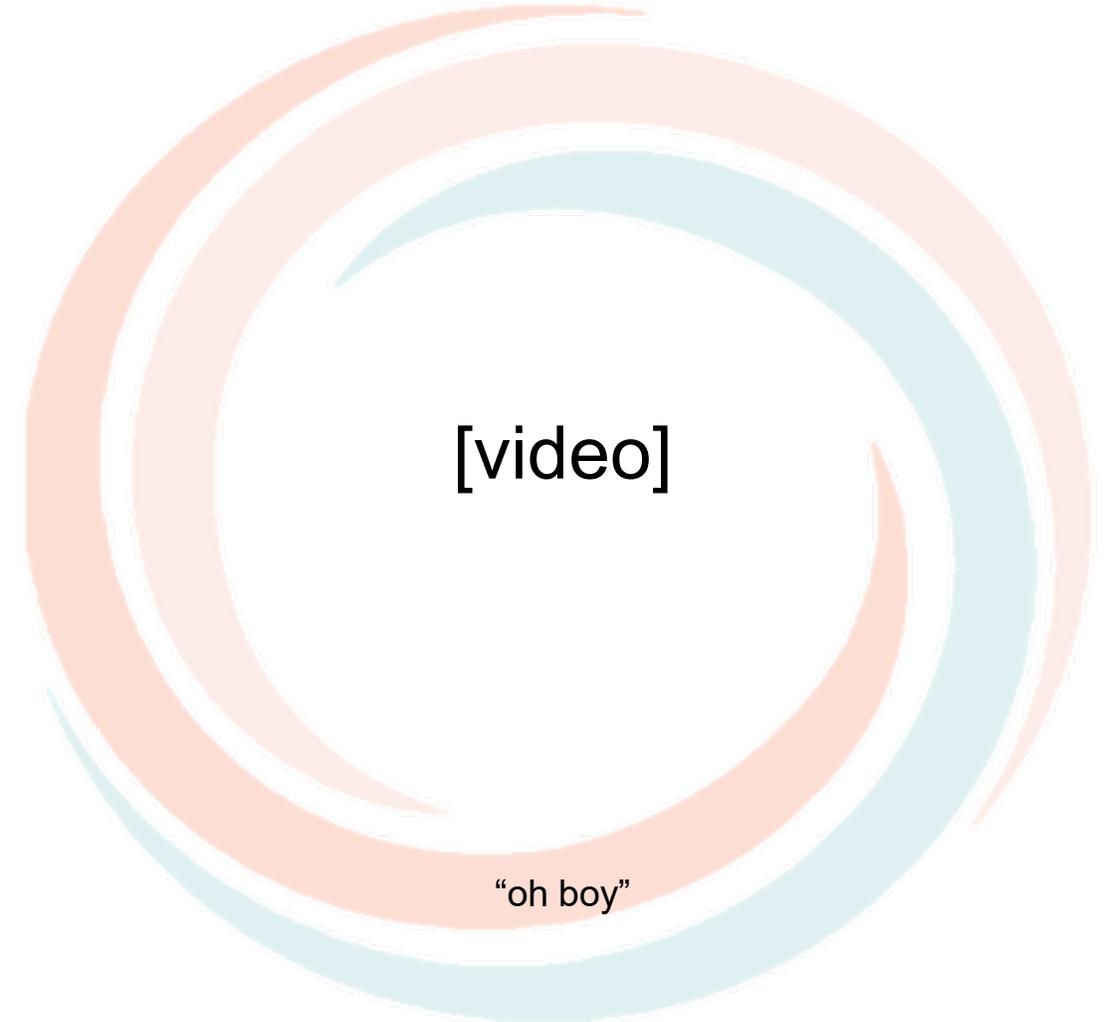
# Discussion

- How did that feel, as the interviewer and as the interviewee?
- Are there things that make doing a strengths inventory difficult? What are they?



NWIA

- Many young people have been asked to list their strengths so many times in so many different contexts that it feels like a chore
- Having a conversation about strengths in a way that is not tedious for the young person is difficult; having a conversation about strengths in a way that feels engaging and authentic can seem impossible



# What NOT to Do: Reviewing Common Pitfalls

- The pit of awesome
  - It is easy to fall into the habit of following up everything the young person says with generic praise - “cool,” “great,” “awesome!” - but this can come off as automatic and inauthentic





## Common Pitfalls

- Highlighting/Over-emphasizing/Getting excited about certain strengths that reflect your preference
  - For example, if you say “that’s great” when a young person suggests that one of their strengths is being a team player at work but are silent when they mention videogames, it will be easy for the young person to discern your values and priorities
- Making suggestions about what *you* think the young person’s strengths are
- Similarly, making leading reflections and asking leading questions while having a conversation about strengths
  - “I’ve noticed that you have great leadership skills - do you think being a leader is one of your strengths?”

- What do you notice the provider doing well?
- What pitfalls do you notice her encountering?
- Did you find yourself encountering any of these pitfalls, or others, during the opening activity with your partner?

[video]





# What TO Do: Conversational Techniques for Identifying Strengths

- Just go with it
  - Don't feel like you have to stick to rigidly to the task of making a list of strengths - if the young person gets excited talking about a particular topic, go with it
  - Strengths tend to emerge naturally when a young person is enthusiastic and engaged
- Stitching together / reflections
  - “Last week you mentioned how excited you were for your choir concert - it sounded like music was a really big part of your life.”
  - Reflecting on things the young person has mentioned before as interesting or important to them shows that you are paying attention and invested in them



# Conversational Techniques

- Open-ended questions
  - Always ask - never instruct
  - Again, be sure to stay away from leading questions - never identify a strength that the young person has not first identified themselves
- Normalize
  - Talking about strengths can feel awkward- normalize those feelings
  - It may be difficult for young people to think about their strengths - that's normal too. Think about questions you can ask other than “what are your strengths” to start the conversation more comfortably
  - Start to establish the idea that strengths and accomplishments can be small and that the everyday things are just as important as the big milestones



# When Strengths Emerge: Things to Keep in Mind

- Usually, not through sitting down and saying “Okay, let’s make a list of your strengths.”
  - Keep it conversational
  - Asking questions like “what do you like” and “what do your friends think you’re good at” is a natural way to get at strengths without forcing the question of “strengths” per se
- Over time
  - Talking about strengths can feel vulnerable!
  - By building rapport and trust with a young person, you will be able to have deeper and more authentic conversations about the things that are important to them

What do you see the provider doing here?

[video]



## Introduction Activity - Revisited

Partner up with someone different from your table, and do a strengths exploration again, this time using the conversational techniques highlighted during this session. Again, take about five minutes each as the interviewer/interviewee.





# Debrief

- How did your conversation go? Was it shifted by using these different strategies?
- How does it feel to be interviewed on your strengths?
- How might you implement some of these techniques or ideas in your practice with young people?



Questions



Visit Pathways RTC  
on the web for more  
information

The screenshot shows the website for the Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures. The header includes a logo, the organization's name, a search bar, and a newsletter sign-up button. A navigation menu lists Home, About, Research, Training, Publications, and Connect. The main content area features a 'Publications' section with a description and links to 'Featured Products' and 'Publications Search'. A large image of graduates is displayed with social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Below this is a horizontal menu with 'Publications', 'Webinars', and 'Training'. The main heading reads 'Improving the Lives of Young People with Serious Mental Health Conditions Through Research & Training'. Three featured articles are shown: 'PATHWAYS PUBLICATIONS' with a journal article and report, 'Introducing the Pathways Comic' with a comic strip preview, and 'New Journal Article Compares Outcomes of Online Training for Service Providers'.

Research and Training Center  
for Pathways to Positive Futures

Search

Newsletter Signup

Home » About » Research » Training » Publications » Connect »

Publications

Pathways RTC produces publications on young adult mental health.

Featured Products »

Publications Search »

Publications Webinars Training

Improving the Lives of Young People with Serious Mental Health Conditions Through Research & Training

**PATHWAYS PUBLICATIONS**

**Journal Article:** *Is Online Training an Effective Workforce Development Strategy for Transition Service Providers? Results of a Comparative Study (PDF)*

**Report:** *Wraparound for Older*

**Introducing the Pathways Comic**

Posted 01-16-19

Check out our new Pathways

**New Journal Article Compares Outcomes of Online Training for Service Providers**

Posted 01-14-19

Written by Pathways researchers and published online first in *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, the article "Is Online

→ [www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu](http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu)



# Acknowledgments/Funders



The contents of this product were developed under a grant with funding from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, and from the Center for Mental Health Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, United States Department of Health and Human Services (NIDILRR grant number 90RT5030). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this product do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, or of SAMHSA, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



# Contact Information

National Wraparound Implementation Center (NWIC)

[www.nwic.org](http://www.nwic.org)

Email: [nwic@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:nwic@ssw.umaryland.edu)

Shannon Robshaw: [srobshaw@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:srobshaw@ssw.umaryland.edu)

Eric Bruns: [ebruns@uw.edu](mailto:ebruns@uw.edu)

Kim Estep: [kestep@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:kestep@ssw.umaryland.edu)



## The Institute for Innovation and Implementation

University of Maryland, School of Social Work

525 W. Redwood St

Baltimore, MD 21201-1023

Email: [theinstitute@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:theinstitute@ssw.umaryland.edu)

Website: [www.ssw.umaryland.edu/theinstitute](http://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/theinstitute)