

Wisdom from Strength-based Working

Capturing the voices of people taking a strength-based approach to working alongside people going through tough times.



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Introduction

As part of its PTS Frontline Network activities, Mayday Trust captured experiences of those who take a strength-based approach to working alongside people experiencing tough times, such as homelessness. This Wisdoms is part of a suite of Wisdoms where the voices of people who either experience or deliver services are captured and shared.

Frontline workers were offered a variety of platforms to share their voices, including group Zoom conversations, individual conversations, WhatsApp messages, email, and social media. Conversations took place with people from across the UK during COVID-19 restrictions, so face to face meetings were not possible. It was agreed that all the contributions would be anonymised when used in this listening exercise.

We used the Mayday Trust approach of deeply listening through ‘Wisdoms’, which poses just one open question and listens to what each person wants to bring to the conversation.

A total of 66 people contributed to *Wisdom from Strength-based Working*, all of whom were directly delivering strength-based work, and some of whom had lived experience of homelessness or other tough times. The conversations and comments were initiated with the question – **What is your experience of delivering strength-based work?** The following document captures the main themes which were identified from what was heard. For context please also see our previous Wisdoms work: [Wisdoms from the Pandemic](#), [Wisdoms from Behind Closed Doors](#), and [Wisdoms from the Street](#).

What Does it mean to Work in a ‘strength-based’ way?

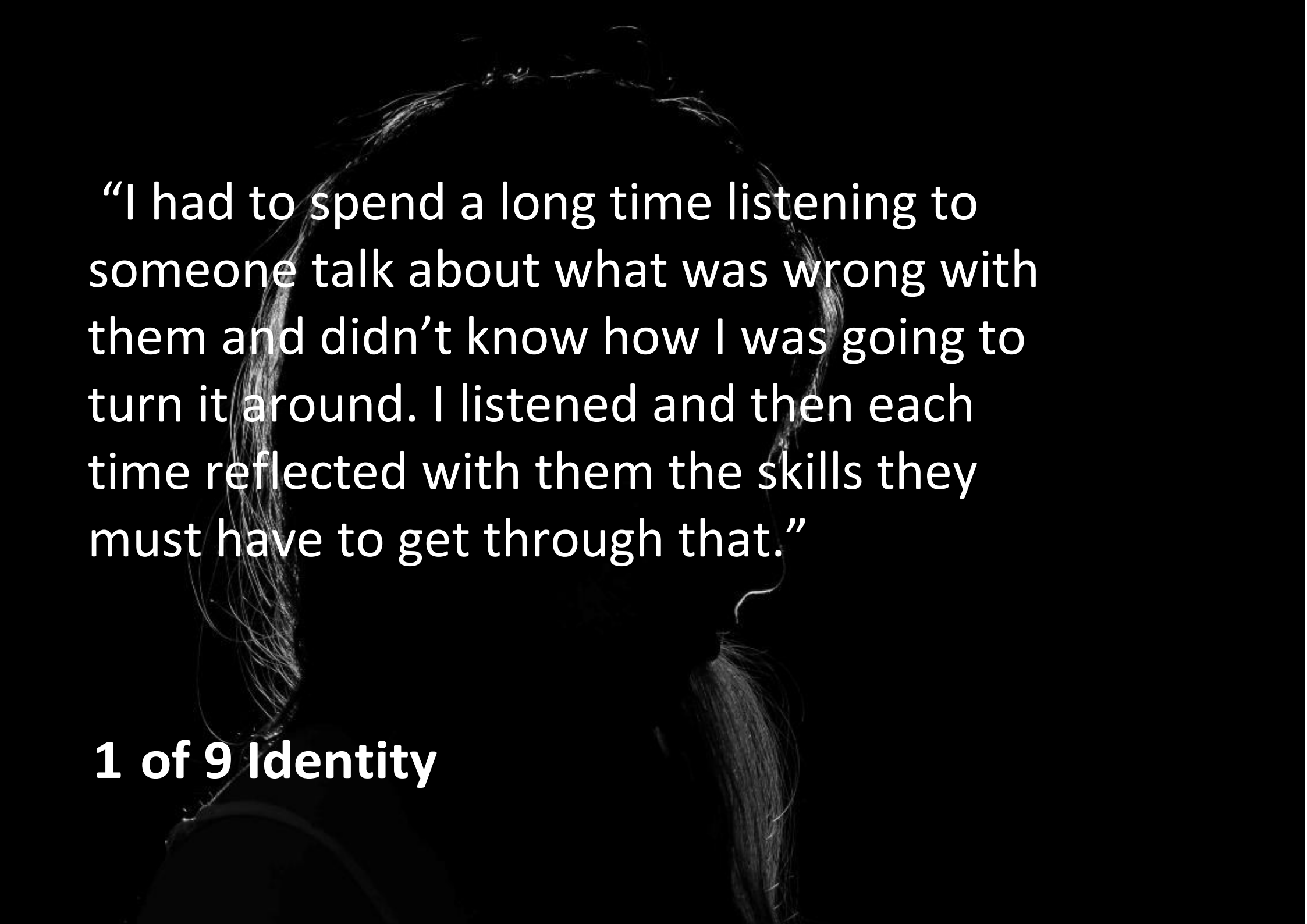
Mayday Trust, as a result of more than 11 years of extensive research, listening to people going through tough times and practical experience, has developed the Person-led, Strength-Based, Transitional (PTS) Response. Mayday’s

experience has shown that being strength-based only works when the person has choice and control, is able to accept or reject support, able to define the goals of that support on their own terms, and where PTS coaches have a high degree of autonomy to be led by the individual, hearing what's important to them and together working out what will move them toward the life they want to achieve.

- **Strength-based** - To be strength-based requires more than just focusing on the positives in someone's life. In order to be truly strength-based, you need to be led by what is important to the person and respond on an individual basis. The work of a strength-based practitioner is to listen, be curious and reflect with the individual to contextualise their experiences and to work alongside them on the things that the person feels are the most important. The aim is not to fix things for the person, nor to manage their situation, but to identify and build upon the individuals' skills, talents and abilities to tackle situations themselves whilst leveraging the right support at the right time.
- **Relationship Building** – this is what it's all about. Once trust is developed, conversations open up to include areas of the person's life including their aspirations, interests and what they'd like to achieve for themselves. These are positive goals and hobbies that people can develop within their communities. By doing so, people prove to themselves that they have the strengths to achieve and this realisation can spur them on to make the changes that they want in their lives.
- **Commitment** - it requires the continuous commitment of the whole organisation to also become strength-based, adapting organisational systems and structures which support strength-based working, and to seek funding that allows for the person to truly lead the relationship without tightly defined targets of success which are not meaningful to their lives.

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“I had to spend a long time listening to someone talk about what was wrong with them and didn’t know how I was going to turn it around. I listened and then each time reflected with them the skills they must have to get through that.”

1 of 9 Identity

Practitioners shared that the people they work with are often so used to talking about what is deemed to be *'wrong with them'* that having a strength-based conversation was not always easy. Due to the expectations of the system to provide negative information about needs and issues in order to access support, many people felt that this negative image had started to become part of their identity.

By providing a safe space for people to explore and reflect upon this, people were able to change the narrative to one of resilience, strength and resourcefulness. In this way, strength-based working could challenge this identity and reframe self-perception to one that is more positive.

“What struck me the most... is how deeply people's identities are shaped by the experiences of homelessness or substance misuse or the trauma they went through. And, often people just start telling you about all those negative experiences.”

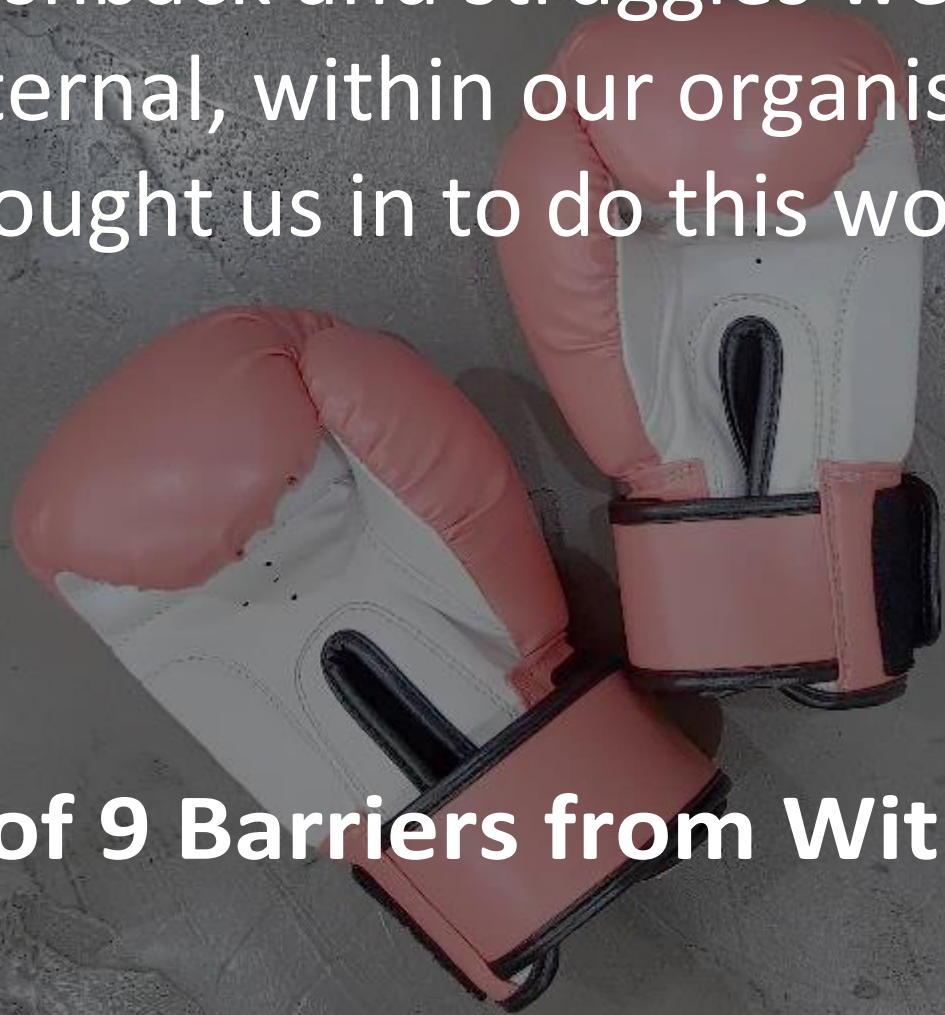
“I was working with that man... he started telling me about all these kind of negative experiences in his life. And I kind of stopped him and said, I don't need to know that. And he was speechless and didn't know what to say.”

Reflection:

Through careful and thoughtful conversation, practitioners were able to work with people to start to see themselves in a more positive light, developing self-belief which led to strength-based conversations rather than defaulting to deficits. Once people see the difference it becomes obvious and they can't go back, people start to believe in themselves and to build on successes, to shed the identity and failures they've acquired from the system, better able to cope with future tough times.

“I think something our team never anticipated was that some of the biggest pushback and struggles were going to be internal, within our organisation, who brought us in to do this work.”

2 of 9 Barriers from Within



Practitioners found it frustrating that their organisations had the best intentions about working in a strength-based way, but in reality, that there was an assumption that strength-based work was only relevant for those working on the ground and could remain as just a 'delivery approach'. Without the change of wider culture, practice and internal systems, strength-based working had a limited impact and barriers were experienced internally as well as externally by those trying to deliver in this way.

For example, although practitioners were often told to put the person they were working with first, they were also having to meet the demands of the organisation so that prescriptive contracts could be fulfilled. The two didn't always match and more often than not, the contract requirements were prioritised.

“I feel like they're not listening to my needs. They're not really respecting the way I work in that sense, because they're telling me work a certain way, but they're not going to make any effort.”

Where there was a lack of understanding from colleagues and managers this created internal challenge that added a layer of extra difficulty to an already challenging way of working. Being strength-based was often reduced to a buzz word, without any intention of wider change and reflection. These frustrations have led to people feeling conflicted, unsupported and that they had no choice but to find a different role and move on from their organisations.

“This job has caused me a lot of anxiety and stress that I didn't need. And I didn't think I was going to have. My senior management took on board all the stuff about working in this way... but on the ground, from last week, we've been told to do timesheets, as if we're in school. That's not how I thought it was going to be.”

Reflection:

Practitioners felt that their organisations as a whole needed to buy into a strength-based way of working. When people experienced an organisation that fully bought into a strength-based approach, there was opportunity for real change. They felt supported and part of a collective that were modelling something different together which gave them a sense of solidarity and motivation to drive strength-based work forward.

“It's all about funding. Our organisation has a great heart. It wants to do good work and wants to help people and it needs money to do that... But there's all this push and pull from funders.”

3 of 9 Survival

A small green plant with three leaves is growing out of a large pile of coins. The coins are mostly copper-colored, with a few silver ones visible. The background is a plain, light gray surface.

Practitioners shared that even if their organisations really wanted to embrace strength-based work, they felt that the pressure their organisations were under to get funding often compromised their work as the funding requirements didn't match the way they worked. The demands and requirements of funders and commissioners could include having to get lots of intrusive information from people, having tight timeframes to work together or having to work towards specific outcomes the person had not chosen for themselves or which focused on deficits. People felt this really impacted on their ability, and the organisation's ability, to truly be strength-based despite a real passion to work differently. The majority of funders and commissioners, including those where strength-based working is detailed within their service specifications, continue to measure success and performance via outputs, deficit outcomes and data reporting. Working to organisational or funder targets overshadowed the goals or targets determined by the person themselves.

Practitioners, even those who felt that their organisations really understood their work, still felt that the pressure from funders overrode the commitment to strength-based working, meaning that they were unable to work with people on their terms.

“It seems like managers are applying for funds, you know, right and left and they think after the fact ‘alright, how are we going to adopt that?’ and it doesn't work because we still need to be marking the outcomes of the council that they want us to meet.”

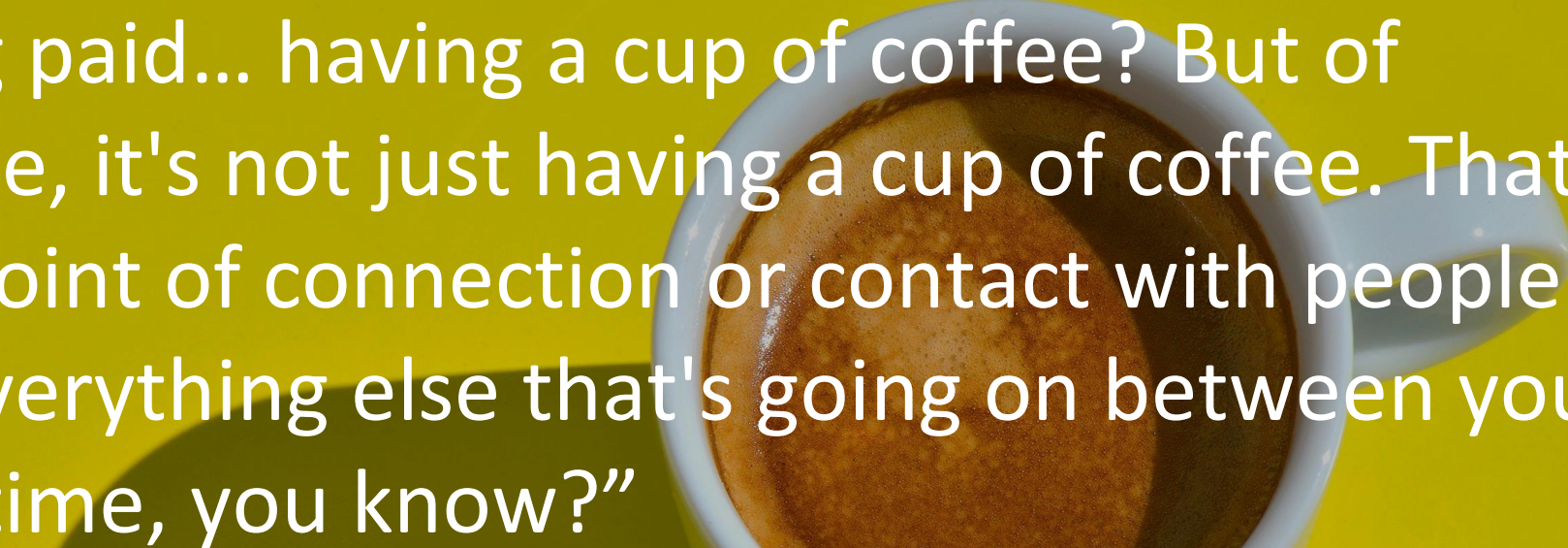
Some practitioners even questioned if strength-based work had been brought into the organisation just so that they could attract additional funding.

“I guess sometimes I feel like my organisation uses our services kind of lip service like, hey, look, we're doing this really cool new thing.”

Reflection:

Strength-based working is often compromised by funding linked to traditional reporting and outcomes targets. Organisations and commissioners could work together to understand this better and to create strength-based reporting and outcomes frameworks; practitioners and people they are working with could support this process. Therefore funding for strength-based work needs to focus more on funding the way of working, not the term.

“What do you do? You just sit there while you're being paid... having a cup of coffee? But of course, it's not just having a cup of coffee. That's the point of connection or contact with people... it's everything else that's going on between you in that time, you know?”



4 of 9 The Wrong Impression

“I actually find, that because I try and advocate for people I'm working with and be a voice that's not necessarily always listened to... I then sort of get coined as the soft one, if that makes sense. Like the person who is always, asking people to consider what they're thinking and challenging things and that's not... it's not nice for me.”

Practitioners explained that they had experienced conflict from colleagues within their own organisation and also from other services and even the Local Authorities. People felt that they were often having to challenge others around the use of deficit language or their approach to working with people, and this often put them in an uncomfortable position. People felt that there was a real lack of understanding of strength-based work and it was often regarded as ‘fluffy’ meaning they were looked upon as not being as important or knowledgeable as their peers.

“People think I just get paid for having coffee, they have no idea how difficult some days can be for me.”

Some practitioners expressed that this lack of understanding left them feeling isolated and unsupported in terms of their wellbeing because their job was perceived as ‘easy’.

Practitioners also shared that where their organisations were good at listening and did try to embrace strength-based work throughout, they didn’t experience this kind of conflict from colleagues, and although external challenge still existed, it was easier to deal with because they had the support of their organisation.

Positively, practitioners spoke about the difference in approach being noticed by people they were working alongside, who saw strength-based working as a positive thing. Practitioners also noticed that when others saw strength-based work in practice it generated interest from those not yet working in this way. For example, the use of strength-based language and space for people to lead their own journey and determine goals sparked interest as a new way of working.

“When you’re around other people who have the same strength-based approach it makes it easier. It’s a conversation rather than a battle.”

Reflection:

We can work together to develop a better understanding of strength-based work, to share the impact of strength-based working with individuals, to support the practitioners who are working in this way. There are a lot of great people out there doing great work, everyone wants the best for those who are experiencing tough times.

“When it comes to sitting down to talk about tenancy and move ons... the council say, here's your place, you're taking it. If you don't take it, you'll be back on the streets again, and there's no leeway, no negotiation.”

5 of 9 Housing



In cases where organisations provided both housing management and support, practitioners talked about how hard it was to be seen as separate from the housing management side of their organisation. People explained that much of their time was spent talking about housing management issues and this impacted on their ability to focus on providing strength-based support. Examples may include rules and regulations, rent arrears or areas that are specifically housing management related that clash with a strength-based approach.

“ I find it is unavoidable because I carry the label of being part of my organisation. So, when I sit down and meet people to talk about separate things, housing unavoidably comes up because they naturally associate me with others who are managing their housing and that just becomes entangled into the conversation.”

Practitioners shared that housing issues were one of the biggest barriers to being truly strength-based. It was felt that some of the people they were working with wanted to focus on securing housing, but they were being forced to engage in support that didn't seem relevant to them. While we were unable to substantiate the claim, the feeling from practitioners was that councils' approach was to work through lists to house people but that the people on those lists were not being listened to. They spoke about people being pushed into unsuitable properties with the expectation that they should be grateful.

“When people have a lot going on and have an immediate housing need the work can become or feel like fixing, this is sometimes exacerbated when working over the phone rather than face to face”

Reflection:

Strength-based working may be compromised where practitioners are seen as part of the housing and management provision. Unsuitable housing offers can get in the way of people focusing on other areas of their lives or getting stuck in the system e.g. where the only offer is supported housing which comes with a requirement to access the support, irrespective of whether it is needed.

“Sometimes I fail. Sometimes I'm like ‘oh my god, what do I do? How do I help?’ Then I end up trying to fixing things. It never ends well.”



6 of 9 ‘Why don’t you just fix it?’

Practitioners explained that often the people they worked with had an expectation that they would do things for them and 'fix' situations. Having strength-based conversations that focused on the person's ability to do things for themselves were hard because it went against people's previous experiences of services.

"Sometimes people have been in the system for quite a while. And this is what they're used to... This is what they want, they want you to make the phone calls, fill in the forms and write letters. And so yeah, I guess it's about, having that that real-life conversation and explaining, you know, that this is going to benefit them in the long run, because they will have those skills too."

Many practitioners felt that the system had created a dependency on services through the focus on 'issues' rather than people's strengths. Changing this narrative and expectation was a really challenging part of their role as they worked with people so that they could value themselves, do things for themselves and see their own worth. Sometimes practitioners felt it was very difficult not to jump in to try and fix things for people and they needed to really learn to sit back and listen to people.

"Not fixing helped me a lot with other relationships. Like when I'm talking to my friends or my partner or whoever and they are telling me about how hard their day was. I'm so much better at just sitting back and listening and being there with them and the hard time. I'm not like have you thought about this? Have you thought about that? Have you tried that?"

In addition to the difficulty of resisting the urge to fix people's problems or provide solutions, practitioners also shared how this fixing mentality could have a negative impact on their relationship with the people they work with. Often people would just want someone to listen and understand, not try and solve their problems.

"I meet with someone who was in a really low place. They would say... 'I want this. I want that.' I was like, 'we could do this or why don't we do that'... he was like 'no no no...' He shut down all my ideas and gloriously told me they were terrible. I knew I was wrong, but it was so hard to stop, even though I knew he really didn't want solutions."

Reflection:

Practitioners want to help, so they can end up taking over and 'fixing', focusing on the problem and not the person. People and services have grown to expect it to be that way, so when choice is introduced, or people are encouraged to lead on the solutions themselves, that can seem unfamiliar territory to everyone.



“What we get to do is build relationships, learn and understand people. I genuinely think by having different conversations, people are actually safer.”

7 of 9 Relationships Reduce Risk

Practices surrounding risk assessment and how that connected to services delivered was one area identified by practitioners as needing some further thought. Practitioners understood why organisations were so concerned about risk but they felt that this concern was misplaced. It seemed more about protecting the organisation if something went wrong rather than the people they were there to help.

People felt pressure to make sure they had certain conversations or filled in forms, but didn't feel that this was always in line with strength-based working. People shared that forms were rarely representative of the people they were working with and that building trust and relationships were a much better way of people having the opportunity to be safe. Practitioners felt that risk assessment should be an ongoing conversation about how that person can keep themselves safe, whereas, sometimes risk assessment seemed to be more about completing a form for the organisation's benefit.

"I can't make a generalised statement but a lot of the people we support, we support them because of trauma and their past... I'm expected to sit down and say hey, can you tell me about all of your traumas? I haven't got time to ask how their day was, why they're here, or why they're crying. Only, if you could just stop crying and fill out this form? Like, it's not professionals' fault that they have to work in that way, right? It's a system that's so terrified of a person killing themselves by suicide, or hurting someone at all. It's so scared of some horrible negative consequences being lumped onto the organisation that it's all about risk."

Practitioners also mentioned that part of strength-based working was allowing people take some risks themselves. They felt that this is how we ordinarily live and learn in everyday life, but when you go through a tough time, like becoming homeless, this seems to be taken away from you. It all becomes very controlled and organisations become fearful of people making decisions and taking risks 'we' wouldn't think twice about.

"People aren't allowed to take risks if they become homeless, suddenly they are the risk. I get things wrong all the time, lots of people do – when you become homeless you are not allowed."

Reflection:

When people access services because of tough times they can be seen as a risk which needs to be managed by the organisation, often seen as someone who inherently carries high risks which they cannot manage themselves, simply because of how they are coping with trauma or the situation they find themselves in. As a practitioner it can be difficult to focus on listening to the person when you feel pressure to protect the organisation, or yourself, from blame when things go wrong.

“Many people I’ve worked with talked about their situations as their fault. But you know what? Most of the time it was the system that failed them. We failed them. That’s hard to face up to.”

8 of 9 The System

Practitioners felt it was easy to get caught up in the pressures of the system and they knew this impacted on the way they wanted to work with people. Sometimes, on reflection, they felt that they were working with the system rather than with the person. Practitioners said that they felt increased pressure when they were working with those who were involved with lots of other agencies. They shared how they often felt helpless and frustrated with the way people were treated when they are caught up in systems and processes. Often, these processes actually prevented people from being able to move forward in their lives. Practitioners expressed how difficult it was to work with people when they are trying to challenge and change the system.

“People are losing their children because of how social services focus on mental health, deficits, and they treat parents going through tough times. Yesterday a mother gave up and handed her children to a relative. Solicitors didn’t feel able to challenge.”

“It can be tough to work alongside someone when they are experiencing negative situations or damage caused by the system.”

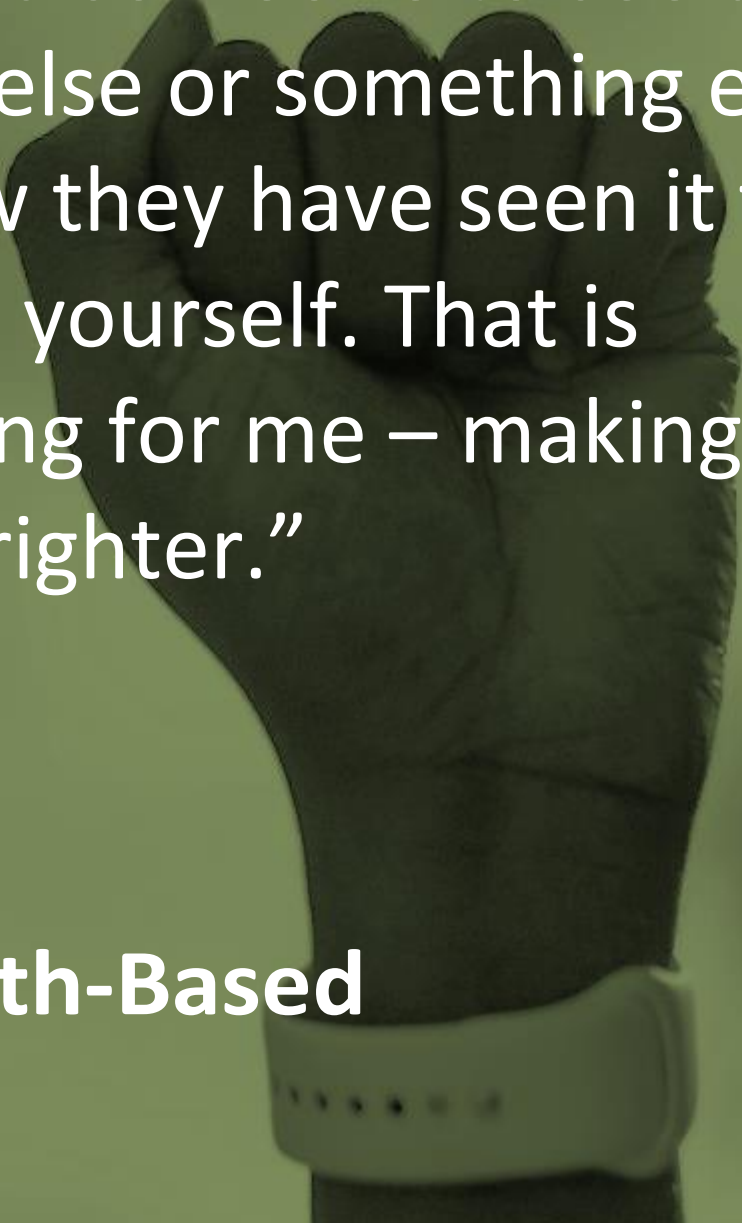
Practitioners shared how they had conversations with people they were working with about understanding their situation within the context of the system rather than the view that there was something wrong with them. They explained that they felt that this helped people to think about their situations in a different way in order to gain hope and motivation to move forward. They felt that having honest conversations with people was an important part of their work.

“I love asking people ‘you know what, what do you like doing?’ I love finding common interests with people... I have political debates with people talk about what a progressive society might look like that would support them properly. We talk about systems, we talk about systems change. And I think people find that really empowering.”

Practitioners explained that when they had been able to flip the conversation with people they were working with, so that they were aware of the impact the system was having on their lives, they often felt more in control or it made them angry at the system and their situations rather than at themselves.

Reflection:

Strength-based working can help people see things from a completely different perspective, simply by contextualizing their situation and their experiences, and this in turn can create a different mindset which in turn can support the ability to transition through their tough time.



“When you feel bad, you don’t need someone to confirm it. You need someone to see a glimmer of someone else or something else and you need to know they have seen it then you can start to see it yourself. That is strength-based working for me – making that glimmer shine a bit brighter.”

9 of 9 Being Strength-Based

Practitioners were passionate that working in a strength-based way was the right thing to do and felt that this should be the approach adopted by everyone. However, some people felt that you had to be clearer regarding personal boundaries when you work this way to avoid being seen as a friend or confusing the relationship.

“If you work in a strength-based way...you need to be really strong on boundaries.”

When reflecting upon what strength-based working meant to practitioners, there were common themes such as not fixing, avoiding labels, and looking beyond risks. When practitioners spoke about their work directly with people there was a sense of pride and joy about the work that they did.

“Once you start working like this there’s no going back!”

Although practitioners said that working in a strength-based was challenging, there was also a sense that once you take this approach, there was no going back. This was a challenge in itself, as often people felt if they couldn’t continue to work in a strength-based way, they had no option but to move on from their jobs or out of the sector completely.

“For me it means that you are facilitating rather than fixing, you look at pointing that person towards good health rather than dysfunction, stop using labels, but instead look at whole person and well-being. You need to see beyond the risk.”

“Since I've been working with a strengths approach, I've changed the way I talk and act with people - I'm now focusing on each individual's strengths instead of trying to get them to improve on their weaknesses as I did before. The results have been amazing. I also get much more enjoyment and satisfaction from my job.”

“It's just so freakin cool to help someone figure out positive things about themselves. Be proud of something, be confident in social situations, whatever it might be.”

Reflection:

When practitioners talk about strength-based working, they could describe the specific ways they behave, they communicated an energy and a passion for that way of working, and also an inability to go back to the more traditional deficit-based ways. The agenda is purely led by what the person wants to work on or achieve, and they focus on building connections and positive networks within communities as opposed to within services.

Conclusion and what next?

The overall view of practitioners who work in a strength-based way was that whilst it is not easy, there are clear benefits for the individual and the practitioner. Key to this was a trusting relationship, the person having choice and control, understanding the context of their situation, the language used, and the focus on people building an identity outside of problem-defined services, managing their own risks and being able to determine their own path out of the current situation, accessing the support they needed on their own terms.

The barriers encountered by both practitioner and the individual included lack of understanding and organisational commitment to strength-based working, target driven funding and commissioning of services, sector expectations to fix and manage people, the perception of strength-based working being the softer or nicer side of working within homelessness, and as such being an add in to the deficit-based environment.



So how can practitioners and organisations respond to this?

1. Trusting practitioners – It requires time, listening and reflecting with the person at the beginning of the relationship in order to facilitate the shift from reliance on services to self-belief and the ability to transition out of a tough time. Practitioners need to be trusted and to be able to share the learning and impact of strength-based working within their own organisation and with their funders.

2. Organisational culture and commitment – Whilst there may be compromises due to funding, current systems or structural issues, organisations can learn more from practitioners and those they support. Organisations can support this way of being e.g. adapting policies and procedures, use of language, funding applications which detail the benefits and behaviours of strength-based working.

3. Funding - Some organisations have responded to reporting requirements by reporting on strength-based outcomes and impact alongside their other reports, this sparks interest in funders and can lead to change, including more meaningful outcomes and data reporting. Learning together with commissioners and funders can bring about meaningful change for both organisations and funders. Practitioners and the voices of people they work with can be invaluable in this learning.

4. Understanding strength-based work - There's a lot to learn from strength-based practitioners and the people they work with – if organisations take the time, create the space, it can benefit everyone.

5. Housing and support – Organisations could review how they structure their housing management alongside their strength-based support, learning from within and from others who have made changes in how these services are aligned/delivered. Where systems present people with barriers, practitioners and the people they work with need to be supported to challenge what doesn't work. Organisations can come together as allies to highlight what doesn't work and what they have learnt by doing things differently.

6. Fixing – If you take the time to listen to people they can come up with their own solutions and strength-based working can reduce the reliance on services. It's not always easy, organisations could provide practitioners the space to reflect and learn as they work in this way. Practitioners could share the impact with other organisations as a way of influencing wider change and understanding.

7. Risk – You may want to review your approach to risk, be honest about what is for the benefit of the organisation and what is a way of working with someone to identify what they need to feel safe. Reflect on how we all take risks and how your approach to people receiving services may be different to that for people outside of homelessness, social care or other systems.

8. System challenges – Systems and services are under pressure, they can be difficult to navigate, people may give up and feel that everything is a battle. Strength-based working can be an opportunity to enable people to understand the context of their experiences, to keep going as opposed to giving up and feeling hopeless. Practitioners and organisations can do the same, to channel their frustrations and support each other through both understanding each other's context whilst also challenging where needed.

9. Being Strength-based brings passion into the work – There's a set of behaviours which are part of strength-based working. Both practitioners and organisations can explore what this would look like for them, and what support structures they can put in place for what is often challenging but impactful and rewarding work.

“Strength-based work should be the norm. It makes no sense that we even have to say that.”

About Mayday Trust

Formed in 1976 by Probation Officer Michael Varah and Probation Volunteer Jim Higgins, Mayday Trust is a forward-thinking organisation working alongside people going through some of the toughest life transitions. Following deep listening to those we worked alongside and others working within the system we have undergone an inside out transformation to ensure the services we offer are truly reflective of those we look to support.

Mayday directly supports those facing tough times through the PTS, providing person-led, transitional, and strength-based support, a method we now support others in our sector to adapt through delivery of our PTS qualification in partnership with Coventry University.

Through developing the PTS and reflecting on the experiences of those we work alongside, Mayday believes that the systems people encounter when they experience a tough time may not connect well to their needs, meaning that people face unnecessary barriers, become trapped in services, and may be forced to sacrifice their dignity in order to survive. We strive to support those working within the systems to find person-led approaches to create radical and meaningful change.

To find out more visit:

www.maydaytrust.org.uk

Or contact:

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About the Frontline Network

We support workers from the public, statutory and voluntary sectors working on the frontline with people experiencing homelessness across UK.

The Frontline Network aims to build relationships, share best practice, develop solutions, and communicate the experience and views of frontline workers.

It's not about us. It's about you. We work with your ideas and expertise, finding ways to help you and your work. As part of that, we offer funding, community and resources.

Find out more and get involved: <https://frontlinenetwork.org.uk/>



In order to find out more about Mayday Trust or the Frontline Network please visit www.maydaytrust.org.uk or www.frontlinenetwork.org.uk

Alternatively, you can email PTS@maydayturst.co.uk or frontline@smartinscharity.org.uk

