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# Helping the Helpers

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# Helping the helpers

**Integrating a strength-based perspective in graduate school and beyond can help fortify new and developing counselors during normal periods of self-doubt**



Tanisha is a master's student in the middle of her internship. She has just left supervision with her site supervisor and says to herself, "Will I ever know enough?"

Chuck is a first-semester counseling student in a skills class. He hears a lot of feedback from his faculty member and tells himself, "I can't do anything right."

Dre and Janice are first-semester counselor educators who maintain the same crazy hours they did when they were doctoral students. They don't really know where they stand or if they are accomplishing the goals they need to be accomplishing. They think to themselves, "Will I ever be enough?"

The process of becoming a counselor, supervisor or counselor educator can be exciting, exhilarating and, in some ways, exhausting. Counselor education programs encourage and expect personal growth and development, which can take many forms. Although growth can be exhilarating, it can also be challenging, both professionally and personally. We posit that a strength-based perspective can help fortify counseling students and new professionals through this growth process and bolster their personhood as they traverse identity shifts during graduate school and as they begin their careers.

In many conversations with master's students, doctoral students and new professionals, we have heard the following sentiments:

- ❖ "I don't know who I am anymore."
- ❖ "I wonder who I will be when I graduate."
- ❖ "I've changed so much my friends and family say they don't know me."
- ❖ "What if I discover I don't like who I am becoming?"

During this time, counselors-in-training and new professionals are generally receiving constructive critical feedback from faculty members, supervisors and peers. Although this process is imperative for a counselor's growth and development, taking in a great deal of critical feedback can cause

people to feel unmoored and experience self-doubt. They find themselves thinking, "I can't do anything right!"

Oftentimes, new counselors and new counselors-in-training focus their attention on all of the areas they need to "work on" — all of the skills they have yet to master, all of the insight they have yet to gain — instead of taking time to identify and concretize the ways they are growing and the areas in which they are already strong. A significant component of absorbing constructive critical feedback is the ability to discern between feedback that "fits us" (and is effective for our growth and development) and feedback that does not fit us. Along with that, it can be difficult, yet just as imperative, to hone our ability to notice our strengths and what we are doing well. We may very well develop a "criticism filter" rather than a "this is to help me grow" filter, ignoring our strengths in the process.

During this period of growth and development, counselors-in-training and new professionals may also struggle with a lack of support or a perceived lack of support. They might ask themselves, "Whom can I turn to?" or "Does anybody believe in me?" They may continue to struggle with their emerging



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sense of identity and identify with the “impostor syndrome”: “One of these days people will figure out I am not good enough/smart enough to do this, and they will remove me from my graduate program/new job.” All of these struggles can cause us to feel like impostors and feel inadequate. Possible mental health and somatic issues can even arise.

We believe that people have more strengths and are far more resilient than they often realize. Through identifying strengths, we believe counselors-in-training and new professionals are equipped to handle their identity struggles and areas for growth, while seeking support that nourishes who they are and who they are becoming.

### Who we are

As two recent counselor education doctoral graduates, we empathize with the struggles related to feedback, have questioned our own developing identities and have dealt with negative thoughts about our abilities. We both moved across the country for our doctoral work (Jennifer from the West Coast to the East Coast, and Pamela from the East Coast to the West Coast), and then moved across the country again for our first jobs as counselor educators (Jennifer from the East Coast to the Midwest, and Pamela from the West Coast to the South). We recognize our ever-present shifting identities and the need to be open to constructive critical feedback.

In our conversations with master’s and doctoral students across the country, we heard many folks discuss their struggles with impostor syndrome, their feelings of not being good enough and their inability to recognize when they were doing a competent job. We, too, have grappled with the same things.

We realized that we needed to recognize our positive contributions and consider the strides we were already making, then apply those things to the ways we wanted to grow. In the process, we saw a change in ourselves and the work we do and, consequently, more readily saw changes in those whom we serve.

### What a strength-based perspective is (and is not)

When people first hear about applying a strength-based perspective, they might say, “I am *so* not that optimistic” or “My

#### A strength-based perspective ...

- **Is:** Realistic
- **Is:** Person affirmative
- **Is:** Reframing
- **Is:** Self-care
- **Is not:** Rainbows, sunshine and unicorns
- **Is not:** Constant optimism
- **Is not:** Ignoring one’s shortcomings
- **Is not:** Haughty, stuck up or arrogant

life has been hard, not rainbows and unicorns.”

Our response is to *agree* with these comments. We, too, have had complicated lives and uncertain trajectories. We would not call ourselves “optimists” per se. Luckily, a strength-based approach does not require *any* of those things.

From our point of view, a strength-based perspective is about being *realistic* — but in a new way. This new way includes acknowledging your positive attributes and strengths rather than seeing only your faults and deficits. In this view of being realistic, one is required to *reframe* experiences. It does not require you to ignore what happened or pretend everything went exactly as planned. Instead, one reframes an experience to have a balanced perspective that includes both what went well and what can be adjusted. From a humanistic perspective, we believe this way of thinking and being affirms and cares for the whole person. It allows you to know you are a worthy, good person who is striving to do your best. Reframing adjusts your mindset and allows you the room to identify your strengths.

One of the hardest parts of adopting a strength-based perspective for many people, especially women and other individuals who have nondominant cultural identities, is their sense that it might be haughty, stuck-up or arrogant of them to identify their strengths. Many of us have been taught, whether culturally or through our families of origin, to ignore or downplay how we are competent because it might be perceived as bragging or being full of ourselves.

Again, fortunately, this is not what a strength-based perspective is about. A strength-based perspective does not ask people to get “too big for their britches.” It asks people to identify, realistically, how they are strong and to *lead with their strengths*.

We know that those of you reading this article are acutely aware of your shortcomings. We want to suggest that your shortcomings need some balance that can be provided only by your strengths. It is important for everyone to recognize that *our* individual strengths may be very different from *your* individual strengths — and that is a really great thing. So, remember the three keys to a strength-based perspective: be realistic, reframe and lead with your strengths.

### How to identify strengths

We believe it is important to work from a strength-based paradigm. That means that if you want to tackle a challenge or work on an area of growth, it is imperative to know your strengths so you can use them to inform your process.

For example, let’s say a practicum student counselor wants to increase her use of open-ended questions during counseling sessions. As her supervisors, we ask her to identify her strengths. The student counselor, doubtful and frustrated, states, “I don’t have any. I just want to stop asking closed-ended questions.”

After talking about it with her further and explaining the importance of identifying one’s strengths, the student counselor shares that she uses silence well, cares deeply for her clients and truly wants to understand her clients’ perspectives. We encourage her to take it a step further: How can she use the strengths she identified to ask more open-ended questions? The student counselor shares, “Well, I know I learn more about the client when I ask open-ended questions. And because I care so much about my clients and want to understand my clients’ perspectives, it makes sense to show that through open-ended questions.”

New counseling professionals may experience something similar. For example, let’s say a new counseling professional is consulting with a colleague about a client who is challenging for her. In the conversation, her colleague hypothesizes aloud: “I wonder what it would be like if you were more authentic with your client?”



If you are thinking ...	How you might apply a strength-based, realistic reframe
"I'm a mess. How can I ever help other people?"	"I have navigated a lot of change in a short amount of time. I know my experiences will allow me to be present for my clients."
"I can't possibly finish all of this work in such a short amount of time. Everyone else is succeeding, but I think I'm failing."	"I've been a hard worker in the past. There is no reason why this will be any different."
"I laugh every time someone mentions self-care. Who are these people? I don't have time for that!"	"I know that self-care is imperative to my own wellness, as well as to my personal and professional development. Self-care has been a cornerstone for me in the past, and because I care about myself and my clients, I know I can make it a priority again."
"I am completely overwhelmed and confused by my new workplace. I didn't learn any of this in graduate school."	"I have been overwhelmed and confused before. I found a way through it then, and I can find a way through it now."
"I feel pressured to be good at everything — counseling, supervision, research, teaching, service. I can't do it all!"	"I'm correct. I can't do everything all at one time. I can take things step by step, one thing at a time."
"Who am I to be trusted with educating future counselors?"	"I can be trusted to educate future counselors. I can remember why I chose this path and how I got here."

Immediately, the new counseling professional thinks, "I bet my colleague thinks I don't know how to be authentic!" In an instant, the new professional who made an ethical choice to consult about a client who is challenging for her sees only possible judgment from her colleague. Yet it's not too late for her to take a strength-based approach and change her inner dialogue. For instance, she might say, "I felt like I was being authentic, but I want to focus on how you said I could be *more* authentic. Can we brainstorm some ideas?"

When it comes to using strength-based methods to work on your professional identity development, it may be helpful to start with what you know about yourself as an individual, and then move on to what you know about yourself as a professional. What aspects of your personality do you consider strengths? Which of your abilities do you naturally fall back on when the going gets rough? What types of situations, events and activities give you energy?

It can help significantly to write these qualities down so you can see them on paper. Reading true words about who you are, written in your own hand, can be powerful and moving for many of us. In fact, this process can bring up strong emotions. That's OK. Stay with it. You might need to take a break, but commit to returning to the activity later that day

or week. Connect with a trusted friend or counselor to help you process what you're experiencing.

Next, write down one concrete aspect of yourself that you want to strengthen. Resist the temptation to make a long laundry list of faults. Recognize that this isn't a time to berate or shame yourself. Rather, it's an opportunity to look at yourself honestly, openly and with congruence concerning who you are and who you wish to become. Inevitably, any one area that you choose will strengthen your counselor, supervisor, researcher or educator identity.

This concrete aspect can be about a myriad of things. You might choose to strengthen a particular skill, like the counseling student did in the earlier example. You might choose to strengthen something that you identify as both a professional and personal concern. For example, a doctoral-level supervisor might notice that he gives constant advice to his supervisees rather than allowing them to explore possible solutions on their own. Similarly, he notices that he does this frequently with his partner and friends. He might decide to set the intention to strengthen his ability to listen more fully and to ask questions that allow his supervisees to explore their own options. Notice in this example that the supervisor did not set the goal to "give advice less often." Instead, he focused on things

he knows how to do and can improve upon: listening and exploration. With these objectives in mind, the supervisor is free to focus on strengthening what he knows how to do rather than trying to extinguish an unwanted behavior. When you focus on strengthening a part of yourself, unwanted behaviors tend to fall away on their own.

Finally, it's important to reflect on your process. What do you notice? How do you feel mentally and physically? What's working? Celebrate any incremental changes you observe, and be kind with yourself if things don't change as quickly as you would like or even if things seem to get worse before they get better. Increase your self-care practices, and give yourself permission to not set perfection as a goal. "Perfection" is not a strength, and many of us understand how detrimental it can be to strive for that unattainable goal.

### Realistically reframing negative thoughts

Through experience, we have learned that although a strength-based perspective makes sense conceptually, it can be difficult to understand how to put it into everyday practice. Consider the information on realistically reframing negative thoughts in the chart above.

What are your thoughts as you read these reframes? Can you imagine

shifting some of your language in this way? It can be hard, but it is worth it. Remember, reframing your thoughts is a step toward allowing yourself to identify your strengths. And when you identify your strengths and apply them to bolster an area of growth, you will experience incremental progress toward the goal you want to accomplish.

## **Conclusion**

Committing to a strength-based perspective can be scary because it encourages us to look at ourselves in an honest, authentic way. Yet applying a strength-based perspective can also be incredibly empowering because it helps us achieve a more balanced view of who we are and who we are becoming. By being realistic, reframing your experiences and leading with your strengths, you will begin to hone your strength-based abilities.

A strength-based perspective encourages you to keep moving forward and to keep growing, even when it seems “too hard” or “not worth it.” You possess strengths and gifts that are seen every day by the people you serve. Why not take the chance to see yourself through their eyes, and then use those qualities to bolster the ways you want to grow? You might be surprised by who you see emerge in the process. ♦

Knowledge Share articles are developed from sessions presented at American Counseling Association conferences.

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