
STRENGTHS-BASED INTERVENTION 8:**Assist Youth in Identifying People and Life Experiences for Which They Are Grateful**

SBI-8 encourages youth to identify people and life experiences that have had a positive impact on them. Studies have found that taking time to think about and show gratitude toward others is associated with heightened well-being in the form of increased positive and decreased negative affect (e.g., depression) and that these practices help youth build personal and interpersonal resources for coping with adversity (Bono, Emmons, & McCullough, 2004; Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Identify People for Whom Youth Are Grateful

We have all had people in our lives who had a positive influence on our development—people who showed an interest in us, spent extra time helping and supporting us. These people are sometimes family members (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents, extended family); school personnel (e.g., teachers, coaches, counselors); or others we have encountered in life (e.g., close friends, neighbors, employers, mentors, mental health professionals, clergy, probation/parole officers, caseworkers, direct care staff). Assist youth in identifying and thinking about these positive people:

- Ask youth to write down or tell you the names of family members, school personnel, or other people in their past and present life who have had a positive influence on them.
- Ask youth to write down or tell you about what these people specifically did that had a positive impact on them. What are youth grateful for?
- Ask youth about how their lives may have been different without these positive people and experiences in their life.
- Ask youth what attributes these positive people possessed that they can emulate in their own lives.

Identify Life Experiences for Which Youth Are Grateful

During the course of life, we all have experiences that impact us in positive ways. These experiences often influence how we think and feel about ourselves and others and how we interact with the world around us. Ask youth to write down or tell you about life experiences that have had a positive impact on them. These life experiences might include earning good grades in school, excelling in an academic subject, performing well at extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, art, theatre, debate, chess), earning a high school diploma or GED, having a passion that they pursued, attending a school or treatment program that improved their lives, spending time with an influential person, or having a positive job experience. Drawing a timeline can assist youth in identifying

various experiences during the course of life for which they are grateful. These life experiences are sometimes positive from the onset, but not always. Some life experiences are difficult yet result in positive outcomes over time. If a challenging life experience has enhanced a youth's resiliency or empathy for others, for example, that is something to be grateful for.

Express Gratitude

After youth have identified the people and life experiences that have had a positive impact, encourage them to share their gratitude and appreciation with these worthy people through letters, emails, or in-person meetings.

Summary

Optimism about at-risk youth is not just wishful thinking: It is rooted in empirical fact. A great deal of evidence exists regarding youths' capacity to develop into productive, prosocial adults. Possessing an optimistic attitude and sharing this optimism with youth and families can greatly augment the effectiveness of youth services. Optimism can be stimulated by sharing information about developmental research and statistics, remaining supportive when youth lapse/relapse and using these experiences as teachable moments, focusing on solutions and exceptions to problems, distracting away from chronic victim-stance and deficit-based talk, educating youth about personal power to reduce the risk of learned helplessness, and helping youth to focus attention on the people and experiences for which they are grateful. Promote hope!