

John J. Murphy and  
Jacqueline A. Sparks

Psychotherapy and Counselling Distinctive Features

Series Editor: Windy Dryden

# Strengths- Based Therapy

Distinctive Features



“This book is rich with clinical dialogues that help readers put into practice the collaborative, transtheoretical ideas and methods of strengths-based therapy. SBT challenges the assumptions of diagnosis-based treatments and offers an alternative client-directed approach. A must read for mental health practitioners and graduate students.”

**Michael J. Lambert, Ph.D.**, Professor, Brigham Young University. Editor of *Bergin and Garfield's Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change*

“Whether you’re a novice and simply curious about Strength-Based Therapy, or an experienced SBT clinician, this book is a must read. It offers an in-depth understanding of the roots of this client-centered therapy approach, a clear description of its components along with clinical examples that bring the ideas to life. Regardless of your current theoretical model, if you want better outcomes with your clients—and more enjoyment from your work—you will greatly benefit from this practical guide.”

**Michele Weiner-Davis, LCSW.**

Co-author of *In Search of Solutions: A New Direction in Psychotherapy*

“I am very excited to see the publication of this book. Emphasizing a strength-based approach to therapy is not only a needed addition to current practice, it is a needed corrective. Fostering strength is one of the best ways to correct psychopathology. The book provides an excellent theoretical and research base for this approach, and follows it up with a whole set of useful suggestions for strength-based practice.”

**Arthur C. Bohart**, Professor Emeritus, California State University-Dominguez Hills. Author of *How Clients Make Therapy Work: The Process of Active Self-Healing*

“It is clear from the research that clients—not therapists—are the principal driving force behind positive therapeutic change. This unique and compelling book shows how counsellors and psychotherapists can capitalise on that and help clients make the most of their therapy. Accessible, informed and illustrated throughout with client studies and dialogues, *Strengths-Based Therapy* can help therapists of all orientations develop their practice in a client-centred, outcome-informed, and socially-just direction. An invaluable addition to the contemporary counselling and psychotherapy literature.”

**Mick Cooper**, Professor, University of Roehampton. Co-author of *Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy*

“Read *Strength-Based Therapy* and improve your therapeutic success rate. Murphy and Sparks share a thought-provoking non-pathologizing therapy in which client wisdom is championed as a major ingredient of successful outcome. They generously illustrate this with their wealth of clinical experience—showing their embodiment of respect and humility, and importantly, exemplifying ‘doing social justice.’”

**Harlene Anderson, Ph.D.**, International Consultant,  
The Toas Institute, Houston Galveston Institute

# Strengths-Based Therapy

*Strengths-Based Therapy: Distinctive Features* offers an introduction to what is distinctive about this innovative client-directed approach. Written by two experienced practitioners of strengths-based therapies, this book translates SBT principles and practices into concise, evidence-based ideas and techniques that mental health practitioners can immediately apply on the job. Using the popular Distinctive Features format, this book describes 15 theoretical features and 15 practical techniques of Strengths-Based Therapy.

*Strengths-Based Therapy* will be a valuable resource for psychotherapists, clinical, health and counseling psychologists, counselors, psychiatrists, marriage and family therapists, social workers, and all who wish to know more about this unique approach to therapy.

**John J. Murphy**, Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Arkansas (USA), is an internationally recognized clinician and trainer of client-directed, strengths-based therapies. His books have been translated into multiple languages and he has trained thousands of helping professionals throughout the world.

**Jacqueline A. Sparks** is a Professor of Couple and Family Therapy in the College of Health Sciences at the University of Rhode Island (USA). She has written and trained extensively on the use of systematic client feedback in psychotherapy to promote client voice and choice.

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# **Strengths-Based Therapy**

**Distinctive Features**

**John J. Murphy and  
Jacqueline A. Sparks**

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# Foreword

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There is no one on the planet for whom I'd rather write a foreword than these authors and there's no book that I'd rather have people read in the mental health and substance abuse fields than this one. High praise indeed. Let me tell you why. First, the authors: John J. Murphy and Jacqueline A. Sparks exemplify everything that's right about providing services to clients and embody the original aspirations of why many of us got into this profession in the first place—to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those we serve. Drs. Murphy and Sparks have done everything they encourage you to do in this book. Interestingly, both started on the front lines collaborating with heroic clients to overcome adversity in all the varied ways it presents itself to human experience. There is no one I'd rather have on my team, behind the mirror, or in the room with me while I see clients. I have first-hand experience of their work and it has always served as an inspiration of what our field can be. And they have been writing about and teaching these ideas for many years to students and practitioners worldwide. This book brings a wealth of experience to the table from two extremely gifted practitioners, teachers, and scholars.

There is something else that needs to be said about the authors. Strengths-based therapy (SBT) has been derided over the years as naïve as well as many other derogatory descriptions. Sadly, the prevailing perspective to view those we serve as broken, scarred, incomplete, or sick provides fierce resistance to an alternative that

privileges client ideas and resources throughout the therapeutic process. But certain individuals held strong and did not succumb (to the dark side of the Force) to view clients in terms of the “Killer Ds:” diagnosis, disorder, deficit, dysfunction, or damaged. Jacqueline Sparks and John Murphy fought the battles in both practice and print year after year to view clients well beyond and far greater than the pathological labels we bestow upon them. Your authors were undaunted by the dominant discourse of pathology and have been on the right side of this ongoing values argument long before it was fashionable.

And now this book: Drs. Murphy and Sparks combine this treasure trove of experiences—clinical, teaching, and standing up to practices that diminish clients—with a conceptual tour de force that takes strengths-based therapy to a new level. They identify the roots of SBT, pay appropriate homage to key players, cogently describe its theoretical underpinnings, and importantly, establish its empirical foundation. They follow this creative integration and coherent distillation of ideas with a clear articulation of what SBT means when the doors are closed facing the dilemmas of human existence. The evocative client examples come to life and provide understandable guidelines for conducting strengths-based therapy. They examine SBT in ways that it has never been examined or articulated before, its many strands of theoretical features woven together to create a tapestry of understanding; and its many tributaries of practice that flow together to merge into a common river of strengths-based practice.

Considering all the attributes of this book—the authors’ clinical experience of doing SBT as well as their history of championing a non-pathological perspective, its cogent theoretical framework and empirical foundation, and its lucid guidelines of how to do SBT in encounters with clients—doesn’t do it justice in terms of its contribution and why I consider it the one book I want everyone in the field to read. This book not only provides a scholarly yet immediately practical guide to SBT while eviscerating a pathology-based view, it elevates SBT beyond just another approach to add to the already too many flavors of the month. This book demonstrates

that being strength based is transtheoretical and can be applied across clients as part of any practice of any model. It is a way of inhabiting any of the wonderful plurality of approaches available today. Please take whatever you can from this book and know that you are continuing the revolution of SBT these authors have not only advanced, but evolved to a new place of conceptualization and practice.

Barry L. Duncan  
BetterOutcomesNow.com  
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# Preface

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We have good news and bad news. The good news is we know more than we ever have about helping people change. Decades of scientific research confirm that the most effective clinicians—regardless of theoretical orientation—“bring out the best in clients” by involving them in every aspect of therapy and privileging their strengths, perceptions, and feedback. Every idea and technique in this book is driven by these findings, which is why *practitioners of all persuasions can benefit from integrating SBT into their everyday practice*.

Now for the bad news. Despite empirical evidence linking therapeutic outcomes to the quality of client involvement and the therapeutic alliance, mental health services as a whole remain steeped in the medical model and out of step with the evidence. In contrast to traditional diagnostic-prescriptive approaches in which expert therapists analyze client deficits and prescribe corrective treatments, SBT clinicians build collaborative solutions inspired by client strengths, feedback, and other resources.

The book consists of 30 short chapters addressing SBT’s key theoretical features (Part 1) and practical features (Part 2). Chapters in Part 1 present SBT as a transtheoretical, client-directed, culturally responsive approach that treats clients as resourceful heroes of change. In addition to highlighting the centrality of clients, Part 1 emphasizes the “person of the therapist” as a powerful therapeutic factor and offers guidelines for maximizing one’s effectiveness as



a clinician. The practical implications of SBT's theoretical features are woven throughout Part 1 to enhance theory-to-practice connections and applications.

Part 2 offers dozens of concrete techniques to help you put SBT into action on the job the very next day. Techniques in this section include being respectfully curious, instilling hope, recruiting client resources, using between-session strategies, and collecting systematic client feedback that gives clients a voice and choice throughout their care. The last few chapters of the book invite readers to "think outside the therapy room" by creating strengths-based work environments, integrating SBT into training and supervision, and acting for social justice.

We wrote the book for current and prospective mental health practitioners—psychotherapists, counselors, social workers, psychiatrists, graduate students, and anyone else in the business of helping people change. We use the terms therapy/counseling and therapist/counselor to align with the title of the book series, though we realize there are many other terms that could be used for therapeutic services and providers (social worker, helper, etc.). We use the word "clients" to refer to individuals, couples, or families.

Since people learn best from examples, the book is full of real-life dialogues from our work with individuals, couples, and families. While the names of clients have been altered for confidentiality purposes, many of the dialogues are lifted directly from session transcripts to provide an up-close-and-personal perspective of SBT in action.

Writing is a privilege and responsibility we take seriously. In an era of information explosion, time is precious and we thank you for including the book in your reading agenda. Our goal was to describe SBT ideas and methods in concise and practical ways that equip you to put the book into immediate action. We invite you to read on and judge for yourself whether we accomplished this goal.

# Acknowledgments

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We are grateful to many people for their inspiration, support, and contributions to our work. The following colleagues have significantly influenced our understanding and development of client-directed, strengths-based practices (listed alphabetically)—Harlene Anderson, Insoo Kim Berg, Harry Goolishian, Steve de Shazer, Barry Duncan, Michael Lambert, and Michael White. We offer special thanks to our friend and colleague Barry Duncan, who wrote the Foreword to this book and continues to inspire us through his tireless advocacy and efforts on behalf of client voice and choice in therapy. To Michael Lambert, Harlene Anderson, Michele Wiener-Davis, Arthur Bohart, and Mick Cooper, thank you for your wisdom and writings, and for your endorsement of this book. We also thank our partners and friends at the Heart and Soul of Change Project ([www.heartandsoulofchange.com](http://www.heartandsoulofchange.com)), an international repository of research, resources, and other information supporting the delivery of evidence-based, socially just therapeutic services to clients of all ages and circumstances.

To our students, thank you for helping us to continually question, learn, and refine our thinking, teaching, and writing. We appreciate the practitioners and trainers we've been privileged to supervise and consult with, whose wisdom, questions, and experiences have encouraged us to continue researching, revising, and writing about the challenges and joys of implementing collaborative, strengths-based practices.

We appreciate the proofreading assistance provided by Carley Owen, Greg Edgin, and other graduate students who read earlier drafts of the book. We thank our colleagues at the University of Central Arkansas and University of Rhode Island for their friendship, support, and collaboration on various projects over the years. To Joanne Forshaw, Senior Editor at Routledge Press, thank you for your support and professionalism throughout the book's writing and production. Jacqueline thanks Martin for his understanding and patience with her seemingly endless work, and Tricia, Tav, John, and Cary for their constant support. John thanks Deb for her love and patience, and Tom, Helen, Erin, Maura, Robbie, Ruby, and Julia for their ongoing reminders of life's goodness and possibilities.

Finally, we thank the individuals, couples, and families we have been privileged to work with. You remain our most reliable source of wisdom when it comes to delivering respectful and effective services.