Spinal Cord Injury: Using a Strengths-based approach to having challenging conversations

Challenging conversations are a part of pediatric rehabilitation. For clients with a spinal cord injury, challenging conversations may occur around topics such as prognosis, acceptance of the diagnosis and prognosis, adjustment to life with a disability and alternative treatments. There are a variety of different strategies that healthcare providers can use to help navigate challenging conversations with clients and their families. Solution-focused coaching is one strategy that healthcare providers can try to help foster a strengths-based conversation. This document defines solution-focused coaching, introduces a solution-focused coaching model and provides tips for fostering therapeutic relationships and rapport building.

Solution-focused coaching: What is it?

Solution-focused coaching uses language to emphasize the client’s strengths and resources to help transition them from focusing on a problem to thinking about what they would like instead.1 Solution-focused coaching enhances2:
- independence
- agency
- hope
- goal setting
- client well-being
- therapeutic relationships

Solution-focused coaching model: E.A.R.S.

Elicit, Amplify, Reinforce, and Start again (E.A.R.S.)³ is a solution-focused model of communication that can be used to help facilitate challenging conversations. Here are some guiding principles and sample questions you can try to guide your conversation.

**Elicit**
- Ask questions that help to elicit the client or family’s strengths and resources
- Try:
  - What needs to happen in our conversation today so that it will be useful for you?
  - What are your best hopes from our conversation?
  - What’s better since our last conversation?

**Amplify**
- Ask questions that amplify strengths and resources
- Try:
  - What did you do?
  - How did you do that?
  - What was helpful for you?
  - What is different for you as a result?

**Start again**
- Start the conversation again
- Try:
  - What else is a little bit better?

**Reinforce**
- Reinforce strengths and resources with compliments (direct and indirect)
- Try:
  - What have you learned as a result?
  - What can help you maintain these improvements?
- Words to try:
  - Wow
  - That is so great

Some solution-focused elements featured in this document are a result of the collaborative work done by the Solution-Focused Health Care Coaching Program at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, in an effort to incorporate and embed practices into the roles of healthcare practitioners.

Last updated: March 2020
Tips for relationship building

Establishing a therapeutic relationship with your client is important and can lead to positive outcomes.⁴ Here are some things to try with your client to help with relationship building⁴:

- Take time to build rapport
- Listen
- Establish trust
- Seek a common ground (focus on abilities or strengths)
- Establish a connection based on a shared understanding
- Collaborate and create goals together

Knowing your role

It is important to think about your role in facilitating challenging conversations with your client and their family. Ask yourself:

- What is the professional expertise I can lend to this conversation?
- Are there supports within my program that can assist the client during this conversation?
- How can I best prepare for sharing information? (e.g. be organized, have information available)
- How can I best explain how this information relates to the client?
- How might the parent receive the information I am sharing with them?

Rapport Building

Rapport building is an essential skill that highlights the importance of relationships and humanizes the individual being spoken to.⁵ Although clinical appointments with your clients may be short, rapport building is still possible and is important to do.

To build rapport:

- Aim for understanding
- Gather information about the client
- Use language that is easy to understand
- Begin with positive assumptions
- Avoid directives (e.g. asking versus telling)

Tools

Words matter! Using positive words can help to enhance resiliency, coping and self-actualization. Here are some examples of key words you can use to foster a solution-focused conversation:

- Manage
- Instead
- Helpful
- Even just a little
- Suppose
- Useful
- What else?
- Notice
- Suppose
References


**DISCLAIMER:** The information in this document is not intended as medical or professional advice or opinion. Individuals are required to exercise their own judgment in using and applying any of this information. Application should be based on individual/patient needs, the relevant circumstances, and the local context. Neither Holland Bloorview nor any of the contributors to/authors of this information are providing medical, diagnostic or treatment services. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the contents of this information, Holland Bloorview does not give any guarantee as to the completeness or accuracy of the information provided. Furthermore, Holland Bloorview Kids rehabilitation hospital is not responsible or liable for any harm, damage or other losses resulting from reliance on or from the use or misuse of the general information provided. We do not endorse the content of any links referenced in this document.