

# Where Next for Strengths Based Practice?

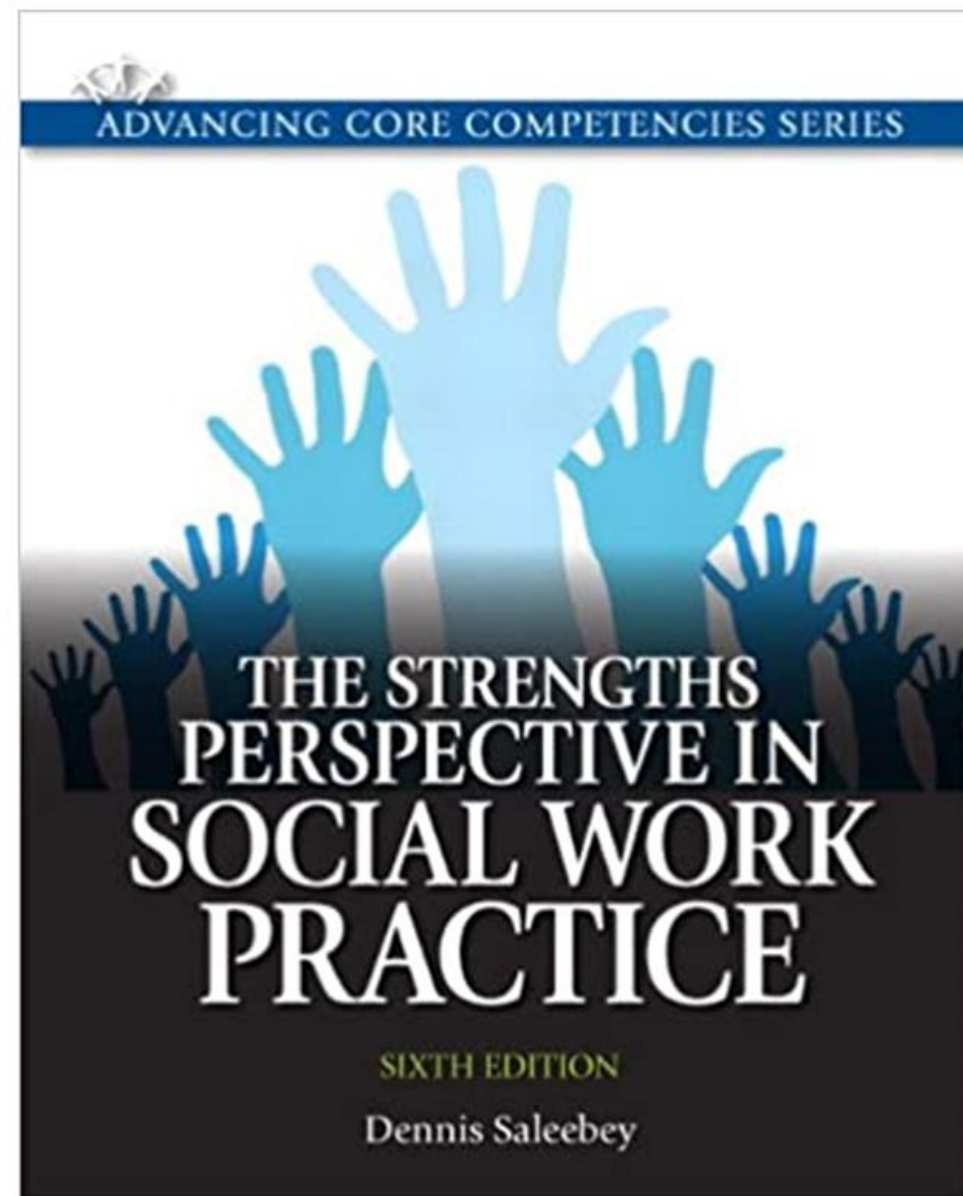
## Relationships & Reciprocity

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Principal Social Worker  
Essex Adult Social Care

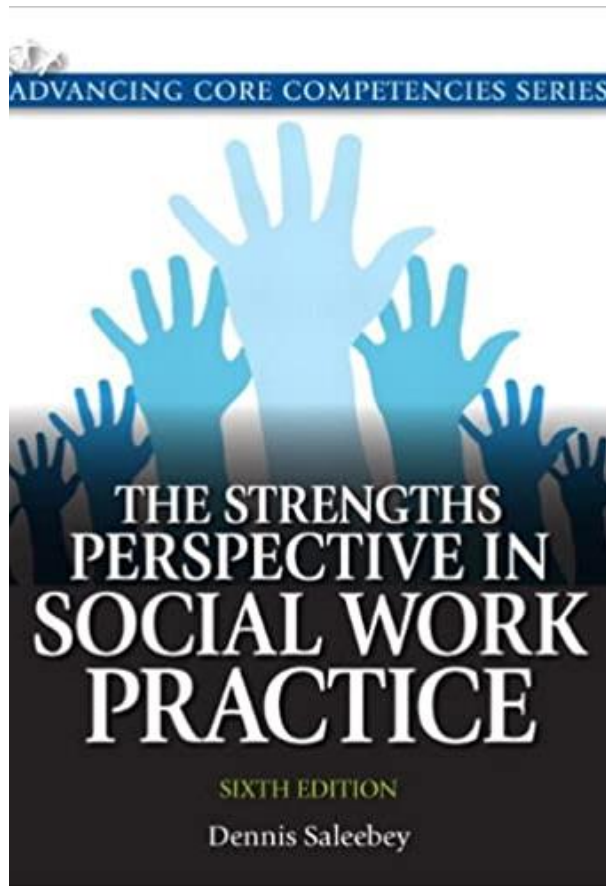
Date: October 2024



# What is Strengths Based Social Work?



# Principles of Strengths Approach



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Belief that focussing on deficiencies alone isn't useful so interest is in strengths resiliencies, coping mechanisms and contribution.

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Optimism; everyone has the capacity to contribute, reciprocate, learn and grow.

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Relationship between person and social worker is key and is a source of discovery, understanding and containment

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The person is the director of the helping process

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Community is a source of potential support and an opportunity for reciprocity and contribution

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# The Problem with Strengths



Undermined by its  
over-simplification



Lack of high-quality  
evidence about its  
effectiveness



Accused of sanitising  
issues that are too  
difficult to acknowledge

# Strengths Approach means never having to ask someone what they're good at

By communitysocialworkerrmej September 11, 2021



## Relationships and reciprocity; where next for strengths-based social work in adult social care?

Tanya Moore

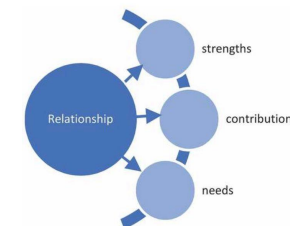
Principal Social Worker, Hertfordshire Adult Care Services, UK

### ABSTRACT

Strengths-based social work is a deceptively simple approach that is conflated with community strengths-based models, causing confusion for local authority commissioning processes as well as for practice. This has led to the reductionist question 'what are your strengths' now being seen as an acceptable basis for assessment. It may be that in our determination to avoid a deficit approach, we are ignoring the realities of living with care and support needs. But it may also be that in the face of overwhelming need, a simplistic approach to assessment serves the unconscious need to contain anxiety for social workers and wider system. This article uses a local authority case study to explore the meaning of strengths approach for social work. An approach of Relationships and Reciprocity is proposed to build upon the affirming principles of strengths and contributions whilst recognising the centrality of the relationship in forming authentic collaboration and containment.

### KEYWORDS

Strengths; social work; relational; contribution; reciprocity; commissioning



### Introduction

Vague understanding of what 'strengths-based practice' means for social work has led to an over-complication of its explanation and over-simplification of its application. Strengths-based social work is written into UK statutory guidance and professional practice expectations in England. Yet there is both a lack of clarity about what it means to practice social work in a strengths informed way and routine conflation between strengths-based social work and strengths-based community development models.

Using the case study of a local authority in England to demonstrate its application, this paper clarifies the meaning of strengths-based social work, unpicks its conflation with community development and notes the impact of such conflation on wider local authority commissioning practices.

The implications of strengths-based social work are examined and a psychodynamic lens is applied to the implicit defence mechanisms highlighted. The suggestion is made that over-simplistic understanding of the meaning of strengths-based social work serves the function of protecting overstretched services from the vulnerabilities of relational connection in the presentation of overwhelming need.

The author proposes the development of strengths principals into an approach of Relationships and Reciprocity. This incorporates understanding the importance of both

# ~~What are your strengths?'~~

Dismisses  
reality of the  
difficulty of the  
person's  
experience

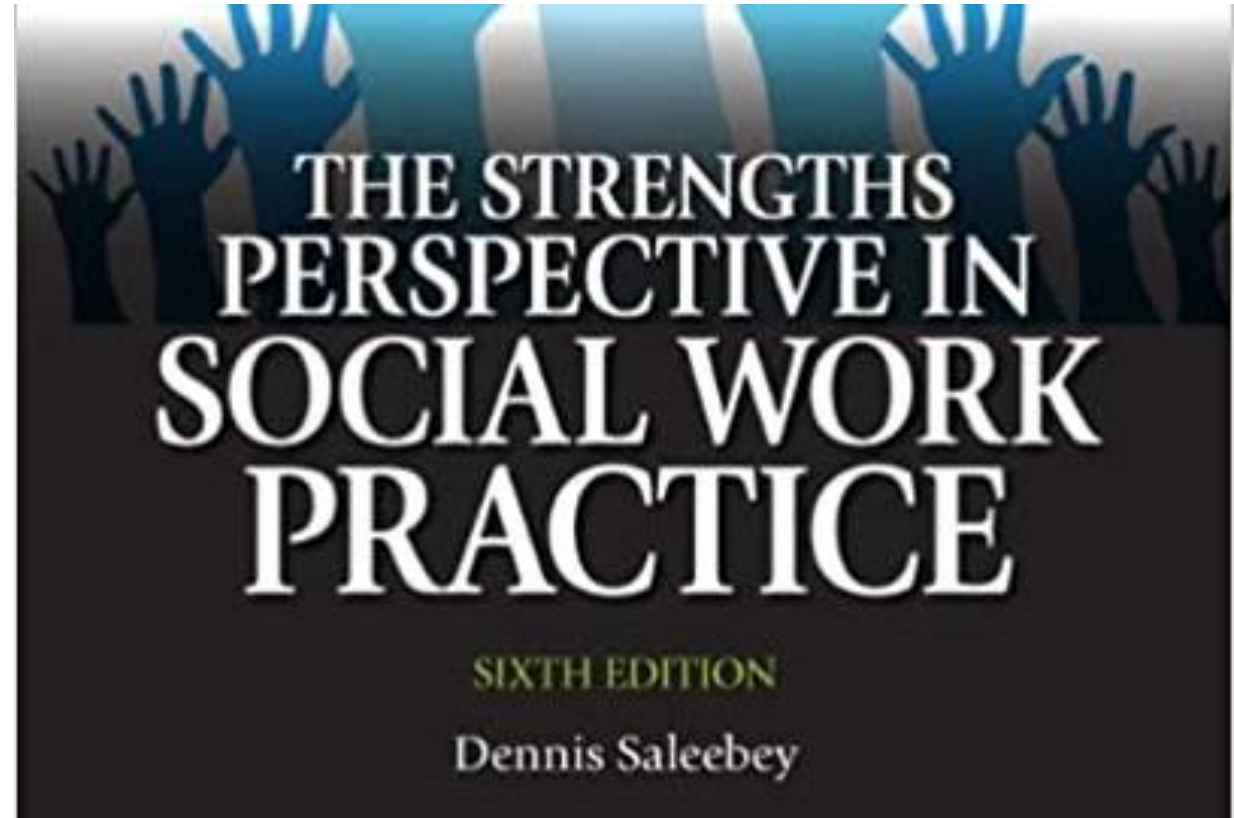
Side-steps  
personally  
directed  
narrative which  
is essential to a  
strengths based  
conversation

Shifts  
responsibility  
for  
identification of  
strengths from  
the practitioner  
to the person

Denies the  
power dynamic  
of the role of  
the social  
worker as gate  
keeper to  
services



# Conflation with broader community Strengths-based models

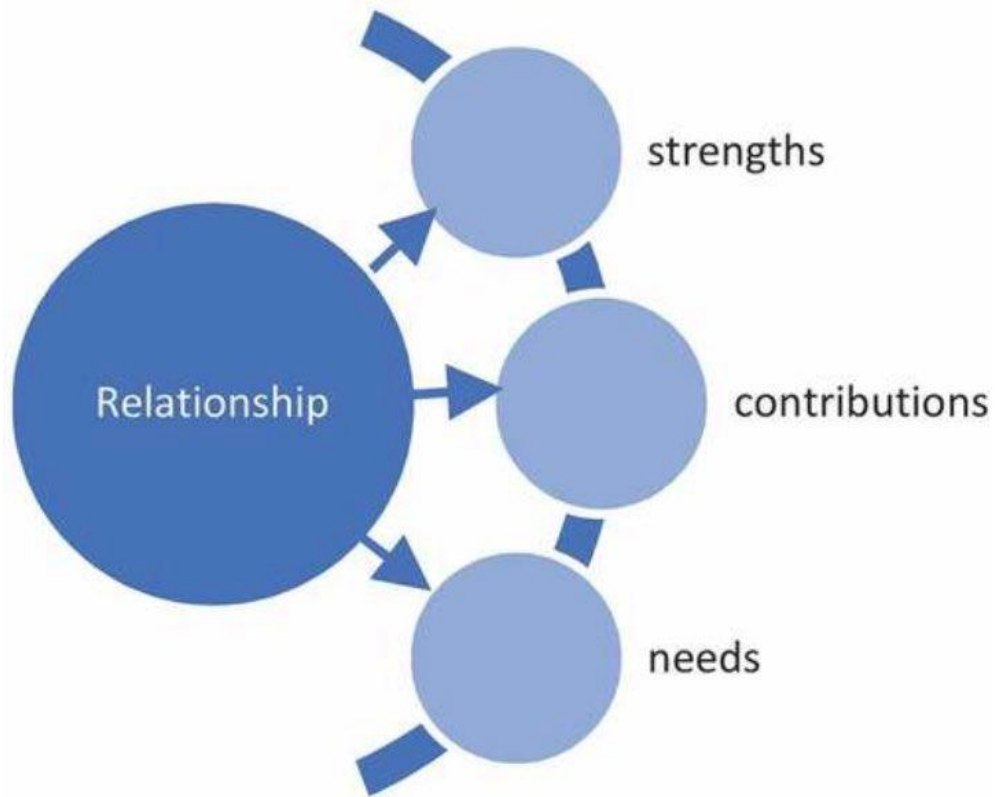


# Relationships are Key



- Must be genuine connection
- But genuine connection demands a vulnerability from all participants
- We give a little of ourselves when we connect to another
- Alternative is emotional disconnect that can lead to process driven practice-by-numbers
- Collaboration requires transformative connection and must be two-way.





Abi and Meera

# At what cost relationships?

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## Contributions and Need

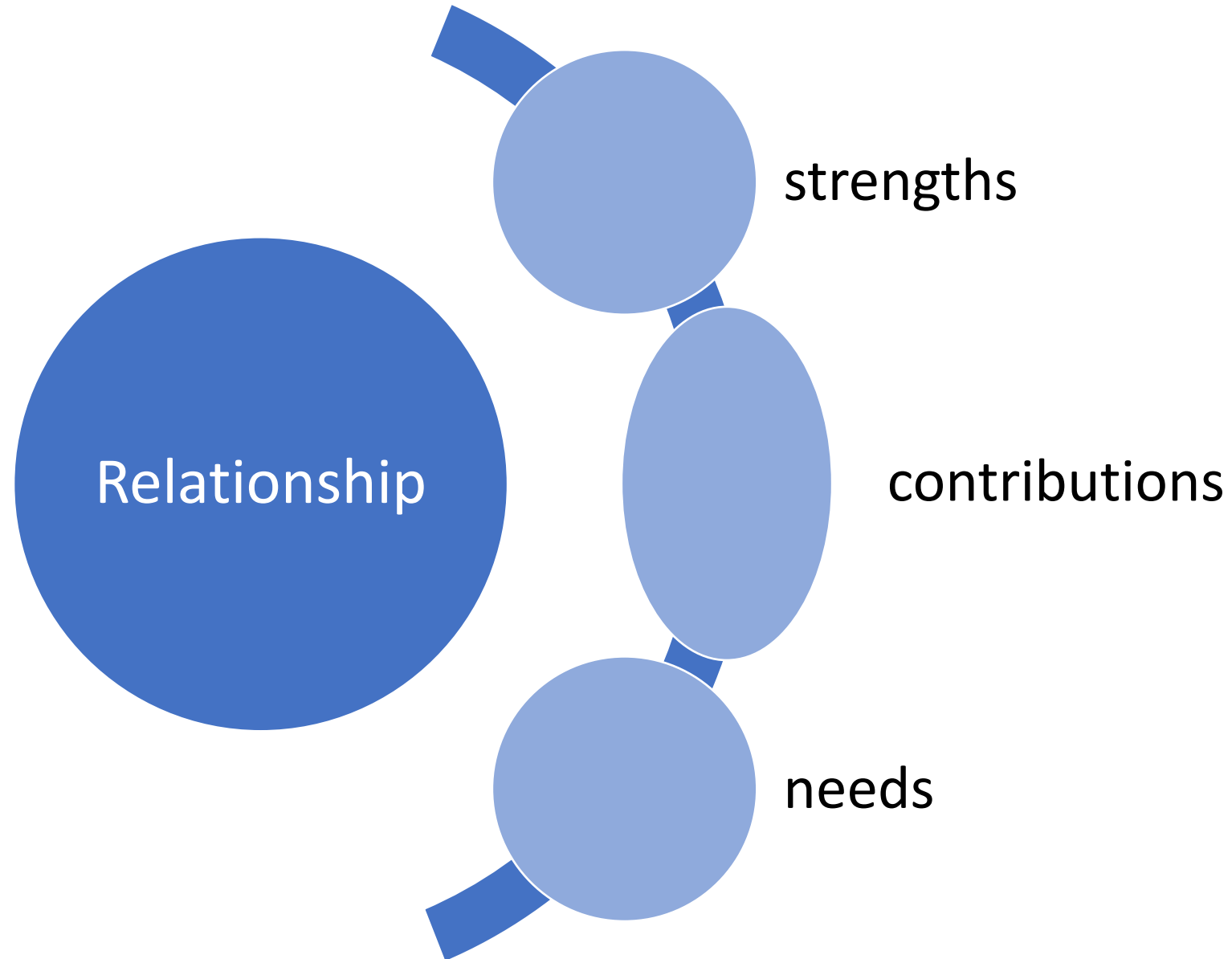
- We need to give as well as receive love, friendship and support
- This symbiotic drive has been termed the 'reciprocity imperative' (Richardson, 2020) and highlights the importance of contribution



## Relationships and Reciprocity

Recognises strengths, contributions and needs within context of authentic relationship necessary for genuine connection and helpful understanding.

Principles would build upon the existing principles of strengths-based social work:



# Relationships and Reciprocity

## Principles

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Belief that focussing on deficiencies alone isn't useful so interest is in strengths resiliencies, coping mechanisms and contribution. *But experiences of dependency are also attended to*

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Optimism; everyone has the capacity to contribute, reciprocate, learn and grow. *Relationships are the container within which this can be communicated, encouraged and experienced*

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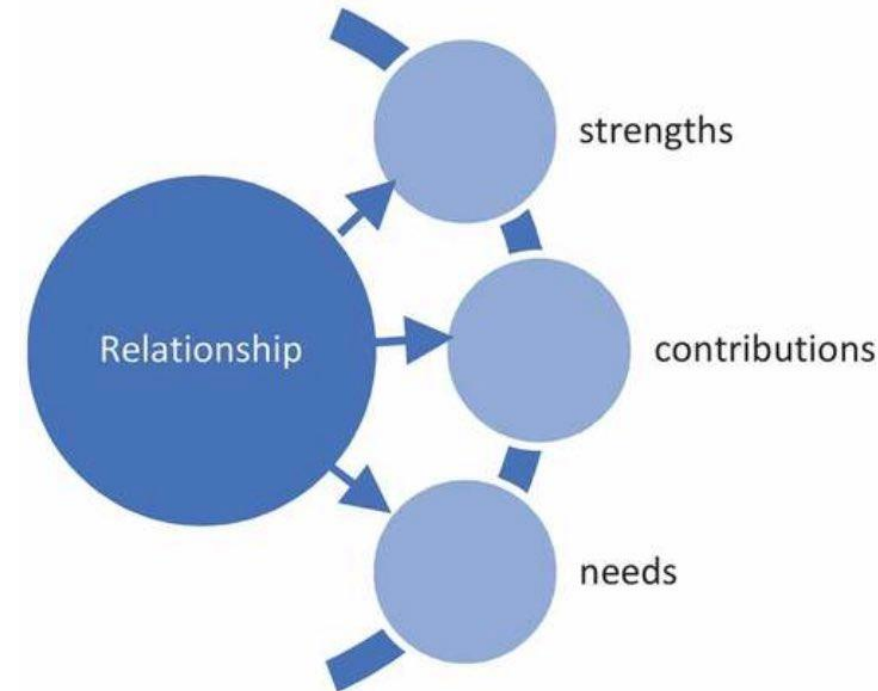
Relationship between person and social worker is key and is a source of discovery, understanding and containment

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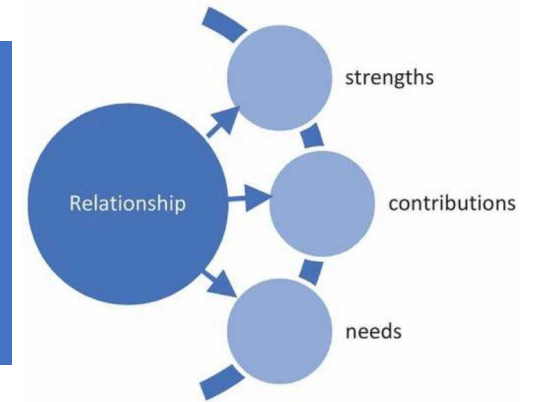
The person is the director of the helping process but *there needs to be a trusting relationship in place in order to understand and authentically respond to their direction*

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Community is a source of potential support and an opportunity for reciprocity and contribution but *meaningful connection with the person is needed for personalised understanding of what this means*



# Finally



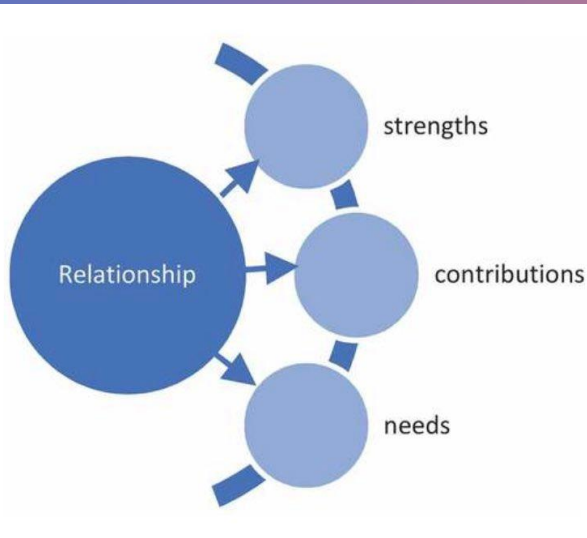
- Development of strengths and contributions thinking into a model of Relationships and Reciprocity offers the value base and affirmative approach of strengths and contributions whilst facing up to the reality of need and demanding the reflective space necessary for meaningful relationship-based practice





# References

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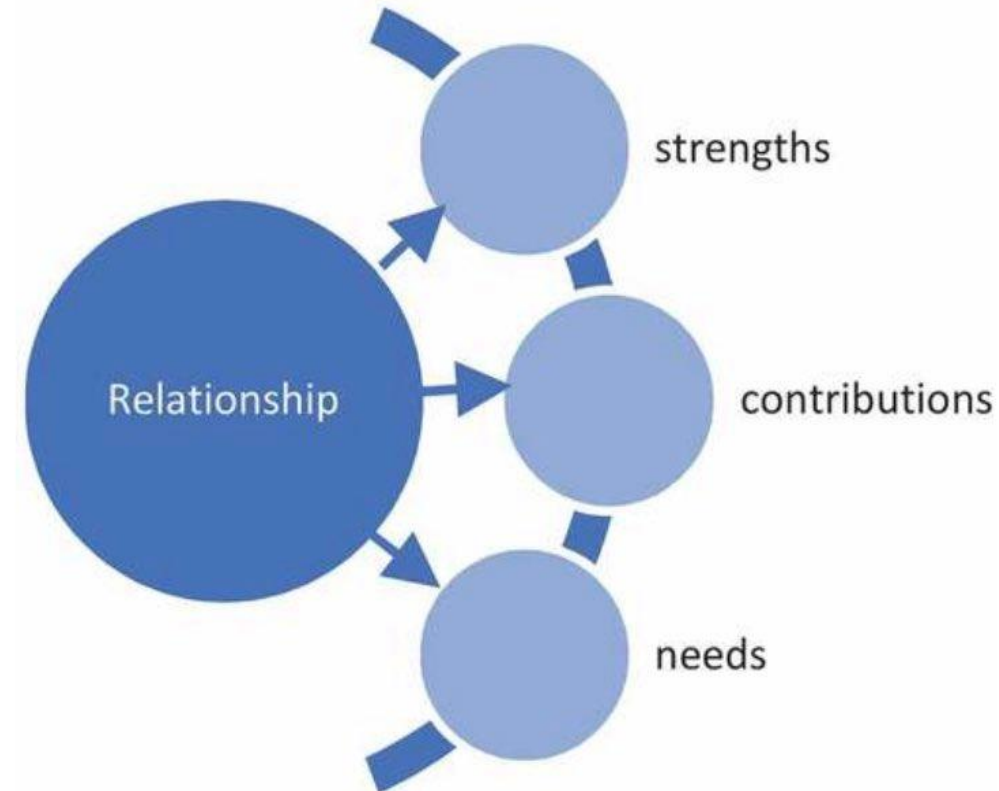
# Over to You



What does Strengths based practice look like within your service?



How might this model be used to enhance practice in your area?





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