



Identifying and Building on your Personal Strengths: A Tool for Improving Your Health

Indigenous people and communities have many unique strengths. The languages, cultural practices, strong social connections, and ceremonial customs ground health and well-being in important ways. In addition, personal characteristics, talents, and achievements add to one's strengths that are important for health.

Here, we will consider how to build on our strengths as a tool for improving health. We will also discuss how to bring our strengths into visits with medical providers.

An example:

John is a 45-year-old carpenter and father of three children who lives in a Tribal community. Prior to a car accident last year, he was in very good health, and he enjoyed weight lifting and biking for exercise. He is dealing with back pain on a daily basis and is struggling to keep his job. This has also led to depression. He is not interested in medications for either the back pain or depression, saying "I feel that our Native Ways are going to best help me recover."

What strengths do we see in John?

- Strong health and active lifestyle until very recently.
- Belief in his Tribe's healing traditions.

How can John use those strengths toward his healing?

- Since he has always been an active person, it is important for him to find new activities that he can do with back pain. By becoming more active, this will help treat his depression naturally. He might enlist a physical therapist as well, as they can help his back pain without medications.
- John can enlist Traditional Healers in his community to support him in mental, physical, and spiritual ways. This gives him an avenue for healing that is very different than relying solely on his local Tribal clinic.

Identifying Your Strengths and Applying Them To Improve Your Health

- List your strengths: this is something many of us have not done in years or ever, as the focus is often on the opposite (e.g. our deficits, and in terms of health, our health conditions).

Strengths may include the following.

- Family and social support
- Traditional Knowledge – cultural ways, language, ceremonial
- Profession/Trade/Education
 - Personality Traits such as resilience, positivity, etc.
 - Talents and Creativity

- Share that list with a few family members or friends. Add them to the list as they point out the strengths they see that you may have forgotten.
- Now, with a full list of what you do well in hand, think about 1-2 health issues you are dealing with now. How could you utilize your strengths to help address/overcome these health issues?

How to Bring Personal Strengths Into Your Healthcare Visits

Health care providers are often focused on deficits such as health conditions, addictions, social stressors, etc. The following are tips for bringing strengths into medical visits, both for yourself and for those you advocate for such as children and elders.

- **Share about yourself and your life with your health providers.** This gives them a fuller sense of who you are. This will help them to develop care plans with you that take all your needs and life circumstances into consideration.
- **Share your cultural perspective.** When you see things differently from an Indigenous cultural lens, speak up about it. For instance, you may feel that ceremony is needed to correct an issue, while your health provider believes psychotherapy is the answer. Share your perspective!
- **Bring your strengths into the care plan.** We are all the experts in our own strengths, and your healthcare team needs you to share your strengths for these to be incorporated into the care plan. You might even suggest how a particular strength (e.g. my job as a rancher) can be used to address a health condition (e.g. Why don't I start walking more while working on my ranch, instead of using a 4-wheeler, to help address my high blood pressure).

Our strengths are powerful tools for our health journey. Now, you get to put this into practice. Work on identifying your strengths and putting them into practice. Find ways to bring them into your conversations with your health providers. Have fun watching your strengths energize your health journey!