The Aotearoa New Zealand Strengths-Based Counselling Practice Framework.
## The Aotearoa New Zealand Strengths-based Counselling Practice Framework summary

### Practice philosophy
All people have strengths, resources, abilities, and capabilities; People’s strengths, resources and abilities provide the keys to growth and change; People are the experts on their own lives; Collaborative practice is essential in strengths-based counselling and is underscored by socially just practice; It is not just about the problem but also about hearing positives and exceptions.

### Practice component - Skills and Activities
- Strengths-based questioning: open-ended questions, exception-finding questions, exploring the preferred-future/goal-oriented questions, coping questions, scaling questions
- Strengths-based listening
- Validation, affirmation, and acknowledgement
- Making meaning and reframing
- Normalisation
- Externalisation
- Strengths-based language
- Strengths-based tools and tasks
- Using the self
- Storytelling
- Awareness of spirituality

### Practice component - Phases
#### Flexible process
- **Initial engagement**
  - Rapport, therapeutic alliance, develop trust, set up as a strengths-based process, give information, whanaungatanga and tikanga, respectful, warm welcome, attentive to strengths and resources.
- **Assessment**
  - Collaborative; focus on strengths, skills, resources, ability, capacity, possibility and risk, and needs and problems; holistic focus: physical, spiritual, family, mental health.
- **Work phase**
  - Goals, hopes, preferred future, plans, collaborative process, build and focus on strengths and resources.
- **Closure**
  - Evaluate; acknowledge and celebrate achievements; reflect, deconstruct, reinforce, and review change; maintenance plans; and collaborative process.

### Practice component – Positive Client Outcomes
- Effective and fast
- Facilitate empowerment
- Uplifting
- Enhance hope, courage, self-trust, self-esteem, and engagement
- Validating
- Acknowledging
- Reduce anxiety
- Neurobiological benefit

### Formal and informal strengths-based knowledge
Incorporates:
- Practice theory from strengths perspective and strengths-based practice approaches (Indigenous and Western approaches) as well as strengths-based research.
- Local knowledge - cultural and ethnic concepts and narratives, tikanga, whanaungatanga, knowledge about the community and its structures, processes, services, resources, systems, organisational systems and public and political issues.
- Practice knowledge from various fields of practice.
- Practitioner self-knowledge and self-awareness.

### Context of practice
Contextually and culturally informed and sensitive. Includes broad cultural dimensions. Respectful and non-judgemental, collaborative practice, culturally appropriate engagement, honours self-determination, recognises and acknowledges the client’s culture, the engagement of cultural advisors and supervision, attention to whanaungatanga, and the involvement of larger relationship groups.
Summary of the Aotearoa New Zealand Strengths-Based Counselling Practice Framework for social work.

This practice framework reflects the contextual considerations and practice components that are central in strengths-based counselling in social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. This framework was developed from what practising social workers, who were involved in this project, reported that they did in their practice. The practice framework represents a body of knowledge, which includes different practice approaches and possibilities, a number of skills and activities, and a sequence of phases that can be employed in strengths-based counselling. The specific choice of application, however, would be guided by the practice philosophy of the framework and determined by the practitioner, practice situation, and that which was suited to the client and client requirements. It can be used in different fields of practice but adapted to particular practice contexts.

The visual representation of this practice framework depicts the framework sections nested in a contextual awareness with formal and informal knowledge at the core of the practice framework. The practice philosophy informs and connects all the framework sections and the practice components are guided by the practice philosophy, knowledge, and context of practice.

The practice philosophy

The practice philosophy requires an approach to practice that demonstrates a belief that all people have strengths, resources, abilities, and capabilities. This entails seeking out and drawing attention to people’s internal and external strengths and resources. This approach further demonstrates a belief that people’s strengths, resources, and abilities provide the keys to growth and change and takes centre stage throughout the counselling process. This practice philosophy also trusts and respects that people are the experts on their own lives. This belief is demonstrated in the therapeutic relationship through a concerted effort to support and protect the client’s self-determination. The philosophy, furthermore, supports collaborative practice as an essential characteristic of strengths-based counselling. Practice is focused on teamwork where all team members are respectfully engaged as equals in a process driven by social justice principles. This philosophy lastly also supports practice that
demonstrates a belief that it is not just about the problem but also about hearing positives and exceptions. This entails fully validating and assessing the client’s concerns and problems but also focusing on the client’s unique strengths, solutions, and successes.

**Foundational formal and informal strengths-based knowledge**

The theoretical assumptions and research from the strengths perspective and strengths-based-practice approaches inform the knowledge base of this practice framework. This includes the theory from solution-focused therapy and narrative therapy as well as other theories, models, and frameworks that are supported by the strengths perspective and the aforementioned practice philosophy. This framework therefore offers the scope for eclectic practice and may incorporate various strengths-based approaches, including Western strengths-based approaches with Indigenous approaches or cultural constructs, as is beneficial for clients and relevant in a particular context.

Further knowledge components of this practice framework include the practitioner’s self-awareness and self-knowledge as well as an awareness of local knowledge. Local knowledge includes indigenous models and concepts, culturally appropriate practices or tikanga, cultural narratives, and the concept of whanaungatanga or family, wider connections and connectedness. It also includes knowledge regarding the community, its structures, processes, services, and resources, systems, public and political issues, organisational systems, and culture. It further comprises an understanding of the client’s immediate context and public or political issues that affect the client’s well-being and service delivery to the client and is inclusive of the social service organisation and organisational culture that may affect service delivery.

**Context of practice**

This practice framework is contextually sensitive and adopts a broadly inclusive view of various contextual and cultural factors that may impact a person’s life. These factors may include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, age, political environment, socio-economic aspects, and gender. All aspects that form part of a client’s context and culture need to be regarded with sensitivity and awareness. Practitioners’ awareness of their own
Cultural views and backgrounds are important in culturally appropriate practice.

Culturally appropriate practice includes a respectful and non-judgmental approach, collaborative practice, culturally appropriate engagement, as well as recognition and acknowledgment of the client’s culture. The engagement of a cultural advisor and supervisor, attention to whanaungatanga, and the involvement of larger family groupings are further key elements of culturally appropriate practice in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Practice components**

**Strengths-based practice skills and activities**

Practitioners are facilitators of change through a co-worker relationship with their clients in working towards the client’s goals and preferred future. This Aotearoa New Zealand strengths-based counselling practice framework uses various strengths-based skills and activities to explore or highlight the client’s strengths and resources throughout the process. These practice skills and activities include strengths-based questioning; strengths-based listening; validation, affirmation, and acknowledgement; making meaning and reframing; normalisation; externalisation; strengths-based language; strengths-based resources and tasks; using the self; storytelling; and awareness of spirituality. Other strengths-based skills and activities may also be included and employed under the guidance of the practice philosophy. Combinations of these skills and activities can be employed as needed and suited in the strengths-based counselling practice framework. The strengths-based practice skills and activities drawn on, however, need to have a good fit with the particular needs and context of clients.

**Phases**

The phases of the practice framework are utilised with flexibility and are also adapted to the particular context and needs of clients. This practice framework broadly recommends initial engagement, assessment, the work phase, and closure, as phases of the counselling process. The aforementioned skills and activities are used throughout these phases.

The initial engagement with clients, from this strengths-based practice framework, calls for a
respectful, non-judgemental, and welcoming approach that sets the process up as strengths-based and is collaborative from the start. Further important aspects of the initial phase are validating client concerns, focusing on strengths and resources, change is implied and having strengths-based conversations. Other aspects include creating a safe space, working towards trust and rapport, giving information regarding the service, and dealing with the issue of confidentiality. A culturally appropriate engagement with clients in this phase is essential and includes an awareness of customs or tikanga.

In the second phase, concerns, needs, risks, strengths, skills, abilities, capacity, successes, exceptions, and resources are assessed collaboratively with the client. The focus is on a holistic assessment that considers physical, spiritual, family, social, economic, emotional, mental health and environmental dimensions of a person’s life. The assessment is furthermore culturally sensitive and also focuses on whanaungatanga or relationships, kinship and wider connections in the client’s life as well as tikanga or customs and traditions. Assessment is done from a stance that it is about the client, but that it also for the client.

In the third or work phase, collaboration around goals, hopes, the preferred future, solution finding, plans, and steps are characteristic. Incorporating the client’s growing awareness around strengths, abilities, and competency is vital in this process.

In the closure phase, emphasis is placed on reflecting, reviewing, evaluation, reinforcement, and termination. Client progress and successes are acknowledged and celebrated, again through a collaborative process. A maintenance plan may be developed with a focus on the preferred future.

Positive client outcomes

Various positive treatment outcomes are likely, for instance, an effective way of working that may contribute to a broader neurobiological benefit for the client, and may facilitate client empowerment; further, this practice appears likely to be uplifting, to enhance hope, courage, self-esteem, and client engagement. Recording the client outcomes could be beneficial for a treatment programme’s development and evaluation, as well as for funding purposes.