

Introducing the Strengths Bank

By Lori Ashcraft, Ph.D.
lori@resilience4u.us

Section I: A Conceptual Framework for Recognizing, Developing and Exchanging Strengths

Community living and the strengths bank: To belong to any community, one must have three things: 1) the intent to belong, 2) the social skills needed to belong, and 3) a meaningful role to play. Once people have a role to play that has value to them and to others, they can become community members in ways that build and reinforce their own positive identity.

The “Strengths Bank” provides a conceptual framework, a model that can prepare people-in-recovery to attain the balance of give and take that is needed to meet the challenge of community inclusion. Here’s how it works: It begins with a process that prepares people to identify and develop personal strengths. Once people develop and “own” their strengths, they can build the social capital necessary to develop reciprocal relationships. These relationships are what sustain wellness for all of us — and people-in-recovery are no exception. In short, the Strengths Bank provides a framework for putting community inclusion into action.

In many places across our country the recovery movement has been launched, and we are now faced with sustaining and extending it. To sustain recovery and maintain wellness, we must create pathways for the journey of each recovering person that lead to continuous learning, growth and contribution. These pathways can only be created and followed in communities where reciprocal relationships build an interdependent network of ongoing natural support.

The litmus test for community living: The most important next step may be a personal one. Each of us can take it by asking ourselves: “Do we really believe that people-in-recovery can become valued contributing members of their communities— giving, not just taking?” If we really believe this, we need to create the next steps in the pathway for sustainable recovery. This may seem daunting, but I’m not scared. I think we can see real and lasting results if we dare to apply what we’ve learned about recovery to the litmus test of real community living – *giving, not just taking*.

The power of giving: *Giving, not just taking* is not just a nice thing to do; it is the necessary next step. When any human being contributes in ways that cause others to value us, we tend to be our best selves because we don’t want to lose our good standing in the group. When we are valued by others, we begin to value ourselves; we relate to our strengths and repeat them because we like the feeling of being valued. This is how all human beings build social capital and sustain our individual and collective wellness. This is especially true of humans-in-recovery.

Skillful giving and taking: Striking a healthy balance between *giving and taking* is important. This process of reciprocity is a key part of any culture and it is most effective when carried out in a mature and thoughtful manner. Listed below are some skills we can role-model and teach people to be comfortable with so they can be skillful *givers* and *takers* while they grow into valuable members of their communities:

- Knowing how to give to others in ways that make us both stronger
- Knowing how to take in ways that appreciate the giver without becoming dependent on them
- Expressing one's real self in ways that others can appreciate
- Appreciating the uniqueness of others
- Asking for help and support without becoming clingy
- Offering support to others while supporting their independence
- Recognizing one's own resentments and self-righteousness as things that interfere with belonging

These skills can be learned and practiced in the context of the Strengths Bank framework in ways that are both enjoyable and meaningful. We'll explore this further in section II.

Section II: Using the Traditional Banking Model to Playfully Create a Strengths Bank Game

Developing important skills: The Strengths Bank as an entertaining way to develop personal skill in building and exchanging strengths with others and, in so doing, to invest in others and in the community. It is a fun way to learn about and develop social capital. Because it is designed as a game, the Strengths Bank takes the fear of rejection out of giving and taking, freeing participants to share their strengths and learn new skills in a playful yet very effective way. In time, participants can expect their investments to yield a return — measured in social capital — and demonstrate evidence that each person involved has a lot to contribute.

Setting up the Strengths Bank: Basically, we will be translating the commercial banking process into a fun and creative way of investing in each other's strengths. The three steps outlined below are just one way of playing the game. In Section III we will discuss a few of the options and adaptations that can expand the application of the game to other settings with other players. But for now, here's the basic protocol for practicing strength-building and having fun at the same time.

Step One: Appoint an advisor for the Strengths Bank. Look for someone who enjoys stepping into unexplored territory – someone with a spirit of adventure — in other words, not your typical banker.

Step Two: Recruit customers who are interested in taking their recovery to the next level by developing expertise in giving and receiving. Their interest in doing these things might vary, so intriguing advertising is important. Here are the selling points that can capture the interest of potential customers:

- The main selling point is that customers will learn how to develop more meaningful relationships, how to contribute to healthy community living, and how to build social capital. So perhaps the appeal to use to recruit customers would go something like this: “Want to become a valued member of your community? Join us and learn fun ways to enhance relationships in your community by investing in yourself and in others.”
- For others, including those who want to learn more about how financial systems work and become better managers of their own finances, perhaps the following appeal would work: “What your mother didn't tell you about banking.”
- Then, there are the folks interested in doing something new and having some fun. To appeal to the interests of these folks, you might suggest, “Have fun learning new ways to discover your strengths and bring out the best in your friends.”

Step Three: Once you've collected a group of participants, you can get the game underway by asking each “customer” to assess his or her strengths and challenges. To do this, each can meet individually with the bank advisor to identify strengths (or assets, in banking terms), as well as challenges (or liabilities, best understood as areas where a person wants or needs to develop a strength but hasn't done so yet).

Each participant then works with the advisor to build a balance sheet. A balance sheet is a document that lists assets on one side (assets must include skills or talents that could become assets if they were used differently) and liabilities on the other. Assets are things that help with recovery and things that help us connect with others and the community, while liabilities include challenges, problems, or concerns that get in the way of both social relationships and recovery. Liabilities are what drain away the assets that we're trying to build in the Strengths Bank.

Let's translate this to story-form so we can see how bring it to life and see how it might actually play out:

Creating and using an individual account. I get up one morning and decide it's time to open an account at my local bank. I'm not sure what the process is, so I ask one of those important looking bankers sitting at the desks opposite the teller windows. The banker is friendly and invites me to sit down across the desk from him.

The banker begins by asking me about my assets (strengths). He hands me a form so I can list these assets and determine my (social/relational) net worth. I list my assets on the form (including what I'm good at; what others like about me; what my accomplishments have been; what my skills are and what knowledge I've garnered from life lessons).

To arrive at my net worth, the banker shows me how to weigh these assets and strengths against my "liabilities," the things that I need to work through and overcome. The banker also wants to know my potential for increasing my net worth, so I write down some other "potential" assets. These aren't real assets yet. They are talents, abilities, dreams and interests that I could contribute to my community once I develop them further.

Now that we have a clear picture of my net worth, it's time to set up my account so I can begin investing and spending my assets. By this, I mean using my strengths and abilities to build relationships, contribute to others, and get what I need from others in the community. So, I deposit my assets and get a debit card, with instructions that I can spend my assets anytime, anywhere. However, the banker suggests that I be very thoughtful about how I invest my assets. The key to gaining bigger returns, he says, is to invest in people who can support my recovery.

The banker also reminds me that there are two unique features about my Strengths Bank account:

1. I've got to use my assets, or I'll lose them. There's no such thing, he says, as "saving" my assets by putting them away in the bank. If I just let assets "sit there," the fees for not using them, not investing them, will rise steadily and drain my assets away. He says that the more I spend and invest my assets—the more times that I use my card — the more interest I'll accrue and the better return I'll get. So, the rule is to invest often — and wisely — in others and in my community.

2. Others can and will invest in me, too! I'm really excited about this feature, but I've got a question for the banker: "How is it that others can invest in me or make a deposit in my account?" It's pretty simple, he explains, noting that when I spend/invest my strengths into other people, they usually respond with gratitude. They often choose to invest in me through their acknowledgement, thanks, or appreciation for what I have done. "Wow," I think. The more I invest my strengths in others, the more strengths they will invest in me. It's a great way to get richer!

Practice makes perfect: Using my account effectively: Now that I'm on the pathway to riches though, I'm feeling a little bit nervous. Where do I begin? How do I make a "smart" or valuable investment? And, what happens if I invest in someone, but nothing really happens? Am I back at "square one?"

What I need is a "safe" place to practice investing before I venture out into the broader world, a place where it's OK to experiment, to see what works for me, and to get the hang of this. According to the banker, I need to invest in people who can support my recovery. So, I think that he is talking about investing in my family, my group, or those closest to me. They are the people that have always given the most to me, so they'll probably be happy to see me wanting to develop my strengths so that I can give something back to them.

But I'm not sure that I can explain all of this to them. So, I ask everyone to come to the bank with me, so the banker can help us create a group account. We all sit down with the banker, who begins by asking each of us to think about our individual assets. Then, we fill out an individual asset form, just as before.

After we finish calculating our social/relational net worth as individuals, the banker asks that we read them to each other. Then, he asks the group whether each individual has strengths that he or she had not realized or had forgotten to list. There is a terrific response—all sorts of things that each individual had never even considered—things that others see in them that they cannot see themselves.

Then, the group considers how, by working together, we could help each other develop our real and potential assets more quickly. The goal, of course, is to rapidly develop additional strengths and assets that we can spend and invest not only within our group but, in time, with those outside the group as well.

Step Four: Now it's time to put the Strengths Bank into action by having the customers share their lists of strengths and liabilities with each other and begin to exchange strengths. This process will vary depending on the group and the goals of the group. We will discuss this in more detail in Section III.

Section III: Modifying the Strengths Bank Game to Fit Other Groups

Ways to use the Strengths Bank game: I have used the Strengths Bank with a variety of groups that were interested in building strengths among their members. I can't think of a time when this wasn't fun for the players and also produced great insights and outcomes regarding the power of reciprocity in building strengths. I'm going to share some of my experiences with you to give you a glimpse of how you can adapt the game to many situations. So crank up your creativity and be ready to add even more amusement to the process.

People in recovery: The illustration and descriptions in Section II describe how the game might be played with a group of folks who are in recovery and want to build their own strengths and help others build theirs as well. I have used the game this way many times and have found it rewarding to all the players. It gives them a safe place to talk about their strengths and challenges and allows for helpful feedback from others. It also provides an opportunity to help each other by using each other's strengths.

Families: I first realized the usefulness of the Strengths Bank game with families when meeting with and talking with families about a family member who was experiencing mental health challenges. At the end of workshops, family members came to me and thanked me for the presentation. They went on to tell me that they had become so focused on their loved one's deficits that they had forgotten about their strengths and accomplishments. It wasn't hard to find group of families who wanted to try the game.

The usual approach to playing the game with families is to engage the whole family – mom, dad, siblings, and other members who are constant contributors to the family dynamic. By the way, “family” can be any constellation of supports that feel like a family.

I've been telling you how much fun this can be, but I would be remiss if I didn't tell you that this also brings up painful issues and it's not unusual for arguments and finger pointing to take place. Even yelling and stomping around the room have happened. The key is to stay focused on getting each member's list on the table and then to begin exchanging strengths. It may sound like this: “John, you are so good at figuring out computer things. Will you help me with my computer if I fix a few meals for you?” Since the members now have copies of each person's list, they can ask for things that are on the list. Call me before you try this. I can give you a few more ideas.

Work groups: New groups of people who are just starting to work together are prime candidates for the game. Also, teams that are not getting along well and wasting energy on resisting each other can really benefit from this process. It helps if there is a level of trust among members since the game requires a willingness to be vulnerable for it to yield benefits.

After an introduction and an explanation of the game, group members list their strengths and challenges. They share their lists and ask their colleagues if they have overlooked anything that should be on their lists. Then they begin sharing their lists and exchanging strengths. They also help each other come up with ways to address their challenges.

If you wish to use the Strengths bank, either in the form I have described it or in ways that may fit your group more suitably, I am happy to help you think through the process. Just send me a note and we can talk it over.