



## *STRENGTHS PLUS GIVES CASE*

## *MANAGERS NEW TOOLS FOR CARE*

Ally Mabry was excited when she first heard about the expansion of Strengths Model case management in Kansas. She had worked at a community mental health center for many years and saw how people who were receiving services were not always well served by the system designed to help them. Too often, case managers were working in organizations that used approaches focused on pathology and diagnosis, held low expectations for what people with mental illness could achieve in their life, and frequently used stabilization and maintenance as measures of success. Too many people weren't getting the right kind of support to recover and move beyond the mental health system.

Mabry was intrigued by the Strengths Model's radically different approach and its potential to transform services by providing a foundation for case management practice. The model was initially developed by Charles Rapp and later refined by Rick Goscha at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare. The Strengths Model views people not only as capable and possessing a unique array of personal and environmental strengths, but also challenges, and equips professionals to focus their efforts and support toward helping people achieve life goals and roles that anyone else in the community might pursue.

*"The case managers feel like their skill levels are improving. They also reported feeling a greater amount of comfort in having discussions with people around substance use" says Mabry. "The more we can do to put tools in case managers' hands, the better off they will be and will feel as they will more likely be able to help those they serve achieve recovery."*

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# STRENGTHS MODEL CORE PRINCIPLES

The Strengths Model tools and methods help people step toward hope, wellness, and recovery. The approach, pioneered at KU 35 years ago by Charles Rapp and the University of Kansas Center for Mental Health Research and Innovation, includes these core principles:

- People with mental illness can recover, reclaim, and transform their lives.
- The focus is on an individual's strengths rather than deficits.
- The community is viewed as an oasis of resources.
- The client is the director of the helping process.
- The relationship between the case manager and individual is primary and essential.
- The primary setting for the work is in the community, not in a behavioral health clinic.

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So when Mabry, MSW, research project director with the KU School of Social Welfare, was asked by Rapp in 2007 to be a part of expanding the Strengths Model, she was thrilled. But, she was also skeptical about whether the model could adequately address the many challenges she had experienced as an administrator and social worker in the mental health system.

She initially worked with a few programs that volunteered to implement the model. "At first, most of the people receiving case management had no hope of being anything other than a client at a mental health center," she recalls. "I spent two years with the programs, following Strengths Model implementation guidelines, and slowly supported the case managers and their supervisors to change the way they practiced."

Then, amazing things happened as the staff applied the tools and processes of the Strengths Model. She says, "The difference I saw in the two years was phenomenal! People were now going to college for the first time, they were getting jobs, and they were reconnecting with family."

After that transformative experience, Mabry became a passionate advocate for Strengths Model case management. Now she is once again involved in a first-time pilot, this time for Strengths Plus. Strengths Plus is an enhanced version of the Strengths Model that was developed in 2014 by the University of Kansas Center for Mental Health Research and Innovation, specifically for use with people who experience both mental illness and substance use disorders.

"This isn't happening anywhere else. It's really exciting," Mabry says of the pilot, which initiated January 2019 at a community mental health center in Kansas that already uses Strengths Model case management. The KU team will track outcomes of those at the pilot site who receive Strengths Plus versus those who receive the Strengths Model alone, to see if Strengths Plus is a more effective approach for this unique population.

Working with people who have both mental illness and substance use disorders can be difficult, Mabry says, and most case managers have very little training on how to do so. Strengths Plus gives them the framework and practical skills they need to address the issues they encounter and engage the people they serve with hope. Motivational Interviewing, a counseling method that helps people change their behavior, is a key component of Strengths Plus. As part of the pilot, case managers participate in weekly motivational interviewing coaching circles where they spend time practicing motivational interviewing techniques. The KU team also goes in the field with the case managers, observing, modeling, and offering feedback on their use of the model.

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A Foundation of Strengths:  
A Catalyst for Change, Hope and Growth  
for Systems Serving Adults

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A Foundation of Strengths: A Catalyst for Change, Hope and Growth for Systems Serving Adults  
Presenter: Ally Mabry, Research Project Director

Presented on February 20, 2020, recording available at

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