

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

Caring for Vulnerable People

Introduction

The only way to effectively care for vulnerable people is to work together in an organised way: lone wolves go astray, get picked off or burn out. Here are a few basic principles that enable us to work well together, whether we are Christians or not.

We Are ...

We are all vulnerable people. The more we understand the issues, the more we realise that we are not dealing with two categories of people: us (the strong, sane, sorted and secure people doing the helping), and them (the weak, damaged, sick and vulnerable people being helped). Nobody is fully healthy or completely sick, either physically or mentally: we are all somewhere in the middle. We are all damaged in various ways; we are all vulnerable.

The people we are seeking to help are damaged and vulnerable: that's why they need help. We are damaged and vulnerable. And the people we work alongside are also damaged and vulnerable; which is where much of the challenge comes from.

The key to helping others is to understand what we share. The most important thing to understand is what we have in common. Yes, we need to understand the differences where they exist, but it is more important to understand the similarities. It is the similarities that allow us to build bridges, to reach out and touch others, to understand and identify with them, so that we can really make a difference.

We can help other people because we can identify with their struggles, not because we are perfect.

We are interested in people, not problems. Our clients have many problems, but if we focus on solving the problems we can lose sight of the person. You can help a person without fixing their problems, because the person is much more than the sum of their problems: the person has value, and has hopes, fears, dreams and potential. A problem solving approach can lead to the classic 'the operation was a success, but the patient died' misunderstanding of success. A person-centred holistic approach cares about the whole person: mind, body, spirit, emotions, relationships, resources, commitments and potential. Nothing which matters to the person can be unimportant to us.

It's All About ...

It's all about people; it's all about relationships; it's all about love. We are here because we care about people, not because we care about issues or principles or projects or causes. We are here because we believe that what matters most to people is other people, and our relationships with them: our lives are shaped by the

relationships we have with other people, good or bad. We are here because loving and being loved is more important than anything else; and we understand that learning how to love – really love – is incredibly difficult. The work is all about loving people; everything else is just a detail.

Our lives are changed by people, not programmes. Our lives are changed for the good by people who love us and who understand how to express that love.

It's all about faith. People are spiritual creatures, whether they understand this or not. Every significant problem we face is spiritual in nature, and must be responded to accordingly.

Faith is not just about religion, although it includes that. Faith is essential for the folk we are seeking to help, and it is essential for us as we seek to help. Faith is a hard thing for people to understand, and we easily get it wrong. Faith *is not* about believing things when we have no evidence for them: faith *is* about holding on to what we know to be true, even when it does not feel true. We believe that the work we do is worthwhile, and this faith is supported by the evidence over months and years of changed lives. Sometimes, when you see someone relapse, or fail to take up the opportunity you have fought so hard to make available to them, it feels like you have wasted your time, but this is not true.

It's all about hope. People are not motivated to change because life is hard, difficult or painful; they are motivated to change because they have dared to hope that things can get better.

What We Can Do ...

We are not in a position of power. We cannot provide a place to live, we cannot reunite an estranged family, we cannot provide an easy way through the complexities of the benefits system. But this is also our strength: because we cannot deliver the services our clients need, we can genuinely be alongside them, and work on their behalf as they seek to get the help they need. We can support and encourage precisely because we have no power.

What we can do is to listen. People need – desperately need – to be heard. This takes time – the most valuable thing we can offer to another person.

What we can do is to be honest. We must be honest with ourselves, honest with each other, and honest with the clients. This is not easy, but it is the only possible place to start, and it is the only option if we want to learn and to genuinely help others. Also, our clients generally need to learn how to be honest, and we have an obligation to provide a model for them.

What we can do is limited. But we can do a limited amount. We cannot solve the problems of the world – we cannot even solve the problems of one person. But we can make a difference. What we do is limited, but it is worthwhile.

What we can do is to be there for people when they need us. This is intentional, not accidental; active, not passive. Simply recognising what we share with others is not enough: we have to do something about it, and what we can do is to be present for them.

If we want to make a difference, we have to make ourselves available. This is more than simply turning up and doing a job – providing food, offering advice, or writing letters. It is about being there for others when they need us: about treating them with dignity and respect, and about being ourselves.

Being there for people is not just about being physically present – although that is a good start! – it is about being emotionally present, about developing a personal relationship with them; acknowledging that they have value here and now, just as they are.

Our Aim Is ...

Our aim is to empower. The temptation is to try to solve the problems we are told about. But if I solve your problem, all you learn is that you need me to solve your problems – which creates another problem when I am not around! We must avoid doing things for people which they could do for themselves, so they can build up their own skills, judgement and confidence.

Our aim is to develop resilience. Empowering people is not primarily about giving them the ability to get what they want, although that is an aspect. It is much more about developing resilience: the ability to handle problems when they arise – to handle problems flexibly, appropriately and well, not just to survive them.

Our aim is to nurture wisdom. Wisdom is about more than the accumulation of knowledge and understanding: it is the ability to use that knowledge and understanding well and appropriately. Many of our problems arise because we have made poor, unwise choices. As we learn to make good choices, things go wrong less often and less seriously; life becomes less chaotic and more manageable.

How we work ...

We work within appropriate boundaries. When we move beyond *doing things* for others towards *being there* for them, we immediately hit the difficult issue of boundaries: how much do I share, how much do I do, how much do I care, how far do I get involved? What is an appropriate response to their needs, concerns and priorities? Boundaries constantly need to be examined and evaluated: are they appropriate in this situation, for me, with this person? Much of what we need to learn is about discovering how to set appropriate boundaries, and how to use them.

We work, like God, primarily through incarnation. It's not primarily about what we do: it's about who we are. For Christians, there are two major aspects here.

Firstly, Christians believe that God recognised the need to be available: a God up in Heaven is ultimately of no use to us – He may be able to answer prayers, but He cannot understand what we need. Through the incarnation, we have a God Who has experienced first hand all the difficulties and frustrations of human life – Who understands in the deepest possible way both what we want and also what we need.

Secondly, Christians believe that God is present in His people. Our words and our works can touch people in ways that go beyond our own individual abilities, because God is somehow involved and active.

Nothing is wasted. We believe that nothing done in love for someone else is ever truly wasted. But loving people means we want to do the best for them. We do not want to waste our time and energy doing things for people simply because we have a blind hope that they will be helped: we want to be as effective as possible, and to learn how to become even more effective, and we are motivated by the belief that this strategy is both right and worthwhile.

We believe ...

The cost is real, but so are the benefits. It is not easy to help other people, and working this way – through love rather than power – is even more difficult. It takes time and emotional energy. But the benefits are also real: this is the most effective way to genuinely help other people in the long run, there is a deep joy and satisfaction which comes from being able to make a difference to other people's lives, and in doing this work we grow to become better, stronger, more capable people ourselves. We gain more than we give.

We need to review what we do regularly and honestly. We cannot assume that what worked yesterday will continue to work today; and we dare not assume that we have learned all we need to know. If we are going to keep growing, we need to be constantly examining how well things are working for the people we are seeking to help, for ourselves, and for the other people around us.

There are no simple, right, do-able answers. One way or another, we are involved in the lives of other people, and there are no simple answers to the problems which they and we face. Each organisation will have its own set of guidelines, written or unwritten, and each individual worker will have their own areas where they are comfortable or uncomfortable, skilled or inexperienced. *Different* does not necessarily mean *wrong*, but we do need to be consistent where possible; and we do need to work within our organisation's guidelines.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
- Strong Foundations: <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>

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