Strengths Assessment Instructions

1. Clearly introduce the intent of the strengths assessment. The exact introduction you choose should be tailored to your personal style and the client's reading level or cognitive ability. Below is a sample introduction to the strengths assessment process:

   "One of the activities that we will complete together to help you identify your needs is a strengths assessment. This assessment is different from past assessments that you may have completed with another CM. The design of this assessment helps you to recognize your ***strengths, skills, abilities, and things that you're good at doing****. We have found that when people can recognize what they are good at, it helps them accomplish new or difficult goals. By recognizing areas where you've been successful, you can use those examples to put you in a better position to accomplish your personal goals and to take the necessary steps to seek treatment. You may already be aware of these strengths. Or, they may be things you haven't thought about for a long time or things you've never thought about.*

   Some people find it hard at first to focus on their personal strengths because most of us were taught that it is bragging to talk about what we've done right. I don't think that at all. I think focusing on our personal strengths reminds each of us how we all have talents and abilities that help us do what we need to do for ourselves."

2. Choose one of two options to complete the assessment with a client. Both options accomplish the same things: building effective relationships, gathering information, and engaging the client.

   Option 1: Simply talk to the client about his/her life. This option occurs in a natural, but guided, conversation designed to help the client think about and identify strengths and abilities. Pick up on the stories told that reflect the client's *abilities*. Summarize or use open-ended questions to encourage clients to talk about positive rather than negative experiences. For example, *"Earlier you noted something about a job at the corner market. Tell me more about what you did to find that job and to get hired."*

OR

   Option 2: Start the conversation about strengths using very general, but direct questions, such as:

   - *What strengths do you think you have?*
   - *What are your abilities?*
   - *When have you successfully faced barriers, and what did you do to overcome them?*
   - *What are you good at?*
   - *Tell me about a time when you felt like most things were going well. What were you doing to make them go well?*

3. During the conversation (regardless of which option you choose), listen for examples where the client identifies his/her strengths. Focus on what the client says, and

remember these examples by using reflection, summarizing, and affirmations to reinforce the ideas for you and the client (if necessary, jot down a **quick** note). This is important because many of the ideas and examples will apply to the client's goals.

4. Make a list of the strengths, abilities, and skills identified by the client in his/her stories during the conversation. Use the client's own words. What is most important is giving the client an opportunity to see, in writing, a list of his/her personal, positive attributes. Therefore, you can choose a format for the assessment that suits your agency. A suggested format for the **strengths assessment** is on page 71.

5. Copy the list for the client, if s/he would like to take it home.

While the above strengths assessment exercise is designed to solicit examples of previous successes from the client, you should **never** view the assessment process as static. That is to say, it is an ongoing process, rather than a one-time, discrete activity. Because the intervention is client-driven, a client may not be ready to share his/her personal stories immediately or may not be able to share strengths right away. S/he will choose to share on his/her terms. Therefore, it is important for you to continually search for strengths, skills, and abilities during each client session, brief phone call, general conversation, or other contact with the client. By doing so, you provide an opportunity for the client to choose the right time to share and to help the client see the day-to-day presence and connection of his/her strengths.

Collecting information that is not strengths-based: While the emphasis of ARTAS is identifying strengths and abilities, it is always appropriate and necessary to incorporate sound clinical practice into each session. Therefore, it is also essential to collect information that is not strengths-based. Examples of non-strengths information that must be collected include:

- Suicidal ideation or attempts
- Risk to do harm to others
- Physical problems associated with substance abuse, including overdose risk, delirium tremens, or drug withdrawal
- Inherent limitations, such as not being able to read, having a learning disability, or having physical impairments that may affect the client's ability to link to medical care

By having knowledge of and sensitivity to inherent limitations, you will be able to identify valuable resources for the client.

When collecting this non-strengths information, you should remember to treat the client as an individual and never as a member of a group with problems.

Additional key points to remember when conducting the strengths assessment are listed below.

- Believe in the power of strengths and abilities, and believe that every client possesses strengths and abilities. Many clients, because of their previous contact with services providers, are adept at spotting someone who is being phony, condescending, or patronizing.

- From time to time, it may be necessary to gently refocus a client on his/her strengths and away from a discussion of problems and deficiencies. A strengths assessment stands out as a *significantly different approach to addressing a client's needs*, as many ARTAS clients have confronted numerous negative events in their lives.
- Remind yourself and your clients that important problems are not being ignored by completing a strengths assessment. More accurately, the focus on strengths and abilities prepares the client to deal with barriers to accessing medical care and other challenges s/he might face.
- Be careful about reaching too far to find strengths. For example, suggesting to a client: "*You've been a successful sex worker. Let's talk about your strengths in that area*." While this situation includes some strengths, such as negotiating skills around price, the emphasis should on the specific characteristic—being resourceful—and not on the larger role—being a sex worker. Encourage clients to identify how these characteristics can be readily adapted to a healthier lifestyle.
- Emphasize *the client's role* in making things go right and help him/her explore how s/he personally influenced the positive outcome. A client may attempt to give someone else the credit for his/her strengths and/or for times when things were going well.
- Often you will hear a client discuss certain actions but then not directly describe them as strengths. If you think those actions, thoughts, or feelings are strengths, use responsive listening techniques to encourage the client to consider them as such. Ultimately it is your client's perceptions of something as a positive in his/her life that will enable him/her to mobilize to solve current problems/barriers.
- Periodically summarize strengths that have been identified by the client. This will help him/her identify patterns that exist.
- Avoid acting as an investigator. It is better to assume a facilitator role in the search for abilities.
- Keep the goal of linkage to care as an honest part of the strengths assessment and all discussions. Do not try to covertly or overtly steer the client in a desired direction.

STRENGTHS ASSESSMENT FORM

Linkage Coordinator's Copy

Client ID: ____
LC's Name: ____
Date: Session Number:
Is this the first assessment completed for the client or is it an amendment? _____

1. **What strengths, abilities, or skills did the client identify (either directly or indirectly)?**
   - **a.** Strengths:
   - **b.** Skills:
   - **c.** Abilities:
   - **d.** Which items from the Life Domains List, if needed, prompted the client?

2. **What examples did the client give about a time when s/he successfully faced barriers?**
   - **a.** What did s/he do to overcome the barrier(s)?

3. **What did the client explicitly say s/he was good at?**

4. **What did the client implicitly say s/he was good at, i.e., what did you hear him/her say?**
   - **a.** Did the client agree with what you heard as something s/he is good at once you repeated it back?

5. **What example(s) did the client give about a time/experience when s/he felt like most things were going well in his/her life? What was s/he doing to make them go well?**

STRENGTHS ASSESSMENT FORM

Client's Copy

Date:
Session Number:
New Assessment or Updated Assessment? (Circle one)

1. **My strengths, abilities, or skills identified:**
   a. Strengths:
   b. Skills:
   c. Abilities:
   d. Items from the Life Domains List:

2. **Examples I gave about a time(s) that I successfully faced barrier(s) in my life:**
   a. Examples of barrier(s):
   b. Things I did to overcome the barrier(s):

3. **Things I am good at:**

4. **Example(s) of when I felt like most things in my life were going well:**
   a. Things I did to make them go well: