

# Spinal Cord Injury: Using a Strengths-based approach to having challenging conversations

Challenging conversations are a part of pediatric rehabilitation. For clients with a spinal cord injury, challenging conversations may occur around topics such as prognosis, acceptance of the diagnosis and prognosis, adjustment to life with a disability and alternative treatments. There are a variety of different strategies that healthcare providers can use to help navigate challenging conversations with clients and their families. Solution-focused coaching is one strategy that healthcare providers can try to help foster a strengths-based conversation. This document defines solution-focused coaching, introduces a solution-focused coaching model and provides tips for fostering therapeutic relationships and rapport building.

## Solution-focused coaching: What is it?

Solution-focused coaching uses language to emphasize the client's strengths and resources to help transition them from focusing on a problem to thinking about what they would like instead.<sup>1</sup> Solution-focused coaching enhances<sup>2</sup>:

- independence
- agency
- hope
- goal setting
- client well-being
- therapeutic relationships

## Solution-focused coaching model: E.A.R.S.

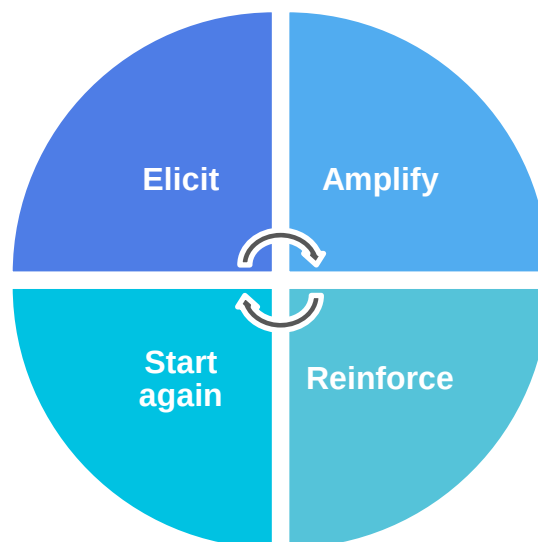
**Elicit, Amplify, Reinforce, and Start again (E.A.R.S.)**<sup>3</sup> is a solution-focused model of communication that can be used to help facilitate challenging conversations. Here are some guiding principles and sample questions you can try to guide your conversation.

### Elicit

- Ask questions that help to elicit the client or family's strengths and resources
- Try:
  - o What needs to happen in our conversation today so that it will be useful for you?
  - o What are your best hopes from our conversation?
  - o What's better since our last conversation?

### Start again

- Start the conversation again
- Try:
  - o What else is a little bit better?



### Amplify

- Ask questions that amplify strengths and resources
- Try:
  - o What did you do?
  - o How did you do that?
  - o What was helpful for you?
  - o What is different for you as a result?

### Reinforce

- Reinforce strengths and resources with compliments (direct and indirect)
- Try:
  - o What have you learned as a result?
  - o What can help you maintain these improvements?
- Words to try:
  - o Wow
  - o That is so great

## Tips for relationship building

Establishing a therapeutic relationship with your client is important and can lead to positive outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Here are some things to try with your client to help with relationship building<sup>4</sup>:

- Take time to build rapport
- Listen
- Establish trust
- Seek a common ground (focus on abilities or strengths)
- Establish a connection based on a shared understanding
- Collaborate and create goals together

## Knowing your role

It is important to think about your role in facilitating challenging conversations with your client and their family. Ask yourself:

- What is the professional expertise I can lend to this conversation?
- Are there supports within my program that can assist the client during this conversation?
- How can I best prepare for sharing information? (e.g. be organized, have information available)
- How can I best explain how this information relates to the client?
- How might the parent receive the information I am sharing with them?



### Rapport Building

Rapport building is an essential skill that highlights the importance of relationships and humanizes the individual being spoken to.<sup>5</sup> Although clinical appointments with you clients may be short, rapport building is still possible and is important to do.

To build rapport:

- Aim for understanding
- Gather information about the client
- Use language that is easy to understand
- Begin with positive assumptions
- Avoid directives (e.g. asking versus telling)

## Tools



Words matter! Using positive words can help to enhance resiliency, coping and self-actualization. Here are some examples of key words you can use to foster a solution-focused conversation:

- |           |                      |              |
|-----------|----------------------|--------------|
| • Manage  | • Even just a little | • What else? |
| • Instead | • Suppose            | • Notice     |
| • Helpful | • Useful             | • Suppose    |

## References

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