

RESEARCH BRIEF

SONOMA COUNTY PROBATION

July 2014

Strengths in the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model

A debate exists among corrections researchers about an apparent lack of focus on strengths and motivation in the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model. Some researchers assert that RNR uses a deficit based approach that hinders motivation toward positive change, and propose models that place more emphasis on building upon existing strengths and motivation, while also being sure to address issues connected with re-offending (criminogenic needs). The proponents of RNR sometimes characterize these models as misguided, not attending enough to criminogenic needs and focusing on things that will not reduce recidivism. RNR supporters also assert that, done with fidelity to the current model, RNR actually is strength-based:

One of the newer principles in the RNR model is to assess personal strengths and integrate them into rehabilitation efforts. Treatment can build upon a person's prosocial strengths and in so doing enhance motivation and engagement in treatment. The consequence is reduction in risk. The RNR model is not just about risk. It is also a strength-based approach to helping offenders.¹

A research summary from Public Safety Canada Corrections Research (whose Director is James Bonta, Ph.D., a leading voice in RNR research) provides policy recommendations to ensure that the strengths focus of the RNR model is properly applied:

1. When developing programs and policies the expanded RNR model should be considered and not simply the three principles derived in the 1990 version of the model.
2. The assessment of offenders for treatment purposes should integrate the assessment of strengths and motivations. In this way, treatment providers can build upon personal strengths in their efforts to decrease program attrition and reduce offender risk.
3. Basic human needs and aspirations are important elements to engagement and success in offender treatment. One of the principles of the expanded RNR model is respect for the person. However, one must not lose sight of addressing criminogenic needs. It is by reducing criminogenic needs that offenders are helped to lead a more prosocial lifestyle.¹

This broader understanding of the Responsivity Principle is consistent with Sonoma County's RNR implementation. Download the article here:

<http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/strgnths-rhb/strgnths-rhb-eng.pdf>

¹ Bonta, James (2011). Strengths and Human Needs in Offender Rehabilitation. *Research Summary*. Public Safety Canada. 16(5). Retrieved from <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/strgnths-rhb/strgnths-rhb-eng.pdf>.

REVIEWING THE RNR MODEL:

Risk – Who To Target:

Identify risk to reoffend to determine who to focus on and intensity of interventions. Focus higher-intensity interventions on higher-risk people.

Need – What to Do:

Assess criminogenic needs and provide interventions targeted on the needs most closely associated with reoffending.

Responsivity – How to

Do it: Use cognitive-behavioral strategies effective in changing offender behavior (general responsivity), and enhance motivation for individual offenders (specific responsivity).