

## Origins of the Strengths Approach

The 1980's saw the early emergence of strengths-based ideas in the fields of child and family welfare, mental health and disability in Australia and the USA in particular. American social worker, Dennis Saleebey with colleagues Charles Rapp and Anne Weick from the University of Kansas formally developed *the strengths perspective* in the USA. Narrative Therapy pioneered by Michael White in Australia and David Epston in New Zealand, emerged alongside these developments from the 1980's through to the 1990's, as did Solution-focused Therapy pioneered by social worker Steve De Shazer in the United States. Each is considered part of the 'strengths movement' and has strongly influenced social work and therapeutic practices worldwide.

In Australia during this period a small team of social workers at St Lukes, a social work agency based in Bendigo, Australia, began its own work to develop strengths based practice. Intensive Family Based Services that emphasised strengths, and newly emerging solution focused and narrative therapies and radical social work thought resonated with the agency's experience and commitment to socially just practice. These ways of thinking helped shape St Lukes 'brand' of strengths-based practice.

This 'brand', which became known as 'the strengths approach', was progressively articulated by social workers Di O'Neil and Wayne McCashen over years of practice and subsequent consultancy and training to many thousands of human service workers and hundreds of agencies throughout Australia and New Zealand from the mid-nineties.

This work generated a large cohort of leaders, consultants and trainers and the proliferation of the strengths approach captured in the book by the same name: *The Strengths Approach* (McCashen W, 2005, St Lukes Innovative Resources, Bendigo; reprinted in 2006, 2007, 2011). The strengths approach has become one of the most influential approaches to social work and human service practice in Australia and New Zealand. During these years, social worker, Russell Deal, led the development of St Lukes Innovative Resources which has created and published over 50 card-based resources and numerous books based on the strengths approach that are distributed worldwide.

*McCashen W, 2012 The Strengths Approach*  
[www.thestrengthsapproach.com.au](http://www.thestrengthsapproach.com.au)

