# What Is Strength-Based Practice’s Relationship to Trauma?

**Trauma-Based
Self-Concept**

**Strength-Based
Self-Concept**

“I shouldn’t try. I’ll just fail.”

“I don’t belong.”

“I’m not worth anything.”

“Somebody’s gonna hurt me any moment now.”

“I have no future.”

“I’m constantly in pain.”

“Adults are out to get me.”

“I’m unloveable.”

“I have no talents.”

“I’m ugly.”

“I’m abnormal.”

“I’m broken beyond repair.”

“I can’t do it.”

“My friends are pretending
to like me”

Trauma strips the sufferer of the ability to stay present in the normal flow of life experiences; it pushes the sufferer out of time. Many students in our schools have been identified as troublemakers; many have been singled out and punished for it; some have been suspended or incarcerated. Many students in our schools have faced instability in their families; some have had to live on the streets or work to get their next meal. Many students in our schools have been bullied or harassed or felt compelled to do the same to others; some have been victims of violence and abuse. All of these are forms of trauma. Dropping out of school, or being held back multiple times, or feeling consistently rejected and overlooked and problematized by your school setting, can be experienced as a trauma. Watching your friends continue without you. Questioning whether what you say and feel are worth anything. Feeling dumb. Feeling like the world does not have a place for you, like you do not belong.

Becoming a Strength-Based Practitioner means being aware of the way that a deficit-driven school (or larger societal) system can influence the way students think and act. It means counteracting these negative messages with an **absolute belief** that every person has potential and the urge to succeed, and that it is their unique strengths, capabilities, and knowledge that will help to define their evolving story.

## For a Strength-Based Practitioner, each person’s perspective of their reality is a primary source—practitioners begin with seeking to understand what experiences are crucial to the person. When we begin to believe that each young person is actually the expert on their own story, we send the message to them that their experiences are essential, and that their lives belong to them.

Judith Herman writes that traumatic events “*overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.… They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror. Adaptation to this climate of constant terror requires a state of constant alertness. Children in a [traumatic] environment develop extraordinary abilities to scan for warning signs of attack. They learn to recognize subtle changes in facial expression, voice, and body language as signals of anger.… Child victims learn to respond without being able to name or identify the danger signals that evoked their alarm.”*

 [*Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, p. 19]