

# The Role of Strengths and Resiliency in Overcoming Challenges with Personal Weight in Children and Youth

JOHN S. LYONS, PH.D.

CHAPIN HALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# Obesity and resilience



- ▶ There seems little doubt that the epidemic of obesity that we are witnessing worldwide is attributable to excess energy consumption and inadequate energy expenditure.

- ▶ Ball, 2006

# Obesity and Resilience



- ▶ Both energy consumption and energy expenditure are facilitated in large part by behavioral choices
- ▶ Behavioral choices reflect life style choices
- ▶ There is increasing evidence that life style choices are affected by the presence of meaning in our lives.
- ▶ The development of personal meaning is driven by the development of resilience

# Resilience—Pathways to Meaningful Lives

- ▶ People in our lives—family, friends, people
- ▶ A job that we like that respects us back
- ▶ Something we do outside of work that we enjoy
- ▶ Something larger than ourselves

# Strengths and Resilience

## Full Definition of RESILIENCE

- ▶ **1:** the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress
- ▶ **2:** an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change

Miriam-Webster online, 2016



# What are Strengths?

- ▶ Assets.
- ▶ Positive Resources
- ▶ Not the absence of needs

# Our definition of a strength



- ▶ A strength is a characteristic of a person in the environment that describes a situation that promotes meaning and wellbeing in that person's life.
- ▶ While some strengths are more personal characteristics (e.g., musical talent) and other strengths are more characteristics of the environment (e.g. family), it is generally the case that it is the interaction of the person and environment that is key to understanding the presence of a strength.

# The Four Pathways to Meaning



- ▶ People-Family, Friends, People
- ▶ Work (school)
- ▶ Things you like to do outside of work (school)
- ▶ Something larger than yourself



# What Strengths are not:

- ▶ Saying positive things
- ▶ The absence of needs
- ▶ Compliance with treatment

Do not fall into the trap that being 'strength-based' is always finding something positive to say. Between optimistic is good. Making stuff up is just another form of lying

# Conceptualizing Strengths and their Impact on the Lives of Children



# The Putative Roles of Strengths in Mental Health

- ▶ A mediator
- ▶ A moderator
- ▶ A predictor
- ▶ A suppressor
- ▶ An outcome

# Examples of Strengths

- ▶ Coping
- ▶ Savoring
- ▶ Spiritual/Religious
- ▶ Talents/Interests
- ▶ Recreation
- ▶ Self Expression
- ▶ Creativity
- ▶ Leadership
- ▶ Family
- ▶ Interpersonal
- ▶ Positive Peers
- ▶ Natural Supports
- ▶ Educational
- ▶ Vocational
- ▶ Community

# As Example of Strengths as a Mediator

- ▶ The treatment of obesity often requires careful control of diet and exercise
- ▶ Building Family Strengths can mediate the process of weight loss by supporting the child's life style changes and embedding those changes into family life.



# Strengths as a moderator

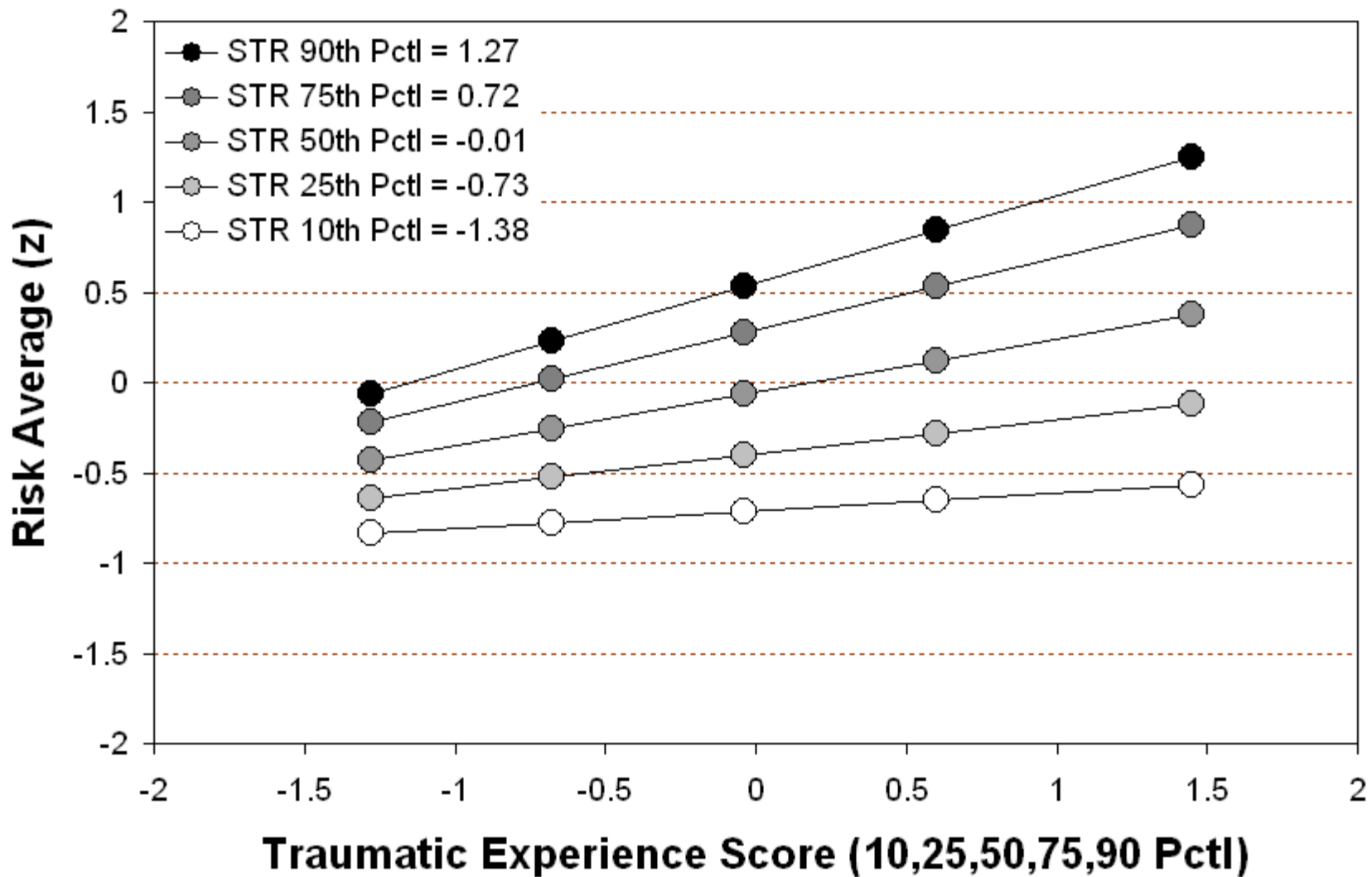



- ▶ The presences of optimism and talents/interests moderates the relationship between weight and functional impairment

# DCFS Risk Behaviors Based on Traumatic Experiences



# DCFS Risk Behaviors Based on Traumatic Experiences And Moderated by Strengths





## Examples of Strengths as a Suppressor

Community and Educational  
Strengths mask the  
relationship between weight  
and well-being



# Examples of Strengths as An Outcome

STRENGTH BUILDING OUTCOMES ARE INVISIBLE 'STEP CHILD' OF THE CHILD SERVING SYSTEM.



# An Example of Strengths as a Predictor

- ▶ Predicting Re-arrest in MHJJ
  - ▶ Talents/Interests
  - ▶ Vocational
  - ▶ Spiritual/Religious
- ▶ Predicting Foster Care Placement Stability among children with SED
  - ▶ Talents/Interests
  - ▶ Educational
  - ▶ Community Inclusion

# Strength-Based Planning



- ▶ Strength-based planning is not simply the use of strengths to address needs. It is the creation of resiliency and resourcefulness. Building the capacity of children and families to identify, build and use strengths to address health development.

# A fully strength-informed system:

- ▶ Uses strengths when available to either address needs or support healthy development
- ▶ Looks for opportunity to build strengths when not currently present
- ▶ Ensure that strengths are maintained even when this competes with meeting needs.

# Examples of strength building

- ▶ Interest inventory
- ▶ Links to recreational programs
- ▶ Building positive family relationships
- ▶ Supporting friendships/social opportunities
- ▶ Positive life experiences
- ▶ Vocational/career support
- ▶ Coping and savoring skill development

# Most young people with weight challenges

- ▶ Will always have weight-related needs
- ▶ Will learn to live with the personal weight challenges without it interfering with their lives
- ▶ The majority of people with obesity are not involved in the formal mental health treatment system