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Character Strengths



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Synonyms

[Character strengths](#); [Positive Psychology Interventions \(PPIs\)](#); [Strengths-based approach](#); [VIA classification](#); [Virtues](#)

Definition

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), character strengths are ubiquitous traits which are valued in their own right and do not diminish others. In summarizing the evolving concepts and literature, Niemiec (2018) defined character strengths as positive personality qualities that reflect personal identity, produce positive outcomes, and contribute to the greater good.

Description

Human beings have the unique ability to think about themselves: Who are we? We can recall our past and make predictions about our future. Our ability to think about ourselves, about our

past, and about the future, however, is marked by negativity. We are hardwired to focus on problems, weaknesses, and the negative or bad (Baumeister et al. 2001) as opposed to focusing on strengths, and we are more risk averse than gain sensitive (Kahneman and Tversky 1984). We have evolved to be more adept at worrying than at appreciating. When we encounter challenges, we are more likely to recall shortcomings, failures, and setbacks – our own and those of others – and if we do this persistently, we develop psychological distress. Riding on this default wave of negativity, the field of psychology has, over the decades, enumerated more than 200 different varieties of psychological distress and numerous efficacious therapies to remediate this distress. This has largely made psychology a remedial or correctional discipline. In addition, traits of character with any moral inkling have been emphasized more for decades by philosophers and moral theologians, since the early writings of prominent personality theorist Gordon Allport (1921), who believed character was not a subject matter for the field of psychology. Until recently, there was not a single coherent system which could reliably classify, define, and measure characteristics and conditions which make life worth living.

In the past decade, positive psychology has made concerted empirical efforts to advance the science behind what is strongest and best in people. Most prominent in these efforts is the field of character strengths. Whereas symptoms, in their varying combinations and severity, help us to

understand nuanced levels of stress, sadness, and anxiety, character strengths help us to understand ways one can experience satisfaction, positive relationships, engagement, meaning, and well-being. Character strengths are the basic psychological ingredients that enable us to act in ways that contribute to our well-being (Park et al., 2004; Proctor et al., 2009). Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) spearheaded the first systematic effort to classify core human strengths, acknowledging that character strengths are morally desired traits of human existence, and at the same time, are presented as descriptive traits open to empirical examination. Much like psychology has shown that individuals who experience negative emotions such as anger, hostility, vengeance, or narcissistic traits are more likely to develop a host of psychological ills, individuals who experience ► [gratitude](#), forgiveness, humility, love, and kindness are more likely to report being happier and satisfied with life. Hence, character strengths describe various shades and dimensions of human flourishing and well-being.

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), character strengths are ubiquitous traits which are valued in their own right and do not diminish others; rather, they elevate those who witness the strength expression, producing admiration not jealousy. Some individuals strikingly embody strength, while others may have what appears to be no perceivable level of a given strength in particular situations. Societal institutions, through rituals, attempt to cultivate character strengths.

Peterson (2006) distinguishes character strengths (e.g., kindness, teamwork, zest) from talents and abilities. Athletic prowess, photographic memory, perfect pitch, fine dexterity, physical agility, and such constitute talents and abilities. Character strengths have moral flavor, whereas talents and abilities do not. Also, talents, by and large, are not buildable. Clearly, self-regulation and optimism can improve one's swimming performance, but these increments tend to be relatively small. To swim like Michael Phelps and run like Usain Bolt, one needs certain physical abilities. Character strengths can be built on even frail foundations and, with enough practice, persistence, and good mentoring, can take root to

make life worth living. Also, one can squander a talent, but a character strength is usually not squandered. Character strengths are also distinct from other types of strengths human beings have including skills (proficiencies one develops such as typing skills, presentation skills, or anger management skills), interests (passions or hobbies for leisure such as sport, art, music), and resources (external supports such as having many friends or a supportive spirituality community) (Niemiec 2018).

The field of psychology has placed a predominant emphasis on weaknesses which has led mental health professionals and consumers to think of psychological disorders primarily as the presence of symptoms. Taking a similar categorical approach, disorders can also be conceptualized as an overuse and/or underuse of multiple character strengths. However, we believe a dimensional approach makes more sense in attempting to understand the complexities of the character strength-psychopathology relationship. Such a dimensional approach would view strengths in terms of their overuse and underuse, and their expression would exist in degrees. Character strength use varies by context so there is no perfect mean other than to reflect what Aristotle (2000) expressed as the golden mean where each virtue has two negative opposites and there is a practical wisdom of expressing the right combination of strengths to the right degree in the right situation (Niemiec 2019; Schwartz and Sharpe 2006). From this angle, depression might be viewed as an underuse of the character strengths of hope/optimism, humor/playfulness, and zest; simultaneously, it may often be characterized as the overuse of the character strengths of judgment/critical thinking as well as of perseverance as reflected in thought rumination. Likewise, anxiety nearly always has an element involving the underuse of courage and determination, and the narrowing of attention reflects an underuse of the character strength of perspective.

Knowing and using something positive that one already has increases individual's well-being, and self-efficacy to deal with challenges confidently and adaptively (Wood et al., 2011; Park et al., 2004; Proctor et al. 2009). What

follows are some arguments for why character strengths are important, particularly in therapy, counseling, coaching, and teaching. While there is emerging research to support these points, further research is necessary before final conclusions can be drawn.

- *Repairing or Fixing Weakness Does Not Necessarily Make You Stronger:* The assumption that fixing all weaknesses will make us happy or happier is a misconception. In writing or editing a paper, one may correct all spelling and grammatical errors, but this does not necessarily make the paper excellent in quality. Writing an excellent paper entails expressing creative craftsmanship.
- *Using Strengths Helps to Reinterpret and Reframe Problems Adaptively:* Using strengths increases one's self-efficacy and confidence in ways focusing on weakness cannot. Being aware of our character strengths facilitates us to reinterpret and reframe problems from a strength's perspective rather than from a weakness perspective.
- *Fixing Weakness Does Not Necessarily Cultivate Well-Being:* A popular working principle many practitioners take is that fixing weaknesses is of utmost importance for happiness and strengths will simply take care of themselves. A paralleled conception is that working on something one is already good at is wasting time and energy which could be better spent on correcting weaknesses. Weaknesses require fixing, but strengths require nurturance. Fixing weakness yields remediation, while strength nurturance produces growth and much like positive emotions, builds our cognitive and attentional resources (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002).
- *Be Wary of Trite Proclamations:* There are many popular statements that are more likely to be misconceptions than conventional wisdom, for example, "you can do anything, if you work hard at it" and "the sky is the limit." Instead of chanting these mantras, consider using your character strengths. A strength-based approach helps frame specific, practical yet realistic goals geared toward alleviation of depression and create enduring life satisfaction.
- *Character Strengths Interventions Are Shown to Increase Happiness and Life Satisfaction and Decrease Depression:* A meta-analysis of character strength-based interventions (Schutte and Malouff 2019) showed that across nine intervention studies there was a significant increase in positive affect or happiness, and across seven studies interventions had a significant impact on decreasing depression and increasing life satisfaction.
- *Character Strengths Help Us to Better Understand Resilience:* A number of Character strengths in concert, also known as poly-strengths can help us to better understand resilience. Three kinds of adversities (victimization, stressful life events, financial strain) of adults and adolescents ($N = 2565$) were assessed, along with 23 protective factors, representing three broader domains of resilience. The combination of strengths and adversities accounted for 42% of the variance in trauma symptoms, 50% of the variance in post-traumatic growth, and 58% of the variance in subjective well-being (Hamby et al. 2018). Character strengths could improve outcomes in individuals who have experienced adversity.
- *Strengths Use Promotes Resilience.* Adversities, traumas, and losses undermine physical and emotional health and pose a significant risk for thwarting growth. Evidence shows that strengths predicted an additional 3% of the variance in resilience over and above socio-demographic variables, positive affect, self-efficacy, optimism, social support, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Martínez-Martí and Ruch 2017). Challenges can strike anytime and are often unexpected. Knowing and using character strengths, in good times, can help develop strategies for use during tough times. Being aware of and using strengths not only promote resilience but also prepare individuals to encounter challenges adaptively.
- *Strengths Use for Finding Balance in Daily Interactions and in Relational Challenges.* If daily interactions between two partners, friends, or colleagues focused more on each

other's weakness and deficits, then unease, tension, and resentment are likely going to mark these interactions. A balanced approach is going to address conflict as well as cooperation, grudge as well as gratitude, hubris as well as humility, and self-centeredness as well as empathy. This will likely lessen tension and create more positive opportunities in these interactions. Likewise, not all character strengths predict relationship enhancement equally. Too much use of one or more character strengths may produce negative effects. Hence, balance of specific strengths or pairs of strengths need to be considered. Research has shown that character strengths in pairs, in particular, honesty and kindness, love and social intelligence, and hope and gratitude had the strongest relations to meaning in life (Allan 2015).

Character Strengths and Optimal Experiences

Strengths are natural to, and can be used to build, optimal states such as ► [flow](#). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) articulated the phenomenology of flow as an engrossing and enjoyable state that is worth doing for its own sake. During flow, time passes, and attention is razor sharp on the present moment activity. The individual becomes one with the activity; thus, both the conscious experience of emotion and the self fades, but only in the immediacy of the experience because the aftermath of flow is invigorating. Flow is maintained through the balance between skill and challenge in which the activity is not so easy that the person finds it boring or too difficult that one is frustrated. Flow is intrinsically motivating and highly enjoyable. Seligman (2002) has proposed that one way to build flow is to identify the salient character strengths of individuals and then help them to find opportunities to use these strengths more often.

► [Mindfulness](#) is another optimal state that involves observing one's ever-changing present moment experience. Researchers operationally defined mindfulness as two core character

strengths, stating it involves the *self-regulation* of attention while employing an attitude of *curiosity*, openness, and acceptance with what one places their attention on (Bishop et al. 2004). Mindfulness and character strengths can be wielded to have a mutual impact on one another where character strengths can facilitate greater mindfulness and adherence to meditation practices and mindful living (Niemiec et al. 2012), and, in turn, the practice of mindfulness has been shown to nurture a variety of character strengths (e.g., kindness, forgiveness, zest, spirituality). The evidence-based program, mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP) facilitates this synergy (see Niemiec 2014), and research not only supports this mutual integration model but shows these practices bring significant benefits for well-being, work performance, and stress management (Pang and Ruch 2019a, b).

Signature Strengths

One of the more prominent lines of research and topics in positive psychology is the area of signature strengths. *Signature strengths* are those highest strengths of character that an individual self-consciously owns and celebrates, which he or she feels a sense of ownership and authenticity ("this is the real me"); the individual feels excited while displaying these signature strengths, learns quickly as they are practiced, feels more invigorated than exhausted when using them, and creates and pursues projects that revolve around them. One particular intervention used widely by practitioners around the world is the "use signature strengths in new ways" intervention. This involves the client first taking the VIA Character Strengths Survey (www.viasurvey.org) to receive their rank ordering of character strengths per the VIA Classification, and second using one of their highest strengths in a way that is new and unique for that client (Rashid and Seligman 2018; Linley et al. 2010; Madden et al. 2011; Mitchell et al. 2009; Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews 2012; Rust et al. 2009; Peterson and Peterson 2008; Seligman et al. 2005). As mentioned earlier, this intervention has been found in a meta-analysis to

boost happiness and decrease depression (Schutte and Malouf 2019), in some studies showing effects of this one-week intervention for up to 6 months.

Signature strengths may play a central role in a variety of outcomes. Future research will fine tune the distinctive benefits of signature strengths when compared with other subsets of strengths such as happiness strengths (those consistently correlated most highly with life satisfaction), achievement-oriented strengths, and lower strengths). Nevertheless, the science is clear that character strengths in general have a substantial role in our lives and are useful across contexts. For a summary of over 700 studies of character strengths, see VIA Institute 2020. We offer examples of several recent studies below:

1. Character strengths change over the course of life (Owens et al. 2018).
2. Zest, hope, curiosity, love, and gratitude, and emotional strengths, in general, related most strongly to overall job satisfaction among 12,499 employees including nurses, physicians, supervisors, office workers, clinical psychologists, social workers/educators, economists, and secondary-school teachers (Heintz and Ruch 2019).
3. Character strengths facilitate quality of friends (Wagner 2019).
4. Application of signature strengths among medical students and residents predicted better mental health and wellbeing (Hausler et al. 2017).
5. Strength-based parenting – the tendency for parents to spot and encourage children to use their strengths – is associated with lower stress and higher life satisfaction in adolescents (Jach et al. 2018).

Character Strengths, Table 1 The VIA classification of character strengths. (© Copyright 2004–2020, VIA Institute on Character. Used with permission. All rights reserved. www.viacharacter.org)

Wisdom	<i>Creativity</i> : Originality; adaptive; ingenuity
	<i>Curiosity</i> : Interest; novelty-seeking; exploration; openness to experience
	<i>Judgment</i> : Critical thinking; thinking things through; open-minded
	<i>Love of Learning</i> : Mastering new skills and topics; systematically adding to knowledge
	<i>Perspective</i> : Wisdom; providing wise counsel; taking the big picture view
Courage	<i>Bravery</i> : Valor; not shrinking from fear; speaking up for what’s right
	<i>Perseverance</i> : Persistence; industry; finishing what one starts
	<i>Honesty</i> : Authenticity; integrity
	<i>Zest</i> : Vitality; enthusiasm; vigor; energy; feeling alive and activated
Humanity	<i>Love</i> : Both loving and being loved; valuing close relations with others
	<i>Kindness</i> : Generosity; nurturance; care; compassion; altruism; “niceness”
	<i>Social Intelligence</i> : Emotional intelligence; aware of the motives/feelings of self/others, knowing what makes other people tick
Justice	<i>Teamwork</i> : Citizenship; social responsibility; loyalty
	<i>Fairness</i> : Just; not letting feelings bias decisions about others
	<i>Leadership</i> : Organizing group activities; encouraging a group to get things done
Temperance	<i>Forgiveness</i> : Mercy; accepting others’ shortcomings; giving people a second chance
	<i>Humility</i> : Modesty; letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves
	<i>Prudence</i> : Careful; cautious; not taking undue risks
	<i>Self-Regulation</i> : Self-control; disciplined; managing impulses and emotions
Transcendence	<i>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</i> : Awe; wonder; elevation
	<i>Gratitude</i> : Thankful for the good; expressing thanks; feeling blessed
	<i>Hope</i> : Optimism; future-mindedness; future orientation
	<i>Humor</i> : Playfulness; bringing smiles to others; lighthearted
	<i>Spirituality</i> : Purpose; meaning; calling; pursuit of the sacred

6. A single-session, 90-minute intervention can increase well-being and depression among first year students, with gains maintained at follow-up (Duan and Bu 2019).
7. A study of older adults, who described their day-to-day living, found that resources and character strengths facilitated better coping with challenges and enabled thriving (Russo-Netzer and Littman-Ovadia 2019).

Summary

The research and practice of character strengths is an emerging science that has elucidated important discoveries yet is marked by significant potential. Researchers in the science of character are drawing a number of fascinating connections between the use of character strengths and positive outcomes and the manifestation of optimal states. Novel synergies of character strength education, research, and practice are being conceptualized (e.g., Niemiec and Wedding 2014). Practitioners are finding quick and effective strategies for helping their clients get closer in touch with their best qualities, face suffering and challenges with strength, and pursue life goals by capitalizing on their strengths. In the end, this leads clients to be better informed to answer the question on identity that we opened with and, taken a step further, helps the clients use their positive core toward flourishing (Table 1).

Cross-References

- Flow
- Gratitude
- Mindfulness
- Positive Affect
- Satisfaction with Life
- Self-efficacy
- Self-esteem
- Strengths-Based Approaches

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