



Ryan M. Niemiec

Character Strengths Interventions

A Field Guide for Practitioners

“The GO-TO book for building character”

Martin E. P. Seligman, The founder of positive psychology



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|x| **Foreword**

Let's go straight to the bottom line: Dr. Ryan Niemiec is the world's foremost authority on the science, practice, and teaching of character strengths, and, with this book, he summarizes in clear and practical terms what practitioners need to know to put this new knowledge to work for themselves and their clients. In my opinion, this book brings to practitioners the most important insights into actualizing positive human potential since the insights of cognitive psychology! Character strength science is the backbone of a "new" psychology – one focused on the array of beautiful psychological characteristics with which all human beings have been imbued – characteristics that can be used to help each and every one of us live our lives most fully, both individually and collectively.

In 1999, Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, then 1 year post-President of the American Psychological Association, began writing about the need for the science of psychology to augment its efforts to understand and remediate psychological suffering with developing scientific knowledge about "the plus side" of the human experience – how we can construct lives with positive emotions, relationships, and achievements along with high degrees of engagement and meaning. In other words, he made a call to the profession of psychology to learn about the processes that lead to human flourishing. He envisioned efforts to understand positive emotions, positive psychological characteristics, and positive organizations, with positive characteristics being "the backbone" of this new "positive psychology." As a clinical psychologist and president of a philanthropic foundation, I responded to his call to the field. To make a long story short, Dr. Seligman and I worked together to conceive of a 3-year project to create the two basic tools any new scientific effort requires – an intellectual framework and language of what we want to understand, and tools of measurement. When asked to identify the most qualified person in the world to colead this effort, Dr. Seligman identified, without hesitation, Dr. Christopher Peterson of the University of Michigan. We fortunately

were able to recruit Dr. Peterson for a full, 3-year hiatus from his university responsibilities to focus 100% on this project.

As it is said, the rest is history! Drs. Seligman and Peterson, with input from 55 noted scholars and positive youth development practitioners, embarked on the most comprehensive and robust effort ever to understand what's best about human beings and how we build full and flourishing lives for ourselves and others. The work was presented in a groundbreaking publication in 2004 entitled *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. That book describes the intellectual foundation for the VIA Classification – a classification of 24 universal psychological characteristics – along with introducing the strategies for measuring these characteristics in adults and youth. At the same time, the VIA Institute on Character made the VIA Surveys available for free on its website, and, without any marketing promotions, after about a year over 1 million people from around the world had found and taken a VIA Survey! During the period of the next few years, people continued flocking to the site to discover their character strengths, positive psychology journals and associations took form, and it became apparent that the new subdiscipline of positive psychology had taken root and was here to stay. Fast-forward to today and over 5 million people from every country in the world have taken a VIA Survey which is currently translated into 37 languages, and there are over 300 scientific publications relating to the Survey in professional journals.

Dr. Niemiec was the one of the first psychologists to jump into this work with both feet. He coauthored a book on movies and character strengths in 2008 with Danny Wedding, and then became the first employee of the VIA Institute after the hiring of an executive director. When I first interviewed Dr. Niemiec, he was moving to Cincinnati, Ohio where the VIA Institute resides, and was looking for employment. VIA did not yet have the capacity to hire him. When I asked how long he could wait for a position to open I recall his answer: “Working for VIA would be a dream job, and for that, I would wait forever!” Unbelievably, his enthusiasm for the work has only ^[xiii] grown and he has been *the* major teacher of this work across the globe. Additionally, he has continued to merge his personal interests with the science, having published *Mindfulness and*

Character Strengths in 2014, and creating the related mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP) program. As a central figure with the VIA Institute, Dr. Niemiec has been deeply involved with the Institute's ever evolving thinking about the potential of this important work for helping to tip humanity towards its better nature. With this book, he shares the most current thinking and research-to-date on such topics as signature strengths, situational (phasic) strengths, dynamics between strengths, overuse and underuse, and strengths blindness, among others.

So, what's the big deal about character strengths? As a psychotherapist who has spent thousands of hours across 15+ years sitting with people trying to help them move their lives forward, I can say that I wish I had the advantage of this knowledge when I was doing that work. Practitioners are always needing tools. When Skinner uncovered the processes by which contingency schedules of reinforcement affect human behavior, it provided tools for practitioners wanting to help clients change behaviors. When Ellis, Beck, and Seligman - the giants of cognitive psychology - uncovered processes by which different thought forms affect emotions and behavior, it provided practitioners with strategies for modifying thinking in order to modify unwanted feelings and associated maladaptive behaviors. In this vein, the uncovering of the corner of the human psyche where the 24 strengths of character reside provides practitioners with levers that can be pulled to activate achievement, enhance well-being, and elevate others towards becoming their best.

Let me be more specific. If a couple presents at a practice with relationship problems, now a therapist can ask them to take the VIA Survey, discuss their use of strengths with each other, and structure a relationship enhancing process for recognizing and appreciating the strengths in their partner on a regular basis. If a person wants to improve their engagement and satisfaction at work, now a manager or counselor can create a program by which they have the client deliberately apply their top strengths of character in their jobs on an ongoing basis and to select roles at work that match best with who they are. Now, when a parent or teacher wants to help a child flourish, they can focus on recognizing the character strengths in their child as they are revealed, nurture those strengths, and help the child develop their self-concept -

their personal narrative - around their strengths of character. Now, psychotherapists can build their relationships with clients from the point of assessing what's strong vs what's wrong. The emerging applications of character strengths seems to be nearly endless, and it is only a very young field!

In this book, Dr. Niemiec organizes and describes dozens of specific applications that have various amounts of supporting evidence. Unlike any other book of its kind, this book distinguishes itself by clarifying vs. obfuscating what kind of evidence actually exists at the time of publication for each of the specified applications. While some applications have replicated evidence from double-blind, placebo-controlled studies, others have more anecdotal evidence. Practitioners can select applications with full knowledge of what the level of evidentiary support is and, of course, what seems relevant to their client. And, as with any field of practice, it is part-art and part-science. So, astute practitioners can use the content of the book to stimulate their own adaptations to tailor interventions as they see fit.

This book opens up the practice field of character strength psychology. The genius of the VIA work of Peterson and Seligman is not so much that it is a listing of important psychological characteristics, but more so that it uncovers a psychological *system* that has dynamics that are only beginning to become understood. Dr. Niemiec brings us up to date on what we know about that system, and I am confident that he will remain our leading guide into the future as more and more becomes discovered about how we all can actualize our highest potentials together through the application of our character strengths!

Neal H. Mayerson, PhD
Chairman of VIA Institute on
Character

|xiii| Preface

In 2004, something groundbreaking took place in the field of social sciences. For the first time in history, a cross-cultural, common language describing the best qualities in human beings was born – the VIA classification of strengths and virtues. A new science of human character had arrived. Along with it, a measure (test) of positive traits was being dispersed freely around the globe. The practical ramifications of this emerging work have been substantial. It has been regarded as the most or one of the most wide-reaching efforts in positive psychology, and, by Harvard scientist and multiple intelligences theorist Howard Gardner, as one of the most important initiatives in psychology in the last century.

Meanwhile, in 2004, I was busy practicing as a clinical psychologist in St. Louis, working every day in clinical pain management, a psychology and religion program, and a general outpatient clinic, assisting people in relieving their suffering and trying to help them find mental, physical, social, and spiritual health along the way. I came across this VIA classification by Peterson and Seligman. I was lured in, enamored by its holistic nature. After a short courtship, I was in love. I began planning my future. This was to begin by using the classification to study movies with a positive lens ([Niemiec & Wedding, 2014](#)) as my colleague and I had already done this from a psychopathology lens (see [Wedding & Niemiec, 2014](#)). My study led me to practice with the VIA classification with my clients – to experiment, to question, to wonder, to appreciate. A couple short years later my wife and I decided to move to Cincinnati, which would be closer to our families of origin. As we engaged in the process, I came to realize that the VIA Institute on Character (formerly referred to as Values in Action Institute), the nonprofit that championed the entire project that culminated in this common language and measurement tool, had its headquarters in the city I was moving to. Do you believe in synchronicity?

VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

Virtue of Wisdom

Creativity: Original, adaptive, ingenuity, seeing and doing things in different ways

Curiosity: Interest, novelty-seeking, exploration, openness to experience

Judgment: Critical thinking, thinking through all sides, not jumping to conclusions

Love of Learning: Mastering new skills & topics, systematically adding to knowledge

Perspective: Wisdom, providing wise counsel, taking the big picture view

Virtue of Courage

Bravery: Valor, not shrinking from threat or challenge, facing fears, speaking up for what's right

Perseverance: Persistence, industry, finishing what one starts, overcoming obstacles

Honesty: Authenticity, being true to oneself, sincerity without pretense, integrity

Zest: Vitality, enthusiasm for life, vigor, energy, not doing things half-heartedly

Virtue of Humanity

Love: Both loving and being loved, valuing close relations with others, genuine warmth

Kindness: Generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruism, doing for others

Social Intelligence: Emotional intelligence, aware of the motives/feelings of self/others, knowing what makes other people tick

Virtue of Justice

Teamwork: Citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, contributing to a group effort

Fairness: Adhering to principles of justice, not letting feelings bias decisions, equal opportunity for all

Leadership: Organizing group activities to get things done, positively influencing others

Virtue of Temperance

Forgiveness: Mercy, accepting others' shortcomings, giving people a second chance, letting go of hurt when wronged.

Humility: Modesty, letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves

Prudence: Careful about one's choices, cautious, not taking undue risks

Self-Regulation: Self-control, disciplined, managing impulses, emotions, and vices

Virtue of Transcendence

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence: Awe and wonder for beauty, admiration for skill/excellence, elevation for moral beauty

Gratitude: Thankful for the good, expressing thanks, feeling blessed

Hope: Optimism, positive future-mindedness, expecting the best & working to achieve it

Humor: Playfulness, bringing smiles to others, lighthearted – seeing the lighter side

Spirituality: Connecting with the sacred, purpose, meaning, faith, religiousness

A Unique Role

Neal Mayerson recalls that when I met with him and Donna Mayerson over breakfast discussing a potential job at the VIA Institute, he asked me how long I was willing to wait for a position at VIA. Even though my wife and I were already in the process of moving to Cincinnati and crunched for work, I spoke from the heart, “For that job, I’d be willing to wait forever.”

Fortunately, I did not have to wait that long and I formally started as Education Director at the VIA Institute in March 2009. My task, according to Neal, was simple: aggregate and disseminate. He and the VIA Institute wanted me to: (a) gather all the latest research and best practices on character strengths or relating to character strengths – connect with scientists and pioneering practitioners in positive psychology/character strengths across disciplines to further gather knowledge; (b) give it all back to the positive psychology community – find channels and create outlets to share the research and practice of character strengths to coaches, counselors, managers, educators, and consumers. And so, that has been my work the last 8 years. One could argue that that’s when the writing of this book started.

I would describe my work in accordance with what positive psychology researchers refer to as a “calling,” which means the work is an extension of who you are, a meaningful purpose. And, how could it not be a calling for me? I study and teach on those core qualities that help us understand the human condition – that make us more humane, help us improve ourselves, build up and support others, and contribute to goodness. What could be a better focal point than the focal point that lies deep within us? I’ve gotten spoiled with my work because I talk with others who are either barely getting by in their work, focusing solely on retirement down ^[XIV] the road, or are, at best, content with what they do. I leave such conversations surprised by the lack of meaning people find in their work, but also grateful for the work I am honored to do each day.

Many times I’m asked (by established professionals and by students), “How do I get a job like yours?” I tell them “I have no idea.” There’s no job like it and few points of comparison. I’m not solely a practitioner or a pure academic. Rather, I’m part-practitioner, part-researcher, part-educator,

part-consultant, part-scholar, part-blogger, part-innovator. I tell people I'm an educator-writer-networker-practitioner and, first and foremost, a core VIA staff member on a team of five that takes action each week that is global in scope.

I've had my ear to the ground for over a decade in the field of positive psychology, working closely with thought leaders, researchers, and practitioners. I listen to stories of suffering and stories of success. I am privileged to hear the challenges coaches, psychologists, teachers, and managers face when working without character strengths. In discussing how this science of character strengths might be integrated, a mutual learning effect and virtuous circle unfold that helps me, and hopefully them.

The Science-Practice Gap

Science is slow moving, whereas practice is rapidly moving. This creates a large gap, and the field of positive psychology is particularly vulnerable to this. Graduate and certificate programs in positive psychology are collectively churning out thousands of students in the world each year. Most of these students are practitioners of some kind and therefore want the best practices to offer clients, students, and employees ... and to offer those practices right now! It is striking to contrast this with the pace of science: a typical researcher could be faced with the following scenario:

- In September 2017, a researcher attends a conference and a new idea is catalyzed for an intervention they would like to conduct to boost well-being.
- He/she reflects on this idea for 1 month, and examines the resources they have, resources they need and 6 months later determines the project is feasible.
- He/she proposes the idea to their institution, supervisors, a granting agency, or other decision-makers. 6 months later, he/she gets the green light to pursue the project.
- Luckily, the timing is right and they can begin recruiting subjects in 2 months.
- He/she recruits participants for the study over a 2-month period.

- He/she randomizes the participants into groups and runs a 6-month intervention study and completes it.
- He/she takes 1 month to analyze the data.
- Upon having encouraging and interesting results, he/she takes 6 months to collaboratively write up the data into a paper that could be publishable.
- He/she submits the paper to a journal, following the steps and requirements of the journal being pursued (1 month).
- One month later, the journal's editor sends the paper out to peer reviewers instructing them to review the paper and offer feedback within 4 months.
- The editor receives the feedback at that deadline and takes 1 month to review the paper and this feedback. He/she sends all this feedback to the researcher. It is a rejection with encouragement to resubmit.
- The researcher discusses this feedback with colleagues and they decide to make the changes and resubmit the paper. They do this within 3 months.
- A month later, the editor sends the revised paper back out to the peer-reviewers.
- [xvi] These reviewers send feedback back to the editor within 3 months and 1 month later the editor sends this information back to the researcher. It is an acceptance, with revision.
- The research team happily makes the final, additional changes and get the again-revised manuscript back to the editor within 1 month. Two months later it is accepted.
- The paper is now officially in-press and it is placed in the journal's queue. It will be published in 12 months.
- The journal releases the paper (electronically) on schedule. The recipients of the journal can now read the paper. It has come out 60 months following the original idea. The date is now September 2022.
- Sadly, the paper has no support from the press or the researcher's institution in terms of marketing, and only a small percentage of people actually read the article, despite the positive results for this new intervention. It is, however, archived in several online databases.

Five years! These numbers vary – more or less – based on the individual researcher, the institution, their home country, and the journal submitted

to. Many additional obstacles and steps will be at play for some researchers such as a lack of good results, a lack or loss of funding, flaws in the design that cause the study to cease, continued rejection from journals, etc.

As a point of comparison, here's the typical scenario for the everyday practitioner:

- In September 2017, a practitioner takes a new workshop on character strengths.
- The next day, they look at their schedule and see that eight clients, all of whom are suffering in life, need their help. With the first client they see, they weave a character strengths intervention into their existing approach to help them.

The contrast here – 5 years versus 1 day – is stark. The numbers may shift on either side – for example, some journals have a much quicker turnaround process especially those that are online, and some practitioners will discern, reflect, read, and discuss new ideas for a considerable amount of time before applying. But the contrast remains.

Considering this gap, a bridge is needed in the field of character science. This book intends to contribute to that bridge – true to VIA's namesake – as a bridge to support and inform both the science and practice.

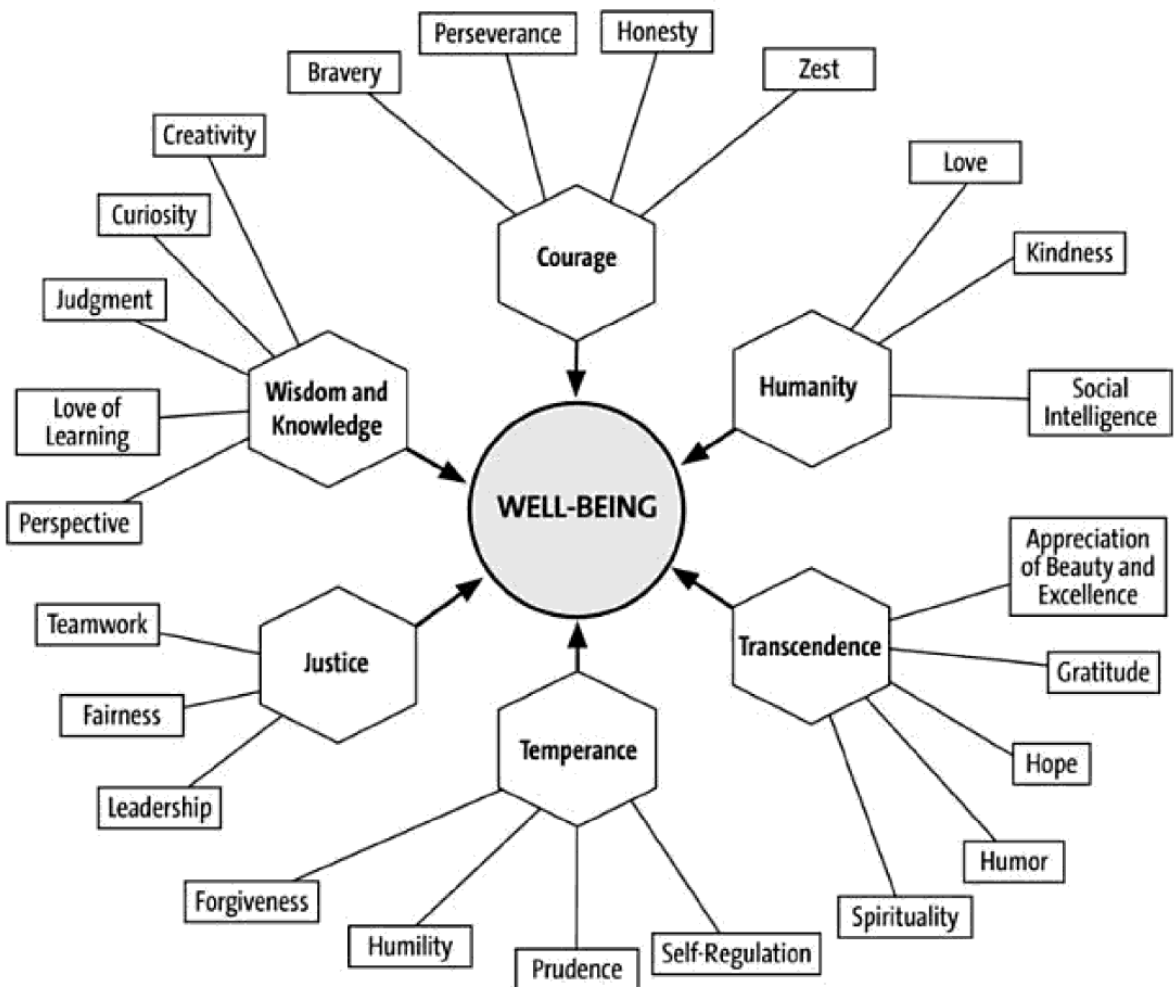
Why Now?

Too many times I would offer a practical workshop or lecture on character strengths and people came up to me afterward and said – this was great, how do I apply it? I would look at the individual dumbfounded as if either: a.) they walked in at the last 5 minutes of the workshop; b.) I was an awful workshop leader; or c.) they could not make the leap from practical exercises for themselves to helping their clients/students. This, along with the encouragement of many, strengthened my interest in writing this book as a “field-guide” for practitioners.

The *Character Strengths and Virtues* text ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)) on the VIA classification is 13 years old. That is also when practitioners began applying this work. In the field of positive psychology, there has been no book for practitioners that squarely targets the richness of concepts surrounding the VIA character strengths and lays out what is known about best practices with character strengths. This book for you, the helper, has been a long-time coming.

Positive psychology's backbone has exploded in this time amounting to hundreds of scientific and scholarly publications. While there is much to learn about the application of character strengths, core concepts and strong practices are emerging. When applied, character strengths have strong potential to boost well-being, foster resilience, improve relationships, and create |xvi| strong, supportive "cultures" in families, classrooms, and organizations. To this end, character strengths lubricate and catalyze the good life while managing hardships and life challenges.

VIA Classification: Character Strength Pathways to Well-Being



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But, are character strengths best taught through words on a page? Probably not. Nothing replaces the experience and connection that flows from receiving genuine love from another or expressing profound curiosity to another. However, words on a page set the stage, offer depth, provoke new ideas, and reflect examples and exercises – all to then be put into action by the reader, for themselves or for others.

Throughout the book, I frequently use these two words:

- Practitioner: I am referring to any helping professional, such as a psychologist, counselor, social worker, mentor, coach, manager,

teacher, physician, nurse, health technician, mediator, or professor. In many cases, the word might be stretched to a parent helping a child, a spouse helping a spouse, or a consumer acting as the practitioner for themselves. My approach here is no doubt most strongly reflective of my work as a psychologist/coach/educator, therefore, those in a similar professional will likely find the most alignment with the suggestions and exercises throughout the book.

- Client: I am referring to any person being helped or supported, such as a patient, counseling client, coachee, student, employee, or even oneself.

It is assumed that any practitioner picking up this book at least values a strength-based approach to working with clients. This book is purposefully written with that reality in mind. Any manager, counselor, coach, or teacher can pick up the book and learn the core concepts of character strengths and signature strengths ([Chapters 1 and 2](#)), the most crucial applied considerations ([Chapter 3](#)), ways to troubleshoot and fine-tune an approach to character strengths ([Chapter 4](#)), and advanced topics relating to character such as overuse, strengths collisions, morality, and the integration with savoring, flow, and mindfulness ([Chapter 5](#)). Practitioners and clients can then review detailed information on each of the 24 strengths in one-page handouts ([Chapter 6](#)), and work with user-friendly, research-based practices ([Chapters 7 and 8](#)) and a number of additional resources ([Appendices](#)).

There Is No Algorithm for Life

In his text on virtues, [Fowers \(2005\)](#) offers this adage which is also true for character strengths. Despite the hundreds of studies referenced in this book, over 100 research-based character strengths activities, and numerous core concepts involved in applying this work, there remains, and perhaps always will remain, a subjectivity, a demand for understanding the myriad of individual and context-based factors. Hence, there is no algorithm for completely understanding and applying character strengths. Therefore, this book is not “a 10-week program” or “6-steps to apply the science of strengths” approach. Not that such programs

shouldn't be done - because they should, and are. But, such programs are always an extension of the individual practitioner who is creating and leading it. There is not one way.

May something in this book help you clearly see the wisdom that lies beneath, express the goodness that is you, and help others find their way.

Ryan Niemiec

May 2017

Cincinnati, Ohio

[XVIII] Acknowledgements

The part of my books that I reread the most are the acknowledgements sections. I enjoy relishing in gratitude and humility about all the people that have had an impact on me and/or offered support and wisdom.

My full-fledged gratitude to the core VIA Institute team, where there are five of us: VIA Chairman, Neal Mayerson, one of the unsung founding fathers of positive psychology, who displays an almost inhuman level of creativity, judgment/critical thinking, and perspective, meaning that he comes up with ideas and pathways on the smallest of scales and the largest of scales, both hammering through the nuances and visioning the long-term future, sometimes in the same sentence. Neal occasionally talks about VIA's 50th anniversary and where it will be in that year of 2050; he says he won't be there for it, but, considering his perseverance, I think he might. In either case, he will surely be honored for this unparalleled organization and the many great decisions, made by him and others, that got VIA to where it is today.

In every good team, there is a relationship-oriented person – someone to offer support, handle conflicts, and express emotion clearly and directly in a tone of everyday conversation ... someone to do the little things that after a while are taken for granted ... someone who goes out of their way to help just to help (and thereby proving altruism can indeed be unselfish) ... someone who is brilliant but would never say it, magnanimous but focuses more on walking the talk. I am, of course, speaking of the inimitable Donna Mayerson, VIA Practice Director.

And there is Breta Cooper, VIA Business Director, who is remembered by each person she meets. She is remembered because she is impressive. She uses her razor-sharp mind to wield a playful “what's-next” prudence, an always-appropriate social intelligence, and a politely challenging judgment/critical thinking. It can take people by surprise as she surveys the situation, gathers where people are coming from, slices and dices ideas/thoughts/responses in her mind, and then shares. No doubt this

combination of strengths brings her to successfully lead our VIA team meetings and so many happenings at VIA in so many ways, I won't even dare to count.

Finally, Kelly Aluise, VIA Communications Specialist, e-mails and talks with hundreds of people each month, helping them with a research code to study the VIA Survey, navigating the terrain of their inquiry and proposal, and a myriad of other tasks that help professionals and consumers use their own strengths or help others to do so. In what amounts to thousands upon thousands of people, I would be willing to bet there are zero or almost zero who have had a negative experience with Kelly. The exact opposite of a negative response is actually the norm. Kelly is an exemplar for teamwork; she could be interviewed and studied around how she brings forth this strength so strongly and for the benefit of others, especially the VIA team.

All in all, the VIA team is a collaborative one. There's isn't a day that goes by that it doesn't build a bridge and offer support/advice/hope for another. That's the kind of nonprofit organization I want to be part of. It's a team that pushes and challenges, and, especially, it leads. On a bad day, this team is on fire with ideas and critical thinking. Imagine what it's like on a good day.

Others at work whom I frequently speak with about character strengths include the always-ready-to-fill-in, quick-to-accomplish-a-task Chris Jenkins and the Mayerson art gallery guru and grant manager, Jeff Seibert. While I appreciate many things about Chris and Jeff, perhaps most appreciated is our conversations about *The Walking Dead*, which help me manage my sanity, work through theories, and relish in postapocalyptic fantasy. I could fill the remaining pages describing the talent and graciousness of Clare Blankemeyer, who champions the innovative Mayerson Service Learning Program. On our company volunteer day, Clare was the [XVIII] one on top of a tall ladder, with a drill, various screws, and other tools, while balancing on one leg to put up a trellis in a low-income neighborhood, while everyone else safely watched from below (I was good at holding the ladder!). I think that I'm busy and accomplish a lot, then I see Clare and I'm brought back down to Earth – thanks Clare! The kind-hearted, good natured and character strengths-based conversations and stories that

emerge when I speak with Rachel Gray and Maureen Heckmuller are also always deeply appreciated.

With appreciation for VIA's senior scientists, Bob McGrath and Willi Ruch, both of whom function at an extraordinarily high level of sophistication, integrity, and perspective. They are lighting the path of character science with their innovative research, their nurturing of research disciples, and the deep foundation of knowledge they have laid for the decades to come. With additional appreciation to VIA consultants and my friends, including Michelle McQuaid, Jillian Darwish, Tayyab Rashid, and Fatima Doman.

There are some people in positive psychology whose enthusiasm soars and simultaneously moves me to new heights. Some might say it's something intangible within the person; I would say it's a certain way that they express their strengths that speaks to me. When I hear these individual's names, I can't help but to smile and appreciate their gifts and my connection with them. These people include Itai Ivtzan (whom I refer to as "the Roberto Benigni of positive psychology"), Dan Tomasulo, Shannon Polly, Margarita Tarragona, Tayyab Rashid, and Roger Bretherton. Each is brilliant in their work and an authentic exemplar of what it means to be in this field.

In the same way, I can't say enough positive things about the talents, enthusiasm, and collaborative nature of my friends and colleagues, David Giwerc, James Pawelski, Scott Bantock, Lea Waters, Maria Sirois, Lucy Hone, Meriden Peters, Rene Oehlenschlaeger, Claudia Morales Cueto, Aaron Jarden, Bob Bradley, Ruth Pearce, Christina Madrid, Darren Coppin, Kristin Truempy, Eileen Henry, Ebbe Lavendt, Lotta Wallin, Katie Curran, Megan McDonough, Jane Anderson, and Mads Bab.

And a deep bow of gratitude to a few of my collaborators, associates, and/or supporters: Hadassah Littman-Ovadia, Suzy Green, Sven Roovers, Karrie Shogren, Mike Wehmeyer, Dan Lerner, Seph Fontane Pennock, Fred Bryant, Mathew White, Judy Lissing, Dave Shearon, Kate MacKinnon, Mark Linkins, Linda Rufer, Cypress Walker, Hugo Alberts, Tim Lomas, Nirb Singh, Veronika Huta, Carol Kauffman, Kelly Michael, Mary Gregerson, Mike Steger, Lisa Sansom, Greg Pejda, Paul Wong, Charles Walker, Caroline Adams Miller, Cooper Woodard, Keith Oatley, and Tal Ben-Shahar.

With appreciation for those who have gone out of their way to support my presentations, university connections, touring, and/or writing: Karl Stuckenberg, Tim Bryant at the Center for Ethical Leadership Development at Mount St. Joseph University, Jim Hudson, Mike Sontag, Leanne Hides, Tash Dean, Jan Walburg, Juan Humberto Young, Dora Gudmundsdottir, Sajel Bellon, Jennifer Cory, Todd Finnerty, Deb Easley, Mike Holman, Jane Wundersitz, Margarita Tarragona, James Pawelski, Judith Saltzberg, Hans Henrik-Knoop, Marlena Kossakowska, Sandra Scheinbaum, Dianne Vella-Brodrick, Aaron Jarden, Kathryn Britton, Nancy Snow, Senia Maymin, and Ohio State University's Todd Gibbs, Amy Barnes, Vicki Pitstick, and James Larcus (as a rabid Michigan State University fan/graduate, I might not root for your school but I certainly root for your character strengths integration work).

With gratefulness for VIA Institute partners, including Ofer, Tomer, and Tiffany at Happify; David Covey and Stephan Mardyks at SMCOV; the brilliant Rabbi Irwin Kula and Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu at CLAL; Megan McDonough and colleagues at the WholeBeing Institute; Craig Case and colleagues at Q Works; Paula Felps, Deb Heisz, and the staff from Live Happy magazine; the gifted Tom Lottman and Sarah Zawaly from Children Inc., a national leader in early child development and teacher training. And, of course, VIA's innovative, central partner in [\[XIX\]](#) the field of education, bringing character strengths to teachers and youth in a substantive way – the Mayerson Academy. This nonprofit organization that trains the public-school teachers throughout the Cincinnati region is spearheaded with thoughtful strategy and compassionate heart by Jillian Darwish along with the supreme talents of many, including: Lynn Ochs, Karen Graves, and Lisa Scheerer. Special thanks to all those researchers who send me updates on what they are working on and forward their articles ahead of publication to keep me (and the VIA community) informed, including but not limited to Hadassah Littman-Ovadia, Willibald Ruch, Marianne van Woerkom, Bob McGrath, Todd Kashdan, Shiri Lavy, Claudia Harzer, Rene Proyer, Thomas McGovern, Marco Weber, and Kim Sperber.

On behalf of the world, I'm happy to share thankfulness to the emergence of the VIA classification, specifically the *Character Strengths*

and Virtues text authors, directors, and advisors, which include positive psychology founder Marty Seligman, the inimitable genius that is the late Chris Peterson, along with 53 distinguished scientists. I often have Chris in mind while writing books on character strengths, hoping that he is somehow beaming with pride and feeling like justice is being done for his path-blazing work.

Locally in Cincinnati there is a movement called Strong Cincinnati, which is working to make the city of Cincinnati to be *the* global leader in character strengths applications in the community (see <http://www.strongcincinnati.org>). Indeed, if you look up the following incredible organizations, each at different levels of character strengths integration, and each with character strengths pioneers, you'll know what I mean: Children Inc., Talbert House, Mayerson Academy, Beech Acres Parenting Center, Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati, Lindner Center of Hope, Starfire, Public Allies, Interact for Health, Living Arrangements for the Developmentally Disabled (LADD), Mount St. Joseph University, Northern Kentucky University, Reel Abilities Film Festival, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, and Xavier University.

Also in Cincinnati, with appreciation for my friends/colleagues: Teri Caudill, Tara and Brad Proano-Raps, Bob Pautke, Lou Flaspohler, Jim Mason, Tim Vogt, Susan Brownknight, Molly Lyons, Steph Weber, Dave Brewer, Jami Cabrera, Neil Tilow, Robin Arthur, Nickol Mora, Jason Harris, Jennifer Sharp, Rick Reckman (my positive psychology teaching partner at Xavier University), and the one and only, Deb Pinger.

For those in St. Louis that sent me on my way to VIA in Cincinnati, only wanting the best for me: With a lifelong appreciation to my writing partner Danny Wedding, my friend and former boss, Ron Margolis, and my dear friend Marilyn Wussler, as well as my buddies Bob and Renae Achter, Helen Friedman, and Rob Furey.

In an age where other publishers are decidedly uncourageous or stuck in their ways, it is Hogrefe that has stepped up as one of the leading publishers in the positive psychology movement. Their outstanding collaborative team and the incredible people that make up the team are what make this publisher outstanding to work with. For this book, I am

speaking of Rob Dimbleby, who leads and juggles projects with strong social intelligence, perspective, and critical thinking, and Lisa Bennett, whose blend of mind and heart while editing helped to make my words shine. Anyone who appreciates this book should send a thank-you note to Rob and Lisa.

It might sound cliché to say that I have learned from thousands of people, but in this case, it is true. Since I joined the VIA Institute on Character, I have taught thousands of people, e-mailed thousands of people, and had hundreds of personal conversations – formal and informal – with people about this character strengths work. The people have ranged from Oprah Winfrey to a 5-year-old child; CEOs to janitors; distinguished positive psychology luminaries to young students; from disgruntled to enthusiastic VIA Survey takers; stalking naysayers to cheerleading zealots. How could I not learn from all of you? Each interaction, whether face-to-
|xx| face, phone, Skype, or e-mail has played a role in informing, challenging, and supporting my understanding of this beautifully complex, universally enlightening, constantly-evolving area of character strengths. My gratitude to all of you, named and unnamed!

To my family at a distance: First off, thank you to my Mom and Dad, both of whom most strongly influenced who I have become today. And, Lisa, Joey, Bob, Gloria, Monica, J. P., Zara-zen, Danny P., Ellen, Betty, Alex, Danielle, Marley, Kelly, Jade, Hedy, Chris, Scott, Erin, Benjamin, Stacey, Austin, Alayna, Aunt Jeanne, Uncle Jerry, Julie, Danny, Kelly, Steve, Dave, Daniela, Dominic, Charlotte, Uncle JJ, Aunt Laurie, Morgan, Jacob, Aunt Gwen, Uncle Don, and the whole Juszczuk family – I’m grateful to have you in my life.

And to my family at home – Maya, Ryland, Rhys, Rachele – it has now become commonplace for me to say “it won’t take long for me to write that book.” And then it does. Truth be told, a few months of evening and weekend writing is not a long time but any bit is too long if it takes me away from you. Thank you for your patience in allowing me to follow my passion. Thank you for teaching me work-home balance. Thank you for being R⁴ x M.

^[1] **Chapter 1** **Foundations of Strengths-Based Practice**

Seven Core Concepts of the Science of Character

Introduction

It was 2009. I had written a book on character strengths the previous year and was one of only a couple of people who had devoted themselves to such an effort on this topic. Yet, I realized I knew very little about character strengths. I had thoroughly studied the 24 strengths, the research, the existing applications, and the extensive background on the VIA classification, but a true depth around the nature of character and versatility of the practice was not there. It would have been easy for me to think I already knew it all as I arrived at the VIA Institute, but that would have been a fixed mindset, expert-minded, fateful error. With appreciation for my strengths of curiosity and hope, I set forth on a course of being open to new ideas and views. It was not until I had conversations with Neal Mayerson (Chairman of the VIA Institute) that I expanded my thinking of what is really meant by character. With these dialogues, in addition to being challenged by the critical thinking and creative thinking of the VIA Institute team, day after day – along with solitary reflection – I began to truly understand the depths of this work. It is clear that those who work with character strengths are engaged in the work of a lifetime. These strengths are the catalysts of positive speech and action that we can use in any situation for the rest of our life.

By reading this chapter you will build a foundation of character strengths knowledge on which the practices and character strengths interventions

(CSIs) offered in later chapters will rest. I outline seven core concepts that underlie the character strengths: a common language, dimensionality and context, plurality, all character strengths matter, different types of strengths, character strengths can be developed, and being and doing. While the concepts discussed are not exhaustive, they serve as a springboard for readers, and especially for practitioners working with individuals from a strength-based approach. To this end, “strengths-based practitioner tips” are offered to assist the practitioner in moving the idea into action.

As a supplement to this chapter, I recommend your reading [Appendix A](#) which offers a background on the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues and the VIA Survey measurement tool. Many practitioners will find it helpful to explain these concepts to their clients. [Snapshot 1.1.](#) lists a number of definitions of character strengths from the character strengths literature.

[2] Character strengths are positive traits/capacities that are personally fulfilling, do not diminish others, ubiquitous and valued across cultures, and aligned with numerous positive outcomes for oneself and others.

Snapshot 1.1. What Are Character Strengths?

- The wellsprings or mansions of the good life – a life well-lived ([Seligman, 2002](#)).
- Psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the great virtues (e.g., wisdom, justice, temperance) ... distinguishable routes to virtues ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)).
- Capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving ([Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004](#)).
- Positive traits that are core to our being/identity and our doing/behavior ([Niemiec, 2014a](#)).
- Basic building blocks of a flourishing life; character strengths are the pathways to well-being, described as PERMA – Positive emotions, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment ([Seligman, 2011](#)).
- The inner determinants of the full life – a life of pleasure, engagement, and meaning ([Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005](#)).
- A family of positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors ([Park & Peterson, 2010](#)).

- Aspects of personality that are morally valued...the foundation of optimal life-long development and thriving ([Park & Peterson, 2009](#)).
- A power to act well, a force that has or can have an effect, the will to act in a human way (“virtue” described in [Comte-Sponville, 2001](#)).
- In summing up what these and other researchers across cultures are saying about the character strengths, the VIA Institute on Character explains that the VIA classification is a “common language” of personality traits that:
 1. Reflect our personal identity;
 2. Produce positive outcomes for ourselves and others (e.g., well-being, positive relationships, achievement); and
 3. Contribute to the collective good.

These are also referred to as the three refractions of the VIA classification.

Common Language

The 24 character strengths, as a group, are a common language that describe what is best in human beings. This is an innovative discovery as, historically, there has never been a language of character that crosses cultures. The realities of this principle are everywhere: Coaches and counselors use this “common language” with their clients to help them identify their best qualities. Managers use the “language” to help their employees become more productive and happy at work, and teachers use it to help their students entrench themselves more deeply in learning. Families use it to create a positive culture at home and individuals use it in their self-development. Having a language readily understood by all permits each person to be “on the same page” with others when approaching a challenge, engaging in conversations, and supporting one another.

It is important to understand that this language is not a random assembly of positive words. Quite the contrary, as it was the result of a 3-year project and collaboration among scientists. Under the auspices of the VIA Institute on Character (see [Appendix H](#)), a global nonprofit organization, scientists/scholars Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman led a team of 55 well-known scientists on this multiyear project that involved an

extensive historical review and [3] analysis of the best thinking on the topic of character in philosophy, virtue ethics, moral education, psychology, and theology over the past 2,500+ years. The result was a classification of six virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) found universally in human beings across religions, cultures, nations, and belief systems. After applying various strengths criteria, 24 character strengths emerged, strongly representing pathways to each of the six virtues. This research, analysis, and review is discussed at length in the text, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). See [Snapshot 1.2.](#) for an overview of the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues. Measurement tools were also developed and went through several iterations over the years until they were finalized with good psychometrics. Two assessments were created - the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; colloquially referred to as the VIA Survey) for adults and the VIA Youth Survey for youth between 10- and 17-years-old. [Snapshot 1.3.](#) offers talking points for practitioners on the VIA Survey.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

Memorize the dimensions listed next to each character strength to expand your knowledge of the VIA language. You'll find this can also enhance the range of strengths you will notice in yourself and in your conversations with others.

A common language means communication doors open. It means practitioners have a template for thinking about and working with clients. It means clients have a new way of viewing themselves; the language serves as a guide for understanding the core of who they are. From this mutual understanding, interventions and strategies can sprout, and conversations in which client and practitioner mutually spot strengths emerge.

Snapshot 1.2. VIA Classification

- Prior to the early 2000s, there did not exist a consensual nomenclature, or common language, for understanding, studying, and discussing what is best about human beings.

- As a common language, the character strength words are readily understood by persons as young as 4-years-old (Fox Eades, 2008), and there is often an immediate resonance with these inherently good concepts.
- It is descriptive, not prescriptive. The emphasis is on classifying psychological ingredients of goodness in human beings rather than saying anything about what one “should” do.
 - It is not a taxonomy of strengths as taxonomies require an underlying deep theory explaining multiple relationships between constructs.
- It is holistic in its conceptual framework. The structure suggests cognitive strengths (wisdom), emotional strengths (courage), social & community strengths (humanity & justice), protective strengths (temperance), and spiritual strengths (transcendence).
- The classification is imperfect. Arguments can be made for strengths to be included or excluded and for virtue categories to be collapsed. Ongoing research is being conducted and it is possible that, as compelling science emerges, changes will be made.
- Within the VIA classification there is a hierarchy from the broadest construct to the narrowest (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
 - *Virtues*: Characteristics valued by philosophers throughout time.
 - *Character strengths*: Pathways to the virtues.
 - *Situational themes*: Specific habits that lead people to manifest character strengths in given situations. These are highly variable to the person and .

[4] *Note.* The distinction is made here between virtues and character strengths, that virtues are the higher order (overarching) category within which the character strengths nest. There have been well-over 10 published factor analytic studies showing the clustering of character strengths under higher order factors, although the quantity of those factors is not consistent in the literature (see McGrath, 2014, for the largest factor analysis to date). As there is not a substantial, *practical* difference guiding us in the research literature on character strengths versus virtues, I will therefore give most attention in this book to using the term “character strengths,” which have been studied empirically in positive psychology far more than virtues.

Snapshot 1.3. VIA Survey

- The only free, psychometrically valid, online test measuring the 24 character strengths. Available at <https://www.viacharacter.org>
- User receives immediate rank-order results.
- The survey offers relative comparisons (comparison within oneself) rather than absolute comparisons (comparisons with others).

- Over 5 million users have taken the survey, with increasing numbers each year, and reaching every country across the globe.
- The survey is repeatable over time (good reliability) and it accurately measures what it is supposed to measure (good validity).
- About 37 translations of the VIA Survey.
- A new suite of VIA assessments (an outgrowth of the unfolding character strengths research) have been developed to substantially improve the measurement of character strengths. These include a significant revision of the VIA Inventory of Strengths (revisions to all 24 scales), two short forms, the Signature Strengths Survey, the Virtues Survey, and a handful of other measures of character strengths (McGrath, 2017). Users will use the same link to access the free VIA Survey. As studies emerge and continued analyses are conducted, the VIA Institute responds accordingly striving to offer the best measure of character strengths from a scientific perspective.

Strength-Based Practitioner Tip

Be careful to not become too rigid in limiting your thoughts about individuals to one strength or a handful of strengths (e.g., “here comes the creative person”). Practitioners can take lessons from certain medical and psychological professionals who rely so heavily on diagnosing others that they only see “the label” in front of them and lose sight of the actual person. This insight applies to those in character science too. In first learning the VIA language, individuals will quickly identify with one strength or a handful of strengths and may even overidentify with a particular strength. I am high in curiosity and individuals can describe me as a curious person but there is much more to who I am than this one construct. What strengths do you most readily identify with? Least identify with?

As mentioned earlier, the original model of conceptualization from *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) explained the highest level of the hierarchy as virtues, followed by the 24 character strengths that make up each virtue, which are followed by situational themes that character strengths are expressed in (see [Figure 1.1](#)). As research has emerged from various studies around the world, additional levels can be considered, at least for practitioners to reflect on. [Figure 1.2](#) offers some useful distinctions that are relevant for practitioners. Note that this is not a scientific model, but a conceptual one. The relationships between each of the elements in the figure have not been deeply explored. One of the two additions is context, |5| i.e., is the character

strength expressed at work, school, home, community, or another context in general? There are many studies that are context specific, such as the myriad of studies of character strengths in the workplace context (e.g., [Harzer & Ruch, 2012](#)) and the school setting (e.g., [Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2016](#)). These studies offer the practitioner and client wisdom as to what outcomes might occur at work or school or home or community, in general, should character strengths be deployed. This is distinct from the more nuanced level of situational themes, which has not been explored as deeply. For example, in the work context, how might signature strengths be expressed differently in a situation with one's customers or clients, a situation in which work projects and stress are piling up, a situation of interacting with one's boss during an employee review, or the situation of the employee feeling sick but knowing he or she has to get a project done? The quantity of potential situational themes are myriad and appear endless in each context. Nevertheless, that is the work of exploration within the practitioner-client dialogue in regard to strengths use.

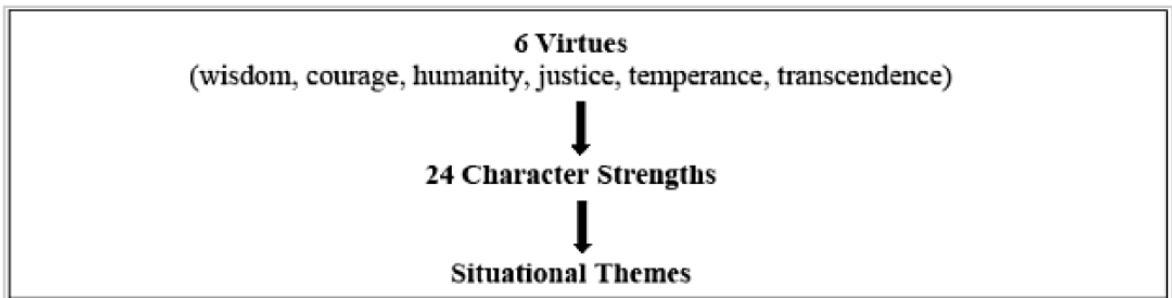


Figure 1.1. VIA Classification hierarchy in *Character Strengths and Virtues* ([2004](#)).



Figure 1.2. A practitioner-friendly expansion of the VIA Classification hierarchy, hypothesized from emerging research.

The other addition in [Figure 1.2](#) is the three virtues – caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control. [McGrath \(2015c\)](#) studied over one million individuals across four samples and multiple measures of character strengths and found support for the 24 character strengths splitting into 3 factors. This was found to be consistent with philosophical accounts of virtues as well as with the experience of leaders in the fields of moral character and character education. While it could be argued that these three virtues might replace the six original virtues in this practical conceptualization, ^[6] this possibility has not reached a scientific consensus to do so, thus, I have retained the original to provide more nuance and dialogue for practitioners. Might there be one “master strength” at an even higher level? Some researchers, practitioners, and theorists argue for this, most commonly noting perspective/social intelligence (i.e., practical wisdom), self-regulation, humility, and gratitude, however, there is not much consistency across scientists in these arguments.

The focus in this book is, of course, the character strengths level; however, readers will find interventions for the higher levels and much discussion throughout the book on the application of strengths in different contexts and specific situations therein.

Dimensionality and Context

An honest man who works hard. A woman of integrity who makes good moral decisions. A business-person with a poor reputation. In today's world, each of these people would likely be described as having good or bad character. Such conceptions represent traditional, limited views of character, popularized over the decades. They have the unfortunate consequence of reflecting all-or-none perceptions of character. The labeling of people's character as good/bad, high/low, positive/negative is pervasive across many cultures and is quickly witnessed, absorbed, and displayed in societal views of presidents, leaders, movie stars, and professional athletes.

In reality, character is more complex than this. The character of a person, whether that be Tiger Woods or J. K. Rowling, is multidimensional. Dimensionality means that character is viewed in degrees; in other words, how much of the character strength of fairness are you displaying? This is in contrast to a categorical approach used in diagnosing psychological disorders and medical disorders in which an individual either meets the criteria for bulimia, panic disorder, or Type II diabetes, or does not meet the criteria. The person either has the disorder or does not have the disorder.

The VIA classification and VIA Survey reflect this dimensional approach as character strengths are expressed in degrees - we have degrees of creativity, honesty, zest, and so on. This is aligned with the concept of "continuous traits," in that any character strength can show up across a wide continuum of more and less ([Miller, 2013](#)). Explained another way, using the example of other personality traits:

Introversion and extraversion are typically conceived and measured as dimensions (as are VIA character strengths) so asking how many introverts there are is like asking how many tall people there are. The answer depends on where we choose to make the cut along the dimension of interest. That said, psychological assessment is dimensional, and although we love the shorthand that allows us to speak about introverts or optimists or geniuses, the fact remains that there are precious few "types" in psychology, just extreme cases (Chris Peterson, personal communication, January 5, 2010).

Research using the VIA Survey shows that this view of dimensionality best describes character strengths ([McGrath, Rashid, Park, & Peterson, 2010](#)), but this does not fully exclude a categorical approach in which a person has or does not have a character strength in a particular situation, similar to [Peterson and Seligman's \(2004\)](#) criterion of “selective absence” in establishing the VIA classification. For example, a child ruthlessly beating another child on the playground may have an absence of kindness in that situation but that same child may go home and express genuine kindness to his mother (hence kindness is not completely absent from him). The same could, in general, not be said about a person with the “categorical label” of alcohol dependence; their alcoholism is present categorically within them whether they are at work, home, or with friends. Thus, while all-or-none categorical distinctions such as “you either have creativity or you do not” are less accurate globally about a person, they may be useful in particular situations. Some moral character scholars ^[7] have argued that there is a minimal threshold or certain standards by which a character trait must first qualify (i.e., categorical trait) before it can be defined as a continuous trait ([Miller, 2013](#)).

Taken further, there is a multidimensionality to each character strength; for example, kindness involves dimensions of compassion, generosity, care, nurturance, altruism, and niceness, each offering a different flavor or dimension of this strength called kindness.

“There is no algorithm for life” explains [Fowers \(2005, p. 13\)](#) in his text on virtue practice; in other words, there will always be subjectivity, unique individual factors, and especially context-based nuances. The degree of character strengths expression is based on the context one is in. Context is crucial in understanding and ultimately using character strengths with a practical wisdom ([Fowers, 2005, 2008; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006](#)).

Individuals will likely express their character strengths in different ways and to a greater or lesser extent based on the circumstance they are in. For example, the level or amount of kindness expressed to an individual's relationship partner (e.g., offering to cook dinner) differs in scope from that expressed to a homeless person on the street (e.g., giving the person \$5). Also, the individual might find it very easy to express kindness to

fellow employees yet very difficult in another work situation, such as while consulting to a client or communicating with his or her supervisor.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

Context is king. Most of life lies in the middle, and is not black or white, all or none, good or bad. Take your highest character strength. Write about the impact of context on the character strength. To do this, write about one situation in which you expressed the strength strongly; be sure to reflect on the situation and how it had an impact. Then, write about a different context in which you expressed the same strength to a much lesser degree. What about the situation – the environment, the people, the type of discussion – had the biggest impact on your expression of the strength to a lesser degree?

Character strengths don't operate in isolation from settings, rather they are shaped by the context we are in. One individual might call forth his or her kindness and curiosity when with friends, use self-regulation and gratitude when eating, draw on leadership and creativity at work, and show love and teamwork with family. The degree of character strength the person expresses with family may differ depending on the context – who they are with, where they are, what they are doing, what the expectations or demands of the situation are, past experiences in the situation, the family's culture, and so on. For example, one person's strength of love may be expressed to a different degree with a restrained mother versus a jovial father, and it will also vary based on the location with those people – is everyone at a crowded restaurant, a loud sporting event, or a movie theater? And, are there situational demands that encourage or discourage certain strengths (e.g., less humor at a funeral home, more zest when at an outdoor park)? Is there a family history of being in that situation or are there embedded expectations to behave a certain way?

Consider the expression of character strength(s) in response to each question as the context is detailed out and nuance and complexity increase:

- How much character strength do you express?
- How much curiosity do you express?
- How much curiosity do you express at work?

- How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss?
- How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss talking about personal matters?
- How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss talking about personal matters and your boss is in a positive mood?
- |8| How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss talking about personal matters and your boss in a positive mood but you are running late for a special event?

Culture: A Special Kind of Context

The VIA character strengths are frequently described as universal, or ubiquitous, across human beings regardless of nation, culture, or religious affiliation. The cultural context in which a given character strength is expressed will often offer a unique appearance of the strength. Many times, the character strength will manifest itself in a different way for a different purpose, varying according to the culture; and cultural norms and rituals will frequently reinforce strengths which help the individual to keep family and community together ([Rashid, 2012](#)). In other words, there are culture-specific nuances in how character strengths are displayed.

At VIA, I am frequently approached by individuals from different cultures who say something similar to the following: “In my culture, we have _____, and I think that’s a strength too. Why isn’t that in the VIA classification?” This important question needs proper exploration of the culture and exploration of the meaning of the word being queried. Generally speaking, there are several possible explanations for this, and although empirical evidence is needed around the nuances, the following points might serve as initial guidance and provide insight:

- The strength mentioned is a cultural expression of an existing VIA character strength. For example, the trait of *hospitality* common in Middle Eastern cultures might be noted. This is likely to be, in most instances, a variation of the character strength of kindness. In other

words, kindness can be presented in a meaningfully unique way as hospitality (however, it is still kindness being expressed).

- The strength mentioned is a compound strength. It is a combination of existing VIA character strengths. For example, *tolerance* is hypothesized as the combination of fairness, kindness, and judgment/critical thinking ([Peterson, 2006b](#); [Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)). The strength of responsibility can be viewed as a blend of perseverance and teamwork ([Peterson, 2006b](#)). The strength of *patience*, on the other hand, is viewed as a combination of perseverance, self-regulation, and judgment/critical thinking ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)), while others have emphasized fairness and forgiveness from their analyses ([Schnitker & Emmons, 2007](#)).
- The strength mentioned is a “culture-bound strength” linked to a particular culture and not ubiquitous – An important attribute of the VIA classification is the proclamation to not include any “culture bound strengths” ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)). The example of *ambition* might apply here as a major Western trait that certainly exists in other cultures like certain parts of Africa, but perhaps with less priority and value.
- The strength mentioned is a more intense form of an existing VIA character strength. In the Finnish culture there is *sisu*, a special strength of determination and resolve to overcome major adversity. Sisu is cherished in Finland and one way to think about this is as an intense form of perseverance, and as that perseverance is deployed other character strengths naturally flow in sisu, including bravery.

I’m not suggesting one or more of the reasons above fully explain and capture all the cultural nuances (i.e., fairness, kindness, and judgment won’t explain 100% of tolerance), but perhaps these explanations offer some substantial takeoff points for understanding cultural strengths and their contextual expression. In the end, the character strengths-based practitioner will ask questions and explore the nuances of the individual’s culture, rather than offering an authoritarian or ethnocentric viewpoint.

⁹ There are seemingly countless examples of important qualities that arise when the nuances of an individual’s culture are examined. [Lomas \(2016\)](#) conducted a quasisystematic search for “untranslatable” words

relating to well-being, and “character” was one of three overarching categories in his framework which he further subdivided into resources and spirituality. Examples of resources include *sumud* and *baraka*, Arabic terms translating to steadfastness and a gift of spiritual energy transferred from one person to another, respectively. Also included were the Japanese terms *ikigai* and *sunao*, translating respectively to reason for being and a positive connotation of meekness exemplifying the respect a student gives a teacher. In Lomas’ subcategory of spirituality, he offers a variety of untranslatable words such as *smriti*, the Buddhist concept for present-moment awareness. [Rashid \(2012\)](#) suggests additional words that are specific to particular cultures such as abidance, amiability, duty, piety, and savoir-faire.

Plurality

When Chris Peterson, lead scientist of the development of the VIA classification and former science director of the VIA Institute, was once asked to share his most important finding from the myriad of findings and advancements in character strengths science, he responded simply and distinctly: “Character is plural” (Peterson, personal communication, 2010). What Peterson meant is that people are not simply kind or humble, brave or hopeful, or honest. Rather, people have many character strengths, and these strengths are expressed in combinations, with each person having a unique profile of character strengths. This variation, multiplicity, and uniqueness informs the rich tapestry of an individual’s character.

There is a structure to our character – this is best described as a unique profile of strengths with varying highs and lows (i.e., individuals have higher strengths, middle strengths, and lower strengths). There are over 5.1 million possible Top 5 combinations of character strengths an individual might have, and across the full rank order of character strengths from 1 to 24, the number of potential character strengths profiles is exponentially greater than the number of people living on the planet. While this seems virtually infinite, when one considers that each person’s expression of character strengths is unique (e.g., no two people with creativity as a top strength will express the strength in an identical way),

the expression of character strengths (i.e., frequency, duration, and intensity) for any individual is truly “one-of-a-kind.” In this way, character is necessarily individualized and idiosyncratic.

Character strengths are not expressed in isolation but in combinations or constellations with one another ([Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011](#); [Niemić, 2013](#); [Peterson, 2006a](#)). It is unlikely that an individual expresses one strength alone. For example, as I sit here typing these sentences, I’m hopefully expressing some creativity and judgment/critical thinking but there are also degrees of hope, perspective, leadership, zest, and so on. When we express one character strength deliberately, many others automatically and fluidly come along for the ride. I have repeatedly observed that as situations become increasingly complex and challenging, the number of character strengths being expressed increases. For example, a parent coping with a new medical diagnosis for one of their children is in the position to act strongly with a panoply of character strengths, whereas the parent watching a movie with their child is not likely to express as many character strengths in terms of quantity or intensity.

This leads to the relational concept that character strengths are interdependent – they “inter-are” ([Niemić, 2012](#)), to build from the Buddhist concept of interbeing ([Nhat Hanh, 1993](#)). There are dynamics that occur as the strengths interact with one another, cause increases in one another, or hinder the expression of one another. It is difficult to be creative without some level of curiosity. Can you express kindness in a strong way without expressing humility and perhaps a small dose of bravery? This concept of virtue interdependence has been observed by ^[10] the great philosophers, including Plato, who observed that the four virtues of justice, wisdom, temperance, and courage are interdependent – if one virtue is missing, and especially if justice is missing, then the other three cannot be fully achieved. For the ancient Athenians, social contribution and personal flourishing were both wrapped up in the concept of virtue. A fundamental principle of their beliefs was that virtues represented a seamless whole. To be virtuous required excellence in all the virtues, not just one, an idea that has been called the reciprocity of the virtues. As the moral philosopher Susan Wolf has framed it (although not

without philosophical rebuttals) – to have one virtue is to have them all (2007). And, when scientists have examined the correlations of the 24 character strengths with one another (i.e., creating an intercorrelation matrix), they have found that all the strengths have a relationship with one another to some degree. Some strengths relate very highly to one another (e.g., zest and hope), while others relate minimally to one another (e.g., humility and love of learning).

Strength-Based Practitioner Tip

Bring together the concepts of dimensionality, context, and plurality of character. Picture the character strengths as 24 stocks side-by-side on the New York Stock Exchange with jagged lines rising and falling throughout the day. These increasing and decreasing frequency waves represent your character strength expression. In any situation, you are expressing high, low, and medium levels of each of the 24 strengths. Choose an activity that you engage in that has a high level of meaning to you (e.g., giving a 2-hour presentation, leading an important work meeting, having dinner with a friend while conversing about life problems). Rate each of the 24 strengths from 1-10 in terms of the degree to which you are expressing them at the beginning, middle, and end of the activity. The plurality of strengths expression, the nuances of degree, and the importance of context should become immediately clear to you.

All 24 Character Strengths Matter

When people take the VIA Survey and look at their results, they are sometimes pleased and proud and other times they are disappointed. Much of this relates to the level of meaning and importance they place on certain strengths and where they expected or wanted those strengths to be in their rank-order profile. In reality, it doesn't matter if the individual is high in self-regulation or kindness or curiosity. Each of the 24 character strengths is positive and can be used for the good. Each is associated with different positive outcomes in character science. Each is a capacity that can be enhanced. Therefore, each of the 24 character strengths is important.

Some character strengths have more direct links with happiness; others enable opportunities in achievement and reaching goals; and others

appear more connected to better physical health. [Table 1.1](#) maps out a handful of the positive associations for each of the 24 character strengths as originally offered in [Peterson and Seligman \(2004\)](#). Some updates can be found in other sources (e.g., [Niemić, 2013](#); [2014a](#); [Niemić & Wedding, 2014](#)).

Character strengths have important consequences. These consequences or outcomes differ according to the particular strength. For example, zest and hope are the character strengths found repeatedly to be the most strongly linked with happiness ([Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004](#); [Peterson; Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007](#); [Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2009](#); [Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006](#)), and there is some evidence that character strengths can “cause” happiness ([Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013](#)). Perseverance is a character strength especially associated with academic achievement (^[11] [Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009](#); [Park & Peterson, 2009](#)). The character strength of gratitude has been linked with high positive emotion, optimism, life satisfaction, vitality, religiousness and spirituality, and less depression and envy than less grateful individuals ([Emmons & McCullough, 2003](#)). These studies show that some character strengths matter more for specific outcomes. Likewise, some character strengths might matter more at particular periods in life. For example, in a representative sample of adults in Switzerland, strengths that promote affiliation and commitment were among those most aligned with well-being for adults in their late 20s and early 30s; strengths that support maintenance of family and work for those in their late 30s through mid-40s; and strengths that facilitate a vital involvement with the environment for those in their late 40s through late 50s ([Martinez-Marti & Ruch, 2014](#)).

Table 1.1. Character Strengths Associations Noted in [Peterson and Seligman \(2004\)](#)

Character Strength	Positive Correlates
Creativity	Openness to new experiences; cognitive flexibility
Curiosity	Positive affect; willingness to challenge stereotypes; creativity; desire for challenge in work and play; goal perseverance; adept at making complex decisions; excitement/enjoyment/attentiveness; engagement and achievement in academic settings; sense of subjective well-being

Judgment	Adept at problem solving; increased cognitive ability; more resistant to suggestion and manipulation; more effective in dealing with stress
Love of learning	More adept at navigating obstacles/challenges; autonomy; resourcefulness; increased sense of possibility; self-efficacy; healthy, productive aging; more likely to seek/accept challenges; decreased levels of stress
Perspective	Successful aging; life satisfaction; maturity; open-mindedness; even-temperedness; sociability; social intelligence
Bravery	Prosocial orientation; internal locus of control; self-efficacy; ability to delay gratification; tolerance for ambiguity/uncertainty; capacity to assess risk; capacity for reflection; involvement in socially worthy aims; capacity to create and sustain high quality connections with others
Perseverance	Achievement/goal completion; resourcefulness; self-efficacy
Honesty	Positive mood; life satisfaction; openness to new experiences; empathy; conscientiousness; capacity for self-actualization; agreeableness; emotional stability; effort/goal attainment
Zest	Autonomy; connection with others; goal attainment
Love	Positive relationships with others; healthy balance between dependency and autonomy; positive social functioning; higher self-esteem; less susceptibility to depression; capacity to cope with stress
Kindness	Overall mental and physical health; longevity
Social intelligence	Smooth social functioning; life judgment; lower levels of aggression; lower incidence of substance abuse
Teamwork (framed as citizenship)	Social trust; positive view of human nature
Fairness	Perspective; self-reflection; cooperation; leadership; altruism; prosocial behavior
Leadership	Cognitive skills/intelligence; flexibility/adaptability; emotional stability; internal locus of control; integrity; interpersonal skills; creativity/resourcefulness
Forgiveness	Prosocial behaviors; agreeableness; emotional stability; lower levels of anger, anxiety, depression, and hostility
Humility	Perspective; forgiveness; self-regulation; capacity to attain self-improvement goals
[12] Prudence	Cooperativeness; interpersonal warmth; sociability; assertiveness; positive emotion; imaginativeness; curiosity; insightfulness; physical health; longevity; optimism, internal locus of control; high achievement/performance; lower levels of anger expression
Self-regulation	High levels of academic achievement; self-esteem; self-acceptance; capacity to control anger; secure interpersonal attachments; high levels of satisfaction with social relationships; lower levels of anxiety and depression; perceived by others as more likable/trustworthy

Appreciation of beauty & excellence	Openness to experience; altruism; devotion to others/larger community; capacity for change/self-improvement
Gratitude	Positive emotion; life satisfaction; optimism; prosocial behavior; increased cardiovascular and immune functioning; longevity; lower levels of anxiety and depression; openness to experience; agreeableness; conscientiousness; less neuroticism
Hope	Achievement; positive social relationships; physical well-being; active problem-solving; lower levels of anxiety and depression; conscientiousness; diligence; ability to delay gratification
Humor	Positive mood; capacity to manage stress; creativity; intelligence; less neuroticism
Spirituality	Self-regulation; lower levels of substance abuse; positive social relationships; marital stability; forgiveness; kindness; compassion; altruism; volunteerism, philanthropy; happiness; sense of purpose; life satisfaction; capacity to cope with illness and stress

Reproduced with permission from [Niemiec, R. M. \(2014a\)](#). *Mindfulness and character strengths: A practical guide to flourishing*. Boston, MA: Hogrefe Publishing.

From what scholars, researchers, and practitioners are observing, each of the 24 character strengths appear to be present, in varying degrees, in human beings. It is easy to overlook or take for granted the smaller degrees of strengths use. In fact, you have probably used all 24 character strengths in the last couple days. For example, this morning did you brush your teeth, wash your body, get dressed, and eat breakfast? If you did any of these, you were using some level of self-regulation and prudence. These are “little” uses of two strengths that happen to consistently be two of the least endorsed character strengths across the globe ([McGrath, 2015b](#); [Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006](#)). Researchers have long been interested in drawing distinctions between “big” and “small” uses of character strengths; for example, “big C” creativity ([Simonton, 2000](#)) can be seen in Mozart’s 9th Symphony, Jean Pierre-Jeunet’s film *Amelie* (2001), and Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” painting, while “little c” creativity can be seen in a flash of insight we have about a personal struggle and in a new idea to arrange the flowers on our kitchen table. Elsewhere, I have shared several examples of “big” and “little” character strengths use found in the research literature and other sources ([Niemiec, 2014a](#)). To highlight the subtle, often unconscious uses of these character strengths, [Table 1.2](#) offers examples of how each of the 24 strengths may appear in “little”

doses. Of course, the word “little” should not be taken literally in terms of its importance as small doses of character strengths not only are the ingredients of “big” uses of character strengths but can potentially serve as important sources of meaning and positive impact in and of themselves.

[13] **Table 1.2.** Examples of “Little” Character Strengths Use

Character Strength	“Little” Example of Everyday Use
Creativity	Thinking up a new story to tell your child.
Curiosity	Asking a neighbor a couple of questions.
Judgment/Critical thinking	Reading two very different news columns to get different views.
Love of learning	Reading three online articles about the same topic.
Perspective	Offering a one-liner of advice to a clerk who seems to be having a bad day.
Bravery	Driving downtown when one is afraid of heavy traffic.
Perseverance	Deciding to respond to 10 emails in a row and completing the task.
Honesty	Admitting a mistake when one recalls a situation inaccurately.
Zest	Taking a brisk 10-minute walk on a break.
Love	Listening carefully to a colleague who had a rough day.
Kindness	Holding the elevator for someone.
Social intelligence	Asking a family member how they are feeling when they show a distressed facial expression.
Teamwork	Asking a team member for feedback on a work project.
Fairness	When giving candy to neighborhood children, making sure every child gets the same quantity.
Leadership	Organizing a gathering of friends for lunch at a restaurant.
Forgiveness	Letting go of the tension created when someone cuts you off in traffic.
Humility	Holding off on sharing positive news so the other person can share their story.
Prudence	Planning a quick breakfast for two.
Self-regulation	Brushing and flossing one’s teeth in the morning.
Appreciation of beauty & excellence	Marveling at the skill and grace of an Olympic downhill skier.

Gratitude	Offering a personal thanks to the universe upon waking up in the morning.
Hope	Feeling optimistic about an upcoming work meeting.
Humor	Smiling to a stranger on public transportation.
Spirituality	Feeling a sense of meaning during a mindfulness practice.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

“Little” character strengths use is so commonplace and so often taken for granted that it easily occurs without our awareness. Consider each of the 24 character strengths. Jot down one way you used several of your character strengths this week that was at least moderately useful to you. Make note of the outcome that each strength led to or contributed to. For example, your conscientious planning in being on time for a meeting (prudence) led to extra time for productive group discussion; your good eating habits at breakfast (self-regulation) contributed to your feeling more vital and healthy throughout your morning; your favor for a colleague (kindness) led them to smile and experience a moment of joy thus contributing to your positive relationship with them. Note that there are often a multitude of factors that can contribute to such outcomes so your noting of the outcomes will often be speculation; however, this exercise can still be useful for drawing potential links between character strengths and benefits/valued outcomes.

[14] One of the dominant theories in positive psychology is the well-being theory articulated by [Seligman \(2011\)](#) and framed in the acronym PERMA (see [Snapshot 1.1](#)), in which each letter stands for an independent, measurable pathway to a flourishing life – a full life of substantial well-being. Seligman describes the integral relationship the 24 character strengths have with flourishing as follows: “In well-being theory, these twenty-four strengths underpin all five elements, not just engagement: deploying your highest strengths leads to more positive emotion, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships” (p. 24).

[Table 1.3](#) shows a handful of the empirical connections between these five areas of flourishing (i.e., PERMA) and character strengths. In practical terms, this means that an individual can deliberately use their character strengths to engage more fully in their work, to find more meaning in life, to experience positive emotions, to improve relationships, and to

accomplish goals. One study ([Peterson et al., 2007](#)) looked specifically at the relationship between the character strengths and three PERMA elements (the pleasure/positive emotions, engagement, and meaning components of authentic happiness theory) and identified those strengths that most highly correlated with those elements.

Table 1.3. The Interconnection of PERMA and Character Strengths Research

Flourishing Element	Research Studies	Comment	Specific Correlates Found in Peterson et al. (2007)
Positive emotion	Güsewell & Ruch (2012) ; Lavy & Littman-Ovadia (2016) ; Quinlan, Swain, Cameron, & Vella-Brodrick (2014)	Study populations range from employees to students and people in the community	Humor, zest, hope, social intelligence, love
Engagement	Brdar & Kashdan, (2010) ; Madden, Green, & Grant, (2011) ; Peterson et al. (2005)	An abundance of studies link engagement, character strengths, and well-being	Zest, curiosity, hope, perseverance, perspective
Relationships (positive)	Kashdan, McKnight, Fincham, & Rose (2011) ; Veldorale-Brogan, Bradford, & Vail (2010) ; Weber & Ruch (2012a)	A critical factor here is the relational intimacy that is created by character strengths use	N/A
Meaning	Berthold & Ruch (2014) ; Littman-Ovadia & Steger (2010) ; Vella-Brodrick, Park, & Peterson (2009)	An abundance of studies link meaning, character strengths, and well-being	Spirituality, gratitude, hope, zest, curiosity
Accomplishment	Peterson & Park (2009) ; Shoshani & Slone (2012) ; Wagner & Ruch (2015)	Studies range from achievements in the military, classroom, and workplace	N/A

To drive home this concept that all 24 character strengths matter, consider the strength that typically turns up last in my character strengths profile – humor. I highly value humor and playfulness and use the strength regularly. I use it to connect with new people in conversation, to be socially appropriate, and sometimes consciously bring it forth to deal with life stress. I particularly love using playfulness with my young children.

This is where my lower strength really shines. All that said, humor does deserve to be toward the bottom of my profile because I don't turn to humor as the first-line way to connect with others in social situations, telling jokes and funny stories that entice new connections or captivate audiences. I feel awkward when it seems that a situation calls for something funny in the moment and I don't have a witty [15] remark to offer. As I reflect on my use of this strength, one of the key differences between me and someone who has humor as a signature strength is that I express it more *reactively* than *proactively*. With the exception of playing with my children, where I am very proactive with playfulness, I will typically be reactive with smiles and laughter in response to others' humor rather than initiating the jokes. Using humor and playfulness is important to help me be well-rounded, more versatile, and in some situations, happier. Could I train my humor strength and become a comedian? Sure, and there is research showing humor is malleable and can be built up with training ([McGhee, 1999](#); [Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2014a](#); [Wellenzohn, Proyer, & Ruch, 2016a](#)). But, in reality, the value for me personally to elevate this strength up to the ceiling is low. I'll leave my humor where it is, appreciated and valued, but in the basement.

Different Types of Strengths

An important pathway towards understanding character strengths is to understand what they are not. One way to explore this insight is to understand the other types of "strengths" that human beings have; namely, talents, skills, interests, resources, and values. [Appendix E](#) lists the differences between the VIA Survey and two other tests: the Gallup StrengthsFinder 2.0 and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which are two popular tests for strengths such as these. And, we can place a microscope on character strengths and examine its many subsets, such as signature strengths, phasic strengths, and lower strengths. What immediately follows are other general strengths categories and their connections with character strengths.

Talents (What We Do Naturally Well)

The study of expertise has found that developing a talent takes thousands of hours of practice, actually 10,000 hours of deliberate practice over at least 10 years ([Ericsson & Ward, 2007](#)). How could the world-class pianist, the superstar home-run hitter, or the champion chess player possibly develop their talent without intense use of the character strengths of perseverance and self-regulation? Several other strengths need to be used, such as zest where the individual exerts significant energy, passion, and enthusiasm, throwing themselves into their practice each day. The leading work in talents/abilities is the theory of multiple intelligence from Howard [Gardner \(1983\)](#), a Harvard psychologist, who proposed humans have not one intelligence but at least 7 core intelligences or talents: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, linguistic, and musical. This theory has stood strong for over three decades. The Olympic athlete actualizes his or her bodily-kinesthetic intelligence/talent, in large part, because of extensive self-regulation, perseverance, prudence, hope, and many other character strengths, whereas the person who is naturally gifted at communicating with others (i.e., an interpersonal intelligence/talent) is probably using perspective, social intelligence, fairness, and creativity. Consider the young man who used his curiosity and interest in the world to build his spatial intelligence. He asked questions about his environment, explored new neighborhoods where he lived, and soon he had mentally mapped out the city he lived in; he had used his curiosity to make the most of his talent for spatial reasoning.

Skills (What We Train Ourselves to Do)

As individuals build up a proficiency, such as learning on-the-job tasks and trades, it is likely they are being driven by the character strength of hope in that there is a wider purpose or reason that they are learning the skill. For example, the person may be trying to gain promotion in ^[16] their place of employment by learning a new computer program or attaining a certification in some skill which will help them improve their job performance. In some cases, the strength of love of learning might be a driver. Conceivably, any of the 24 character strengths can drive the building of a skill. Youth are often trained in certain skills that schools, parents, coaches, and other professions perceive the child or adolescent is

lacking, such as anger management skills or communication skills. In these instances, it is often the strength of the parent or professional that is driving the interest in skill-building, such as the character strength of love to want the best for the child or hope for the child to have a better life.

Interests (Our Passions)

Research is showing an important link between our signature strengths and our interests; namely our natural, harmonious passions in life ([Forest et al., 2012](#)). Our highest character strengths – and not only love of learning and curiosity – are intrinsically linked with our interests and life passions. We might choose hobbies and other interest areas in order to express particular character strengths. I play one-on-one sports because I can express my perseverance and zest, team sports because I can bring forth teamwork and social intelligence, and online chess so I can exercise my judgment/critical thinking and perspective strengths together. No doubt my passion for collecting Pez dispensers allows me to tap into my playfulness/humor strength. In my work, I have a strong interest in educating others about universal phenomena in human beings such as character strengths, mindfulness, savoring, and spirituality. When my interests and passions are ignited, so are my character strengths. As I teach, my zest and enthusiasm elevate, and my hope and love strengths enliven as I see the immediate impact these teachings have on people's lives and the many ways these could be used in their future and my future. The connection between my strengths of character and my strengths of interest seems inseparable. It is a synergy – a swirl of fervor and excitement.

Resources (Our External Supports)

The only category of strengths that is external to us is resources. Resources are those important supports to us such as living in a safe neighborhood, having several close friends, being part of a good learning community, and having family to rely on. Building up and maintaining our social and spiritual resources takes character, such as those strengths that help us in relationships (e.g., fairness, kindness, forgiveness) and those

that help us connect outside of ourselves (e.g., spirituality, gratitude, hope).

Values (What We Internally Hold Dear)

Values live in our heads and thus exist in our thoughts and emotions; values do not tell us about our actions or behaviors. An individual can have a value for family but that resides in their thoughts and emotions; to spend time with family and show love, kindness, and fairness to one's family takes "character" and is essentially putting one's values into action. Thus, character is not only about cognition and emotion, it is also about bringing what's in our head into our behaviors in the world. It's interesting to note that the name of the nonprofit organization behind the work of the VIA classification and VIA Survey was originally "Values in Action Institute." The name was later changed to appropriately represent what is central to this work – character – hence the name for well over a decade has been VIA Institute on Character.

[17] *The Driving Force*

Character strengths cut across each of the strength categories as a *driving force*, catalyzing or intimately connecting with the other strength domains. There's a moving story of a young man named Benny, a talented and influential presenter to businesses and youth education programs. Benny was married, had two children, a strong spiritual community, and many friends. He was a charismatic man with many talents, resources, and interests. Unfortunately, job stress, financial struggles, and peer temptation began to impact Benny and he turned to selling drugs to supplement his income. Benny noticed his resources began to dwindle as he prioritized the wrong crowd and avoided his childhood friends. His situation worsened as he sunk deep into this dangerous lifestyle. One day, when walking to his car in broad daylight, he was shot several times in the stomach and arms. Benny underwent 17 surgeries and meanwhile lost all his financial savings, could no longer hold down his job, his wife left him, and he became estranged from his children and church community. These circumstances were accompanied by deep feelings of depression which almost always means anhedonia – a loss of interest in what he was

previously interested in. As the young man recounted his story to me he also shared a stirring insight that came to him one day while lying in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling: “I had lost everything, the people in my life, my money, my job, and even use of parts of my body, but one thing I did not lose was my core strengths. These could not be taken away from me.” He was speaking about his bravery, honesty, creativity, social intelligence, and hopefulness.

In summary, talents can be squandered, resources can be quickly lost, interests wane and change, skills diminish over time, but when all seems completely lost, we still have our character strengths. When focused on, our character strengths crystallize and evolve and can integrate with these other positive qualities to contribute to the greater good.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

Neal Mayerson has offered the concept of the “power zone” to refer to the successful alignment of talents, character strengths, resources, and interests. Many people are deployed at work in areas within their competence (talent) but the work does not connect with them as human beings (character). [Mayerson \(2015\)](#) describes these people as “succeeding without fulfillment.” However, if our strengths can be aligned with what we are good at and what we are interested in, then we can succeed with fulfillment and meaning. For example, an accountant who is talented and passionate about working with numbers and configuring information on computers can find ways to apply their highest character strengths at work (e.g., perhaps they regularly use judgment/critical thinking to solve computer problems or they use their zest/energy in their work interactions on breaks and at team meetings). They are then said to be in the power zone. This would be viewed as an area of optimal functioning or flourishing. However, future research is needed to bear out the various benefits of integrating and aligning these different types of strengths.

Think of a time when you were working and in the power zone. Describe your experience in terms of your expression of each of the types of strengths. How might you create more power zone experiences in your future? What strengths would you need to get involved?

Character Strengths Subsets

Most of these concepts are explored in greater depth in later chapters and therefore the following explanations will be short. These are listed below in order from most to least researched.

[18] Signature Strengths

Those character strengths that are most central to who the person is and that best capture their uniqueness or essence. They also are likely to be more energizing to use and more natural to express than the other strengths in the person's profile.

Happiness Strengths

Across several studies in different cultures, a handful of character strengths repeatedly emerge as most correlated with life satisfaction, a type of happiness. Those strengths, starting from (typically) the strongest correlation are zest, hope, love, gratitude, and curiosity (see, for example, [Buschor, Proyer, & Ruch, 2013](#); [Park et al., 2004](#)).

Lower Strengths

Sometimes called lesser strengths or bottom strengths, these character strengths emerge in the Bottom 4-7 of an individual's profile. These are not viewed as weaknesses, rather as strengths that are either undeveloped, unrealized, not as valued as other strengths, or, at the least, less used compared to other strengths in the profile.

Phasic Strengths

The "rise to the occasion" strengths, meaning that when a given situation demands use of a particular strength that is not the person's signature strength, the individual can not only call the strength forward but do so strongly and adaptively.

Middle Strengths

Character strengths that likely support or readily enhance the display of an individual's signature strengths. Sometimes called "supportive strengths," these round out the middle of a person's character strengths profile.

Lost Strengths

These character strengths have gone dormant for a period or eroded from the individual's consciousness and use. A character strength might have been suppressed by an authority figure (e.g., parent, teacher, manager, sport coach, sibling, friend) or discouraged due to cultural or social constraints. A lost strength can conceivably be any character strength in the individual's profile.

Character Strengths Can Be Developed

I recall a middle-aged woman approaching me prior to a workshop I was about to deliver in Sydney, Australia. She approached me with excitement, eager to share her news. She told me she had taken the VIA Survey 6 years prior and discovered her character strength of self-regulation to be number 24 in her rank order. She had been unhappy about this and so worked hard to deliberately improve her self-regulation over the years, discovering it was fairly easy [19] for her to do so. When she took the VIA Survey a week prior to the workshop, she found it to be number 2. She shared several explanations for how she elevated her strength. While there can be many reasons for this shift in rank-order and what precisely accounted for her change in self-regulation, there is reason to believe she directly impacted one of her character strengths.

A commonly held traditional belief over the last century is that our character – much like an engraved mark etched in stone – is immutable and unchanging. New research in personality psychology shows that personality is more changeable than originally thought ([Blackie, Roepke, Forgeard, Jayawickreme, & Fleeson, 2014](#); [Harris, Brett, Johnson, & Deary, 2016](#); [Hudson & Fraley, 2015](#); [Roberts et al., 2017](#)), and that the change is not necessarily slow and gradual, occurring across many years, which was

another previously held assumption. In addition, the new science of character strengths ushered in by the VIA classification has shed light on this error. First, it's important to appreciate the stability of character strengths. Data from 11,635 repeat VIA Survey takers, separated by at least 6 months, found that less than 1% of repeat takers have no overlap among their Top 5 strengths from Time 1 to Time 2, and 76% of repeat takers have 3-5 strengths in common in their Top 5 from Time 1 to Time 2 ([Niemi, 2009](#)). In addition, longitudinal research examining the virtues of the VIA classification in children between the ages of 12 and 14 found character virtue stability over 3 years; these researchers noted that in addition to girls scoring higher than boys across the six virtues, there was only a slight increase in the virtues of humanity and justice over three assessment periods ([Ferragut, Blanca, & Ortiz-Tallo, 2014](#)).

We are learning that character strengths can be developed. Research in personality has found that personality traits can shift for a number of reasons, including normative changes based on our genetics and predictable changes in social role (e.g., getting married, having a child) as well as nonnormative changes. Nonnormative changes include less common but deliberately chosen changes in one's social role (e.g., joining the military) and atypical life events (e.g., going through a trauma) ([Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & ter Weel, 2008](#)). In a study of the latter, gratitude, hope, kindness, leadership, love, spirituality, and teamwork all increased in a US sample (but not a European sample) 2 months after the September 11th (2001) attack on the World Trade Center in New York City ([Peterson & Seligman, 2003](#)). Ten months later these character strengths were still elevated but to a lesser degree.

Another factor that has been shown to impact personality change is deliberate interventions focused on improving a trait. The latter is particularly exciting and applicable to the themes in this book as strength-based practitioners are especially interested in impacting changes in one part of our personality – our character strengths. Intervention studies are showing that our traits are malleable and that intentional changes can have a positive impact ([Hudson & Fraley, 2015](#); [Roberts et al., 2017](#); [Yeager, Johnson et al., 2014](#)). Personality theorist Will [Fleeson \(2001\)](#) has written widely about this with his “density distribution model” of traits,

which offers a promising resolution to the decades-old, person-situation debate: Is personality mostly the result of individual trait differences or changes in context/situational cues? According to Fleeson's model, traits are stable in that there is reliable between-person variation (people are consistently distinct from one another), and are changeable in that there is significant within-person variation (people display a variety of qualities) based on the situation ([Blackie et al., 2014](#); [Fleeson, 2001, 2004](#); [Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002](#)). This model suggests there is a wide range of possibility for people to develop their traits, especially strengths of character. In discussing virtue theory, [Bright \(2016\)](#), echoing numerous philosophers over the centuries, explains that virtues are traits that are second-nature to the person, developable, and acquired through intention and effort.

In a study of thousands of employees across 65 countries, [Michelle McQuaid and the VIA Institute on Character \(2015\)](#) tested a brief strengths intervention involving three steps of habit ^[20] change - cue, routine, reward - based on McQuaid's work connecting character strengths and positive habits ([McQuaid & Lawn, 2014](#)) and research on habit theory ([Duhigg, 2012](#)). They found that strengths (not specified as character strengths per se) were malleable to the degree that there were the following results among this large sample of employees:

- 41% improved their ability to name their own strengths.
- 60% became better at setting weekly strength-based goals.
- 41% improved their feeling of having the opportunity to do what they did best each day.
- 39% improved the likelihood of having a meaningful strengths conversation with their supervisor.
- 32% felt their organization was more committed to developing their strengths.
- Additional benefits included: greater flourishing, engagement, and feeling valued, energized, and like they were making a difference.

The development of character is not a new topic, and neither is the argument that intentional or deliberate interventions can be deployed to improve a character strength. Many centuries ago, [Aristotle \(4 BCE/2000\)](#) and [Saint Thomas Aquinas \(1265-1273/1989\)](#) emphasized that virtue

could be acquired through practice. One of the founding fathers of the US, Benjamin [Franklin \(1962\)](#), set up a personal system in which he placed his attention on improving one virtue per week while leaving the other virtues to “their ordinary chance.” Franklin tracked his progress and journaled about his experiences. In his autobiography, he described this approach as contributing greatly to his happiness and life successes. People can learn to be more curious, more grateful, more fair, or better critical thinkers. The key is to create new habits through practice and effort over time, which allows us to break free from routines. Many others have recently echoed the importance of building character strengths through practice and habit creation (see [Franklin, 2009](#); [Linley, 2008](#); [McQuaid & Lawn, 2014](#); [Niemiec, 2014a](#); [Peterson, 2006a](#)).

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

Remember what Aristotle observed and Chris Peterson echoed: “We are what we repeatedly do.” We can make a practice out of virtue and out of strengths use. Making the practice a routine is one route of strengths development. Using this observation as a personal motto (for yourself and your clients) can serve to awaken your potential.

Being and Doing

The mindfulness literature has offered an important distinction between being and doing ([Kabat-Zinn, 1990](#); [Niemiec, 2014a](#); [Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013](#)). We can go about our day as “human doers” running around from task to task, multitasking, thinking only about what’s next to do, and not present and aware for most of it. Or, we can infuse a sense of being present to our day – connecting with the food we are eating, noticing the greens of the trees as we drive down the expressway, seeing the smile on our loved one’s face, and so on. Mindfulness practice, in many ways, is about developing “our mode of being.”

The concepts of being and doing are also relevant to this character strengths work, but in a different way. The work of character strengths is clear: it is being and doing. It is “being” because character strengths work is about our identity, understanding who we are, and helping us to “be

ourselves.” It is also about “doing” because character strengths are about expressing these 24 strengths into the world, taking action, and doing the good that needs to be done. It’s about putting our values into action.

[21] There is support for both approaches in the literature: Research on signature strengths reflects our “being” – our identity – those strengths most core to us (for example, [Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005](#)). As researcher Rhett Diessner observed: “Traits are ontologically closer to the core of human being than is thinking or reasoning” ([Diessner, Davis, & Toney, 2009](#), p. 255); existence and being before thinking. At the same time, there is plenty of research linking character strengths and different types of performance – which can be viewed as our “doing” – putting our best qualities into action (for example, [Lounsbury et al., 2009](#); [Wagner & Ruch, 2015](#)).

During psychology graduate school, I spent a lot of my free time writing poetry, drinking scotch, and reading philosophy books. I’m not sure how much I retained from the latter but one thing was clear – there was a heated debate around the nature of humans as people who are essentially “being” or “becoming.” Loosely speaking, “being” refers to wholeness and completeness in the moment, while “becoming” refers to the constantly changing and evolving nature of life. In extrapolating from the complexities and depth of the philosophy, I’ll offer a simplistic vision. The character strengths describe our essential nature – who we are in the world (i.e., our being-ness). For example, someone might say “I define myself as a person who is kind, loving, humble, and curious.” At the same time, the expression of our character strengths reflects what we are “becoming” – not only our actions and how we connect but our changing nature (i.e., our doing-ness). For example, expressing love to a spouse, gratefulness to a coworker, and leadership to a staff.

In the words of the virtue scholar Andre [Comte-Sponville \(2001\)](#):

Virtue is a way of being, Aristotle explained, but an acquired and lasting way of being: it is what we are (and therefore what we can do), and what we are is what we have become...it is our way of being and acting humanly ... our power to act *well*. (p. 3)

We can view ourselves through the lens of our character strengths and see our true nature is both being strong at being ourselves (i.e., authenticity) and doing well by bringing that strength to benefit others (i.e., expressing goodness).

Chapter Summary

- The character strengths provide a common language to describe what is best in human beings.
- An optimal approach to character is a dimensional view rather than a categorical one, and, taken a step further, the character strengths themselves are multidimensional. We have more or less of a particular strength, therefore strengths are expressed in degrees, which vary by the context.
- Character strengths are plural in that each person has a unique profile of character strengths and they are expressed in combinations rather than in isolation.
- All 24 of the character strengths are within each person and associated with different positive outcomes, therefore all 24 character strengths matter.
- There are many kinds of strengths human beings have, such as talents and interests, and there are many subtypes of character strengths, such as phasic strengths and happiness strengths.
- Character strengths are somewhat stable, context-dependent characteristics; they can be developed with practice.
- Character strengths are both “being” and “doing” – they are essential for both understanding who we are and for behavioral expression/performance.

[22] Chapter 2 Signature Strengths

Research and Practice

Introduction

In the *Character Strengths and Virtues* publication ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)) that articulated the criteria, development, and framework for the VIA classification, there were over 2,000 scholarly references and 800 pages of discussion of these 24 character strengths yet not more than a few sentences addressed the topic of “signature strengths.” Nevertheless, those few words were enough as numerous studies on signature strengths have emerged since 2004, articulating the benefits and value of signature strengths. Studies have examined correlation, causation, mediators, moderators, populations, assessment, and interventions in attempting to understand this robust topic. This chapter reviews those research findings and offers practical strategies for working with signature strengths.

Why Are Signature Strengths Important?

The case can quickly be made for the significance of signature strengths from not only the science that has emerged over the last couple decades but also from the perspective of the problem of chronic disengagement across organizations, relationships, and individuals. Here’s a snapshot of both.

- *Disengagement of individuals – A lack of flourishing.* Research has found that less than 25% of the US population is flourishing ([Keyes, 2003](#)), and similar results are found in other countries such as New Zealand, ([Hone, Jarden, Duncan, & Schofield, 2015](#)). This means that

people are not functioning with a high level of well-being, socially and psychologically.

- *Support for strengths.* One study found that those people who use their strengths a lot are 18 times more likely to be flourishing than those who do not use their strengths ([Hone et al., 2015](#)). Each of the core elements of flourishing – positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and achievement ([Seligman, 2011](#)) – are significantly linked with character strengths (see [Table 1.1](#) in [Chapter 1](#)).
- *Disengagement of individuals – A general unawareness of strengths.* Survey research has shown that two-thirds of people are unaware of their strengths ([Linley, 2008](#)). Thus, if people don't know who they are and what they're capable of, how can they be expected to perform well on the job or in life?
 - *Support for strengths.* A representative sample of New Zealand workers found that those who were highly aware of their strengths were nine times more likely to be flourishing than those who were unaware ([Hone et al., 2015](#)). Character strengths have been connected with engagement in a number of studies (e.g., [Peterson et al., 2007](#)).
- ^[23] *Disengagement of couples.* Relationships are suffering, with high divorce rates for *new* marriages.
 - *Support for strengths.* Research is mounting not only for the value of appreciation but, in particular, for strengths appreciation. In studies of couples, those who report that their partner both recognizes and appreciates their signature strengths have higher relationship satisfaction, are more committed to the relationship, and report their basic needs are getting met ([Kashdan et al., 2017](#)). Several studies draw connections between character strengths and relationship health (e.g., [Lavy, Littman-Ovadia, & Bareli, 2014a, 2014b](#)).
- *Disengagement of employees.* Worker disengagement rates are above 70% according to the Gallup Organization, and there is a misalignment between character strengths required of individuals and character strengths that come naturally to them ([Money, Hillenbrand, & Camara, 2008](#)).

- *Support for strengths.* Signature strengths use is connected with work engagement, productivity, work satisfaction, and work-as-a-calling (e.g., [Harzer & Ruch, 2015, 2016](#); [Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2016](#); [Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010](#)). A 3-year analysis of employee engagement found that signature strengths were one of the most crucial drivers ([Crabb, 2011](#)). The Gallup Organization has found that employees who have the opportunity to use their strengths are six times more likely to be engaged in their work ([Sorenson, 2014](#)).

Disengagement appears to be remarkably high across the many domains of our life. This calls for new action. Signature strengths are emerging across domains as not only an important source of engagement but also as a central pathway.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

Examine the main domains of your life: work, school, social and intimate relationships, family relationships, community, spirituality. In which domain are you most engaged, i.e., highly connected, interested, and in flow with what you are doing? Which domain are you least engaged in? How might you learn from your domain of high engagement? What does your high engagement domain have to teach you about your disengaged domain? What character strengths, especially signature strengths, might you bring forth to become more engaged across domains?

Core Concepts

Signature strengths are one of the most researched and practiced concepts in positive psychology. Working with signature strengths has many of the hallmarks of success:

- It's very easy to do: Practitioners don't have to change their style or approach.
- Clients find immediate benefit.
- It has scientific support.
- It is novel and unique for clients who are accustomed to focusing on what is wrong within themselves.

Signature strengths have been discussed in academic and consumer forums. The original publication on the VIA classification, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, discusses signature strengths as those positive, personal traits that an individual owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises ^[24] ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)). Thus, signature strengths are linked with the person's identity and conception of who they are, and they cannot be considered apart from context.

[Seligman \(2002\)](#) offered several ways to think about signature strengths, suggesting that a signature strength would meet most, if not all, of these criteria:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity (“This is the real me”).
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it.
- A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced.
- A sense of yearning to find new ways to use it.
- A feeling of inevitability in using the strength (“Try and stop me”).
- Invigoration rather than exhaustion after using the strength.
- Creation and pursuit of personal projects that revolve around it.
- Joy, zest, enthusiasm, even ecstasy while using it.

The convention among positive psychology researchers has been to target the individual's Top 5 strengths in their profile as their signature strengths. Initial research suggests that individuals have between three and seven signature strengths ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)). The VIA Institute on Character investigated the construct further and conducted four studies examining the initial concept as discussed in the two preceding texts, attempting to understand the quantity of signature strengths within individuals ([Mayerson, 2013](#)). Different tactics were deployed along with varying levels of strictness in the criteria used to determine a signature strength. Signature strengths were found to have significantly higher VIA scores than nonsignature strengths, hence highlighting signature strengths as a distinct category of strengths. A few years later, Robert McGrath conducted three studies to develop and validate the Signature Strengths Survey (SSS). The first study examined mean differences between strengths on VIA Survey data from nearly a half-million people, and the second study involved administering a preliminary SSS and then

interviewing subjects on their patterns of responding. When asked to provide justification for their signature strength choices, the most common response was that the strength is “part of who I am.” These studies informed a final iteration of the SSS which was administered (third study) to 4,131 people and led to the identification of 5.5 strengths as signature, on average (more details on these studies can be found in the technical manual by [McGrath, 2017](#)). These results support the construct of signature strengths and indicate that the average number of signature strengths that people think of themselves as having is consistent with what positive psychology researchers originally proposed, although the criteria are more stringent than originally hypothesized. The criterion for determining a signature strength that seems to matter most, which has been corroborated by other research, is whether or not the strength is viewed as core or essential to who the person is.

Strength-Based Practitioner Tip

If you are trying to determine whether or not a client’s strength is “signature” and you only have time to ask one question, make it: “Is this strength essential to who you are?” Or, more broadly, “Which of these highest strengths is most core to who you are and defines you as a person?” In other words, if you want to get to the heart of the matter, ask about identity.

Another tactic to thinking about signature strengths that drives home their central importance in our life is to engage in a mental subtraction exercise. Consider what life would be like if you did not have one of your signature strengths. Can you imagine how your life would be if you could not express your strength of creativity? What if the strength of curiosity was just plucked out of you? In leading this as an experiential exercise for thousands of people, I’ve found that many ^[25] respond to it with an “ah-ha” reaction, and it’s not uncommon for me to hear gasps of shock and horror at the thought of their not having their core strength. Here are a few typical responses:

- “It would be as if I was suffocating without my creativity. Like I was gasping for breath.”
- “Prudence and caution are who I am. It’s what I do. How could you take that from me?”

- “To not have my curiosity in life would be like I’m barely alive.”
- “Without my social intelligence, I don’t know how I’d interact with people.”

Strengths are portrayed and exhibited all around us, especially in the media. My colleague, Danny Wedding, and I wrote about over 1,500 movie examples that exhibit each of the character strengths of the VIA classification ([Niemiec & Wedding, 2014](#)). In [Appendix G](#), there is a short list of character strengths concepts and corresponding movie articles of a scholarly nature. In movies, we learn about the signature strengths of each character, and often we see our own signature strengths reflected back to us. One can also turn to books, television shows, websites, blogs, and social networking outlets and notice the signature strengths of the individual(s) being depicted or doing the creating.

When reading a book, ask yourself: What are the signature strengths of the narrator and of the supporting characters? What are the signature strengths of the celebrity on television? The leaders in government or business? Wherever we look, we can spot strengths and name the signature strengths of individuals or characters. This kind of approach has received increasing attention in schools (e.g., [White & Waters, 2014](#)). Consider an Academy Award winner for Best Motion Picture, *The King’s Speech* (2010). This film provides the perfect metaphor for what signature strengths are really about – being authentic and expressing our true selves. In the film, King George VI of Great Britain (Colin Firth) suffers from a severe stuttering disorder and is unable to speak clearly to help inform and assuage a panicked public at the brink of World War II. The king begins to work with a speech coach, Lionel (Geoffrey Rush), who uses a large degree of creativity, curiosity, kindness, and perspective to help the king find his voice. The “finding of one’s voice” is a metaphor for the expression of our signature strengths. Lionel encourages the king to “have faith in your own voice,” and one poignant interaction in which the king moves beyond stuttering and expresses himself clearly goes as follows:

King: Listen to me!
 Lionel: Listen to you? By what right?
 King: By divine right if you must, I am your king.
 Lionel:

No you're not, you told me so yourself. You didn't want it. Why should I waste my time listening?

King: Because I have a right to be heard. I have a voice! ...[pause]

Lionel: Yes, you do ... You have such perseverance, Bertie, you're the bravest man I know.

It is in this conversation when the king finds his voice (his core, authentic self); it is clear, forceful, and genuine. Lionel uses a variety of approaches in the role of "coach" – paradoxical intervention, confrontation, resistance, advisor, and supporter – helping the king realize his true self matters and that he can express it. In the preceding interaction, the viewer is also made aware of Lionel's perceptiveness in spotting and valuing two of the king's signature strengths – bravery and perseverance.

We can notice the signature strengths of individuals in virtually any situation. Consider the following obituary:

Sadly, Mary herself suffered much tragedy throughout her own life, outwardly as well as inwardly. Her character strengths were determination and the will to surpass adversity. Most often her compassion for others outweighed her own illness. ([Pocono Record, 2012](#)).

[26] These three sentences from this obituary inform us that Mary was a woman with signature strengths of perseverance and kindness – she was someone who overcame internal and external obstacles and kept going as well as emanated a sense of care for others along the way.

[Snapshot 2.1](#) offers a summary of important points to remember regarding our signature strengths.

Snapshot 2.1. Signature Strengths

- Usually the highest strengths in a character strengths profile.
- An important part of identity, especially when the expression is authentic and natural.
- Part of the human psyche in that signature strengths are expressed through thoughts, emotions, volition, and behavior.
- Naturally emerge in communications, verbally, nonverbally, and written.
- Exhibited across media such as in books, movies, websites, blogs, social networking venues.
- Expressed across each of the domains of life.

Signature Strengths Research

Signature Strengths in New Ways

In what is currently the most cited intervention study in positive psychology, [Seligman et al. \(2005\)](#) conducted a double-blind, random assignment, placebo-controlled study – a gold standard study in terms of good research. The study consisted of 577 adults who were randomly assigned to one of five intervention groups or a placebo group. Here are the groups and the main intervention task for each:

- *Gratitude visit.* Write and deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who has been especially kind to you but who you have not properly thanked.
- *Three good things.* Write down 3 things that went well and the causal explanation each night.
- *You at your best.* Write about a time when you were at your best and reflect on the strengths displayed in the story; review this story and the strengths once per day.
- *Using signature strengths in a new way.* Take the VIA Survey, review the Top 5 strengths, and use one of these Top 5 strengths in a new and different way each day.
- *Identifying strengths.* Take the VIA Survey, review the Top 5 strengths, and use them more during the week.
- *Placebo.* Write about an early memory each night.

While there were initial benefits for each intervention group, the lasting benefits were found in two groups: the “three good things” group (also referred to as “counting blessings” or “practicing gratitude”) and the “using signature strengths in a new way” group. These two groups had significant increases in happiness and decreases in depression for effects lasting up to 6 months. Not only are the effects striking, but it is similarly impressive to note that the interventions were delivered online without the

live counsel of a practitioner offering support or guidance. If these interventions were paintings, they would be considered “minimalists.”

The interventions lasted only 1 week; however, [Seligman and colleagues \(2005\)](#) found that those with the stronger outcomes decided to continue the intervention on their own for a period ^[27] of time. This speaks to how intrinsically rewarding working with signature strengths can be as well as the fact that it takes time and persistence to create new habits.

The intervention of using signature strengths in new ways compared to control groups and other interventions has been replicated or partially replicated in several settings, populations, and cultures. The long-term benefits (6 months) of signature strengths use was replicated in a European sample ([Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013](#)), and benefits have been found in other countries, including Canada ([Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012](#)), Australia ([Mitchell, Stanimirovic, Klein, & Vella-Brodrick, 2009](#)), the UK ([Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010](#)), and China ([Duan & Bu, 2017](#); [Duan, Ho, Tang, Li, & Zhang, 2013](#)). Another study found three interventions and placebo to have positive effects (e.g., significant elevations in happiness) with the signature strengths intervention improving the most by a substantial margin and the placebo group understandably improving the least after 6 months. The study, however, suffered from a high dropout rate in which less than a quarter of the subjects that started the study completed it ([Woodworth, O'Brien-Malone, Diamond, & Schüz, 2017](#)).

Populations ranging from youth to older adults have targeted signature strengths with success. For example, youth who worked on their signature strengths along with meaningful goal-setting experienced increases in engagement and hope ([Madden et al., 2011](#)). In a population of older adults (aged 50–79 years), the group assigned to work on using a signature strength in a new way was the most effective intervention overall as it led to *both* increases in happiness and decreases in depression. Other interventions were partially effective relative to placebo; for example, conducting a gratitude visit and recounting three good things benefited happiness levels while recounting three funny things reduced depression levels ([Proyer, Gander, et al., 2014a](#)).

Another randomly controlled study assigned individuals to (1) a group instructed to use two signature strengths, (2) a group instructed to use one signature strength and one bottom strength, or (3) a control group. Results revealed significant gains in satisfaction with life for both treatment groups compared to the control group, but there were no differences between the two treatment groups ([Rust, Diessner, & Reade, 2009](#)). Both treatment groups wrote about an event or occurrence in the past when they successfully used their character strength. Each week, they also wrote about a plan or situation for the coming week in which they could apply the strength. Similarly, in a nonrandomized study, [Rashid \(2004\)](#) found groups of students who worked on signature strengths or nonsignature strengths to experience significant increases in well-being compared to a control group. A study with law students found that the use of one's top strengths led to a decreased likelihood of depression and stress and an increase in satisfaction in the students ([Peterson & Peterson, 2008](#)). Another randomized trial found that an intervention group that received strengths work, gratitude, kindness, and other exercises had improved balance of positive to negative affect over time compared with a control group ([Drozd, Mork, Nielsen, Raeder, & Bjørkli, 2014](#)). In a longitudinal study, strengths use in general (not VIA character strengths) was found to be an important predictor of well-being and led to less stress and increased positive affect, vitality, and self-esteem at 3-month and 6-month follow-up ([Wood, Linley, Matlby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011](#)).

Strength-Based Practitioner Tip

After your client takes the VIA Survey, talk with your client about their signature strengths. Be sure to have them “confirm” the signature strengths they choose to focus on. While the VIA Survey does well at identifying top strengths in individuals, it should not be considered the “final answer” for clients. Rather, it is the client who offers the confirmation as to whether their highest strengths are indeed essential and authentic to who they are, energizing and natural to use, and expressed widely across settings. A popular practitioner suggestion is to

[28] remind clients that “the results don't trump life” – a client who perceives they are living a life of deep kindness and perseverance should have those observations given special attention even if they do not show up high on the VIA Survey.

Signature Strengths Across Contexts

Signature strengths interventions have been successfully applied in a variety of psychological settings with positive effects; for example, an inpatient unit for people with depression/suicidality ([Huffman et al., 2014](#)), a neuropsychology unit for people with traumatic brain injury ([Andrewes, Walker, & O'Neill, 2014](#)), an outpatient setting for adults with psychosis ([Riches, Schrank, Rashid, & Slade, 2016](#)), a Veterans Administration rehabilitation, where veterans carried around a prompt to remind them to use their signature strengths ([Kobau et al., 2011](#)), and in a career counseling context ([Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbul, & Benjamin, 2014](#)). In the latter study, strengths-based career counseling was compared with conventional career counseling and both client groups had an increase in daily strengths use but only the former had enhanced self-esteem. At 3-month follow-up, the strengths-based career counseling group had a higher rate of employment (81%) than the conventional career counseling group (60%).

Positive psychotherapy is an approach to therapy that focuses on building positive emotions, strengths, and meaning in clients' lives in order to promote happiness. Preliminary trials have found it to be superior to treatment as usual for depression ([Rashid & Anjum, 2008](#); [Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006](#)). Tayyab Rashid has noted that well over 50% of positive psychotherapy revolves around character strengths use and practice (Rashid, personal communication, 2011). Sessions focus on general character strength interventions (e.g., two sessions on identifying and cultivating signature strengths; two sessions on "family tree of strengths" and "gift of time" to promote meaning), specific strengths (e.g., a session on forgiveness; a session on gratitude), and promoting a core positive psychology theme (e.g., love to cultivate engagement; hope to cultivate pleasure).

Successful outcomes associated with a focus on strengths (not character strengths) have also been found in [Minhas \(2010\)](#) and [Cox \(2006\)](#); the latter finding that a strength-based approach (when also endorsed and practiced by the therapist) led to a reduction in scores for various social and emotional problem behaviors.

Character strengths interventions are frequently integrated into broader programs that focus on building well-being, resilience, achievement, and other areas within the positive psychology field. Most often, the approach taken in these programs is to help participants identify their signature strengths and then take action in some way with these strengths. These programs have spanned a number of settings including education, business, and the military. Although the results of these programmatic initiatives are very encouraging and, in some cases, groundbreaking and highly influential, researchers usually do not separate out the contribution made by signature strengths and other character strengths components from the other positive psychology interventions. Despite signature strengths often being described as the “core” of many of these programs, questions remain such as: What is the most crucial element in these comprehensive programs? How much value-add do the character strengths components bring to these programs?

What follows are common domains where character strengths work, especially signature strengths work, is being applied. Research findings are offered here and peppered throughout the book.

|29| **Business**

The organizational/workplace context has been a particularly robust domain of study for the science of character (see [Mayerson, 2015](#)). Claudia Harzer and Willibald Ruch have conducted a number of studies in the workplace. They found that workers who used four or more of their signature strengths at work had more positive work experiences and work-as-a-calling than those who used less than four strengths ([Harzer & Ruch, 2012](#)) and that signature strengths are connected with positive work experiences, irrespective of which strengths are highest ([Harzer & Ruch, 2013](#)). In other studies, they found character strengths were connected with job performance ([Harzer & Ruch, 2014](#)) and with coping with stress ([Harzer & Ruch, 2015](#)). Finally, in an intervention study, they discovered that the alignment of employees’ signature strengths with their job tasks led to increases in work-as-a-calling ([Harzer & Ruch, 2016](#)).

A study of supervisory support found that employees who received supervisor support (but not colleague support) increased their strengths use the following day ([Lavy, Littman-Ovadia, & Boiman-Meshita, 2016](#)). These same researchers published another study in the workplace finding that the use of all kinds of strengths (signature strengths, happiness strengths, lower strengths) were associated with positive outcomes. For example, signature strengths were the biggest contributor to work performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and lower counterproductive work behavior; happiness strengths were the biggest contributor to work meaningfulness, engagement, and job satisfaction ([Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, & Boiman-Meshita, 2016](#)). A qualitative study examined the use of character strengths by women in the workplace and found that in all cases strengths led to a virtuous circle in which the strengths use helped them overcome obstacles that had impeded strengths use ([Elston & Boniwell, 2011](#)). All subjects derived unique value from using character strengths at work. Another study of workers found that using signature strengths in new ways combined with a 10-minute structured debriefing was beneficial for increasing strengths use and the number of goals set compared to a group that only used signature strengths in new ways ([Butina, 2016](#)).

Organizations are recommended to find ways to help employees use their strengths more often at work as strengths use in general (not using the VIA Survey) has been linked with employee levels of self-efficacy and proactive behavior ([van Woerkom, Oerlemans, & Bakker, 2016](#)), positive affect and psychological capital ([Meyers & van Woerkom, 2016](#)), and reduced absenteeism ([van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016](#)). The climate of an organization can also support employees to use their strengths. In a study of 442 employees across 39 departments in eight organizations, a strengths-based psychological climate was linked with positive affect and work performance ([van Woerkom & Meyers, 2014](#)). The Gallup Organization has focused its research on strengths in the workplace and found that the two most important predictors of employee retention and satisfaction are: (1) reporting the use of top strengths at work and (2) reporting that an immediate supervisor recognizes one's top strengths. Sadly, Gallup has found that only about 20% of employees think their supervisors know their strengths and about a third of employees say they

have an opportunity to do what they do best every day. When an organization's leadership does not focus on the individuals' strengths, the chances of an employee being engaged are 9%; however, when the leadership focuses on the employees' strengths, the odds increase to 73% (for examples and details, see [Asplund et al., 2007](#); [Clifton & Harter, 2003](#); [Hodges & Clifton, 2004](#)).

Education

Character strengths have not only been found to be an important source of well-being among students ([Gillham et al., 2011](#)), they have also been a major focus in positive education programs around the globe. In a seminal article arguing for character strengths integration in education, [Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, and Mayerson \(2015\)](#) outline why traditional character education approaches in the US and other countries should shift from monolithic and one-size-fits-all approaches (the school authority chooses a handful of strengths for all students to build up) to individualized approaches that work with students' unique signature strengths.

While character strengths play an important role for creating positive well-being ([Oppenheimer, Fialkov, Ecker, & Portnoy, 2014](#)) and positive classroom outcomes ([Weber & Ruch, 2012b](#); [Weber et al., 2016](#)), character strengths have been woven into entire schools, involving staff, teachers, students, and program leaders. Some programs deploy character strengths as the sole focus (see [Fox Eades, 2008](#); [Proctor & Fox Eades 2011](#)), as well as a major focus (see [Yeager, Fisher, & Shearon, 2011](#)). Strengths Gym, created by Carmel Proctor and Jennifer Fox Eades, is an example of a character strengths-based positive psychology intervention program in which children and adolescents participate in numerous activities involving character strengths applied directly to the students and integrated into school curriculum. One study evaluated the impact of Strengths Gym on adolescents and found that adolescents who participated in the strengths exercises had significantly higher life satisfaction than those adolescents who did not participate ([Proctor et al., 2011](#)). In a Chinese educational context, a strengths training intervention (involving noticing when, where, and how top strengths are used and

writing about this) was found to be effective in boosting life satisfaction in the short- and long-run. The researchers ruled out a placebo effect by having some participants informed of the purpose of the study and some not, and knowing/not knowing the purpose had no long-term effect on life satisfaction ([Duan et al., 2013](#)).

Positive education programs have also been found to increase academic scores, social skills, and students' enjoyment and engagement in school as well as improve character strengths such as curiosity, love of learning, and creativity ([Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009](#)). Preliminary results from a 3-year follow-up of a positive education program ([Gillham, 2011](#)) showed positive education had an impact on engagement and achievement, but not subjective well-being. Extensive positive education programs have been implemented at a number of schools, including Geelong Grammar School and St. Peter's College, both prestigious private schools in Australia, and have resulted in major volumes outlining the trainings, creative use of character strengths, and other methods of implementing positive psychology (see [Norrish, 2015](#), and [White & Murray, 2015](#), respectively). The work on character strengths is typically viewed as the backbone of this course-work, usually taught in the first session, and involves identifying signature strengths, writing narratives about times at one's best, interviewing family members about strengths, learning how to use strengths to overcome challenges, developing lower strengths, and identifying teachers and other leaders on campus whom students believe are paragons of particular strengths. Character strengths work is further embedded into the curriculum and activities throughout the school, from identifying strengths in classic literature (e.g., *Death of a Salesman*, *Macbeth*, and *Metamorphosis*) to infusing strengths in athletics. [White and Waters \(2014\)](#) describe the approach at St. Peter's College and detail examples of five initiatives in which character strengths were woven throughout the areas of sport, student leadership, counseling, and English curriculum.

Exciting work is on the horizon in the public-school domain as well. The VIA Institute has partnered with the Mayerson Academy, which has begun integrating character strengths programming into over 40 public schools ([Bates-Krakoff, McGrath, Graves, & Ochs, 2016](#)), in the Cincinnati, Ohio

region, involving student and teacher trainings, gamified learning online through Happify, and teacher coaching. Evaluation of this programming, referred to as Thriving Learning Communities shows promising early results, such as increases in social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies, self-awareness around strengths, capacity to enjoy ^[31] school, and lower absentee and disciplinary rates and higher GPAs (Jillian Darwish, personal conversation, September 26, 2016).

Military

Character strengths have been deliberately assessed and/or used in numerous military forces across the globe, including Norway, Sweden, Argentina, Australia, and India, to name a few (see [Banth & Singh, 2011](#); [Consentino & Castro, 2012](#); [Gayton & Kehoe, 2015](#); [Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, & Peterson, 2006](#)). The US Army is an example of an organization that has systematically embedded character strengths as a core component of their positive psychology and resilience training, called the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program ([Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011](#); [Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011](#)). Character strengths are among the core areas assessed in the Global Assessment Tool implemented in this program ([Peterson, Park, & Castro, 2011](#); [Vie, Scheier, Lester, & Seligman, 2016](#)). One of the core modules of the training program includes the identification of signature strengths, the practice of identifying strengths in others, and the practice of using both individual and team strengths to overcome a challenge or reach a goal. After taking the VIA Survey, the soldiers are asked to explore the following questions ([Reivich et al., 2011](#)):

- What did you learn about yourself?
- Which strengths have you developed through your service in the military?
- How do your strengths contribute to your completing a mission and reaching your goals?
- How are you using your strengths to build strong relationships?
- What are the shadow sides of your strengths, and how can you minimize these?

initially lower in strengths levels tended to benefit more from working on higher strengths ([Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015](#)).

Currently, it can be concluded from the research that working on any strength is beneficial as the individual is taking positive action to improve themselves. Although it has not been closely studied, it is reasonable to believe that working on signature strengths will be superior to working on lower strengths in the *long-run* as top strengths are more self-reinforcing and energizing and lead the individual to feel more authentic than attempting to build up a strength that might lead to energy depletion or might not be as internally motivating.

[34] ***Why and How Do Signature Strengths Work?***

A natural next question after determining the success of a practice is to attain a better understanding of the reasons why the practice was successful. In practical terms, it is probably obvious to most of us that if a person is unable to express their signature strengths they will soon feel a sense of emptiness (e.g., [Escandón, Martínez, & Flaskerud, 2016](#)), but it's important to understand this question from a scientific perspective as well. What are the mechanisms of action that help to explain the success of the intervention? Alex Linley and his team took on such an investigation and found initial evidence to support a number of reasons why using signature strengths is connected with well-being ([Linley et al., 2010](#)). They found that signature strengths use relates to progress on one's goals and with satisfying one's basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, i.e., the core elements of self-determination theory ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). This makes good, practical sense: Signature strengths come naturally to us; they are an expression of who we are. Therefore, when we allow that core part of ourselves to be expressed, we are meeting basic human needs that have to do with making connections in our relationships and accomplishing as much as we can in this life. Success with our goals naturally flows from this. As a result, we experience greater happiness. This explanation, however, is only one part of the explanation.

In another study, the use of signature strengths elevates individuals' "harmonious passion," which refers to individuals doing activities that are

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In what is the longest-running positive psychology intervention study, [Proyer, Wellenzohn, et al. \(2014\)](#) examined the connection between various positive interventions (e.g., signature strengths in new ways, three good things) and the type of intervention fit with the person in predicting happiness/depression. They wanted to examine under what conditions signature strengths and other positive interventions work best in the long run. Building on the person-activity fit concept of [Lyubomirsky and Layous \(2013\)](#), Proyer and colleagues found the following four elements to be particularly important as predictors of happiness and/or depression 3.5 years after the intervention:

- *Continued practice.* Voluntary continuation of practice above and beyond the designated time frame (as found serendipitously in [Seligman et al., 2005](#)). Continued practice helps to facilitate the development of a habit ([Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005](#)).
- *Effort.* How people work with the intervention, such as completing more or less of the instructed time.
- *Preference.* Whether or not people like or perceive benefit from the intervention (an important variable as found in a study of preferences by [Schueller, 2010](#)).
- *Early reactivity.* How people react to the intervention. Do they show a quick response, such as an immediate increase in positive emotions?

They found that the combination of these four indicators was most successful in predicting happiness and depression in the long-run. They explained that “the way people *think* about positive psychology interventions, the way they *work* with them, and the way they *react* to them play a role in predicting well-being at a later point in time” ([Proyer, Wellenzohn, et al., 2014](#), p. 14). It is these elements of the fit between the person and intervention that contribute to the long-term benefits.

As is probably clear, there are a number of factors that explain the link between character strengths and well-being. Each of these gives us further explanations why strengths use, especially signature strengths use, is a successful intervention. As the mechanisms become more ^[36] clearly understood, it is likely the findings will be aligned with the natural tendency that human beings have to develop their core capacities, use their natural potentials, and become all they can be ([Buckingham &](#)

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As was true for this student, most of us are accustomed to recognizing and even labeling our mistakes, problems, stressors, and bad qualities, and far less accomplished at doing the same for our positive qualities. This is where the practice of strengths-spotting in oneself can make a big difference. Strengths-spotting requires us to be on the lookout for character strengths. When we recognize a strength, we can give it a clear label.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

The labeling of problems can bring forth a lot of good. For example, proper diagnosis (label) can lead to treatment, recovery, and healing. Labeling can also motivate people to take action and make real change in their life. At the same time, I've seen many people get carried away with negative labeling. They rely so much on their label that they become it; the label becomes their identity. They don't know where the label ends and where they, the human being, begins. Positive labeling, on the other hand, is particularly motivating and energizing. It catalyzes mini and large shifts in how people perceive themselves. It sets people off on a new direction, empowered toward horizons of hope. Can we go overboard with positive labeling? I think so. Everything has its limits. The main caution is to not be blind to what's wrong, and to not avoid problems and negative labels. Quite the contrary, positive labels can help us face problems (e.g., using bravery) and notice what's wrong along with what's strong.

Know thyself. This mantra is the starting point for character strengths work. One way to build self-knowledge is by learning to name character strengths as they occur in the moment. This takes practice yet can be pursued by engaging in a variety of strengths-spotting exercises, such as those found in the following sections.

Self-Assessment and Self-Nomination

There are many ways to practice spotting strengths in oneself. The most common and obvious starting point is to take the VIA Survey to measure the 24 strengths. Looking at those character strengths toward the top of your results page is a way to begin generating greater awareness of strengths in yourself. If a person does not have access to the Internet, then the individual can examine a list of the 24 character strengths with definitions (such as the VIA classification list on the inside cover of this

The Power of Narrative

And then there are stories. Daniel McAdams is a researcher who has spent decades studying stories and life narratives as they relate to our personalities. He concludes that we are multifaceted by nature and that there are three levels by which we might consider our personality traits. In addition to a global view of ourselves and a contextual view of ourselves, there is a third level called the integrative life story view that includes internal and evolving stories of ourselves that reflect how we understand ourselves, others, and the world around us ([McAdams et al., 2004](#)). These stories are ripe with potential for spotting character strengths.

The good news is our lives are filled with stories: big stories of our wedding day, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one; smaller stories such as sending a difficult e-mail, playing in a softball game, and watching our child play the piano; and microstories of our drive to work this morning, about paying the checkout clerk at the grocery store, and our bedtime routine. Then, there are not only these stories from the past that reside in our minds but also stories of the future – how we might propose to our significant other, how we might react upon receiving an award, or the story of who will be at our funeral. All of these stories are alive within us waiting to be said aloud or at least to be reminisced or fantasized about. Some of these are defining moments in our lives that catalyze a change or that significantly contribute to our identity. All of these types of stories have something in common – character strengths comprise part of the ingredients.

[49] Character strengths are present in every story, and although they are not necessarily present in optimal doses, they are there for the spotting. This means that stories can be reflected upon for the strengths. We can ask ourselves and our clients to tell a story and then consider: What character strengths can you spot in the story? What character strengths were being used?

Consider the two stories below in which the exact same thing happens in each.

I woke up this morning, had breakfast, and got dressed. As I drove to work, I encountered a lot of bad traffic and the drivers on the road seemed angry and

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