Character Strengths

CHAPTER FOUR



CHARACTER STRENGTHS

Building on our Character Strengths is an enjoyable route to success. Knowing each other's strengths enables us to work with, rather than against each other.

Character Strength

Building on our strengths is more productive than focusing on our short-comings and inabilities. In 1998 Martin Seligman with a number of other psychologists had become quite disillusioned by the often negative labelling and diagnosis of people with 'mind' problems.

GPs and psychiatrists consult a

thick book called the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Illness 5) which lists all the possible dysfunctional symptoms a person can have. Like any book of illnesses, once you start focusing on certain symptoms you suddenly feel that you have a variety of these yourself.

Of course it is important to know what is going on when we are unable to cope, and sometimes targeted medication can lighten the burden of psychological problems. But we also know that many drugs have debilitating side effects.

Professor Seligman and his colleagues felt that too often a person's strengths and abilities are ignored in spite of research evidence that demonstrates, that successful people focus mainly on their strong points and develop those. When a person is left with a negative label it can become a disabling self-fulfilling focus on what is wrong, forgetting that there is so much more to life and who we are, than our problems.

A Book of Strengths

Positive psychologists $\frac{1 \& 2}{2}$ decided to investigate different cultures³, altruistic societies and religious traditions to see if by chance there was a universal agreement about certain behaviours and attitudes, that we all appreciate as strengths in one another. Valuable qualities that we would wish to have and pass on to the next generation.

It turns out that there are a number of qualities which are recognised, not just in Western society but right across the world, as being admirable and well worth pursuing.

The Inuit people in Greenland, the Masai Tribes in Africa, Each one of us has character strengths which can energise us and help to improve other areas of our lives.

various religions and societies, college students in America⁴ and ancient philosophical writings all agreed that there are a number of specific qualities, that are well worth pursuing for a life of meaning and well-being for oneself and others.

Everyone agreed that certain human qualities are very special because these qualities or CHARACTER STRENGTHS are

Strengths that contribute to a good life for oneself and others

Strengths that inspire admiration rather than jealousy

Strengths that remain constant even when one's environment and feelings change

On gathering the research from various places in the world Seligman and Peterson found that all these appreciated character strengths could be divided into six different categories¹:

1. The WISDOM or MIND category

Welcoming new information, loving to learn, being open-minded towards others, being creative and original.

2. The COURAGE category:

Emotional strengths including perseverance in reaching for goals, being loyal to principles in spite of opposition and being true to oneself.

3. The HUMANITY/ RELATIONSHIP category:

These interpersonal strengths include being kind, loving and inclusive towards others and helping those who suffer.

4. The JUSTICE category:

These community strengths include fairness, being a team player, leading others in projects to create a better society for everyone and standing up for those less privileged.

5. The TEMPERANCE category:

These self-control strengths include an ability to stand back and work for long-term goals, being in control of one's negative emotions and not over-indulging in pleasures.

6. The TRANSCENDENCE category:

These spirituality strengths include gratitude, hope, seeing a deeper purpose, a non-materialistic view of the world and an awareness of a bigger picture. Some cultures or traditions prioritise one category over another^{4 & 5} but there is still an agreement across mankind that all the above qualities contribute to a better world. Developing character strengths leads to personal well-being provided one keeps a balance⁵.

Too much of a strength can become a weakness.

While self-discipline is necessary and admirable it has to be tempered with self-kindness and with a respectful acceptance of those who might approach life differently. Religious institutions often encourage self-discipline and loyalty, as this helps to create a respectful environment with faith and modesty, and of goodness towards each other. However a certain amount of negative fundamentalism can creep in where one judges those outside of the group as villains. Those who break the

rules can be viewed as infidels of lesser value and perhaps worthy of punishment. This can happen when the selfdiscipline strengths are valued above respect and common courtesy.

Learning to empathise

Getting to know these universal strengths can be a great

help to understanding other people better. Even though we may embody a number of well-being strengths it seems that each one of us is gifted with a particular set of strengths which makes us view life from that perspective.

The person who is **open-minded** and **loves to learn** would tend to study all the angles of a situation before deciding what to do. The person who has **justice strengths** however might make an immediate judgement of anything that seems to interfere with a person's human rights. Both parties could be right, but as they might approach the situation with different strengths and different priorities they might think, that the other person is on the wrong track.

A mature person however will realise that these are opportunities to learn from each other. Sometimes a quick decision is needed and at other times it is good to investigate all sides to find the right course of action.

Sometimes our focus can be quite narrow. We can be quick to feel that someone deliberately upsets our plans or stands in our way, when in reality they are simply coming from a different strength category.

We can make quite a fool of ourselves by trying to change somebody who comes from a very different strength category. Knowing the six strength categories can help us to avoid hurtful confrontations. When we realise that someone else approaches the situation from a different strength category than our own, we can step back and create a space of negotiation.

The challenge is to extend our empathy to a wider circle including those we do not know or understand. Maybe we cannot change things but we can learn to empathise with one another even if we do not agree or cannot give others what they want. We can activate the 'mirror' neurons in our brain.

'Mirror' neurons help us to put ourselves into another person's position. This is similar to when we view a sports game and find ourselves getting so involved that we try to kick the ball into goal or shout instructions to a player even though we are sitting at home on the sofa and nobody can hear us.

We do it all the time with those we love; we put ourselves in their position and offer them a cup of tea, a helping hand or an approving look according to what we perceive them to feel and need.

Discover Your Personal Strengths

In some workplaces time is set aside to ask individuals when they feel they are at their best 6×7 .

Similarly, we can ask ourselves what we most enjoy about our lives. Answer the following questions (use the six strength categories on pages 110/111 as inspiration):

What are you doing when your life is going really well?

What strengths are you using?

.....

How could you use these strengths even more?

.....

HAPPINESS SKILLS

Getting Up Close to The Mind & Wisdom Category

GROUP 1 Mind & Wisdom Strengths



How a Mind Strength Becomes a Mind Weakness

The Mind and Wisdom Strengths create amazing artists, scientists, problem-solvers, explorers, adventures, professors and teachers in all fields of life. However, strengths need to be nurtured otherwise they remain dormant.

We need an environment which allows us to develop and experiment with various strengths. Also, it takes time to use our strengths well. The Mind and Wisdom Strengths can quickly be turned into weaknesses when:

Love of Learning becomes an excuse not to contribute to practical chores and survival needs.

Open-mindedness and Interest become excuses not to commit oneself to something or somebody.

Judgement and Critical Thinking become hurtful and unappreciative towards other people.

Perspective becomes an excuse not to participate in ordinary living.

Creativity and Originality become self-centred and so involved that people around us feel side-lined.

BRAIN TRAIN

Dave is in his early twenties. He decided to leave home at 16 to finish school in the Irish language on a remote island on the West Coast of Ireland. He now lives in Spain teaching children and adults English and has recently started up a school using iPads rather than books for learning:

> I have wanted to travel from a very young age. I can't count how many times I packed my suitcase and said 'I'm leaving'. I'd stay outside my house until 1 o'clock in the morning in the cold because I just wanted to travel. At the same time I'm very grateful that my parents moved from Dublin to the countryside because it stopped me getting involved with drugs; all I saw was green fields!

> I like to explore boundaries. When I play video games I always try to see how far I can go outside the goals. Every day I hear of someone doing something I thought was impossible.

I used to get in such trouble. I felt I wasn't the way I was supposed to be, but I can see now that it is ok to be different. I'd talk a lot and others wouldn't, but this is what makes me the person I am now. I am concerned about an educational system which does not allow time for self-expression. Many young people do not know what direction to take because they are doing what everyone else is doing; they are not experimenting and trying different directions.

I have a sense of urgency to do my part to make a change. I know I can make a change.

Strengths on page $\frac{116}{120}$ or $\frac{122}{120}$ which ones would you think Dave is using and how:	
One of the Mind and Wisdom Strengths Dav is using iswhen he	
another iswhen he	
He is also usingwhen he	

Strength from Difficult Circumstances

Sometimes a character strength is developed through difficult circumstances. We are torn out of our ordinary safe environment and challenged to cope with a foreign situation. We find ourselves having to access different parts of our personality.

My Story:

When I was fourteen years old our family moved to Norway for four years. In Denmark I had always been welcomed as the new interesting kid in the class. In Norway however I found myself standing on my own in the schoolyard. I was wearing my newly self-sown purple pants which I was proud of having created.

I was creative and different but I did not fit into either of the two cliques: one group were wearing expensive high-brand ski-jackets, designer jeans and YES-badges to join the European Union. The other group were dressed in alternative left-wing military jackets wearing NO-badges against joining the EU.

It was a painful experience not to fit into either group and not to experience any curiosity or interest in me as the new kid on the block. Only later on did I realise that the other students felt intimidated by me because I had jumped a class. Also, I got private Norwegian lessons with the principal of the school. His wife was Danish and he had made a special study of the difference between the Norwegian and Danish language which are quite alike yet subtly different.

On hindsight this whole experience taught me not to make a judgement unless I get to know people. It is often impossible to know exactly what is going on in people's lives unless we get to know them better and somehow put ourselves into their shoes.

As it turned out I found acceptance and friendship in a Youth Club where people of various nationalities got together to do drama, sing in choir and participate in adventurous Catholic youth camps. - And Norway found oil which enabled them to remain independent of the European Union!

Train Yourself in Mind & Wisdom Strengths

More details of the Mind and Wisdom Strengths:

MIND & WISDOM STRENGTH

LOVE OF LEARNING

You are open to new skills and information because you love to learn. You want to learn from your mistakes rather than feeling sorry for yourself. You are willing to learn no matter where and when.

CREATIVITY & ORIGINALITY

You think or behave in an innovative and creative way that others might not have thought about. You bring about good results through your imaginative ways either directly or indirectly through the arts.

JUDGEMENT & CRITICAL THINKING

You tend to gain a balanced view by not jumping to conclusions before making a decision. You make a risk assessment and also examine your needs and wants before acting on them. You view things objectively.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS & INTEREST

Healthy curiosity can be learned from small children or animals who look without judging. They are interested in every point of view and not upset by irregularities or opposite opinions, it is all something to explore.

PERSPECTIVE

You have a wisdom and an understanding which help you to develop a balanced view and see things in the right context. Other people might look to you to help solve their problems through your experience and ability to see the bigger picture.

BRAIN TRAIN +

Choose a character strength from the page opposite and during the week look out for an opportunity to use it.

Over the coming week I will focus on the Character Strength of.....

I will take this opportunity to look out for opportunities to....

.....

Example

I choose to focus on the Creativity and Originality Strength. **I will look out for ways** to be creative in writing this book.

Take A Picture

To remind yourself take a picture with your mobile phone of the box explaining the chosen character strength, and set it as your pc background or homepage for the week.

This way you are constructing a brain pathway which can help make this strength part of your natural personality. Getting Up Close to the Courage Category

GROUP 2 Courage Strengths



Courage Means not Giving Up

The COURAGE strengths focus on having emotional strength especially when one feels timid and does not want to upset anybody or fear rejection.

This is about being truthful about who we are, what we know and what we love doing. It is about having the courage to become fully absorbed in what we do, and daring to have hope that we will succeed if we keep going.

Resistance and conflict are seen as challenges to be overcome rather than a sign of having to give up. Many people give up, but courageous people keep going because they believe something is important.

We might feel afraid of other people's reactions, of being laughed at or failing at whatever we feel strongly about but we keep going all the same because we believe this is what must be done. We believe that what we do is important enough and ignore 'silly' fears. We carry on because we believe we are working at making the world a better place.

When a Courage Strength Becomes a Weakness

The Courage Strengths create great heroes who keep going when the rest of us have given up. Courage can also be more subtle in the hidden heroes who work away in the background doing their best to make this world a better place. These are people who every day chisel away at what they believe in, people who speak their mind in spite of opposition and rejection.

Courage Strengths can go too far. It is a matter of learning to keep a balance otherwise:

Courage and Bravery become an excuse to take unnecessary risks that put our own or other people's lives at risk for something that is not of any great benefit.

Honesty and Integrity become an excuse to say hurtful things to others, or showing up their superficiality.

Passion and Enthusiasm become so important that we brush others aside and ignore the needs of those close to us.

Stability and Diligence become stubbornness or a work obsession at the expense of other people's feelings and needs.

Christina's Dream

Christina Noble was bullied, sexually abused by her uncle and living in dire poverty as her father drank away all the housekeeping money. As a young person after surviving the loss of her mother, being separated from her siblings and sent to a horrific orphanage she became homeless living in Phoenix Park and was gang raped. She gave birth to a son who was taken from her. She went to England and married what turned out to be an abusive husband who threatened to kill her if she left him. She eventually escaped without her three children after psychiatrists finally believed that it was her husband who was the problem, not her.

Thankfully, she got a house and a job that could pay for the counselling that she needed. Her children one by one returned to her as they had all witnessed their father's cruelty towards her. She had a caring second marriage which helped her to heal but she never forgot the dreams she had during her previous abuse, of helping street children in Vietnam.

When her own children were grown she went to Vietnam with only enough money to stay in a hotel for a while. Little by little she made friends with some of the abandoned street children, she organised parties and swimming (to give them a chance to shower) and made them feel loved.

Christina kept searching for a way to help more permanently and linked up with the co-ordinator of an orphanage who gave her a building she could use to set up a dignified living and play space for the children. She approached businesses to get support and kept on begging for financial support until she got it, she would even sing in nightclubs to raise money. She kept repeating that these children deserved to be loved explaining that she herself had been like them when she was growing up. She had been picking up food from the street and she had taken to begging to survive.

Christina Noble has started more than 100 projects that help thousands of children each year to get homes with playground, medical support and education. She is an inspiration to all of us never to give up in spite of resistance, cruelty and opposition.

We all love the heroes in films who despite opposition keep their dream or vision alive. Nelson Mandela of course is another person who throughout his twenty seven years in prison believed that a co-operative white and black South Africa was possible. This is seen in the film 'Invictus'.

BRAIN TRAIN

10	24 or 130 which ones would you hristina is using and how:
	he Courage Strength Christina is using is
another	iswhen she
She is al	so usingwhen she

Train Yourself in the Courage Strengths:

COURAGE STRENGTHS

PASSION & ENTHUSIASM

You tend to become absorbed and fully engaged in what you do. You have a sense of vocation and ability to lose self-awareness and merge with the task at hand. You feel inspired and look forward to engaging with challenges.

COURAGE & BRAVERY

You have the courage to act according to your convictions rather than other people's expectations. You may feel fearful but you face the day with courage no matter what. You are of good cheer through pain, humiliations or illnesses. You are bigger than these.

PERSEVERANCE & DILIGENCE

You carry out work carefully and diligently. You keep going when others give up. Once you commit to something you see it through to the end. You enjoy the work without obsessing on perfection. You are ambitious in the best sense.

HONESTY & INTEGRITY

You live your life in a sincere, transparent, truthful way committed to what you truly believe is important. You speak the truth and you act according to your heart and mind.

You are genuine and you unknowingly remind others of this quality.

BRAIN TRAIN +

Choose a character strength from the the page opposite and during the week look out for an opportunity to use it.

Over the coming week I will focus on the Character Strength of.....

I will take this opportunity to look out for opportunities to

.....

Example

I choose to focus on the Passion and Enthusiasm Strength.

I will look out for ways to forget myself and be all absorbed in what I do making sure it is something I truly believe in.

Take a Picture

To remind yourself take a picture with your mobile phone of the box explaining the chosen character strength, and set it as your pc background or homepage for the week.

This way you are facilitating a brain pathway which can help make this strength part of your natural personality.

Getting Up Close to The Relationship Category

GROUP 3 Relationship Strengths



Relationship and Humanity Strengths

Social intelligence is the ability to tune into other people's feelings and respond accordingly but also to know one's own feelings and needs and be able to express them. It is about developing the best of one's abilities whilst also adapting to the needs of others around us.

Giving and receiving love through thoughtfulness and affectionate communication with people around us, is another humanity strength that we admire in others.

Relationship strengths are often called humanity strengths. Nurses and teachers frequently have these strengths. It consists in sharing resources and being caring without expecting something in return. It is about showing **compassion**.

Kindness is a fantastic strength that enables a person to give freely of their time and energy.

It is about being vulnerable and open to share on a personal level, appreciating many types of love.

Humanity means respecting everyone whatever other people might say and being willing to affirm others in who they are, making them feel comfortable about themselves.

When Relationship Strengths become weaknesses:

Social-Emotional and Personal Intelligence strength goes too far when relationships become so important that one loses respect and turns one's back on anyone who does not have the same understanding of other people.

Giving and Receiving Love strength becomes a weakness when one starts pressuring others to return one's love, feeling a right to control other people's affections. It is a weakness when the love becomes so exclusive that only special people are accepted as worthy of love.

Kindness, Compassion and Generosity strengths have gone too far when one stops setting boundaries and condones people who act irresponsibly and disrespectfully. One can be compassionate without agreeing with someone's hurtful behaviour. One can be kind and still say 'no'. Mother Teresa of Calcutta had many relationship strengths. She wanted the dying street children in Calcutta to have a dignified death. Although a principal of a posh school elsewhere she could not stand back and do nothing. She begged and begged until she managed to start up a shelter where she brought the dying from around Calcutta to nurse them, give them food and water and make them feel that their lives were of value. Danish girls Mette and her sister Lisa decided at an early age to save up money in order to volunteer in the Developing World. They saved their confirmation money and whatever money they earned from working in shops and nursing homes in their spare time. Over the past year they have spent 3 months in Tanzania. This is Mette's experience:

For me it started when I was learning about biology. I became convinced that I had to become a doctor. I thought I would go to Africa and work with Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF – Doctors who step into crisis situations around the world, independent of established organisations, and just help. Then I discovered that it was voluntary and that I couldn't make a living from it.

I decided that I would go and help voluntarily when I had finished school. My twin-sister and I saved up over five years; we set aside money every month. We both had jobs in our spare time. My sister wasn't that keen initially but I was going with or without her!

It is a combination of fascination with the workings of the body and being able to help others who don't know what is happening in their bodies. It was Africa perhaps because it was presented as the poorest part of the world. It wasn't really about me being good or wanting to save somebody, it was about seeing others happy and being able to cause a smile on the face of children in the orphanage where we worked. I would highly recommend it as it puts our own daily lives into perspective.

Mette is now studying to become a doctor while her sister has gone back to Tanzania to support an AIDS project. They have a Facebook page where family and friends can donate to support the cause.

BRAIN TRAIN

Reflecting on the Relationship and Humanity Strengths on page <u>132</u> which ones would you think Mette is using and how:

One of the Relationship Strengths Mette is using

iswhen she.....

.....

and......when she.....

.....

RELATIONSHIP

STRENGTHS

(HUMANITY)

SOCIAL – EMOTIONAL & PERSONAL INTELLIGENCE

You have an ability to tune into other people's feelings and to respond accordingly. You know your own feelings and needs and how to fulfil them in a healthy manner. This enables you to understand other people's needs and communicate compassionately and respectfully with them. You know your own best qualities and find ways and places to develop and express these while adapting to the needs of others around you.

GIVING & RECEIVING LOVE

You have an affectionate nature and are thoughtful in your behaviour towards those close to you. You allow yourself to be vulnerable and open to intimate sharing and caring.

You value receiving attention and are not afraid to commit yourself to deep sharing with another person as you appreciate love in all its aspects.

KINDNESS, COMPASSION & GENEROSITY

You enjoy giving freely of your time, you support others in their struggle for happiness and fulfilment. You share of your resources and give without expecting something in return. You help people feel very comfortable as you see them as equally worthy. You are respectful towards everyone no matter what other people might think or say.

BRAIN TRAIN +

Choose a character strength from the page opposite and during the week look out for an opportunity to use it.

Over the coming week I will focus on the Relationship Strength of.....

I will take this opportunity to look out for opportunities to

.....

Example

I choose to focus on the Giving & Receiving Love Strength.

I will look out for ways to communicate in an encouraging and caring manner and of sharing my thoughts and feelings.

Take A Picture

To remind yourself of this task take a picture with your mobile phone of the box explaining the chosen character strength, and set it as your pc homepage or wallpaper on your mobile phone for a while. Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 61, 6-15.

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