Character Strengths

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Character Strengths

The field of positive psychology emerged as an initiative to better understand optimal human functioning, emphasizing positive emotions, positive traits, positive relationships, and positive institutions, rather than negative aspects of functioning (Lopez & Snyder, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology does not replace traditional psychology, rather it complements deficit-based approaches, offering science to inform, reframe, and/or improve traditional psychological approaches. One area within positive psychology that has received significant attention has been the identification and leveraging of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths are understood to be positive, trait-like capacities that benefit oneself and others (Niemiec, 2014) and are "shown in feelings, thoughts, and actions" (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 3). Each person has a unique constellation of character strengths that vary in degree based on the context. While it is assumed that character strengths are universal across cultures and found in every person, each person has a unique profile of character strengths. The assessment of character strengths is a useful and meaningful endeavor, and assessment data can be used to guide interventions and supports that are individualized to each person's specific profile of character strengths.

Researchers in the field of character strengths engaged in a systematic process, over a three-year period, of identifying character strengths and virtues valued across nations, cultures, and beliefs. This resulted in the VIA *Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Classification defined 24 character strengths that met various inclusion criteria, such as each had to be ubiquitous across cultures, measureable, personally fulfilling, trait-like, and when expressed could not diminish others, to name a few criteria. These are organized under six overarching virtues (i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence), which are core characteristics of humans that have been valued by the world religions, by moral philosophers, and by leading virtue thinkers throughout the centuries. Table 13.1 provides this VIA Classification structure and the concepts related to each character strength and virtue.

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Table 13.1 VIA classification of character strengths and virtues

Wisdom—cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
• **Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
• **Curiosity** [interest, novelty seeking, openness to experience]: taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
• **Judgment** [open-mindedness; critical thinking]: thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
• **Love of learning**: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
• **Perspective** [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself/others
Courage—emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
• **Bravery** [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what's right even if there's opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
• **Perseverance** [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persevering in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks
• **Honesty** [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
• **Zest** [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
Humanity—interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
• **Love** (capacity to love and be loved): Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
• **Social intelligence** [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: being aware of the motives/feelings of others and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
Justice—civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
• **Teamwork** [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
• **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
• **Leadership**: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
Temperance—strengths that protect against excess
• **Forgiveness** [mercy]: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting others' shortcomings; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
• **Humility** [modesty]: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
• **Prudence**: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
• **Self-regulation** [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

(continued)

Table 13.1 (continued)

Transcendence—strengths that forge connections to the universe and provide meaning
• **Appreciation of beauty and excellence** [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
• **Gratitude**: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
• **Hope** [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
• **Humor** [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
• **Spirituality** [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

VIA Classification of Strengths

The 24 character strengths and the six virtues described by the VIA Classification provide a complement to traditional classification systems for deficits used in the psychology field, such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (*DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the *Diagnostic Manual-Intellectual Disability* (Fletcher et al., 2007), an evidence-based manual that helps to improve the accuracy of diagnosing people with intellectual disability and to ensure psychiatric conditions are not overshadowed and left untreated (Griffiths et al., 2002; Reiss, Levitan, & Szyszko, 1982). Since its introduction, the VIA Classification of Strengths has been extensively studied, amounting to hundreds of peer-reviewed publications in a short time period (Niemiec, 2013; VIA Institute, 2016), and researchers have suggested that the nomenclature and classification system has applicability across time and cultures (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Additionally, assessments have been developed that allow for the identification of character strengths in youth and adults.

VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)

The VIA *Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) was developed to align with the VIA Classification System and assesses the 24 character strengths and six virtues described in Table 13.1. The scale was developed for self-report by adults ages 18 and over. When completing the scale, people rate a series of items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very much like me; 2 = mostly like me; 3 = somewhat like me; 4 = a little like me; and 5 = very much unlike me). Sample items include the following: "I find the world a very interesting place" (Curiosity); "I am aware of my own feelings and motives" (Social Intelligence); "I always speak up in protest when I hear someone say mean things" (Bravery); and "When I look at my life, I find many things to be grateful for" (Gratitude). The original version of the scale consists of 240 items, but two shorter versions, the VIA-120 and the VIA-72, with the best items from each of the character strength domains that maintained adequate validity have also been created (Littman-Ovadia, 2015). Researchers have found that scores on the long and short versions of the VIA-IS have adequate reliability with adult populations in the USA (McGrath, 2014; VIA Institute on Character, n.d.). The VIA-IS has also been translated into 32 languages, including Danish, Dutch, French, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, simplified Chinese, and traditional Chinese (McGrath, in press) and has been shown to have strong measurement properties across cultures (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012; Ruch, Weber, Park, & Peterson, 2014; Singh & Choubisa, 2010).

Ongoing research, however, continues to look at the best way to understand character strengths and virtues. For example, several researchers have found that the character strengths tend to be highly related (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010; Haslam, Bain, & Neal, 2004; Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2012; Macdonald, Bore, & Munro, 2008; Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andrea, & Seligman, 2008; Ruch et al., 2010; Shryack, Steger, Krueger, & Kallie, 2010; Singh & Choubisa, 2010), suggesting there may be different ways to understand and define the virtues and the character strengths that align with them. For example, researchers have suggested that rather than the original six virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence, there might be alternative virtue groups, such as interpersonal or sociability strengths, or intellectual or cognitive strengths (Peterson et al., 2008; Shryack et al., 2010).

VIA-Youth

The VIA *Inventory of Strengths for Youth* (VIA-Youth; Park & Peterson, 2006b) was created to allow for the assessment of character strengths based on the VIA Classification in adolescents and youth ages 10–17 years. The assessment is a modified version of the VIA-IS, with changes made to items to make them for age appropriate for youth of these ages. The same character strengths are assessed, just in ways that are relevant to youth and the settings and situations most familiar to them. Modified items were reviewed by youth, teachers, and parents (Steen, Kachorek, & Peterson, 2003). The original VIA-Youth included 198 items, but a short form (96 items) was created to promote usability. Both the long and short version have good reliability (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.). Researchers have shown the tool could be effectively used with US (Park & Peterson, 2006b) and South African youth (van Eeden, Wissing, Dreyer, Park, & Peterson, 2008), and that teacher's ratings of students strengths are correlated with youth ratings (Macdonald et al., 2008; Park & Peterson, 2006a). Assessing character strengths provides unique information, and when youth highly endorse character strengths, this predicts various positive outcomes, including academic achievement and social skills (Macdonald et al., 2008; Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2014) as well as well-being and happiness (Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012).

As discussed subsequently, research has begun to explore the application of the VIA-Youth with adolescents with disabilities, including adolescents with intellectual disability. Before over viewing that work, however, it is worth looking at what one might do with assessment information on character strengths. Having valid and reliable measures of character strengths provides a means through which people with and without disabilities and people who support them can understand the strengths and virtues that people feel reflect them, and this information can then be used to build on each person's strengths, using interventions such as those described in the following sections.

Interventions to Enhance Character Strengths

As briefly described in the previous section, understanding the character strengths that people demonstrate can lead to the development of interventions and supports that build on those strengths. Existing research suggests the importance of building on strengths. Multiple positive outcomes are predicted by character strengths (Harzer & Ruch, 2014; Vertilo & Gibson, 2014; Weber et al., 2014), suggesting that efforts to enhance strengths have the potential to promote more positive outcomes. For example, temperance and perseverance have been found to predict academic achievement, and hope and zest predict well-being (Park & Peterson, 2006b; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004).

Strengths-Spotting

Strengths-spotting involves at least two steps: (1) Look for and label a character strength in

oneself or others, and (2) offer a rationale/behavioral evidence for the character strength that is being displayed. Strengths-spotting is a skill that can be cultivated by anyone, including people with disabilities. Research has supported strengths-spotting of children by parents, finding that parents identify numerous character strengths in their children with intellectual disability and/or autism across multiple domains of life, and the strengths were predicted by greater involvement in community activities (Carter et al., 2015).

As is true for all people, additional support is sometimes helpful with strengths-spotting practices for people with disabilities. Examples include the use of a VIA Classification grid (e.g., a user-friendly list with definitions of the 24 character strengths), question prompts (e.g., "Which of these best describes who you are?"), and structured discussions/activities (e.g., "Tell me a story of something good that you did recently" followed by "What character strengths were in that story?"). Pairing the strengths with valued activities such as watching movies, reading, playing video games, doing artwork, or playing a sport is helpful to the integration of learning (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014) (e.g., "What are the highest strengths of Anna in *Frozen*?" or "What character strengths did you use, while you were playing basketball today?"). Strengths-spotting is a key starting point for supporting people to understand and develop "a common language of strengths" and is the precursor for strengths use as well as the development of a "strengths mindset" (Niemiec, 2014).

Promoting Signature Strengths

One of the strongest findings in all of positive psychology is that a person's signature strengths —those qualities that are most core to who they are—are of extreme importance, as they are related to personal identity, performance, and various outcomes. One commonly used intervention that has been shown to have high impact in people's lives is called "use your signature strengths in new ways each day." In this intervention, people choose one of their signature strengths that emerged high in their VIA Survey profile (the results of the assessment); then, they are asked to use that signature strength in a new way each day. For example, a person who has Curiosity as a signature strength might use that to explore a new Web site one day and try a new food the next day. A person with a signature strength in Social Intelligence might approach someone new at work and ask them a couple of questions. A person high in Kindness might offer to give a friend a ride home one day and then bring his or her coworker a coffee the next day. This intervention has been used with various groups, including youth (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011), older adults (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2014), employees (Forest et al., 2012), and people with traumatic brain injuries (Andrewes, Walker, & O'Neill, 2014). It has also been used across cultures (Duan, Ho, Tang, Li, & Zhang, 2013; Mitchell, Stanimirovic, Klein, & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). In each circumstance, positive outcomes have been found that last beyond the week that is the target of the intervention, and in some cases, the benefits to increased happiness and reduced depression last for six months (Gander et al., 2012; Seligman et al., 2005).

Using Character Strengths to Promote Other Strengths

If you ask 100 practitioners whether or not they are "strengths-based," it is not uncommon to see 100 hands rise up. But, there will be 100 different definitions for what it means to be strengths-based and what a strength is in the first place. Indeed, human beings have many different kinds of strengths. Niemiec (2014) has outlined several types, including talents (i.e., hardwired abilities such as spatial intelligence and mathematical-logical intelligence); skills (i.e., proficiencies people develop such as typing or painting houses); interests (i.e., passions people are pulled toward such as artwork and playing sports); and resources (i.e., external strengths that

support people such as having a caring family, good friends, and living in a safe neighborhood). It is the character strengths that drive the other strengths categories and offer pathways for developing or tapping into skills, talents, resources, and interests. How can a person who has a musical talent not tap into their character strengths of self-regulation and perseverance? How could a person make use of their resource of a spiritual community without using their character strengths of hope, spirituality, and gratitude? Unfortunately, there has been a disconnect in the disability field between character strengths and other strengths. Research, education planning (e.g., IEPs), and support programs have largely focused on building skills, interests, and resources for individuals with disability and given far less attention to strengths that reveal who the individual is at their core—their character strengths. Recently, researchers asked parents of children with intellectual disability and/or autism to name their child's strengths, and overwhelmingly the responses from the parents fell within the domain of character strengths with less focus on the child's skills, interests, and so forth (Carter et al., 2015).

Therefore, we argue for the conversation to shift—not just from disability to ability (deficit-based to strengths-based)—but to shift from generic strengths to character strengths. This does not mean to replace the development of strengths in other categories, but to include and give priority to who the individual is at their core. Practitioners can take action by assessing character strengths, asking questions about the person's character strengths, merging curriculum in schools with character strengths, training parents/support providers/medical teams to discuss character strengths with people, and offer activities and interventions designed to boost or unleash the person's signature strengths.

Aware-Explore-Apply Model

There are a multitude of strengths-based approaches and models that practitioners use and tailor to their population, discipline, and/or theoretical orientation. A character strengths-based model that reflects most of these while reflecting the core features of what practitioners are ultimately doing when they take a strengths approach is the Aware-Explore-Apply model (Niemiec, 2013, 2014). This three-phase model is intentionally simple and practical. The Aware phase focuses on supporting general awareness of character strengths, making sure people can engage in strengths-spotting, begin to develop their character strengths fluency (i.e., their vocabulary related to the 24 character strengths), and ensuring that barriers to understanding strengths are addressed. The second phase, Explore, promotes linkages between character strengths, previous experiences, and valued outcomes to enable people to see how they have used their character strengths at the best and worst of times and to understand that character strengths offer pathways to improved happiness, relationship, and achievement in their future. The person is supported to explore how to use character strengths in everyday life, from task to task, and from conversation to conversation. Finally, in Apply, the person learns to focus on taking action using character strengths and implementing strategies to reach personal or professional goals. These phases build on each other and are part of a cycle of growth, development, and growing awareness and action (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998).

Research and Practice with People with Intellectual and Development Disabilities

The field of positive psychology and the application of constructs associated with positive psychology, such as character strengths, has typically focused on the general population. However, researchers have clearly noted the potential of assessment and intervention to promote character strengths in the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Dykens, 2005; Groden, Kantor, Woodard, & Lipsitt, 2011a; Niemiec, Shogren, & Wehmeyer, in press). For example, Dykens (2005) suggested the need for strengths-based models that address

character strengths to better understand the experiences and outcomes of families and siblings of people with intellectual disability. Groden et al. (2011b) suggested that people with autism spectrum disorders, if supported to do so, can enhance their character strengths and experience more positive outcomes. Niemiec et al. (in press) suggested ways that character strength interventions could be used in the lives of people with intellectual disability. Each of these authors highlighted the potential for more research and intervention development that focuses on assessing and building on character strengths to enhance outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those that support them.

Assessing Character Strengths

While the VIA-IS and VIA-Youth were developed in the general population, researchers have begun to explore the application of the VIA-Youth with adolescents with disabilities, including adolescents with intellectual disability. Findings suggest that the scale has similar reliability and validity in youth with disabilities, although youth with disabilities, particularly intellectual disability, tend to rate themselves lower in their strengths than their peers without disabilities (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Lang, & Niemiec, 2016; Shogren, Shaw, Khamsi, Wehmeyer & Niemiec, 2016). This suggests the need for interventions such as strengths-spotting and Aware-Explore-Apply with this group of students, particularly as it is widely acknowledged that assessment in this population tends to focus more on deficit and remediation, rather than building on strengths (Epstein, Synhorst, Cress, & Allen, 2009). To support youth with intellectual disability to complete the VIA-Youth, Shogren, Wehmeyer, Forber-Pratt, and Palmer (2015) developed a resource that lists accommodations and supports that can be provided during administration to promote the reliability of the scale, but enable people with intellectual disability to communicate their perceptions of their character strengths.

Other researchers have developed proxy report measures of strengths that can be completed by parents, teachers, or others that know the person with a disability well. The Assessment Scale for Positive Character Traits-Developmental Disabilities (ASPeCT-DD; Woodard, 2009) was developed to assess 10 character strengths and predated the VIA Classification System. However, it has been shown to be a valid way of engaging others in understanding and thinking about the strengths of people with disabilities. Using both self- and proxy reports can be an effective way to enable all members of a support team to orient themselves toward strengths, changing the emphasis on deficits that often dominates assessment activities.

The Interactive Behavioral Therapy Approach

Identifying and encouraging character strengths gives practitioners such as treatment facilitators new tools in supporting sustainable changes. In one model, interactive behavioral therapy (IBT), a group format is used, which has been specifically developed for people with intellectual disability and concomitant psychiatric disorders. IBT is an evidence-based psychotherapy developed more than 25 years ago with techniques drawn from components of many therapeutic interventions, but chiefly from Moreno's psychodrama (Blatner & Blatner, 1988; Razza & Tomasulo, 2005), the work of Yalom and Leszcz (2005), and more recently from positive psychotherapy (Rashid, 2015; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). IBT has been the subject of a number of studies (e.g., Daniels, 1998) and the emphasis of the APA's first book on psychotherapy for people with IDs (Razza & Tomasulo, 2005).

The model was fashioned around the activation of therapeutic factors originally identified by Yalom and Leszcz (2005), as these elements were the standards in group therapy outcome studies. Therapeutic factors are those features that have therapeutic value for members in a group and are identified as acceptance/cohesion,

universality, altruism, instillation of hope, guidance, vicarious learning/modeling, catharsis, imparting of information, self-disclosure, self-understanding, interpersonal learning, corrective recapitulation of the primary family, development of socializing techniques, and existential factors. Initially, IBT facilitators were trained on what to look for when a therapeutic factor emerged and how to identify and support its occurrence (Razza & Tomasulo, 2005). However, more recently, facilitators have also been trained to spot the presence of character strengths (Tomasulo, 2014). This addition of character strength-spotting by facilitators builds on the work by Fluckiger et al. (2008). They have developed a procedure, resource priming, where the facilitators of psychotherapy take a few minutes before their session to focus on the strengths of their individual client. Priming leads to resource activation where group participants focus on the positive perspective of their behavior. In people without intellectual disability, this leads to better progress in therapy as measured by a reduction in symptoms and higher levels of well-being. By using this technique and adding strengths-spotting to the recognition of therapeutic factors, the IBT model is expanding the ways in which therapeutic changes can be facilitated (Tomasulo, 2014).

Tomasulo (2014) offered an adaptation of the traditional use of the gratitude visit (Seligman et al., 2005) in which participants wrote and delivered a letter of gratitude to a person they felt they had not properly thanked. However, this powerful method as originally researched requires the users be able to read and write to take advantage of its effectiveness. In the IBT model, it has been modified for people unable to read and write by making the gratitude visit virtual through a role-playing exercise within the group. The use of role playing has many advantages for people with intellectual disability because it enhances the engagement of the members while activating more of the senses (Tomasulo & Razza, 2006).

Within the IBT format, the virtual gratitude visit (VGV) has also been used effectively to enable people with intellectual disability to express the character strength of gratitude to those people who may no longer be accessible to the person because they have moved, passed away, or toward someone unknown, such as a stranger who was kind. In this exercise, the protagonist expresses his or her gratitude for the person symbolized by the empty chair. Following this, the protagonist reverses roles and becomes the person they are expressing gratitude toward. By role, reversing the person responds as if the gratitude had just been expressed to him or her. Then, the protagonist returns to his or her original chair and responds (Tomasulo, 2014).

Conclusions

Further work is needed, in research and in practice, documenting the use and the impact of the character strengths interventions described in previous sections with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. However, there is every reason to believe, particularly given the lower endorsement of strengths in adolescents with disabilities, that strengths-spotting, the promotion of signature strengths, and the Aware-Explore-Apply model can potentially increase awareness of strengths and lead to more positive outcomes for young people with disabilities. Signature strengths interventions have been used with other populations, with success, again suggesting the need to explore the use, and necessary supports and modifications, of this strategy with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For example, Samson and Antonelli (2013), in a study of 33 people with autism spectrum disorders, discovered humor to be a lower or underused strength, ranking 16th out of 24, whereas in a matched group of people without autism spectrum disorders, it was 8th. Since the strength of humor is linked with hedonic happiness and positive emotions, an intervention such as “three funny things” (Gander et al., 2012) for people interested in boosting this lower strength might be considered. The study found that such reframing was found to be useful not only for the participants with autism spectrum disorders, but also for people that

supported them. Groden, Kantor, Woodard, and Lipsitt (2011a) described exercises, such as modeling appropriate laughter to boost the strength of humor and the direct encouragement of the strength of kindness through a kind deeds program at school, as concrete ways to enhance character strengths in adolescents with autism. Such approaches, however, could easily be embedded in supports planning activities, such as those described in Chap. 3, as well as in many of the strategies describe in the Applications chapters included in Part 2 of this text.

More work is needed to develop strategies to enable people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to understand their character strengths, and to leverage these strengths across all domains of life (education, employment, social, community). In doing so, this not only shifts the focus from deficit-based assessment and intervention approaches, but also embraces the strengths that are inherent to each of us and enables the use of these strengths to build positive relationships, develop resilience, enhance well-being, navigate barriers and challenges, and enjoy meaningful activities.

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