
Identifying Signature Strengths

Background

There are many different types of strengths, from creativity to curiosity to kindness to persistence to meaning and purpose (to name just a few). Each of us has a unique pattern of profile of strengths. Some strengths are more central to who we are, to what we value, and to how we behave in the world. Positive psychologists call these top strengths *Signature Strengths* (e.g., Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2002).

Signature Strengths are

- The strengths that most describe who we are
- Closely connected to our core values
- The strengths we use frequently and/or effortlessly
- Our “go to” strengths
- The strengths we rely on in daily life and when challenged

When we use our signature strengths, we feel

- Authentic, that we are being true to ourselves
- Energized
- Engaged
- Fulfilled

Identifying our own signature strengths can increase our self-understanding and help guide us towards greater well-being, as we experience greater happiness and meaning when we use apply our signature strengths regularly in our lives (e.g., Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2002; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011).

We frequently receive messages about “learning from our mistakes”. This advice is valuable but it ignores much of experience and many opportunities for learning. We can also learn from “what went well”. These experiences can teach us about our strengths and about strategies and actions that may be helpful to employ in the future.

This handout focuses on identifying our own strengths. Recognizing others’ strengths is equally important as it promotes understanding and appreciation of others and facilitates positive, caring relationships (e.g., Linkins et al., 2015).

Activities



Personal Strengths Narrative. Reflect on a time when you used one of our signature strengths. This could be an experience in which you used a strength to overcome a challenge, to accomplish something important, or in another way that is important or meaningful to you. This could be an experience that helped you to discover one or more of your strengths. Write about this experience in detail.

- *What happened?*
- *What did you do?*
- *How did your use of the strength(s) benefit you and/or others?*
- *How can you use this strength (these strengths) in your life now?*



Paper flowers show elementary school students' best experiences

Me at My Best. Think about a recent time when you were at your very best. This could be a time when you felt most engaged, most alive, and/or most true to yourself, or being your best self in some other way. Describe this experience

- *What happened?*
- *What did you do?*
- *What strengths did you use?*
- *How did your use of strengths benefit you and/or others?*
- *How can you use these strengths more in the future?*



Complete a strengths survey. You can complete the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) and receive feedback for free at the websites below. Search for “free VIA strengths survey”

- The VIA Institute. Website: Viacharacter.org
- Martin Seligman’s Authentic Happiness website at the University of Pennsylvania. Website: authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu

Keep in mind: The survey is only a tool. It may not perfectly capture your signature strengths. Although the survey captures many strengths, it does not capture all strengths. You may have signature strengths that are not examined in the survey.

References and Further Reading

Linkins, M., Niemiec, R., Gillham, J., & Mayerson, D. (2015). Through the lens of strengths: A framework for educating the heart. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 10*, 64-68.

Peterson, C. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York, NY, US: Free Press.

Wood, A. M., Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Kashdan, T., & Hurling, R. (2011). Using personal and psychological strengths leads to increases in well-being over time: A longitudinal study and the development of the strengths use questionnaire. *Personality and Individual Differences, 50*, 15-19.

Web Resources

Via Institute on Character.

- Website: Viacharacter.org
- Search for: signature strengths

Authentic Happiness.

- Website: authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu

Newark Boys Chorus School and the VIA Survey

This video includes interviews with teachers and students at a school that incorporated activities designed to increase students' awareness of strengths in themselves and in others.

- Video available on the VIA Institute channel on YouTube
- Search for "Newark Boys Chorus VIA survey"



Savoring

Background

Savoring involves attending to and appreciating our experiences, especially positive experiences. Savoring can facilitate well-being by amplifying experiences. Savoring often involves experiences in the present. We can also savor experiences from the past and experiences we anticipate for the future.

We can savor experiences in a variety of ways, for example, by:

- Slowing down, making time to notice and appreciate an experience
- Paying mindful attention
- Basking in an experience

Fred Bryant and Joseph Veroff (2007) describe several different emotional states that are associated with savoring. They suggest that emotional experiences vary depending on whether savoring involve primarily cognitive reflection versus experiential absorption and whether one's attention is primarily internally versus externally focused.

Emotional Experiences in Savoring (Bryant & Veroff, 2007)

		Focus of Attention	
		External World	Internal Self
Type of Experience	Cognitive Reflection	<i>Thanksgiving</i> <i>Example: Feeling grateful for something that someone has done for you, for others, or for humanity.</i>	<i>Basking</i> <i>Example: Feeling deeply satisfied with an accomplishment.</i>
	Experiential Absorption	<i>Marveling</i> <i>Example: Feeling awe as you watch a meteor shower.</i>	<i>Luxuriating</i> <i>Example: Enjoying the warmth of the sun on your face and the sound of bird's singing as you walk through a meadow.</i>

Activities

- 1) Take time to savor experiences such as:
 - A favorite food or a new food
 - Listening to music
 - A walk through the woods
 - A conversation with a friend
 - A memory of a special event
 - An everyday experience; take time to enjoy something you usually hurry through
 - Share a positive experience with a friend
- 2) Try to experience a broad range of savoring emotions. See if you can experience the four quadrants of experience in Bryant & Veroff's model.

References and Further Reading

Bryant, F. B., & Veroff, J. (2007). *Savoring: A new model of positive experience*. Mahwah, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Web Resources

The Greater Good Science Center has several articles and activities on savoring.

- Websites: greatergood.berkeley.edu and ggia.berkeley.edu
- Search for: Savoring
- Examples:
 - Kennelly, S. (2012). 10 steps to savoring the good things in life
 - Savoring Walk

Prevention Magazine

- Website: Prevention.com
- Search for: Savoring
- Article:
 - Harrar, S. (2013). How to double your happiness: New research says “savoring” is the key

Huffington Post

- Website: huffingtonpost.com
- Search for: Savoring
- Article:
 - Lin, M. (2012). Happiness: Why savoring is good for your health – and your wallet