

character strengths, 12 suggestions (1-5): learning, spotting, relationships & writing

(this handout with active hyperlinks was posted as a blog at www.goodmedicine.org.uk on 20.07.16)

In his book *"Tales of the Hasidism"*, Martin Buber writes *"Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said 'In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me 'Why were you not Zusya?'"* It's the classic existentialist challenge - *"How can you more fully become what only you can become?"* And it's true all the way through our being, we're unique ... genetically, in our backgrounds, the major influences in our lives, our personal histories, & in what matters most to us. It's true that we share so much with other human beings, but it's also true that this is the only time someone precisely like us is going to be on this planet. Just like a piece of music, a painting, a tree, we're a profound & rather extraordinary "once off". And a very important area we're unique in is in the particular mix, the profile of our strengths. We can understand & describe our strengths in a number of ways. For example there are the strengths of our knowledge & skills, the strengths of our interests & enthusiasms, and the strengths of our resources & supports. These are well worth paying attention to and can be of real value when we face challenges in our lives - see, for example, the post *"Resource activation: using clients' own strengths in psychotherapy and counseling"*. What I'm interested to talk more about here though are our strengths of character.

There are now a growing number of fascinating research studies that show that clarifying our personal character strengths & using them more deliberately boosts our ability to face challenges in our lives, solve problems more effectively, relate to others better, and increase our happiness & wellbeing. What's not to like?! And how can we learn more about & use our character strengths more fully? The general blog post I've written entitled *"Strengths of character: head, heart & gut"* is useful, as too is the conference report *"European Positive Psychology conference: 2nd day - culture and use of strengths"*. Even more practically, go to *"The VIA Institute on Character"* website and complete their 10-15 minute survey. I suggest you then bite the bullet and spend \$20 downloading the *"VIA ME! Report"*. Although you can get a basic free report about your survey answers, if you're going to use the results seriously you're much more likely to benefit from the considerably fuller, 20 page or so, *"VIA ME!"* response. There are a number of other reports you can buy, but - at least initially - they probably only add a modest amount to what you'll learn from *"VIA ME!"*. Now here are a dozen suggestions on how you can build on what you're learning (they're numbered, but feel free to "pick and mix"):

1.) Reactions to your report: Once you've read through your *"VIA ME!"* report, jot down your responses. Do the results make sense to you? Do they seem accurate? Are there individual strengths you score highly on that surprise you? Are there strengths you score less on that surprise you? Human beings tend to be so self-critical that they often start to focus on what they see as "weaknesses". Remember the VIA report describes strengths. We have all 24 of the VIA strengths. Some shine out more strongly than others in us. We're all different musical instruments in the human orchestra. Thank heavens we're different - it would make it rather boring & produce so many problems if we were all restricted to playing the music of our lives in the same way. Some of our strengths are "situational", emerging mainly with specific, occasional events. Some repeatedly recur in our lives & feel core to us. Research highlights that it's usually especially beneficial to focus on these "signature strengths". They typically feel authentically you, come naturally to you, and give you energy when you practise them - they feel central to who you are. Which strengths seem to have these "signature" qualities for you? The VIA report gives a good idea of what strengths can be considered "signature" for you. You can also download this simple *"Signature strengths assessment grid"* which will give you a linking snapshot of these core strengths as well.

2.) Learn more about strengths - particularly your signature strengths. Go to www.viacharacter.org website and do a bit of exploring. The drop down *"Character strengths"* menu is a good place to start, and clicking through from there to particular strengths with their explanations, video clips, quotes, and linked songs & movies. If you have an academic frame of mind, then relevant chapters in the still rather wonderful 2004, field-defining, multi-authored textbook *"Character strengths and virtues: a handbook and classification"* still have much to offer. Written for a wider audience, the recent, much lighter, 2015 *"Character strengths matter: how to live a full life"* is a great read. There are also a series of online courses available through the *"VIA institute on character"* website.

3.) Practise "strength spotting"! As I explained in the blog post *"Strengths of character: head, heart & gut"*, recent research shows most of the 24 VIA character strengths can usefully be grouped under three

more general headings. The handout *"The 24 strengths and head/heart/gut"* gives brief descriptions of all the strengths. Use this sheet and throughout the day notice when particular strengths emerge in the words & behaviours of yourself & others. Maybe link this exploration to times of day, so for example at each mealtime you could ask yourself what strengths you've observed in yourself and in others in the previous few hours. Try keeping simple notes. I found it helpful, at the same regular time of day, to take a few moments to think back over the previous 24 hours and jot down 3 strengths that I had observed in myself and others. There's a companion handout you can use to do this. We're so often *"strengths blind"*. This is potentially a really validating lens to look through at ourselves and others. See if you can move from *"strengths blindness"* to *"strengths fluency"*.

4.) Find out about your partner's or friends' key strengths. Here are three thoughts about character strengths & relationships. Firstly, as shown in Lavy & colleagues' recent paper *"My better half: strengths endorsement and deployment in married couples"*, recognising and encouraging use of people's character strengths in their key relationships is associated with increased relationship satisfaction. This seems true for couples, but is likely also to be true for close friendships and other important personal relationships. Knowing, appreciating & encouraging the expression of one's own and the other person's signature strengths makes great sense. And, if there are signature strengths you share, this may well suggest conversations & activities that it may be particularly fulfilling to explore together. Consider encouraging your partner, close friends and maybe even your children to take *the VIA survey* (note the VIA website also provides a child/adolescent survey for those aged 10-17). Whether they just get the basic report or the \$20 VIA ME! report, it is probably worth running their top strengths through the second lens of the *"Signature strengths assessment grid"*. Using the *"Strengths & relationships: similarities & ideals"* sheets list your own & their signature strengths, note how *"core"* each strength seems to be, and estimate too how much your signature strengths overlap & are shared by both of you. Your relationship is likely to benefit by knowing, appreciating & encouraging the other's key strengths. It is also likely to benefit if you note key strength overlaps and you come up with shared activities & interests that make use of these overlaps (you can come up with ideas about this on the second page of the *"... similarities & ideals"* sheets. A second potentially helpful insight is to note lessons from Rusbult et al's fascinating paper *"The part of me that you bring out: ideal similarity and the Michelangelo phenomenon"* with its abstract commenting *"This work examines the Michelangelo phenomenon, an interpersonal model of the means by which people move closer to (vs. further from) their ideal selves. The authors propose that partner similarity - similarity to the ideal self, in particular - plays an important role in this process ... they observed consistent evidence that when partners possess key elements of one another's ideal selves, each person affirms the other by eliciting important aspects of the other's ideals, each person moves closer to his or her ideal self, and couple well-being is enhanced."* So the relevant sections on *"... similarities & ideals"* sheets can be used to encourage this inspiring & learning process. Yeats noted this when he wrote about how a friend is someone who sees the potential in you and helps you to live it. The third comment extends the Michelangelo lessons to our broader social networks. Birds of a feather not only flock together, but also help each other shine with the feathers that matter to them. For more on this see the posts *"Cooperative behaviour cascades in social networks"*, *"Be the change you want to see in the world"* and *"Friendship: science, art & gratitude"*.

5.) Writing exercise: Choose one of your central, signature strengths and write about it. Here's a sheet you can use for the writing. Research on self-affirmation theory in particular has highlighted how this simple exercise can produce impressively rapid & long-lasting benefits - see, for example, the fascinating review paper *"The psychology of change: self-affirmation and social psychological intervention"* (and *here's a link* to a 24 minute video on this important research). Particularly if you're under a good deal of stress, there may be value in writing about an interpersonal (self-transcendent) strength like *Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence, Fairness & Gratitude* - see *"Two types of value-affirmation: Implications for self-control following social exclusion"* and *"Social motivation: Costs and benefits of selfishness and otherishness"*. Try writing for about 15 minutes, describing how the strength you have chosen has been important over the course of your life. Maybe too give one or two more detailed memories which illustrate times in your life when the strength has been especially evident. This kind of writing can be repeated with the same strength or with another one. It often produces rapid easing of stress both psychologically and biochemically (with significant decreases in circulating adrenaline & cortisol). It can also support better behavioural outcomes, and the benefits may still be measurable months after the intervention. For a more extensive development of these ideas, see the three linked blog posts beginning with *"Therapeutic writing & speaking: inspiration from values (background information)"*.
