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# Character Strengths Intervention Cards

50 Cards With Instruction Booklet

With a Foreword by Ryan M. Niemiec

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## Foreword

If you are looking for character strengths cards, then these are the ones! They are a colorful tool for integrating into coaching and therapy sessions and homework. The cards are insightful, user-friendly, and ready-for-impact – a tangible resource to help clients build character strengths fluency, catalyze exploration, and set clients on a trajectory of strengths application for building well-being, enhancing relationships, and managing stress.

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## Introduction

This set of Character Strength Intervention Cards is an invaluable tool for practitioners working with individuals or groups in a variety of settings (whether training, coaching, therapy, HR development, or education) to understand what character strengths are and how to use them in their daily lives. The cards are based on the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues. People can also use the cards on their own for homework practice as well as simply for self-development. For ease of use, we shall refer to “clients” throughout the booklet.

Research shows that using and increasing use of character strengths is associated with greater well-being, better work performance, and work engagement, stronger relationships, and an improved self-esteem. The 24 character strengths cards are a simple way to make strengths more tangible. They can serve as a tool to train clients to learn the language of character strengths and to develop a strength-based, appreciative outlook on life. Not by ignoring the negative, but by appreciating what is good and by looking for opportunities to grow based on personal strengths. Negative aspects should not be ignored, but by bringing character strengths into conversations about problems you can offer your clients an alternative approach to viewing and solving these difficulties.

### People Using the Cards on Their Own

If you would like to use the cards to work on your own strengths, you can start right away. Read the information cards in the set (with the dark blue border) which introduce you to the VIA character strengths.

Read the section “Using the Character Strengths Cards” and the section on the aware–explore–apply model on page 8 in this booklet to find out more about character strengths and how you can increase the use of your own strengths. Take the VIA survey ([www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)), find your signature strengths cards, and you can then go on to try out some of the interventions. *Note.* This booklet is directed at practitioners. Some people will feel comfortable working with the cards on their own. We do recommend that people work with a qualified therapist/coach if they are experiencing difficulties.

## Practitioners Using the Cards

If you are a practitioner, use the cards to help your clients discover and improve their personal strengths or the strengths of a team or group. The interventions are designed to help your clients become (more) aware of strengths, learn about them, and use them more often and more effectively. Character strengths are not just a tool to improve performance or happiness; actively being aware of them and applying their use on a daily basis can take the form of a gateway for people to discover a new approach to life that provides them with more meaning and a sense of a higher purpose in life.

Whether you are a practitioner working with clients or you are using the cards for yourself, we hope these cards help you explore the wonderful world of character strengths!

## Types of Cards

The cards are in full color with icons so the user can easily identify the different types of cards in the set.

<b>Wisdom</b>	<b>Justice</b>
Creativity	Teamwork
Curiosity	Fairness
Judgment	Leadership
Love of learning	<b>Temperance</b>
Perspective	Forgiveness
<b>Courage</b>	Humility
Bravery	Prudence
Persistence	Self-regulation
Honesty	<b>Transcendence</b>
<b>Zeal</b>	Appreciation of beauty and excellence
<b>Humility</b>	Gratitude
Love	Hope
Kindness	Humor
Social intelligence	Spirituality

**Recommended Reading**

Niemiec, R. M. (2014). *Mindfulness and character strengths: A practical guide to flourishing*. Boston, MA: Hogrefe.

Niemiec, R. M. (2018). *Character strengths interventions: A field guide for practitioners*. Boston, MA: Hogrefe.

Niemiec, R.M., & McGrath, R.E. (2019). *The power of character strengths: Appreciate and ignite your positive personality*. Cincinnati, OH: VIA Institute on Character.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press and Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

4 information cards with a dark blue border.

**Virtue Wisdom**

Wisdom is the virtue that's about knowledge, both gaining and applying it. It's not IQ. The character strengths associated with wisdom are cognitive strengths. People with this virtue value self-development, learning, and understanding.

Character strengths associated with this virtue: creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective

- Who do you think of when you think about wisdom?
- What do you appreciate about wisdom?
- What behavior do people with wisdom show?
- Why is wisdom important to you?

6 virtue cards: Each has its own color with the icons of the associated character strengths on the back.

**Honesty**

- ☞ You are honest, authentic, and act with integrity. You tell the truth and present yourself as who you are. You take responsibility for your own actions and feelings and you are open about it. You're not pretending to be something that you are not.
- ☞ You're always honest, without consideration for other people's feelings. You can come across as rude. You can become overly righteous.
- ☞ You can come over as phony, unreal, withholding your feelings and thoughts.

24 character strength cards: The front has the color of the associated virtue and the 24 character strength icons are on the back. The optimal use and an example of overuse and underuse of the character strength are listed on each card.

**Strengths Opportunities**

**Develop strengths**

We can view strengths that energize us but that we don't use often as opportunities. The same goes for strengths that we possess but others don't notice that often. In this intervention you can work on realizing these strengths.

1. Lay out the strengths cards that you think are strengths with opportunities.
2. Take the first card that you chose and answer the following questions:
  - When have you already used this strength?
  - Which challenges and tasks do you have generally at the moment (not in connection with this strength)?

- How can you use this strength with that task/challenge? Generate different ideas.
- Pick one way to apply your strength: How are you going to do that exactly? Make it specific.

3. Repeat the questions for each of the strengths. Next, decide which actions you will take and what the first action will be.
4. Plan times for reflecting and evaluating the use of these strengths: When? With whom? You might choose an appreciative question for reflection like, "In what ways have I grown in this strength?"

16 intervention cards are identified by the dumbbell icon and a gray border, and the goal of the intervention is also listed (see target icon).

# Using the Character Strengths Cards

## The VIA Character Strengths

In 1998 Martin Seligman chose positive psychology as the theme for his term of presidency of the American Psychological Association. Under the guidance of the VIA Institute on Character (a global non-profit organization), Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson lead an extensive study with over 50 participating scientists from around the world to create a universal language to talk about what is best in people. The result was a list of 24 character strengths based on interviews, the works of philosophers, religious texts, and psychological research. These character strengths were found to be appreciated all over the world. VIA created a free online survey measuring the 24 character strengths, which now has now been taken by over 8 million users in 41 languages.

## Completing the VIA Survey

It is recommended that both practitioners and clients complete the VIA Survey ([www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)) before using the intervention cards. Practitioners who are aware of their character strengths can not only use their signature strengths to optimize their work with clients, they can also use their own stories to illustrate strengths use to clients. You and your clients can use the Survey results to discover more about your strengths. Take a flexible approach, using the outcomes as a well-studied and useful starting point in this exploration process. It is interesting to repeat the Survey at regular intervals. Although our signature character strengths can be stable, they can and do change.

## Signature Strengths

Each human being possesses each of the 24 character strengths. However, some of these strengths may shape who we are more than others: These are our signature strengths. Research suggests that people have about five signature strengths. The results of the VIA Survey will list the character strengths in rank order. The VIA Institute names three key features that can help us recognize our signature strengths (Niemi, 2018):

- **Essential:** Our signature strengths feel like an essential part of who we are. These strengths exemplify your good traits. People might use them to describe us.



*Subtract a Signature Strength* intervention helps us reflect on how essential our signature strengths are for us.

- **Effortless:** When we use our signature strengths, it feels effortless. Doing things this way just comes to us naturally. Having a sense of flow when using a strength is a good indicator that we're applying a signature strength.



*Appreciative Interview* intervention helps us to discover moments when we were doing things without effort.

- **Energizing:** When we act from our signature strengths, it gives us energy. We often experience positive emotions, we feel satisfied or even thrilled. Using our signature strengths makes us feel energetic enough to do more.



*Discover Your Strengths* intervention helps us to find these energizing strengths.

## Working With Clients on Character Strengths

For people new to the language of strengths, it might be hard to keep track of all the names and definitions. The cognitive workload can be an obstacle in working with strengths. That's why we developed this set. The cards facilitate learning the language of the 24 character strengths and 6 virtues so that clients find the words for what they experience.

Use the cards to physically remind the client of their signature strengths or of the character strengths in general. You can keep them on the table during all kinds of conversations: from performance reviews to coaching sessions to team meetings. Remember, having a signature strength of creativity doesn't mean a person always comes up with new ideas. Neither does it mean a person is not capable of thinking critically, even when that strength is number 24. Remember, every human being has all 24 character strengths and each of these strengths is important.

Often people get focused on increasing lower strengths, but there are good reasons to work on signature strengths as well. Research suggests that working on signature strengths is more effective in creating lasting positive impact. As a practitioner, take notice that conversations about signature strengths should not just be rational stories. When people are truly working with and talking about their signature strengths, you often see this reflected in emotions and body posture.

## Ideas for Using the Character Strength Cards

Here are some short examples illustrating using the strengths cards:

- Peter is having difficulties finding a new job: He's feeling insecure and doesn't know where to start. By taking his signature strengths

as a starting point, he learns to deal with these obstacles in a way that fits him. He uses his social intelligence to ask friends for advice and support and his honesty to be true to himself to explore what job he would find interesting and exciting to do.

- Deborah feels disengaged in life and work. With her signature strengths on the table, she's talking about the positive moments in her daily life. The strengths cards help her to explore what exactly is energizing. She feels more engaged in those moments when she can use her creativity and when there's room for her strength of hope.
- Michael and Caroline are having marital troubles. The strengths cards help them to become aware of their difficulties (overusing or underusing certain strengths, for example) as well as appreciating the positive in these difficulties. What's more, their strengths might also offer clues how to deal with these situations in a better way.
- As a coach or therapist, you can use the cards to practice strengths spotting in your clients. Naming and explaining the strengths revealed in the stories of your client, might help them to reframe problematic situations.
- Ask clients to keep the cards handy while watching films or reading fiction. They could focus on spotting strengths in a particular character in a film or book, or give a film an overall rating for its depiction of particular strengths or virtues.

## Using and Adapting the Intervention Cards

Each of the intervention cards guide the client(s) step by step through the exercise, sometimes listing prompts or questions to be asked. There are additional sections on some of the cards offering variations to the exercise, optional elements, tips, examples, or suggestions of “What’s next?” The interventions all have goals stated on them (see target icon).

### Selecting the Right Intervention

While there is no perfect way of establishing the goals of a client, it is important that the intervention selected is of use to the client. So, what is the goal of the client? And how can character strengths help in attaining that goal?

People improve or build upon their strengths by following four steps: aware, explore, apply, maintain (Niemiec, 2018). Practitioners can help their clients by framing their work and selecting the associated card goal(s) to work towards these steps.

- **Aware:** First of all, increase self-knowledge by becoming more aware of (signature) strengths. A client firstly needs to learn the language of character strengths. Ideally, they learn to know what their signature strengths are and can recognize strengths in others.



Discover Strengths interventions

- **Explore:** With the client knowing what strengths they possess, exploring these strengths is the logical next step. Help your client to get a deeper understanding of what their strengths mean. How

do these strengths look like in action? Are the strengths essential, effortless, and energizing?

### Discover Strengths and Appreciate Strengths interventions

- **Apply:** Next, it is time to bring the insights into action. How can a client act upon their strengths? They might want to apply a specific strength more often. Watch out for possibly sugarcoating problem-oriented talk; for example, a perfectionistic client who suggests using his social intelligence to gauge his work level, might just be perpetuating his difficulties. Search for ways to build on strengths and use the power and energy they generate.

### Apply Strengths, Balance Strengths Use, and Develop Strengths interventions

- **Maintain:** The fourth step is often skipped, but nonetheless important for lasting change. Working on a change might generate a certain level of excitement and focus that helps clients to keep up their good intentions. Working on keeping up the strengths use, regular maintenance and being aware of new opportunities and pitfalls will help your clients to continue working from their strengths. You can regularly restart the aware–explore–apply steps, work on strengths balance every now and then, or build strengths habits.

### All interventions

Appreciating strengths can be helpful in building self-esteem or improving relationships between people. Developing strengths may lead to more use of signature strengths, and thereby increase engagement and well-being. Balancing strengths use might help clients to deal with difficult situations, to deal with personal pitfalls, or to improve relationships. Jobcrafting and using strengths at work can

help people find more work engagement or help them deal with work stress more positively.

## Tailoring the Interventions

When you've selected an intervention, you can think about how you want to let your client carry out the exercise. Will you guide your client through it? Could it be a useful exercise for homework? Is it for an individual client or do you want to use the intervention in a workshop or team session? Here is a list of additional tips for carrying out the interventions:

- **Know your goal:** When working with clients with strengths, it might be helpful to explain why you work this way. Some people might mistrust any intervention that doesn't focus on their problem. Explain that working from strengths has been shown to be very effective (read up on the research so you can back this up!). Also, don't try to ignore or avoid all the negatives. Instead, help clients to search for ways of overcoming or accepting their problems with the use of their signature strengths. Another pitfall that sometimes shows up, for example in managers, is to have strictly instrumental goals: more happiness, higher work performance, etc. Character strengths aren't just a tool to improve performance or happiness. More than just the *means* to an end, they might well prove to represent a higher purpose for many people. That said, research does show that well-being and performance do increase when people are using their signature strengths more often.
- **Choose your interventions:** When your client is familiar with their strengths, you can more freely select interventions to work on their goals instead of only following the aware-explore-apply method. The interventions all have goals stated on them that might be of interest to your client. However, you can also work the

other way around: what are your client's goals? And do you see any links with the interventions?

- **Let clients guide each other:** When working one on one, you can guide an individual through an intervention. However, with proper instructions, clients can easily use most of the interventions independently. For example, the Appreciative Interview on strengths is something that almost everyone can start on right away, without too much knowledge of strengths. Clients that do such interventions with each other often show more energy and ownership. You might want to test out the instructions on some people beforehand.
- **Aiming at the individual or the team:** Most interventions are aimed at individual strengths. Since signature strengths are personal, this seems logical. However, you can have meaningful conversations about team strengths. Letting team members work on team signature strengths, team overuse and underuse, or strengths use in the team might be helpful in team building and improving work performance and well-being in any team. You might want to adapt interventions so team (or family) members can do the exercise as a group. Take note however that individual strengths will come through all these conversations as well. Feeding back individual outcomes to a team might be a great way of creating a better understanding between team members.

An important theme in groups is that of psychological safety, especially with the interventions dealing with under-/overuse or difficult situations. This information is personal, so you need to ensure that the team is safe enough to have such conversations together. With some interventions it might be a good idea to let people do the more personal and sensitive work in pairs first. Only those who feel confident enough, can then report back to the complete group.

You can also consider allowing other people to give a client input for some interventions. For example, the feedback from colleagues or a partner who have played a role in a given situation can be useful for the intervention Know When You're Overusing a Strength. This would obviously necessitate clear guidelines for respectfully and carefully offering someone else feedback on their overuse.

- **Homework or guided work:** Some exercises lend themselves well for homework exercises (e.g., Turn Your Strengths Other-Oriented or Strengths Spotting), others might be more effective when the client is guided through the exercise (e.g., Becoming Aware of Other People's Strengths). Letting the client work out the intervention on their own might appeal to their own motivation and help build up their skills in working with their signature strengths. When guided by a practitioner, a client might learn more, but also lean back a little. The advantage of letting clients do an exercise on their own is that they can immediately apply it in daily life. Before handing out an intervention for homework, you need to first consider whether the client is proficient enough in spotting and using strengths to complete that particular homework activity. If yes, then you also need to make sure that the instructions are clear enough for clients so that they know exactly what they need to do.

## Acknowledgments

Creating this card set has been a journey in itself. We're grateful to have had the help of some wonderful people along the way.

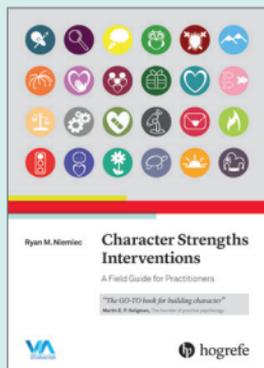
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Anouk van den Berg and Matthijs Steeneveld

# “The GO-TO book for building character”

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



Ryan M. Niemiec

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**The definitive, practical handbook on positive psychology and character strengths for practitioners working in coaching, psychology, education, and business!**

Working with client's (and our own) character strengths boosts well-being, fosters resilience, improves relationships, and helps create a strong, supportive culture. This unique guide brings together the vast experience of the author with the science and practice of positive psychology in such a way that both new and experienced practitioners will benefit. With this goldmine of science-based applications, you'll be able to immediately bring the science of well-being into action!

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