



Ryan M. Niemiec

Character Strengths Interventions

A Field Guide for Practitioners

“The GO-TO book for building character”

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

VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

Virtue of Wisdom

Creativity: Original, adaptive, ingenuity, seeing and doing things in different ways
Curiosity: Interest, novelty-seeking, exploration, openness to experience
Judgment: Critical thinking, thinking through all sides, not jumping to conclusions
Love of Learning: Mastering new skills & topics, systematically adding to knowledge
Perspective: Wisdom, providing wise counsel, taking the big picture view

Virtue of Courage

Bravery: Valor, not shrinking from threat or challenge, facing fears, speaking up for what's right
Perseverance: Persistence, industry, finishing what one starts, overcoming obstacles
Honesty: Authenticity, being true to oneself, sincerity without pretense, integrity
Zest: Vitality, enthusiasm for life, vigor, energy, not doing things half-heartedly

Virtue of Humanity

Love: Both loving and being loved, valuing close relations with others, genuine warmth
Kindness: Generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruism, doing for others
Social Intelligence: Emotional intelligence, aware of the motives/feelings of self/others, knowing what makes other people tick

Virtue of Justice

Teamwork: Citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, contributing to a group effort
Fairness: Adhering to principles of justice, not letting feelings bias decisions, equal opportunity for all
Leadership: Organizing group activities to get things done, positively influencing others

Virtue of Temperance

Forgiveness: Mercy, accepting others' shortcomings, giving people a second chance, letting go of hurt when wronged.
Humility: Modesty, letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves
Prudence: Careful about one's choices, cautious, not taking undue risks
Self-Regulation: Self-control, disciplined, managing impulses, emotions, and vices

Virtue of Transcendence

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence: Awe and wonder for beauty, admiration for skill/excellence, elevation for moral beauty
Gratitude: Thankful for the good, expressing thanks, feeling blessed
Hope: Optimism, positive future-mindedness, expecting the best & working to achieve it
Humor: Playfulness, bringing smiles to others, lighthearted – seeing the lighter side
Spirituality: Connecting with the sacred, purpose, meaning, faith, religiousness

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Character Strengths Interventions

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About the Author

Dr. Ryan M. Niemiec, is Education Director of the VIA Institute on Character, a nonprofit organization in Cincinnati, Ohio that is viewed as the global leader in advancing the science and practice of character strengths. Ryan is author of several books, including *Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A Practical Guide to Flourishing*, and coauthor of *Positive Psychology at the Movies* and *Movies and Mental Illness*. Ryan is an award-winning psychologist, certified coach, international workshop leader, and is adjunct professor at Xavier University, University of Pennsylvania, and a visiting lecturer at several other institutions.

Ryan develops (or codevelops) VIA's courses, reports, and programs and applies strengths as the centerpiece of Character Strengths Coaching. At VIA, he helps professionals in counseling, coaching, business, disability, and education around the world apply character strengths, personally and professionally in their work. He has published over 60 peer-reviewed or invited articles/chapters on character strengths, mindfulness, and related topics. He has been an associate editor or consulting editor for four scholarly journals, including the APA journal *PsycCRITIQUES* since its inception in 2004. He is especially interested in the intersection of character strengths with mindfulness, savoring, resilience, intellectual/developmental disability, and health promotion.

In 2014, Ryan reached a feat of delivering over 100 presentations on character strengths within 1 year. In 2015, he presented a national workshop tour across Australia, at universities in Iceland and Spain, and gave the Rex J. Lipman Fellow address at St. Peter's College in Adelaide, Australia. He's been an invited presenter or keynote at five leading positive psychology conferences. He was awarded Fellow of the International Positive Psychology Association in 2017.

Over the last 15 years, Ryan has been a leader in the mindfulness community, leading hundreds of mindfulness groups for various audiences and has delivered keynotes, retreats, and workshops on character strengths and mindfulness. He's the creator of the evidence-based mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP) program, the first structured program for building character strengths. Ryan adapted MBSP as a track on the web/app-based platform Happify, called "Awaken Your Potential."

On a personal level, Ryan's signature strengths are hope, love, curiosity, fairness, honesty, perspective, and appreciation of beauty. He enjoys spending quality time with his wife and three children, traveling, playing basketball, watching positive psychology movies (and *The Walking Dead*), following Michigan State University athletics, playing online chess, and collecting Pez dispensers and komodo dragon and stingray figures.

Follow Ryan through social media:

- Ryan's blog on Psychology Today is called "What Matters Most?"
- LinkedIn: ryanVIA
- Twitter: @ryanVIA
- TEDx talk: Search "Ryan Niemiec" and "TEDx"

Character Strengths Interventions

A Field Guide for Practitioners

Ryan M. Niemiec



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USA: Hogrefe Publishing, Customer Services Department,
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Praise for the Book

The GO-TO book for building character.

Martin E. P. Seligman, PhD, Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology, and Director of Positive Psychology Center at University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

As inspiring as it is practical. The practical applications of this holistic approach to human behavior are dizzying. This guide to positive psychology is tailor-made for leaders, and is a must-have book that will inspire any leader!

Marshall Goldsmith, PhD, The Thinkers 50 #1 Leadership Thinker in the World, and international bestselling author and editor of 35 books including What Got You Here Won't Get You There and Triggers.

Ryan Niemiec takes one of the most important scientific tools in modern psychology for improving our well-being and makes that research come to life in a practical way for practitioners, parents, and coaches. In challenging times, we each desperately need to know, hone, and utilize our unique strengths to tip this world toward hope, health and happiness.

Shawn Achor, PhD, New York Times bestselling author of The Happiness Advantage

Dr. Niemiec – the world authority on character strengths – has masterfully married science with practice in this book which provides practitioners with a comprehensive field guide of character strengths interventions. This book guides practitioners in the importance of understanding context to ensure the right intervention is used for the right reason with the right person. It is thought-provoking and hope-promoting. The raft of character strength interventions are clearly explained and the handouts are a particularly useful resource. This is a must-have book for anyone doing work with character strengths!

Lea Waters, PhD, President of International Positive Psychology Association; Gerry Higgins Chair at Centre for Positive Psychology, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Australia

I'm so glad you wrote this book! Very important work. This book provides an invaluable guide for teachers and parents, consultants and managers – in fact, for anyone passionate about human flourishing.

Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, Bestselling author of Happier and founder of Happier.TV

For the reader who seeks to understand why Harvard's Howard Gardner once said that *the science of human character strengths* is the most important development in psychology over the past half century my advice is: Begin with this book. Ryan Niemiec's brilliantly conceived "strengths interventions" brings it to life and helped me see the vast vistas ahead with character strengths psychology—for revolutionizing everything from early childhood education to leadership development in business, government, and civil society.

David L. Cooperrider, PhD, Distinguished University Professor at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH

The gap between theory and practice of strengths has now been officially closed – all you need to do is read this book and you could easily apply strengths interventions and exercises

for yourself, clients, or research. With the inspiring Dr. Ryan Niemiec navigating this boat of applied strengths you simply can't go wrong – read the book and unleash the super-powers of Strengths.

Itai Ivtzan, PhD, Director of Masters in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) at University of East London, UK

Sufficient scientific research has accumulated such that it cannot be denied, recognizing, appreciating, and harnessing strengths in yourself and other people, is one of the most efficient and effective paths to a life of success and fulfillment. What has been missing is a manifesto on HOW to do this. In your hands is the most comprehensive account to date.

Todd Kashdan, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Senior Scientist at the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA; Author of The Upside of Your Dark Side

This book is a wonderful resource for clinicians or coaches who want to incorporate a strengths-based approach into their work in a variety of settings. Built around the strengths and virtues of the VIA Classification, this book is comprehensive, based on evidence when available, and remarkably practical. I think it will be essential reading for anyone interested in a strengths-based approach to intervention.

Robert McGrath, PhD, Professor at School of Psychology, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ; Senior Scientist at VIA Institute.

Ryan Niemiec's new book is an all in one place resource for those interested in theory, research, and application of character strengths. Research on character strengths and signature strengths have matured and we know that their use in interventions is effective. Therefore, it is time to disseminate the research-informed, best practices in applied areas. Being the first of its kind and written by the Education Director of the global leader in the science and practice of character, this book will have a long shelf life.

Willibald Ruch, PhD, Professor of Psychology at University of Zurich, Switzerland; Founder and President of Swiss Positive Psychology Association; Senior Scientist at VIA Institute.

I just finished reading Ryan Niemiec's *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners* and I had to stop for few minutes to take in and savor the feat he has accomplished. His book truly is a field guide. As someone who deeply knows and clearly loves the exciting territory of character strengths, Ryan expertly guides us so we can see the wonders that can be found there, shares its history, warns us about possible pitfalls, and invites us to explore and enjoy its riches. And we can even take them home with us, thanks to Ryan's generosity in sharing so many resources that he has created and compiled.

He sees strength practitioners as gardeners who can't – and shouldn't try to – “mold” their clients, but rather, can create optimal conditions for growth and development. I believe that Ryan's own strengths of love, hope, perspective and appreciation of beauty may have created the conditions for the flowering of this wonderful work, and I am grateful for it.

Margarita Tarragona, PhD, Director of PositivaMente; Honorary Fellow of the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne, Australia

Contents

Dedication	IX
Foreword	XI
Preface	XIII
Acknowledgements	XVII
Chapter 1 Foundations of Strengths-Based Practice: Seven Core Concepts of the Science of Character	1
Chapter 2 Signature Strengths: Research and Practice	22
Chapter 3 Practice Essentials: Six Integration Strategies for a Strengths-Based Practice	46
Chapter 4 Behavioral Traps, Misconceptions, and Strategies	76
Chapter 5 Advanced Issues in Applying Character Strengths	94
Chapter 6 Character Strength Spotlights: 24 Practitioner-Friendly Handouts	119
Chapter 7 How to Apply Character Strengths Interventions	146
Chapter 8 Research-Based Interventions for Character Strengths	156
Chapter 9 Afterword	242
References	244
Appendix A Background on the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and the VIA Survey	274
Appendix B Checklist for Strengths-Based Practitioners	279
Appendix C A Sampling of Strengths-Based Models	280
Appendix D Frequently Asked Questions About Character Strengths	281
Appendix E Comparison of VIA Survey with StrengthsFinder (Gallup) and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)	287
Appendix F Flagship Papers on Character Strengths	288
Appendix G 10 Character Strengths Concepts and Applications in Specific Movies	290
Appendix H About the VIA Institute on Character	292
Index	293

Dedication

For

R⁴ x M

Rachelle

Rhys

Ryland

Maya

I treasure the uniqueness of each of you which has an exponential effect
on me and our family synergy.

Foreword

Let's go straight to the bottom line: Dr. Ryan Niemiec is the world's foremost authority on the science, practice, and teaching of character strengths, and, with this book, he summarizes in clear and practical terms what practitioners need to know to put this new knowledge to work for themselves and their clients. In my opinion, this book brings to practitioners the most important insights into actualizing positive human potential since the insights of cognitive psychology! Character strength science is the backbone of a "new" psychology – one focused on the array of beautiful psychological characteristics with which all human beings have been imbued – characteristics that can be used to help each and every one of us live our lives most fully, both individually and collectively.

In 1999, Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, then 1 year post-President of the American Psychological Association, began writing about the need for the science of psychology to augment its efforts to understand and remediate psychological suffering with developing scientific knowledge about "the plus side" of the human experience – how we can construct lives with positive emotions, relationships, and achievements along with high degrees of engagement and meaning. In other words, he made a call to the profession of psychology to learn about the processes that lead to human flourishing. He envisioned efforts to understand positive emotions, positive psychological characteristics, and positive organizations, with positive characteristics being "the backbone" of this new "positive psychology." As a clinical psychologist and president of a philanthropic foundation, I responded to his call to the field. To make a long story short, Dr. Seligman and I worked together to conceive of a 3-year project to create the two basic tools any new scientific effort requires – an intellectual framework and language of what we want to understand, and tools of measurement. When asked to identify the most qualified person in the world to colead this effort, Dr. Seligman identified, without hesitation, Dr. Christopher Peterson of the University of Michigan. We fortunately were able to recruit Dr. Peterson for a full, 3-year hiatus from his university responsibilities to focus 100% on this project.

As it is said, the rest is history! Drs. Seligman and Peterson, with input from 55 noted scholars and positive youth development practitioners, embarked on the most comprehensive and robust effort ever to understand what's best about human beings and how we build full and flourishing lives for ourselves and others. The work was presented in a groundbreaking publication in 2004 entitled *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. That book describes the intellectual foundation for the VIA Classification – a classification of 24 universal psychological characteristics – along with introducing the strategies for measuring these characteristics in adults and youth. At the same time, the VIA Institute on Character made the VIA Surveys available for free on its website, and, without any marketing promotions, after about a year over 1 million people from around the world had found and taken a VIA Survey! During the period of the next few years, people continued flocking to the site to discover their character strengths, positive psychology journals and associations took form, and it became apparent that the new subdiscipline of positive psychology had taken root and was here to stay. Fast-forward to today and over 5 million people from every country in the world have taken a VIA Survey which is currently translated into 37 languages, and there are over 300 scientific publications relating to the Survey in professional journals.

Dr. Niemiec was the one of the first psychologists to jump into this work with both feet. He coauthored a book on movies and character strengths in 2008 with Danny Wedding, and then became the first employee of the VIA Institute after the hiring of an executive director. When I first interviewed Dr. Niemiec, he was moving to Cincinnati, Ohio where the VIA Institute resides, and was looking for employment. VIA did not yet have the capacity to hire him. When I asked how long he could wait for a position to open I recall his answer: "Working for VIA would be a dream job, and for that, I would wait forever!" Unbelievably, his enthusiasm for the work has only

grown and he has been *the* major teacher of this work across the globe. Additionally, he has continued to merge his personal interests with the science, having published *Mindfulness and Character Strengths* in 2014, and creating the related mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP) program. As a central figure with the VIA Institute, Dr. Niemiec has been deeply involved with the Institute's ever evolving thinking about the potential of this important work for helping to tip humanity towards its better nature. With this book, he shares the most current thinking and research-to-date on such topics as signature strengths, situational (phasic) strengths, dynamics between strengths, overuse and underuse, and strengths blindness, among others.

So, what's the big deal about character strengths? As a psychotherapist who has spent thousands of hours across 15+ years sitting with people trying to help them move their lives forward, I can say that I wish I had the advantage of this knowledge when I was doing that work. Practitioners are always needing tools. When Skinner uncovered the processes by which contingency schedules of reinforcement affect human behavior, it provided tools for practitioners wanting to help clients change behaviors. When Ellis, Beck, and Seligman – the giants of cognitive psychology – uncovered processes by which different thought forms affect emotions and behavior, it provided practitioners with strategies for modifying thinking in order to modify unwanted feelings and associated maladaptive behaviors. In this vein, the uncovering of the corner of the human psyche where the 24 strengths of character reside provides practitioners with levers that can be pulled to activate achievement, enhance well-being, and elevate others towards becoming their best.

Let me be more specific. If a couple presents at a practice with relationship problems, now a therapist can ask them to take the VIA Survey, discuss their use of strengths with each other, and structure a relationship enhancing process for recognizing and appreciating the strengths in their partner on a regular basis. If a person wants to improve their engagement and satisfaction at work, now a manager or counselor can create a program by which they have the client deliberately apply their top strengths of character in their jobs on an ongoing basis and to select roles at work that match best with who they are. Now, when a parent or teacher wants to help a child flourish, they can focus on recognizing the character strengths in their child as they are revealed, nurture those strengths, and help the child develop their self-concept – their personal narrative - around their strengths of character. Now, psychotherapists can build their relationships with clients from the point of assessing what's strong vs what's wrong. The emerging applications of character strengths seems to be nearly endless, and it is only a very young field!

In this book, Dr. Niemiec organizes and describes dozens of specific applications that have various amounts of supporting evidence. Unlike any other book of its kind, this book distinguishes itself by clarifying vs. obfuscating what kind of evidence actually exists at the time of publication for each of the specified applications. While some applications have replicated evidence from double-blind, placebo-controlled studies, others have more anecdotal evidence. Practitioners can select applications with full knowledge of what the level of evidentiary support is and, of course, what seems relevant to their client. And, as with any field of practice, it is part-art and part-science. So, astute practitioners can use the content of the book to stimulate their own adaptations to tailor interventions as they see fit.

This book opens up the practice field of character strength psychology. The genius of the VIA work of Peterson and Seligman is not so much that it is a listing of important psychological characteristics, but more so that it uncovers a psychological *system* that has dynamics that are only beginning to become understood. Dr. Niemiec brings us up to date on what we know about that system, and I am confident that he will remain our leading guide into the future as more and more becomes discovered about how we all can actualize our highest potentials together through the application of our character strengths!

Neal H. Mayerson, PhD
Chairman of VIA Institute on Character

Preface

In 2004, something groundbreaking took place in the field of social sciences. For the first time in history, a cross-cultural, common language describing the best qualities in human beings was born – the VIA classification of strengths and virtues. A new science of human character had arrived. Along with it, a measure (test) of positive traits was being dispersed freely around the globe. The practical ramifications of this emerging work have been substantial. It has been regarded as the most or one of the most wide-reaching efforts in positive psychology, and, by Harvard scientist and multiple intelligences theorist Howard Gardner, as one of the most important initiatives in psychology in the last century.

Meanwhile, in 2004, I was busy practicing as a clinical psychologist in St. Louis, working every day in clinical pain management, a psychology and religion program, and a general outpatient clinic, assisting people in relieving their suffering and trying to help them find mental, physical, social, and spiritual health along the way. I came across this VIA classification by Peterson and Seligman. I was lured in, enamored by its holistic nature. After a short courtship, I was in love. I began planning my future. This was to begin by using the classification to study movies with a positive lens (Niemic & Wedding, 2014) as my colleague and I had already done this from a psychopathology lens (see Wedding & Niemic, 2014). My study led me to practice with the VIA classification with my clients – to experiment, to question, to wonder, to appreciate. A couple short years later my wife and I decided to move to Cincinnati, which would be closer to our families of origin. As we engaged in the process, I came to realize that the VIA Institute on Character (formerly referred to as Values in Action Institute), the nonprofit that championed the entire project that culminated in this common language and measurement tool, had its headquarters in the city I was moving to. Do you believe in synchronicity?

A Unique Role

Neal Mayerson recalls that when I met with him and Donna Mayerson over breakfast discussing a potential job at the VIA Institute, he asked me how long I was willing to wait for a position at VIA. Even though my wife and I were already in the process of moving to Cincinnati and crunched for work, I spoke from the heart, “For that job, I’d be willing to wait forever.”

Fortunately, I did not have to wait that long and I formally started as Education Director at the VIA Institute in March 2009. My task, according to Neal, was simple: aggregate and disseminate. He and the VIA Institute wanted me to: (a) gather all the latest research and best practices on character strengths or relating to character strengths – connect with scientists and pioneering practitioners in positive psychology/character strengths across disciplines to further gather knowledge; (b) give it all back to the positive psychology community – find channels and create outlets to share the research and practice of character strengths to coaches, counselors, managers, educators, and consumers. And so, that has been my work the last 8 years. One could argue that that’s when the writing of this book started.

I would describe my work in accordance with what positive psychology researchers refer to as a “calling,” which means the work is an extension of who you are, a meaningful purpose. And, how could it not be a calling for me? I study and teach on those core qualities that help us understand the human condition – that make us more humane, help us improve ourselves, build up and support others, and contribute to goodness. What could be a better focal point than the focal point that lies deep within us? I’ve gotten spoiled with my work because I talk with others who are either barely getting by in their work, focusing solely on retirement down

the road, or are, at best, content with what they do. I leave such conversations surprised by the lack of meaning people find in their work, but also grateful for the work I am honored to do each day.

Many times I'm asked (by established professionals and by students), "How do I get a job like yours?" I tell them "I have no idea." There's no job like it and few points of comparison. I'm not solely a practitioner or a pure academic. Rather, I'm part-practitioner, part-researcher, part-educator, part-consultant, part-scholar, part-blogger, part-innovator. I tell people I'm an educator-writer-networker-practitioner and, first and foremost, a core VIA staff member on a team of five that takes action each week that is global in scope.

I've had my ear to the ground for over a decade in the field of positive psychology, working closely with thought leaders, researchers, and practitioners. I listen to stories of suffering and stories of success. I am privileged to hear the challenges coaches, psychologists, teachers, and managers face when working without character strengths. In discussing how this science of character strengths might be integrated, a mutual learning effect and virtuous circle unfold that helps me, and hopefully them.

The Science–Practice Gap

Science is slow moving, whereas practice is rapidly moving. This creates a large gap, and the field of positive psychology is particularly vulnerable to this. Graduate and certificate programs in positive psychology are collectively churning out thousands of students in the world each year. Most of these students are practitioners of some kind and therefore want the best practices to offer clients, students, and employees ... and to offer those practices right now! It is striking to contrast this with the pace of science: a typical researcher could be faced with the following scenario:

- In September 2017, a researcher attends a conference and a new idea is catalyzed for an intervention they would like to conduct to boost well-being.
- He/she reflects on this idea for 1 month, and examines the resources they have, resources they need and 6 months later determines the project is feasible.
- He/she proposes the idea to their institution, supervisors, a granting agency, or other decision-makers. 6 months later, he/she gets the green light to pursue the project.
- Luckily, the timing is right and they can begin recruiting subjects in 2 months.
- He/she recruits participants for the study over a 2-month period.
- He/she randomizes the participants into groups and runs a 6-month intervention study and completes it.
- He/she takes 1 month to analyze the data.
- Upon having encouraging and interesting results, he/she takes 6 months to collaboratively write up the data into a paper that could be publishable.
- He/she submits the paper to a journal, following the steps and requirements of the journal being pursued (1 month).
- One month later, the journal's editor sends the paper out to peer reviewers instructing them to review the paper and offer feedback within 4 months.
- The editor receives the feedback at that deadline and takes 1 month to review the paper and this feedback. He/she sends all this feedback to the researcher. It is a rejection with encouragement to resubmit.
- The researcher discusses this feedback with colleagues and they decide to make the changes and resubmit the paper. They do this within 3 months.
- A month later, the editor sends the revised paper back out to the peer-reviewers.

- These reviewers send feedback back to the editor within 3 months and 1 month later the editor sends this information back to the researcher. It is an acceptance, with revision.
- The research team happily makes the final, additional changes and get the again-revised manuscript back to the editor within 1 month. Two months later it is accepted.
- The paper is now officially in-press and it is placed in the journal's queue. It will be published in 12 months.
- The journal releases the paper (electronically) on schedule. The recipients of the journal can now read the paper. It has come out 60 months following the original idea. The date is now September 2022.
- Sadly, the paper has no support from the press or the researcher's institution in terms of marketing, and only a small percentage of people actually read the article, despite the positive results for this new intervention. It is, however, archived in several online databases.

Five years! These numbers vary – more or less – based on the individual researcher, the institution, their home country, and the journal submitted to. Many additional obstacles and steps will be at play for some researchers such as a lack of good results, a lack or loss of funding, flaws in the design that cause the study to cease, continued rejection from journals, etc.

As a point of comparison, here's the typical scenario for the everyday practitioner:

- In September 2017, a practitioner takes a new workshop on character strengths.
- The next day, they look at their schedule and see that eight clients, all of whom are suffering in life, need their help. With the first client they see, they weave a character strengths intervention into their existing approach to help them.

The contrast here – 5 years versus 1 day – is stark. The numbers may shift on either side – for example, some journals have a much quicker turnaround process especially those that are online, and some practitioners will discern, reflect, read, and discuss new ideas for a considerable amount of time before applying. But the contrast remains.

Considering this gap, a bridge is needed in the field of character science. This book intends to contribute to that bridge – true to VIA's namesake – as a bridge to support and inform both the science and practice.

Why Now?

Too many times I would offer a practical workshop or lecture on character strengths and people came up to me afterward and said – this was great, how do I apply it? I would look at the individual dumbfounded as if either: a.) they walked in at the last 5 minutes of the workshop; b.) I was an awful workshop leader; or c.) they could not make the leap from practical exercises for themselves to helping their clients/students. This, along with the encouragement of many, strengthened my interest in writing this book as a “field-guide” for practitioners.

The *Character Strengths and Virtues* text (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) on the VIA classification is 13 years old. That is also when practitioners began applying this work. In the field of positive psychology, there has been no book for practitioners that squarely targets the richness of concepts surrounding the VIA character strengths and lays out what is known about best practices with character strengths. This book for you, the helper, has been a long-time coming.

Positive psychology's backbone has exploded in this time amounting to hundreds of scientific and scholarly publications. While there is much to learn about the application of character strengths, core concepts and strong practices are emerging. When applied, character strengths have strong potential to boost well-being, foster resilience, improve relationships, and create

strong, supportive “cultures” in families, classrooms, and organizations. To this end, character strengths lubricate and catalyze the good life while managing hardships and life challenges.

But, are character strengths best taught through words on a page? Probably not. Nothing replaces the experience and connection that flows from receiving genuine love from another or expressing profound curiosity to another. However, words on a page set the stage, offer depth, provoke new ideas, and reflect examples and exercises – all to then be put into action by the reader, for themselves or for others.

Throughout the book, I frequently use these two words:

- **Practitioner:** I am referring to any helping professional, such as a psychologist, counselor, social worker, mentor, coach, manager, teacher, physician, nurse, health technician, mediator, or professor. In many cases, the word might be stretched to a parent helping a child, a spouse helping a spouse, or a consumer acting as the practitioner for themselves. My approach here is no doubt most strongly reflective of my work as a psychologist/coach/educator, therefore, those in a similar professional will likely find the most alignment with the suggestions and exercises throughout the book.
- **Client:** I am referring to any person being helped or supported, such as a patient, counseling client, coachee, student, employee, or even oneself.

It is assumed that any practitioner picking up this book at least values a strength-based approach to working with clients. This book is purposefully written with that reality in mind. Any manager, counselor, coach, or teacher can pick up the book and learn the core concepts of character strengths and signature strengths (Chapters 1 and 2), the most crucial applied considerations (Chapter 3), ways to troubleshoot and fine-tune an approach to character strengths (Chapter 4), and advanced topics relating to character such as overuse, strengths collisions, morality, and the integration with savoring, flow, and mindfulness (Chapter 5). Practitioners and clients can then review detailed information on each of the 24 strengths in one-page handouts (Chapter 6), and work with user-friendly, research-based practices (Chapters 7 and 8) and a number of additional resources (Appendices).

There Is No Algorithm for Life

In his text on virtues, Fowers (2005) offers this adage which is also true for character strengths. Despite the hundreds of studies referenced in this book, over 100 research-based character strengths activities, and numerous core concepts involved in applying this work, there remains, and perhaps always will remain, a subjectivity, a demand for understanding the myriad of individual and context-based factors. Hence, there is no algorithm for completely understanding and applying character strengths. Therefore, this book is not “a 10-week program” or “6-steps to apply the science of strengths” approach. Not that such programs shouldn’t be done – because they should, and are. But, such programs are always an extension of the individual practitioner who is creating and leading it. There is not one way.

May something in this book help you clearly see the wisdom that lies beneath, express the goodness that is you, and help others find their way.

Ryan Niemiec
May 2017
Cincinnati, Ohio

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The part of my books that I reread the most are the acknowledgements sections. I enjoy relishing in gratitude and humility about all the people that have had an impact on me and/or offered support and wisdom.

My full-fledged gratitude to the core VIA Institute team, where there are five of us: VIA Chairman, Neal Mayerson, one of the unsung founding fathers of positive psychology, who displays an almost inhuman level of creativity, judgment/critical thinking, and perspective, meaning that he comes up with ideas and pathways on the smallest of scales and the largest of scales, both hammering through the nuances and visioning the long-term future, sometimes in the same sentence. Neal occasionally talks about VIA's 50th anniversary and where it will be in that year of 2050; he says he won't be there for it, but, considering his perseverance, I think he might. In either case, he will surely be honored for this unparalleled organization and the many great decisions, made by him and others, that got VIA to where it is today.

In every good team, there is a relationship-oriented person – someone to offer support, handle conflicts, and express emotion clearly and directly in a tone of everyday conversation ... someone to do the little things that after a while are taken for granted ... someone who goes out of their way to help just to help (and thereby proving altruism can indeed be unselfish) ... someone who is brilliant but would never say it, magnanimous but focuses more on walking the talk. I am, of course, speaking of the inimitable Donna Mayerson, VIA Practice Director.

And there is Breta Cooper, VIA Business Director, who is remembered by each person she meets. She is remembered because she is impressive. She uses her razor-sharp mind to wield a playful “what's-next” prudence, an always-appropriate social intelligence, and a politely challenging judgment/critical thinking. It can take people by surprise as she surveys the situation, gathers where people are coming from, slices and dices ideas/thoughts/responses in her mind, and then shares. No doubt this combination of strengths brings her to successfully lead our VIA team meetings and so many happenings at VIA in so many ways, I won't even dare to count.

Finally, Kelly Aluise, VIA Communications Specialist, e-mails and talks with hundreds of people each month, helping them with a research code to study the VIA Survey, navigating the terrain of their inquiry and proposal, and a myriad of other tasks that help professionals and consumers use their own strengths or help others to do so. In what amounts to thousands upon thousands of people, I would be willing to bet there are zero or almost zero who have had a negative experience with Kelly. The exact opposite of a negative response is actually the norm. Kelly is an exemplar for teamwork; she could be interviewed and studied around how she brings forth this strength so strongly and for the benefit of others, especially the VIA team.

All in all, the VIA team is a collaborative one. There's isn't a day that goes by that it doesn't build a bridge and offer support/advice/hope for another. That's the kind of nonprofit organization I want to be part of. It's a team that pushes and challenges, and, especially, it leads. On a bad day, this team is on fire with ideas and critical thinking. Imagine what it's like on a good day.

Others at work whom I frequently speak with about character strengths include the always-ready-to-fill-in, quick-to-accomplish-a-task Chris Jenkins and the Mayerson art gallery guru and grant manager, Jeff Seibert. While I appreciate many things about Chris and Jeff, perhaps most appreciated is our conversations about *The Walking Dead*, which help me manage my sanity, work through theories, and relish in postapocalyptic fantasy. I could fill the remaining pages describing the talent and graciousness of Clare Blankemeyer, who champions the innovative Mayerson Service Learning Program. On our company volunteer day, Clare was the

one on top of a tall ladder, with a drill, various screws, and other tools, while balancing on one leg to put up a trellis in a low-income neighborhood, while everyone else safely watched from below (I was good at holding the ladder!). I think that I'm busy and accomplish a lot, then I see Clare and I'm brought back down to Earth – thanks Clare! The kind-hearted, good natured and character strengths-based conversations and stories that emerge when I speak with Rachel Gray and Maureen Heckmuller are also always deeply appreciated.

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There are some people in positive psychology whose enthusiasm soars and simultaneously moves me to new heights. Some might say it's something intangible within the person; I would say it's a certain way that they express their strengths that speaks to me. When I hear these individual's names, I can't help but to smile and appreciate their gifts and my connection with them. These people include Itai Ivztan (whom I refer to as "the Roberto Benigni of positive psychology"), Dan Tomasulo, Shannon Polly, Margarita Tarragona, Tayyab Rashid, and Roger Bretherton. Each is brilliant in their work and an authentic exemplar of what it means to be in this field.

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On behalf of the world, I'm happy to share thankfulness to the emergence of the VIA classification, specifically the *Character Strengths and Virtues* text authors, directors, and advisors, which include positive psychology founder Marty Seligman, the inimitable genius that is the late Chris Peterson, along with 53 distinguished scientists. I often have Chris in mind while writing books on character strengths, hoping that he is somehow beaming with pride and feeling like justice is being done for his path-blazing work.

Locally in Cincinnati there is a movement called Strong Cincinnati, which is working to make the city of Cincinnati to be *the* global leader in character strengths applications in the community (see <http://www.strongcincinnati.org>). Indeed, if you look up the following incredible organizations, each at different levels of character strengths integration, and each with character strengths pioneers, you'll know what I mean: Children Inc., Talbert House, Mayerson Academy, Beech Acres Parenting Center, Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati, Lindner Center of Hope, Starfire, Public Allies, Interact for Health, Living Arrangements for the Developmentally Disabled (LADD), Mount St. Joseph University, Northern Kentucky University, Reel Abilities Film Festival, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, and Xavier University.

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In an age where other publishers are decidedly uncourageous or stuck in their ways, it is Hogrefe that has stepped up as one of the leading publishers in the positive psychology movement. Their outstanding collaborative team and the incredible people that make up the team are what make this publisher outstanding to work with. For this book, I am speaking of Rob Dimbleby, who leads and juggles projects with strong social intelligence, perspective, and critical thinking, and Lisa Bennett, whose blend of mind and heart while editing helped to make my words shine. Anyone who appreciates this book should send a thank-you note to Rob and Lisa.

It might sound cliché to say that I have learned from thousands of people, but in this case, it is true. Since I joined the VIA Institute on Character, I have taught thousands of people, e-mailed thousands of people, and had hundreds of personal conversations – formal and informal – with people about this character strengths work. The people have ranged from Oprah Winfrey to a 5-year-old child; CEOs to janitors; distinguished positive psychology luminaries to young students; from disgruntled to enthusiastic VIA Survey takers; stalking naysayers to cheerleading zealots. How could I not learn from all of you? Each interaction, whether face-to-

face, phone, Skype, or e-mail has played a role in informing, challenging, and supporting my understanding of this beautifully complex, universally enlightening, constantly-evolving area of character strengths. My gratitude to all of you, named and unnamed!

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Chapter 1

Foundations of Strengths-Based Practice

Seven Core Concepts of the Science of Character

Introduction

It was 2009. I had written a book on character strengths the previous year and was one of only a couple of people who had devoted themselves to such an effort on this topic. Yet, I realized I knew very little about character strengths. I had thoroughly studied the 24 strengths, the research, the existing applications, and the extensive background on the VIA classification, but a true depth around the nature of character and versatility of the practice was not there. It would have been easy for me to think I already knew it all as I arrived at the VIA Institute, but that would have been a fixed mindset, expert-minded, fateful error. With appreciation for my strengths of curiosity and hope, I set forth on a course of being open to new ideas and views. It was not until I had conversations with Neal Mayerson (Chairman of the VIA Institute) that I expanded my thinking of what is really meant by character. With these dialogues, in addition to being challenged by the critical thinking and creative thinking of the VIA Institute team, day after day – along with solitary reflection – I began to truly understand the depths of this work. It is clear that those who work with character strengths are engaged in the work of a lifetime. These strengths are the catalysts of positive speech and action that we can use in any situation for the rest of our life.

By reading this chapter you will build a foundation of character strengths knowledge on which the practices and character strengths interventions (CSIs) offered in later chapters will rest. I outline seven core concepts that underlie the character strengths: a common language, dimensionality and context, plurality, all character strengths matter, different types of strengths, character strengths can be developed, and being and doing. While the concepts discussed are not exhaustive, they serve as a springboard for readers, and especially for practitioners working with individuals from a strength-based approach. To this end, “strengths-based practitioner tips” are offered to assist the practitioner in moving the idea into action.

As a supplement to this chapter, I recommend your reading Appendix A which offers a background on the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues and the VIA Survey measurement tool. Many practitioners will find it helpful to explain these concepts to their clients. Snapshot 1.1. lists a number of definitions of character strengths from the character strengths literature.

Character strengths are positive traits/capacities that are personally fulfilling, do not diminish others, ubiquitous and valued across cultures, and aligned with numerous positive outcomes for oneself and others.

Snapshot 1.1. What Are Character Strengths?

- The wellsprings or mansions of the good life – a life well-lived (Seligman, 2002).
- Psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the great virtues (e.g., wisdom, justice, temperance) ... distinguishable routes to virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
- Capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004).
- Positive traits that are core to our being/identity and our doing/behavior (Niemi, 2014a).
- Basic building blocks of a flourishing life; character strengths are the pathways to well-being, described as PERMA – Positive emotions, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).
- The inner determinants of the full life – a life of pleasure, engagement, and meaning (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005).
- A family of positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Park & Peterson, 2010).
- Aspects of personality that are morally valued...the foundation of optimal life-long development and thriving (Park & Peterson, 2009).
- A power to act well, a force that has or can have an effect, the will to act in a human way (“virtue” described in Comte-Sponville, 2001).
- In summing up what these and other researchers across cultures are saying about the character strengths, the VIA Institute on Character explains that the VIA classification is a “common language” of personality traits that:
 1. Reflect our personal identity;
 2. Produce positive outcomes for ourselves and others (e.g., well-being, positive relationships, achievement); and
 3. Contribute to the collective good.
 These are also referred to as the three refractions of the VIA classification.

Common Language

The 24 character strengths, as a group, are a common language that describe what is best in human beings. This is an innovative discovery as, historically, there has never been a language of character that crosses cultures. The realities of this principle are everywhere: Coaches and counselors use this “common language” with their clients to help them identify their best qualities. Managers use the “language” to help their employees become more productive and happy at work, and teachers use it to help their students entrench themselves more deeply in learning. Families use it to create a positive culture at home and individuals use it in their self-development. Having a language readily understood by all permits each person to be “on the same page” with others when approaching a challenge, engaging in conversations, and supporting one another.

It is important to understand that this language is not a random assembly of positive words. Quite the contrary, as it was the result of a 3-year project and collaboration among scientists. Under the auspices of the VIA Institute on Character (see Appendix H), a global nonprofit organization, scientists/scholars Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman led a team of 55 well-known scientists on this multiyear project that involved an extensive historical review and

analysis of the best thinking on the topic of character in philosophy, virtue ethics, moral education, psychology, and theology over the past 2,500+ years. The result was a classification of six virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) found universally in human beings across religions, cultures, nations, and belief systems. After applying various strengths criteria, 24 character strengths emerged, strongly representing pathways to each of the six virtues. This research, analysis, and review is discussed at length in the text, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). See Snapshot 1.2. for an overview of the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues. Measurement tools were also developed and went through several iterations over the years until they were finalized with good psychometrics. Two assessments were created - the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; colloquially referred to as the VIA Survey) for adults and the VIA Youth Survey for youth between 10- and 17-years-old. Snapshot 1.3. offers talking points for practitioners on the VIA Survey.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

Memorize the dimensions listed next to each character strength to expand your knowledge of the VIA language. You'll find this can also enhance the range of strengths you will notice in yourself and in your conversations with others.

A common language means communication doors open. It means practitioners have a template for thinking about and working with clients. It means clients have a new way of viewing themselves; the language serves as a guide for understanding the core of who they are. From this mutual understanding, interventions and strategies can sprout, and conversations in which client and practitioner mutually spot strengths emerge.

Snapshot 1.2. VIA Classification

- Prior to the early 2000s, there did not exist a consensual nomenclature, or common language, for understanding, studying, and discussing what is best about human beings.
- As a common language, the character strength words are readily understood by persons as young as 4-years-old (Fox Eades, 2008), and there is often an immediate resonance with these inherently good concepts.
- It is descriptive, not prescriptive. The emphasis is on classifying psychological ingredients of goodness in human beings rather than saying anything about what one "should" do.
 - It is not a taxonomy of strengths as taxonomies require an underlying deep theory explaining multiple relationships between constructs.
- It is holistic in its conceptual framework. The structure suggests cognitive strengths (wisdom), emotional strengths (courage), social & community strengths (humanity & justice), protective strengths (temperance), and spiritual strengths (transcendence).
- The classification is imperfect. Arguments can be made for strengths to be included or excluded and for virtue categories to be collapsed. Ongoing research is being conducted and it is possible that, as compelling science emerges, changes will be made.
- Within the VIA classification there is a hierarchy from the broadest construct to the narrowest (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
 - *Virtues*: Characteristics valued by philosophers throughout time.
 - *Character strengths*: Pathways to the virtues.
 - *Situational themes*: Specific habits that lead people to manifest character strengths in given situations. These are highly variable to the person and .

Note. The distinction is made here between virtues and character strengths, that virtues are the higher order (overarching) category within which the character strengths nest. There have been well-over 10 published factor analytic studies showing the clustering of character strengths under higher order factors, although the quantity of those factors is not consistent in the literature (see McGrath, 2014, for the largest factor analysis to date). As there is not a substantial, *practical* difference guiding us in the research literature on character strengths versus virtues, I will therefore give most attention in this book to using the term “character strengths,” which have been studied empirically in positive psychology far more than virtues.

Snapshot 1.3. VIA Survey

- The only free, psychometrically valid, online test measuring the 24 character strengths. Available at <https://www.viacharacter.org>
- User receives immediate rank-order results.
- The survey offers relative comparisons (comparison within oneself) rather than absolute comparisons (comparisons with others).
- Over 5 million users have taken the survey, with increasing numbers each year, and reaching every country across the globe.
- The survey is repeatable over time (good reliability) and it accurately measures what it is supposed to measure (good validity).
- About 37 translations of the VIA Survey.
- A new suite of VIA assessments (an outgrowth of the unfolding character strengths research) have been developed to substantially improve the measurement of character strengths. These include a significant revision of the VIA Inventory of Strengths (revisions to all 24 scales), two short forms, the Signature Strengths Survey, the Virtues Survey, and a handful of other measures of character strengths (McGrath, 2017). Users will use the same link to access the free VIA Survey. As studies emerge and continued analyses are conducted, the VIA Institute responds accordingly striving to offer the best measure of character strengths from a scientific perspective.

Strength-Based Practitioner Tip

Be careful to not become too rigid in limiting your thoughts about individuals to one strength or a handful of strengths (e.g., “here comes the creative person”). Practitioners can take lessons from certain medical and psychological professionals who rely so heavily on diagnosing others that they only see “the label” in front of them and lose sight of the actual person. This insight applies to those in character science too. In first learning the VIA language, individuals will quickly identify with one strength or a handful of strengths and may even overidentify with a particular strength. I am high in curiosity and individuals can describe me as a curious person but there is much more to who I am than this one construct. What strengths do you most readily identify with? Least identify with?

As mentioned earlier, the original model of conceptualization from *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) explained the highest level of the hierarchy as virtues, followed by the 24 character strengths that make up each virtue, which are followed by situational themes that character strengths are expressed in (see Figure 1.1). As research has emerged from various studies around the world, additional levels can be considered, at least for practitioners to reflect on. Figure 1.2 offers some useful distinctions that are relevant for practitioners. Note that this is not a scientific model, but a conceptual one. The relationships between each of the elements in the figure have not been deeply explored. One of the two additions is context,

i.e., is the character strength expressed at work, school, home, community, or another context in general? There are many studies that are context specific, such as the myriad of studies of character strengths in the workplace context (e.g., Harzer & Ruch, 2012) and the school setting (e.g., Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2016). These studies offer the practitioner and client wisdom as to what outcomes might occur at work or school or home or community, in general, should character strengths be deployed. This is distinct from the more nuanced level of situational themes, which has not been explored as deeply. For example, in the work context, how might signature strengths be expressed differently in a situation with one’s customers or clients, a situation in which work projects and stress are piling up, a situation of interacting with one’s boss during an employee review, or the situation of the employee feeling sick but knowing he or she has to get a project done? The quantity of potential situational themes are myriad and appear endless in each context. Nevertheless, that is the work of exploration within the practitioner–client dialogue in regard to strengths use.

The other addition in Figure 1.2 is the three virtues – caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control. McGrath (2015c) studied over one million individuals across four samples and multiple measures of character strengths and found support for the 24 character strengths splitting into 3 factors. This was found to be consistent with philosophical accounts of virtues as well as with the experience of leaders in the fields of moral character and character education. While it could be argued that these three virtues might replace the six original virtues in this practical conceptualization,

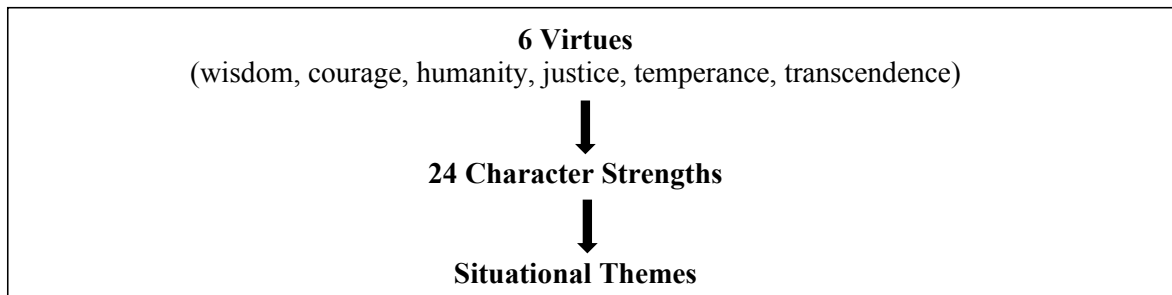


Figure 1.1. VIA Classification hierarchy in *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004).

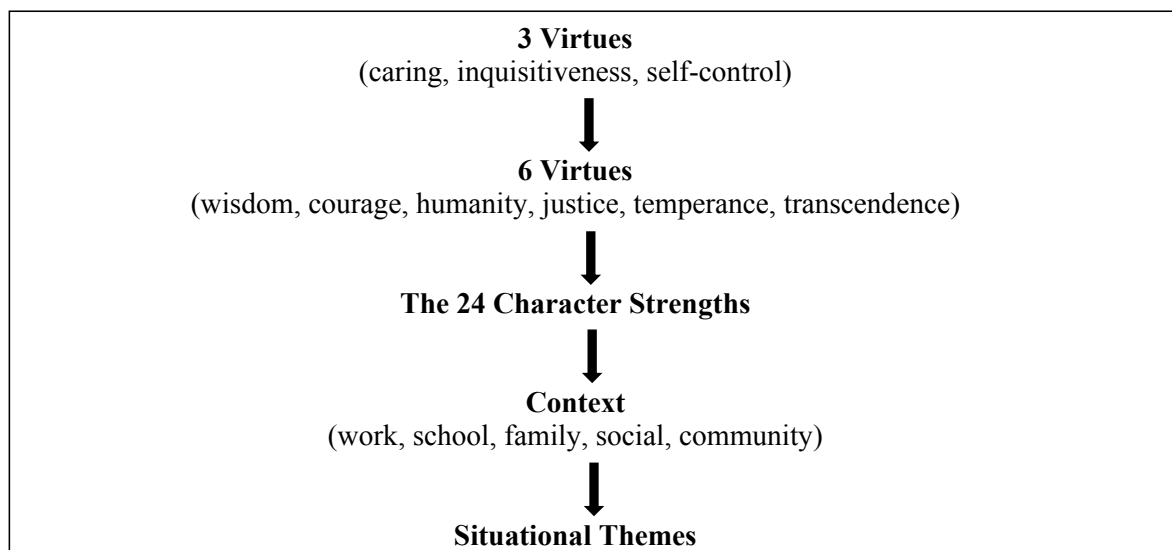


Figure 1.2. A practitioner-friendly expansion of the VIA Classification hierarchy, hypothesized from emerging research.

this possibility has not reached a scientific consensus to do so, thus, I have retained the original to provide more nuance and dialogue for practitioners. Might there be one “master strength” at an even higher level? Some researchers, practitioners, and theorists argue for this, most commonly noting perspective/social intelligence (i.e., practical wisdom), self-regulation, humility, and gratitude, however, there is not much consistency across scientists in these arguments.

The focus in this book is, of course, the character strengths level; however, readers will find interventions for the higher levels and much discussion throughout the book on the application of strengths in different contexts and specific situations therein.

Dimensionality and Context

An honest man who works hard. A woman of integrity who makes good moral decisions. A business-person with a poor reputation. In today’s world, each of these people would likely be described as having good or bad character. Such conceptions represent traditional, limited views of character, popularized over the decades. They have the unfortunate consequence of reflecting all-or-none perceptions of character. The labeling of people’s character as good/bad, high/low, positive/negative is pervasive across many cultures and is quickly witnessed, absorbed, and displayed in societal views of presidents, leaders, movie stars, and professional athletes.

In reality, character is more complex than this. The character of a person, whether that be Tiger Woods or J. K. Rowling, is multidimensional. Dimensionality means that character is viewed in degrees; in other words, how much of the character strength of fairness are you displaying? This is in contrast to a categorical approach used in diagnosing psychological disorders and medical disorders in which an individual either meets the criteria for bulimia, panic disorder, or Type II diabetes, or does not meet the criteria. The person either has the disorder or does not have the disorder.

The VIA classification and VIA Survey reflect this dimensional approach as character strengths are expressed in degrees – we have degrees of creativity, honesty, zest, and so on. This is aligned with the concept of “continuous traits,” in that any character strength can show up across a wide continuum of more and less (Miller, 2013). Explained another way, using the example of other personality traits:

Introversion and extraversion are typically conceived and measured as dimensions (as are VIA character strengths) so asking how many introverts there are is like asking how many tall people there are. The answer depends on where we choose to make the cut along the dimension of interest. That said, psychological assessment is dimensional, and although we love the shorthand that allows us to speak about introverts or optimists or geniuses, the fact remains that there are precious few “types” in psychology, just extreme cases (Chris Peterson, personal communication, January 5, 2010).

Research using the VIA Survey shows that this view of dimensionality best describes character strengths (McGrath, Rashid, Park, & Peterson, 2010), but this does not fully exclude a categorical approach in which a person has or does not have a character strength in a particular situation, similar to Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) criterion of “selective absence” in establishing the VIA classification. For example, a child ruthlessly beating another child on the playground may have an absence of kindness in that situation but that same child may go home and express genuine kindness to his mother (hence kindness is not completely absent from him). The same could, in general, not be said about a person with the “categorical label” of alcohol dependence; their alcoholism is present categorically within them whether they are at work, home, or with friends. Thus, while all-or-none categorical distinctions such as “you either have creativity or you do not” are less accurate globally about a person, they may be useful in particular situations. Some moral character scholars

have argued that there is a minimal threshold or certain standards by which a character trait must first qualify (i.e., categorical trait) before it can be defined as a continuous trait (Miller, 2013).

Taken further, there is a multidimensionality to each character strength; for example, kindness involves dimensions of compassion, generosity, care, nurturance, altruism, and niceness, each offering a different flavor or dimension of this strength called kindness.

“There is no algorithm for life” explains Fowers (2005, p. 13) in his text on virtue practice; in other words, there will always be subjectivity, unique individual factors, and especially context-based nuances. The degree of character strengths expression is based on the context one is in. Context is crucial in understanding and ultimately using character strengths with a practical wisdom (Fowers, 2005, 2008; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Individuals will likely express their character strengths in different ways and to a greater or lesser extent based on the circumstance they are in. For example, the level or amount of kindness expressed to an individual’s relationship partner (e.g., offering to cook dinner) differs in scope from that expressed to a homeless person on the street (e.g., giving the person \$5). Also, the individual might find it very easy to express kindness to fellow employees yet very difficult in another work situation, such as while consulting to a client or communicating with his or her supervisor.

Strengths-Based Practitioner Tip

Context is king. Most of life lies in the middle, and is not black or white, all or none, good or bad. Take your highest character strength. Write about the impact of context on the character strength. To do this, write about one situation in which you expressed the strength strongly; be sure to reflect on the situation and how it had an impact. Then, write about a different context in which you expressed the same strength to a much lesser degree. What about the situation – the environment, the people, the type of discussion – had the biggest impact on your expression of the strength to a lesser degree?

Character strengths don’t operate in isolation from settings, rather they are shaped by the context we are in. One individual might call forth his or her kindness and curiosity when with friends, use self-regulation and gratitude when eating, draw on leadership and creativity at work, and show love and teamwork with family. The degree of character strength the person expresses with family may differ depending on the context – who they are with, where they are, what they are doing, what the expectations or demands of the situation are, past experiences in the situation, the family’s culture, and so on. For example, one person’s strength of love may be expressed to a different degree with a restrained mother versus a jovial father, and it will also vary based on the location with those people – is everyone at a crowded restaurant, a loud sporting event, or a movie theater? And, are there situational demands that encourage or discourage certain strengths (e.g., less humor at a funeral home, more zest when at an outdoor park)? Is there a family history of being in that situation or are there embedded expectations to behave a certain way?

Consider the expression of character strength(s) in response to each question as the context is detailed out and nuance and complexity increase:

- How much character strength do you express?
- How much curiosity do you express?
- How much curiosity do you express at work?
- How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss?
- How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss talking about personal matters?
- How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss talking about personal matters and your boss is in a positive mood?

- How much curiosity do you express at work when you are with your boss talking about personal matters and your boss in a positive mood but you are running late for a special event?

Culture: A Special Kind of Context

The VIA character strengths are frequently described as universal, or ubiquitous, across human beings regardless of nation, culture, or religious affiliation. The cultural context in which a given character strength is expressed will often offer a unique appearance of the strength. Many times, the character strength will manifest itself in a different way for a different purpose, varying according to the culture; and cultural norms and rituals will frequently reinforce strengths which help the individual to keep family and community together (Rashid, 2012). In other words, there are culture-specific nuances in how character strengths are displayed.

At VIA, I am frequently approached by individuals from different cultures who say something similar to the following: “In my culture, we have _____, and I think that’s a strength too. Why isn’t that in the VIA classification?” This important question needs proper exploration of the culture and exploration of the meaning of the word being queried. Generally speaking, there are several possible explanations for this, and although empirical evidence is needed around the nuances, the following points might serve as initial guidance and provide insight:

- The strength mentioned is a cultural expression of an existing VIA character strength. For example, the trait of *hospitality* common in Middle Eastern cultures might be noted. This is likely to be, in most instances, a variation of the character strength of kindness. In other words, kindness can be presented in a meaningfully unique way as hospitality (however, it is still kindness being expressed).
- The strength mentioned is a compound strength. It is a combination of existing VIA character strengths. For example, *tolerance* is hypothesized as the combination of fairness, kindness, and judgment/critical thinking (Peterson, 2006b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The strength of responsibility can be viewed as a blend of perseverance and teamwork (Peterson, 2006b). The strength of *patience*, on the other hand, is viewed as a combination of perseverance, self-regulation, and judgment/critical thinking (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), while others have emphasized fairness and forgiveness from their analyses (Schnitker & Emmons, 2007).
- The strength mentioned is a “culture-bound strength” linked to a particular culture and not ubiquitous – An important attribute of the VIA classification is the proclamation to not include any “culture bound strengths” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The example of *ambition* might apply here as a major Western trait that certainly exists in other cultures like certain parts of Africa, but perhaps with less priority and value.
- The strength mentioned is a more intense form of an existing VIA character strength. In the Finnish culture there is *sisu*, a special strength of determination and resolve to overcome major adversity. *Sisu* is cherished in Finland and one way to think about this is as an intense form of perseverance, and as that perseverance is deployed other character strengths naturally flow in *sisu*, including bravery.

I’m not suggesting one or more of the reasons above fully explain and capture all the cultural nuances (i.e., fairness, kindness, and judgment won’t explain 100% of tolerance), but perhaps these explanations offer some substantial takeoff points for understanding cultural strengths and their contextual expression. In the end, the character strengths-based practitioner will ask questions and explore the nuances of the individual’s culture, rather than offering an authoritarian or ethnocentric viewpoint.

There are seemingly countless examples of important qualities that arise when the nuances of an individual's culture are examined. Lomas (2016) conducted a quasisystematic search for “untranslatable” words relating to well-being, and “character” was one of three overarching categories in his framework which he further subdivided into resources and spirituality. Examples of resources include *sumud* and *baraka*, Arabic terms translating to steadfastness and a gift of spiritual energy transferred from one person to another, respectively. Also included were the Japanese terms *ikigai* and *sunao*, translating respectively to reason for being and a positive connotation of meekness exemplifying the respect a student gives a teacher. In Lomas' subcategory of spirituality, he offers a variety of untranslatable words such as *smriti*, the Buddhist concept for present-moment awareness. Rashid (2012) suggests additional words that are specific to particular cultures such as abidance, amiability, duty, piety, and savoir-faire.

Plurality

When Chris Peterson, lead scientist of the development of the VIA classification and former science director of the VIA Institute, was once asked to share his most important finding from the myriad of findings and advancements in character strengths science, he responded simply and distinctly: “Character is plural” (Peterson, personal communication, 2010). What Peterson meant is that people are not simply kind or humble, brave or hopeful, or honest. Rather, people have many character strengths, and these strengths are expressed in combinations, with each person having a unique profile of character strengths. This variation, multiplicity, and uniqueness informs the rich tapestry of an individual's character.

There is a structure to our character – this is best described as a unique profile of strengths with varying highs and lows (i.e., individuals have higher strengths, middle strengths, and lower strengths). There are over 5.1 million possible Top 5 combinations of character strengths an individual might have, and across the full rank order of character strengths from 1 to 24, the number of potential character strengths profiles is exponentially greater than the number of people living on the planet. While this seems virtually infinite, when one considers that each person's expression of character strengths is unique (e.g., no two people with creativity as a top strength will express the strength in an identical way), the expression of character strengths (i.e., frequency, duration, and intensity) for any individual is truly “one-of-a-kind.” In this way, character is necessarily individualized and idiosyncratic.

Character strengths are not expressed in isolation but in combinations or constellations with one another (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Niemiec, 2013; Peterson, 2006a). It is unlikely that an individual expresses one strength alone. For example, as I sit here typing these sentences, I'm hopefully expressing some creativity and judgment/critical thinking but there are also degrees of hope, perspective, leadership, zest, and so on. When we express one character strength deliberately, many others automatically and fluidly come along for the ride. I have repeatedly observed that as situations become increasingly complex and challenging, the number of character strengths being expressed increases. For example, a parent coping with a new medical diagnosis for one of their children is in the position to act strongly with a panoply of character strengths, whereas the parent watching a movie with their child is not likely to express as many character strengths in terms of quantity or intensity.

This leads to the relational concept that character strengths are interdependent – they “inter-are” (Niemiec, 2012), to build from the Buddhist concept of interbeing (Nhat Hanh, 1993). There are dynamics that occur as the strengths interact with one another, cause increases in one another, or hinder the expression of one another. It is difficult to be creative without some level of curiosity. Can you express kindness in a strong way without expressing humility and perhaps a small dose of bravery? This concept of virtue interdependence has been observed by

the great philosophers, including Plato, who observed that the four virtues of justice, wisdom, temperance, and courage are interdependent –if one virtue is missing, and especially if justice is missing, then the other three cannot be fully achieved. For the ancient Athenians, social contribution and personal flourishing were both wrapped up in the concept of virtue. A fundamental principle of their beliefs was that virtues represented a seamless whole. To be virtuous required excellence in all the virtues, not just one, an idea that has been called the reciprocity of the virtues. As the moral philosopher Susan Wolf has framed it (although not without philosophical rebuttals) – to have one virtue is to have them all (2007). And, when scientists have examined the correlations of the 24 character strengths with one another (i.e., creating an inter-correlation matrix), they have found that all the strengths have a relationship with one another to some degree. Some strengths relate very highly to one another (e.g., zest and hope), while others relate minimally to one another (e.g., humility and love of learning).

Strength-Based Practitioner Tip

Bring together the concepts of dimensionality, context, and plurality of character. Picture the character strengths as 24 stocks side-by-side on the New York Stock Exchange with jagged lines rising and falling throughout the day. These increasing and decreasing frequency waves represent your character strength expression. In any situation, you are expressing high, low, and medium levels of each of the 24 strengths. Choose an activity that you engage in that has a high level of meaning to you (e.g., giving a 2-hour presentation, leading an important work meeting, having dinner with a friend while conversing about life problems). Rate each of the 24 strengths from 1–10 in terms of the degree to which you are expressing them at the beginning, middle, and end of the activity. The plurality of strengths expression, the nuances of degree, and the importance of context should become immediately clear to you.

All 24 Character Strengths Matter

When people take the VIA Survey and look at their results, they are sometimes pleased and proud and other times they are disappointed. Much of this relates to the level of meaning and importance they place on certain strengths and where they expected or wanted those strengths to be in their rank-order profile. In reality, it doesn't matter if the individual is high in self-regulation or kindness or curiosity. Each of the 24 character strengths is positive and can be used for the good. Each is associated with different positive outcomes in character science. Each is a capacity that can be enhanced. Therefore, each of the 24 character strengths is important.

Some character strengths have more direct links with happiness; others enable opportunities in achievement and reaching goals; and others appear more connected to better physical health. Table 1.1 maps out a handful of the positive associations for each of the 24 character strengths as originally offered in Peterson and Seligman (2004). Some updates can be found in other sources (e.g., Niemiec, 2013; 2014a; Niemiec & Wedding, 2014).

Character strengths have important consequences. These consequences or outcomes differ according to the particular strength. For example, zest and hope are the character strengths found repeatedly to be the most strongly linked with happiness (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson; Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2009; Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006), and there is some evidence that character strengths can “cause” happiness (Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013). Perseverance is a character strength especially associated with academic achievement (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh,

2009; Park & Peterson, 2009). The character strength of gratitude has been linked with high positive emotion, optimism, life satisfaction, vitality, religiousness and spirituality, and less depression and envy than less grateful individuals (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). These studies show that some character strengths matter more for specific outcomes. Likewise, some character strengths might matter more at particular periods in life. For example, in a representative sample of adults in Switzerland, strengths that promote affiliation and commitment were among those most aligned with well-being for adults in their late 20s and early 30s; strengths that support maintenance of family and work for those in their late 30s through mid-40s; and strengths that facilitate a vital involvement with the environment for those in their late 40s through late 50s (Martinez-Marti & Ruch, 2014).

Table 1.1. Character Strengths Associations Noted in Peterson and Seligman (2004)

Character Strength	Positive Correlates
Creativity	Openness to new experiences; cognitive flexibility
Curiosity	Positive affect; willingness to challenge stereotypes; creativity; desire for challenge in work and play; goal perseverance; adept at making complex decisions; excitement/enjoyment/attentiveness; engagement and achievement in academic settings; sense of subjective well-being
Judgment	Adept at problem solving; increased cognitive ability; more resistant to suggestion and manipulation; more effective in dealing with stress
Love of learning	More adept at navigating obstacles/challenges; autonomy; resourcefulness; increased sense of possibility; self-efficacy; healthy, productive aging; more likely to seek/accept challenges; decreased levels of stress
Perspective	Successful aging; life satisfaction; maturity; open-mindedness; even-tempereness; sociability; social intelligence
Bravery	Prosocial orientation; internal locus of control; self-efficacy; ability to delay gratification; tolerance for ambiguity/uncertainty; capacity to assess risk; capacity for reflection; involvement in socially worthy aims; capacity to create and sustain high quality connections with others
Perseverance	Achievement/goal completion; resourcefulness; self-efficacy
Honesty	Positive mood; life satisfaction; openness to new experiences; empathy; conscientiousness; capacity for self-actualization; agreeableness; emotional stability; effort/goal attainment
Zest	Autonomy; connection with others; goal attainment
Love	Positive relationships with others; healthy balance between dependency and autonomy; positive social functioning; higher self-esteem; less susceptibility to depression; capacity to cope with stress
Kindness	Overall mental and physical health; longevity
Social intelligence	Smooth social functioning; life judgment; lower levels of aggression; lower incidence of substance abuse
Teamwork (framed as citizenship)	Social trust; positive view of human nature
Fairness	Perspective; self-reflection; cooperation; leadership; altruism; prosocial behavior
Leadership	Cognitive skills/intelligence; flexibility/adaptability; emotional stability; internal locus of control; integrity; interpersonal skills; creativity/resourcefulness
Forgiveness	Prosocial behaviors; agreeableness; emotional stability; lower levels of anger, anxiety, depression, and hostility
Humility	Perspective; forgiveness; self-regulation; capacity to attain self-improvement goals

Table 1.1. Continued

Character Strength	Positive Correlates
Prudence	Cooperativeness; interpersonal warmth; sociability; assertiveness; positive emotion; imaginativeness; curiosity; insightfulness; physical health; longevity; optimism, internal locus of control; high achievement/performance; lower levels of anger expression
Self-regulation	High levels of academic achievement; self-esteem; self-acceptance; capacity to control anger; secure interpersonal attachments; high levels of satisfaction with social relationships; lower levels of anxiety and depression; perceived by others as more likable/trustworthy
Appreciation of beauty & excellence	Openness to experience; altruism; devotion to others/larger community; capacity for change/self-improvement
Gratitude	Positive emotion; life satisfaction; optimism; prosocial behavior; increased cardiovascular and immune functioning; longevity; lower levels of anxiety and depression; openness to experience; agreeableness; conscientiousness; less neuroticism
Hope	Achievement; positive social relationships; physical well-being; active problem-solving; lower levels of anxiety and depression; conscientiousness; diligence; ability to delay gratification
Humor	Positive mood; capacity to manage stress; creativity; intelligence; less neuroticism
Spirituality	Self-regulation; lower levels of substance abuse; positive social relationships; marital stability; forgiveness; kindness; compassion; altruism; volunteerism, philanthropy; happiness; sense of purpose; life satisfaction; capacity to cope with illness and stress

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From what scholars, researchers, and practitioners are observing, each of the 24 character strengths appear to be present, in varying degrees, in human beings. It is easy to overlook or take for granted the smaller degrees of strengths use. In fact, you have probably used all 24 character strengths in the last couple days. For example, this morning did you brush your teeth, wash your body, get dressed, and eat breakfast? If you did any of these, you were using some level of self-regulation and prudence. These are “little” uses of two strengths that happen to consistently be two of the least endorsed character strengths across the globe (McGrath, 2015b; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Researchers have long been interested in drawing distinctions between “big” and “small” uses of character strengths; for example, “big C” creativity (Simonton, 2000) can be seen in Mozart’s 9th Symphony, Jean Pierre-Jeunet’s film *Amelie* (2001), and Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” painting, while “little c” creativity can be seen in a flash of insight we have about a personal struggle and in a new idea to arrange the flowers on our kitchen table. Elsewhere, I have shared several examples of “big” and “little” character strengths use found in the research literature and other sources (Niemiec, 2014a). To highlight the subtle, often unconscious uses of these character strengths, Table 1.2 offers examples of how each of the 24 strengths may appear in “little” doses. Of course, the word “little” should not be taken literally in terms of its importance as small doses of character strengths not only are the ingredients of “big” uses of character strengths but can potentially serve as important sources of meaning and positive impact in and of themselves.