

Character Strengths

With the rapidly growing field of positive psychology, we are learning that when it comes to personal growth and healing, we can often accomplish more, faster by focusing on our strengths rather than focusing on our weaknesses. The first step is to be aware of what our strengths are.

Two positive psychology researchers* wanted to know what strengths were deemed desirable by nearly every society around the world. They set about reading all the major religious and philosophical writings available to them. It took them more than five years to identify 24 strengths that met their criteria. In further research, they discovered that certain character strengths were learned and some were innate and had a profound effect on a person's life experience.

The innate strengths are called Signature Strengths. They seem to be with us all our lives whether we are aware of them or using them or not. Everyone has Signature Strengths—no matter how lost a person may be—everyone has them. It appears that most people have between three and seven; some are usually employed more than others. Many people experience profound changes in their measurable levels of happiness first by discovering what their Signature Strengths are, then learning to use them more in their daily lives. Try it for yourself.

EXERCISE:

1) Review the list of strengths below and see if you can identify your top strengths. Look for strengths that enliven, invigorate, or excite you when you use them or see someone else use them; strengths that you feel are the real you; or strengths that you have learned to use easily and look for ways to employ. You may not have necessarily used the strength a lot in your life, but you somehow feel it is who you are.

- **Creativity** [Originality, Ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it.
- **Curiosity** [Interest, Novelty Seeking, Openness to Experience]: Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience; finding all subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering.
- **Open Mindedness** [Judgment, Critical Thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly.
- **Love of Learning**: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally. Obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows.
- **Perspective** [Wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people.
- **Bravery** [Valor]: Not shrinking from threats challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; Includes physical bravery but is not limited to it.



- **Persistence** [Perseverance, Industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks.
- **Integrity** [Authenticity, Honesty]: Speaking the truth but, more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.
- **Vitality** [Zest, Enthusiasm, Vigor, Energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; no doing things halfway or halfheartedly, living life as an adventure, feeling alive and activated.
- **Love**: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people.
- **Kindness** [Generosity, Nurturance, Care, Compassion, Altruistic Love, "Niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them.
- **Social Intelligence** [Emotional Intelligence, Personal Intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit in to different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick.
- **Citizenship** [Social Responsibility, Loyalty, Teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share.
- **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
- **Leadership**: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.
- **Forgiveness And Mercy**: Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful.
- **Humility and Modesty**: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not seeking the spotlight; not regarding oneself as more special than one is.
- **Prudence**: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted.
- **Self Regulation** [Self Control]: Regulating what one feel and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions.
- **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence** [Awe, Wonder, Elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.
- **Gratitude**: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks.
- **Hope** [Optimism, Future Mindedness, Future Orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about.
- **Humor** [Playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes.
- **Spirituality** [Religiousness, Faith, Purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.



2) Once you've identified your Signature Strengths it's time to put them into practice more in your daily life. Ask yourself these questions and write the answers in your journal:

- How am I using my Signature Strengths in my life now? (You might want to take some time to live with that question, noticing each one of your Strengths individually and how it affects your daily life.)
- What can I do to use my Signature Strengths more on a daily basis?
- Are there Signature Strengths that I may be using to the exclusion of other Strengths? Can I utilize the underused Strengths more to balance my life and increase my happiness and well-being?
- Are there ways I can transform or reframe how I view some of my present activities and circumstances in ways that allow me to employ my Signature Strengths?

3) If you are interested in going further, you can participate in the ongoing research into character strengths by taking a questionnaire that helps you identify your top five strengths. Go to <http://www.viastrengths.org>.

Also note that there is another article on this site which gives instructions for how to take the Signature Strengths Survey.

*The names and descriptions of the strengths are taken from [Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification](#) by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, Oxford University Press, 2004.

