

# INTERPRETATION AND INSIGHTS GUIDE



A Behind-the-Scenes Guide to  
Maximizing Others' Strengths  
with the VIA Total 24 Report

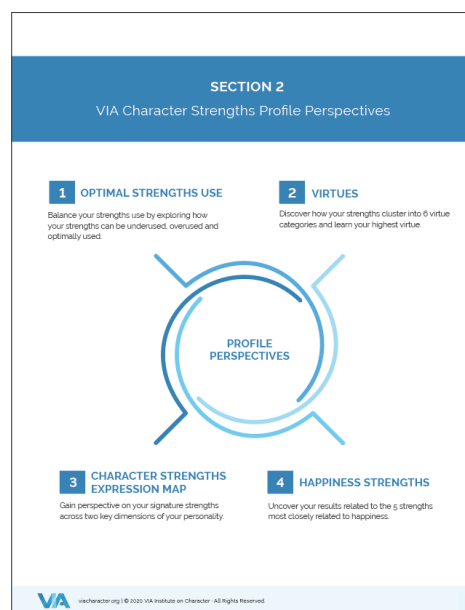
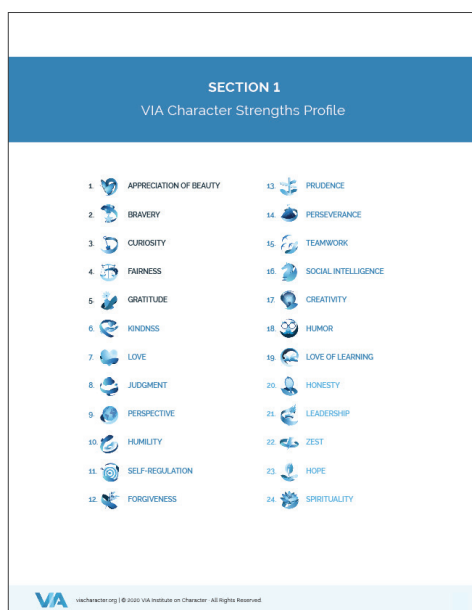
## Introduction

Thank you for choosing the VIA Total 24 Report as a tool in your toolbox when helping others on their strengths journey. Whether you're a coach, manager, counselor, educator, or psychologist, this Interpretations and Insights Guide will give you the inside information on the VIA Total 24 Report. It will provide insights, background, resources as well as tips and ideas for how to use the report.

In this guide you will:

- Discover behind-the-scenes details about the many graphs
- Gain valuable insights about strengths that can increase your confidence
- Understand caveats and clarifications to help you be more precise in your strength interpretations
- Increase your performance, engagement and satisfaction at work and at school
- Learn the research foundations behind the various elements in the report
- Develop practical strategies to advance people on their strengths journey

The emphasis of this guide will be on the VIA Character Strengths Profile which includes signature, middle, and lesser strengths (Section 1) and the four subsections in Section 2, which are optimal strengths use (overuse/underuse), virtues, the expression map, and happiness strengths.



## Getting Started

There are many ways to help someone take action by using the VIA Total 24 Report. Generally speaking, it is beneficial to have the people you are working with (referred to as "clients" throughout this guide, but could be students, employees or other roles) take time to reflect on the questions posed, practice with the activities, and re-read sections to really let the information sink in. When your clients are ready, start working with them to activate their behavior in positive ways!

As you get started, be sure to share these key points about character strengths with your clients:

1. The results are not good or bad. There is not one strength that is better than the other. Each of the strengths can be beneficial depending on who the person is with and the situation at hand. All 24 can bring the person benefits; in that way, they are all potentially good!
2. There are no weaknesses or deficits highlighted. The VIA Survey does not measure weaknesses. No doubt there are strengths that the person can grow and areas to improve because 100% of people have strength blind spots.
3. The results do not help the person compare her/himself to others. Whether reviewing the rank-order of results or the raw score numbers in the report, there is not a benefit nor a conclusion that can be made regarding having better/worse character or more/less of a certain strength than other people do. The test was designed to compare the strengths within a person as opposed to between a person and others.
4. The character strengths are not static and unchanging. Personality is more malleable than previously thought. It appears likely that any of these character strengths can grow if time is taken to practice.
5. There is no interpretation to be made regarding the amount of difference between each strength or the absolute "quantity" of a specific strength. For example, curiosity should not be considered to be twice as strong as creativity and perseverance should not be thought of as half as strong as zest, regardless of the raw score numbers or rankings.

## Section 1 Overview: Character Strengths Profile

This section of the report reviews the individual's full Character Strengths Profile, starting with a wide-lens look at all 24 strengths. The report then provides an in-depth analysis of each signature strength and a review of the individual's middle and lesser strengths.

### Raw Scores vs. Rank Order

Let us begin with the rank-order graph on page 4. This is the perfect overview of all of the 24 character strengths that reside within someone. This is the foundational graph in the report. It allows one to get both a broad picture of the entire profile – the peaks and valleys in the scores – and also very specific details of each strengths (such as raw scores). One important distinction to understand in this graph is raw scores vs. rank order. Rank order is simply the order from 1 to 24 in which the character strengths appear in the profile. The 4th from the top has a ranking of #4, the 20th strength has a ranking of #20, and so on. This can be seen in the character strengths profile that is offered immediately after taking the VIA Survey and is noted in any purchased report. But, the rank-order, however, does not tell the whole story. The raw scores – which are the numbers next to the strength in parentheses – offer a variety of important details.

Raw scores should not be viewed as any definitive statement about a person's character. They are the average ranking (the "mean") for that particular strength based on how the person answered the four questions for that particular strength. If a person answered a 5 ("very much like me") to each of the four questions, then the raw score would be 5.0 for that strength. If the person answered two questions with a 4 ("like me") and two questions with a 5, then the raw score would be 4.5. The lowest raw score for any strength is 1.0, which means the person said the strength is "very much unlike them" for all 4 questions.

The raw scores help the person to see if there are meaningful differences between character strengths. If there is a tie between any number of strengths that means there is no difference between those strengths for this person. If the difference is 0.25 between strengths, this is minimal and unlikely to be a differentiator between the strengths. A general rule of thumb is to look for differences of 1.0 or more; these are more likely to be meaningful, substantive differences between strengths.

Use the raw scores to help understand whether the person's strengths have changed much from one survey to the next. Many people look at their profile from "test 1" to "test 2" and conclude that their strengths have changed significantly. This is because they are only using the rank-order approach. To determine if meaningful shifts have occurred, one must look at the raw scores. It's extraordinarily common – if not expected – for the strengths in a person's top 7-10 to shuffle around a bit (the same goes for the bottom 5-7 strengths). In no way does this mean the strengths have changed or that a shift has occurred in character. Look for shifts in a given strength of 1.0 or more from test to test. It's highly unlikely for large group shifts such as most or all of a person's lesser strengths becoming signature strengths or vice versa.

That said, if there is a rogue strength rising up substantially in a profile or a strength plummeting to the bottom, this is important to investigate! What was happening in the person's life between "test 1" and "test 2"? Did the person experience a major life event or change in lifestyle, such as starting a new and demanding job, getting married, having their first child, joining the military, or experiencing a traumatic event? Did the person deliberately focus on improving a particular strength?

## Signature Strengths

The VIA Total 24 Character Strengths Report offers two pages highlighting information on the person's five top strengths, by convention these top 5 are referred to as signature strengths. Five is the cutoff for everyone in this report. A multi-step algorithm is used to break any ties with the fifth strength. Signature strengths are an important subset of the character strengths profile. They are the strengths that are described to be the "most aligned with the real you, most essential to your personal identity". They are likely to be energizing and uplifting for the person to use and easy and natural to express. No doubt many of the person's family, friends, and co-workers would be quick to see these strengths in her/him.

**Practical tip:** Review clients' profiles to see if there are any strengths that are tied with the strengths listed fifth. If there are, explain to your clients that there is no difference between these ties. As clients reflect on their signature strengths, you must have them consider any strength tied with the one in fifth place. These tied strengths are just as likely to be central (or signature) to the person as the fifth strength..

Identifying and labeling signature strengths is an important endeavor. Several research studies show that the choosing of one signature strength (any signature strength) and using that strength in a new way each day is connected with greater happiness, less depression, and higher flourishing (Schutte & Malouf, 2019).

**Practical tip:** Have clients take time to look at their full grouping of signature strengths (the five highlighted and any additional ties) and ask themselves: Does this seem like the real me? What does it feel like to see "myself" from the lens of this whole grouping of top strengths?

## Middle and Lesser Strengths

It's important to remember – and highlight for clients – that middle and lesser strengths are not weaknesses, deficits or a lack of strength. It is likely strengths that are further down in the profile haven't been given as much attention as signature strengths, are less developed in general, or are simply not prioritized, valued, or regularly expressed as signature strengths. Middle and lesser strengths play an important role in the actions people take every day. Indeed, they are being used to some degree.

The lesser character strengths are identified as the bottom five in a person's profile. Again, as with determining the top 5, a multi-step algorithm is used to break any ties with the 20th strength for the purposes of creating the ranking. If the 19th, 18th, or other strengths are tied with #20 based on raw score, they are equally likely to be lesser strengths for the person.

Research has shown there is a well-being benefit to targeting lower strengths and practicing the use of them more in one's life (Proyer et al., 2015). In fact, one review of strengths studies found that all types of strengths intervention were helpful in some way for producing positive outcomes (Ghielen et al., 2017).

**Practical tip:** A good rule of thumb is to help people bring attention to any of the character strengths in their profile that they are interested in developing. Spend time and explore whatever strength is their highest motivation AND at the same time, remind them that their potential best benefit resides in expanding their highest, most energizing personal resources (signature strengths).

## Section 2 Overview: Character Strengths Profile Perspectives

There are a wide range of lenses one can use to understand, explore, and work with character strengths. Section 2 of the VIA Total 24 Report offers four unique perspectives. These perspectives are optimal use (and overuse/underuse); virtues; expression map; and happiness strengths.

### Overuse/Underuse/Optimal Use

This topic is one of the most provocative and interesting in the field of character strengths. It starts with a perspective that the expression of each character strength in any situation can be plotted on a continuum of more or less; too much in one direction is the overuse, too much in the other direction is underuse, and optimal strengths use sits in the center. These ideas are related to concepts that date back thousands of years to the Buddha, Confucius, and Aristotle (although they tended to use words that relate more to virtues that can be expressed in both directions of extremes). Now, modern day character strengths researchers are applying this ancient wisdom with interesting insights. Researchers are beginning to explore how character strengths relate to everyday problems and conflicts as well as more extreme forms of internal adversity (e.g., psychological disorders, Freidlin, Littman-Ovadia, & Niemiec, 2017).

The latest concepts, research, and directions for practical applications in overuse, underuse, and optimal use are outlined in Niemiec (2019) which is where the Optimal Strengths Use chart in this section of the report comes from. In this chart, one can see an emerging "language" to help understand and conceptualize strengths overuse, underuse, and optimal use. People can then explore ways they bring their strengths forward too strongly or too weakly (or not at all) in certain situations. The "language" for optimal use can serve as a guide for finding the strengths zone or balanced strengths use that might be pursued.

**Practical tip:** How does one know if a person is overusing or underusing a character strength? One clue is whether the person or someone else is being negatively impacted (from mildly to severely) by a strength being used.

## Virtues

From the time the VIA character strengths were first researched, they were grouped into six conceptual virtues (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). These represent the common thinking of many of the great philosophers, the major world religions, and other leaders across cultures who had written about virtue, strengths, morality, ethics, and the full life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The virtues graph offers a rank-order of these 6 virtues for the individual, from highest to lowest.

Step back and reflect on this for a moment. Consider the wisest, most insightful people who have ever lived, including those from thousands of years ago all the way up to recent thinkers. These are the people who have thought more about these virtue topics than any of the other billions of people who have ever lived – they've thought more about the human experience, what it means to live a good life, a moral life, a life that contributes to society. From that centuries-old wisdom, the individual is examined and mapped out on this graph!

Isn't that interesting? Someone can immediately see if they have a larger pattern for cognitive or thinking-oriented strengths (Wisdom virtue) or veer toward self-control type strengths (Temperance virtue). And, this VIA Total 24 Report offers, for the first time noted anywhere, a new concept called "signature virtue."

The invitation is for people to consider their signature, or highest virtue (or consider multiple virtues if there is a tie) and reflect on the meaning and personal relevance of it in their life. This gives people another lens for viewing themselves – a broader, bigger picture lens of how they might tend to operate in life.

Another interesting tidbit to know about this graph is that the results are from another test, a validated test of these virtues, that is embedded within the VIA Survey. There is a technical report that discusses this virtues test and many other character strengths measures on the VIA site (see McGrath, 2019, found here).

**Practical tip:** To "grow" a virtue – develop more courage, tap more closely into justice, or enhance transcendence, consider the following: Turn to the highest scoring strength within that virtue. That strength could be the best pathway to expressing or using that virtue. If curiosity is the highest wisdom strength, consider asking questions and exploring things as a pathway to greater wisdom. If a person is not very high on any justice strengths but fairness is the one that is strongest of those strengths, then consider using fairness as a mindset to developing justice. This is referred to as "the pathways to the virtues" approach.



## Character Strengths Expression Map

Another lens to understand character strengths is the character strengths expression map. It offers multiple frames for character strengths. In a given situation, character strengths can be viewed as being predominant from the heart (more emotional/intuitive as one moves toward the right side of the graph) or the head (more logical, thinking-based, analytic as one moves toward the left), as well as more relational or outward expressing as one goes upward and more internal or inward expressing as one moves lower on the graph. The dots, where the character strengths are plotted, do not move. The placement of the dots on the graph is based on the results of a mathematical procedure called factor analysis which has been conducted by different VIA senior scientists over the years. They are in the exact same position for everyone. What changes from person to person is what is colored in, which is the individual's top 5 strengths.

**Practical tip:** An important first step with this graph, not unlike the approach discussed with the rank-order graph earlier, is to color-in or make note of any character strengths that are tied with the fifth strength; there is no difference between strengths that are tied. Making note of (any) additional strengths can give the person a clearer view of themselves as they use this graph. In fact, some people choose to take this a step further and color-in or make note of any strengths that are within 0.25 of their fifth strength as that level of difference is miniscule.

The dynamics of heart strengths, mind strengths, inward strengths, and relational strengths are frequently very powerful for people. It's common for people to refer to using the "strengths of the heart" such as gratitude and love in order to improve a relationship or lean on "head-oriented strengths" of judgment or prudence while taking time to think about and solve a problem. Likewise, it's easy to see how teamwork and kindness fit in when it comes to building relationships and expressing strengths with others in groups. And other strengths like love of learning and curiosity can be used quite easily and strongly when we are alone and working. These dynamics are the hypothetical defaults for the strengths, not foregone conclusions or rigid boxes. For example, love isn't always a heart-strength as a person can spend quite a bit of time analyzing a loving relationship and thinking loving thoughts.

An earlier version of this expression map appeared as a circumplex graph in Peterson (2006). It has been used to study groupings of character strengths, most commonly heart-strengths vs. mind strengths. Those studies have found heart strengths fairing stronger than head-oriented strengths for valued outcomes such as life satisfaction (Blasco-Belled et al., 2018) and mental health (Haridas et al., 2017).

### Practical tips:

- Use this graph to provide clients with new way to understand their strengths and how they express them. Be sure to expand their thinking about the different character strengths by reinforcing that any of the strengths can be expressed inward when alone, outward to people, from a logical/thinking/head approach, AND from the heart! For example, someone could give heartfelt gratitude to their friend (heart) and then have grateful thoughts about their work-day (head); this might then be followed-up with a gratitude call to a family member (relational) and then concluded with a short gratitude meditation (inward).
- Let clients know that there is no perfect or ideal layout with their strengths in this mapping. It is about self-discovery. If they learn something about themselves with this graph, then it has done its job.
- Ask clients: Do they feel they have a good balance of character strengths in their life? This mapping encourages them to consider the head-heart balance and the inward-relational balance in terms of their highest (likely most frequently used) strengths. In some cases, it leads people to feel confirmed about their life balance with strengths use, while in other cases, it highlights an important imbalance going on in the person's life that they can now address with strengths.

## Happiness Strengths

Although this section is about happiness, it is not intended to suggest that character strengths are only about making the best better. Even in the face of adversity, and the most basic life challenges, things can be made better than they start out. And every move forward with character strengths use can help build self-sufficiency and self-empowerment.

From early studies (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004), to recent studies on flourishing ingredients (Wagner et al., 2019), to cross-cultural work (Shimai et al., 2006), the connection between character strengths and happiness has been strong. Because of their consistent link with happiness across numerous studies, cultures, and populations (for example, Park et al., 2004), five character strengths have been dubbed “the happiness strengths” (Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, & Boiman-Meshita, 2017). These strengths are zest, hope, love, gratitude, and curiosity.

These happiness strengths have been shown to increase levels of happiness when they are targeted (Proyer et al., 2013). In the workplace, it was the happiness strengths that fared best (over signature strengths and lesser strengths) in terms of some workplace outcomes, namely work engagement, job satisfaction, and workplace meaning (Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, & Boiman-Meshita, 2017). It does not matter where one starts from, they can increase their level of well-being and happiness through these five key pathways.

The VIA Total 24 Report provides a rank-order graph of how the person scored on these five strengths. It then offers practical strategies – from research studies (such as Proyer et al., 2013) – as to how to build them up. As is the case for boosting any character strength, it takes time and effort to bring a character strength more clearly into one's awareness.

**Practical tip:** Consider having clients choose one of these character strengths to give attention to and build into their daily routines. In addition, don't forget that these happiness strengths are far from the only character strengths approach that can be used to boost happiness. Other approaches, already mentioned, include using a signature strength in a new way and targeting a lower character strength.

## Conclusion

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The journey into character strengths is vast and expansive. One is reminded of the story Alice in Wonderland in which once one starts down the rabbit hole, it is surprising (and amazing) to see how deep the rabbit hole goes in a positive way. In this way, the character strengths rabbit hole of ongoing new information, insights, research, ways of applying the work, and strengths dynamics is potentially endless.

As people consider the amount of information in the VIA Total 24 Report, it can feel exciting, interesting, and also overwhelming. Remember, there are a number of ways to approach the report to support clients:

1. Take it one section or strength at a time, bite by bite. Encourage clients to sit with each section or strength, explore the questions, concepts, findings, and tips through journaling, discussions with you and others, and in their personal practice. Upon feeling like they have built upon their learning, move on to the next section or strength. In other words, take time allow clients to chew and taste the concepts and practices before rushing on to the next bite.
2. Another approach is to have clients peruse or read through the full report, making note of sections, pages, or ideas they want to return to. Then, focus in on those areas together and experiment with the strengths therein.
3. Ask clients to start with a goal or intention they have to either boost their well-being or manage an adversity in their life. Then, go through the sections and graphs using them as a lens to better understand or gain strategies for that goal or struggle. The VIA Institute offers professional coaching in character strengths that can help you with this approach to using the report with your clients.

We offer you well-wishes and gratitude as you do the important work of guiding people along their character strengths journey! Remember, the VIA Institute on Character is here to help and support you. Don't hesitate to reach out to us.

## Further Reading

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### Books

For an additional complement to the VIA Total 24 Report review, consider a couple book resources. For an abundance of practical activities for each of the character strengths, get the bestselling book, [The Power of Character Strengths](#) (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019).

For practitioners wanting to help clients in a myriad of step-by-step, science-backed strategies in character strengths, consider [Character Strengths Interventions](#) (Niemiec, 2018) and [Mindfulness and Character Strengths](#) (2014).

### Journal Articles

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