



WVAPROSM

Character Strengths Profile

PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

Introduction

History

In 2000, Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman described the need to develop a scientific knowledge base on what is best about human beings and how we use our best characteristics to build our best lives as individuals, families, organizations, and communities. The backbone of this new scientific endeavor needed to include a state-of-the-art/science classification of best characteristics—that is, character strengths—as well as valid ways to measure these characteristics.

The Mayerson Foundation, envisioning the impact that this work could have, provided the funding and nonprofit organizational structure (the Values In Action Institute, renamed VIA Institute) for Dr. Seligman to bring on the best scholars and practitioners in the world to tackle the challenge of creating a best-of-class nomenclature (the VIA Classification) and tools of measurement (the VIA Inventories – Adult and Youth). Under the project leadership by Dr. Christopher Peterson over 50 world-class scholars—scientists and practitioners—contributed to what is now the gold standard for exploring and studying character strengths: the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS).

VIA Classification

The VIA Classification describes 24 character strengths that are thought to be the fundamental building blocks of character. These building blocks are universally considered to be qualities that define and lead people to being their best. Character strengths are defined as capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving. Every person possesses each of these 24 character strengths in different degrees, resulting in unique profiles that constitute the rich array of human personalities we observe.

Like many psychological characteristics, the expression of these 24 character strengths in an individual is thought to be partly determined by genetic predisposition and partly by the experience and will of the individual. We have our signature strengths, which are character strengths that are

strongly represented across many situations. They occur naturally without much effort and are energizing as we express them. We would feel a deflation of spirit and an emptiness if we could not express our signature strengths for long periods of time. They are the psychological air we breathe. We also have what are called phasic strengths (or situational strengths). These are strengths that we may not lead with in our lives, but that we possess in strong measure and can call upon when we need to. For example, we may not generally be perseverant or brave but, if the situation calls for it, we can muster considerable perseverance or bravery. We may not need to express these strengths for their well-being, but we have them when needed. Our middle and lesser character strengths provide color and nuance to our character. Through practice, we can strengthen these character strengths.

VIA Inventory of Strengths

The VIA Inventory allows for people to articulate their strengths of character and to draw a distinction between who they are (character strengths), what they can do (their talents), what they like (their interests), and their external supports (their resources). For example, while we may have talents to succeed at being an attorney (e.g., analytic and verbal skills), an interest in law, and resources of a supportive spouse and good work community/colleagues, if we are not deploying those talents, interests, and resources in ways that connect with who we are (our core character strengths), we may succeed without satisfaction. However, if we find an expression of those talents in an arena that aligns with who we are—for example, a person with signature character strengths of kindness and fairness working as a civil rights attorney—our work will be inspired and inspiring, yielding high levels of engagement, satisfaction, and meaning. When we are able to align our character strengths with our other strengths (talents, interests, and resources), we are in the “power zone”.

Character Connects

Character connects. A focus on character strengths can connect people with their own lives in ways that can have many benefits. This Report is an aid to you as you go about helping your clients build their best life by connecting with the activities and people in their lives and building out their best qualities.

Character CONNECTS

Here is some of what has been learned about character:

- ▶ **Character connects.** Recognizing the character strengths of others and expressing your own created meaningful connections with the activities and people in your life.
- ▶ **Character is plural.** Character strengths do not occur in isolation. Some strengths naturally combine with one another to strong effects (e.g., forgiveness and kindness) while others are less common to work in tandem (e.g., bravery and prudence).
- ▶ **Character strengths have a structure.** People are high or low on different strengths of character, and certain profiles are more typical than others.
- ▶ **Context is pivotal.** It is important to consider the situation and environment when discussing character strength use. The expression of love will look different if one is at a sporting event, a funeral home, a work environment, or in the comfort of home.
- ▶ **Character has important consequences.** These consequences differ according to the specific strength. Some character strengths are strongly linked to happiness, others to physical health, and others to success at school and work.
- ▶ **Change is possible.** Although character strengths are usually stable over time, they can and do change in response to important life events or as a result of deliberate actions that result in lifestyle changes.



What Does the VIA Inventory Measure?

The VIA Inventory measures the 24 character strengths that comprise the VIA Classification. These are the basic building blocks for constructing our best lives. The VIA Inventory measures the strength of these character strengths as perceived by the individual taking the test. It measures what we look like psychologically at our best.

As a self-report measure, it is subject to purposeful efforts to manipulate the results and therefore it should not be used for the expressed purpose of qualifying someone for a job or determining a precise career choice. It was not developed for these purposes.

The VIA Inventory **DOES NOT MEASURE TALENT**. So, for example, a low score on Creativity does **NOT** mean that the person lacks creative talent. Instead, it means that the person does not view creativity as a primary pathway to feeling alive, energized, and self-actualized.

The VIA Inventory **DOES NOT MEASURE WEAKNESS** or **NEGATIVE CHARACTER TRAITS**. For example, a low score on Honesty does **NOT** mean that someone is dishonest. Instead, it means that this person does not view honesty and authenticity as part of his or her core, relative to his or her higher strengths. The person may, nonetheless, be honest as the situation calls for it.

What Results Are Reported?

TOP STRENGTHS:



Top 5 strengths are provided unless there are a number of strengths tied for the fifth position. In such situations, up to seven strengths are reported in this section. If the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth positions are all tied then the eighth position is decided by an algorithm that creates maximum diversity of Virtues in this Top Strengths section. Each of the top strengths has the following sections:

- General information about the character strength.
- Some relevant research evidence about this character strength.
- What the character strength means about the individual.
- Ideas for how the individual could build upon this character strength.
- Underuse of the strength which may occur in particular situations; and novel ways to express the strength.
- Over-use: This is a section only available in this VIA-Pro Report as it involves a level of complexity and sensitivity as to require professional assistance in presenting and interpreting. Each of the strengths can be used unwisely with negative consequence and this section alerts the professional to how the person's top strengths might be overused. See section below for more detail.

TOP-DOWN ORDER:



The top-down rank-ordering report shows the relative representation of all 24 character strengths.

VIRTUES GRAPH:



When scientists reviewed the classic works about virtue and human goodness across religions, philosophies, and classifications, they found strong parallels across all of the great works. They noted there are six broad categories of virtue: Wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. These virtues are part of the VIA Classification and have been found to be universal across cultures and nations. Some have argued that they are grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for the survival of the species. The Virtue Graph offers a perspective of all 24 character strengths across these six virtue categories. It is important to note that the VIA Inventory does not measure the virtues directly: What you see is the average of the individual scores on the character strengths that make up each virtue.

HEART/MIND & SELF/OTHER GRAPH:



Heart/Mind and Self/Other Graph: This graph displays a person's top strengths along two dimensions. The placements of the character strengths in this graph are statistically determined. The top strengths are colored in. Strengths of the heart tend to be ones that are more emotionally based whereas strengths of the mind tend to have a strong cognitive component. Strengths that are positioned as other-directed tend to find expression largely in context of other people, whereas strengths that reside in the self can find expression without interaction with others. It is important to help your client understand that self-oriented strengths are not "selfish" in the pejorative sense of that word.

Interpretation and Identification

INTERPRETING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCORES: Small differences between character strength scores may not be meaningful. As a general rule of thumb, we recommend that raw score differences of 1 point or more may likely be considered meaningfully different. Score differences within half a point may be meaningfully different. There are no hard and fast cutoffs to determine meaningful differences in scale scores. Exploring the meaning of differences with your client is the best way to determine how meaningful the differences are. As you are exploring this with your client, remember to look at the absolute score so you can interpret it in accordance with the 5-point rating scale used to derive the score. Scores at 4 or above are at the high end, while scores below 3 are at the low end (being endorsed by your client as “not like me”).

IDENTIFYING SIGNATURE STRENGTHS: A convention has developed of defining the top 5 strengths as “signature” A more accurate method is to discuss the character strengths with your client in terms of the following criteria:

- How energizing is it when you express it?
- Do you feel that the strength is authentic to who you really are?
- Would people who know you well identify it as a core part of who you are?
- Do you find yourself regularly expressing the strength across multiple contexts in a balanced way?

Though signature strengths are likely to be found in the top 5, they can be found among middle and lower strengths as well.

IDENTIFYING PHASIC/SITUATIONAL STRENGTHS: Review the nonsignature strengths in light of the following question: “Can you call upon this strength pretty easily and strongly if the situation requires it?” As you identify phasic strengths you may want to have the client begin to enumerate and write down actual situations in which he or she has called forth the phasic strength.


CHARACTER STRENGTHS COMBINATIONS: As individuals deepen their understanding of their character strengths, it is a useful learning approach to reflect on each strength individually. However, in reality, we almost never express just one strength at a time. Instead, we use different combinations of character strengths in different degrees, depending on the situation. Some character strength combinations are more common than others such as the combination of curiosity and love of learning, the combination of kindness and fairness, and the combination of kindness and love.

What is most important is to explore the strength combinations. It is easiest to start by exploring different combinations of the individual’s signature strengths and to discuss how the strengths work together for a good effect. Consider a situation in which three people are looking upon a beautiful landscape of mountains, winding rivers, and lush greenery. They all have appreciation of beauty and excellence, but one person has spirituality, which combines to create a sense of wonder and connectedness with nature.

Another person's curiosity might combine to result in the person questioning how the environment was formed, how deep the river goes, and wonder about the wildlife that resides there. Still another person's hope might rise up to elicit an experience that there is so much good in the world and so much that is unknown that anything is possible. The combination of strengths is where to find the nuance and texture of character.

Middle and Lower Strengths

EXPLORING MIDDLE AND LESSER CHARACTER STRENGTHS: It is very important in reviewing the top-down rank ordering to help your client understand that lower and middle ranking strengths do not represent weaknesses but instead simply indicate that there are other strengths more strongly represented. Also, look at the absolute score for the lower ranking strengths, keeping in mind that the rating scale used in the VIA Inventory identifies scores at 3.0 as a neutral rating and scores below that as meaning the person has identified that character strength in degrees of "not like me."

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- Explore with your clients how their middle and lesser strengths do find expression in their lives to help them understand them as simply lesser strengths as opposed to weaknesses or complete absence of those qualities.
 - Explore how middle strengths may be used along with top strengths to modify them. For example, though social intelligence may be a middle strength, a person might use it to moderate their signature strength of honesty so that they are tactful.
 - **Appendix A** shows an example for building up each character strength.

Reviewing the Issue of Overuse

It is important to keep in mind the "golden mean of character strengths" in that we should shoot for expressing the right combination of strengths, to the right degree, at the right time. This is an ongoing challenge; thus a good working knowledge of our overuse and underuse of strengths is critical.

Our signature strengths sometimes occur as strong forces, which results in our using these strengths too intensely or too broadly in situations where they are not particularly appropriate. Overuse of signature strengths can occur in an automatic way. This can result in what some refer to as the shadow side of character strengths, referring to the unintended negative effects of overuse. Our signature strengths also represent what we value most dearly, so when we run into people and situations in which our values are absent or challenged, we are readily offended. Our signature strengths may thus become our hot buttons. When we find ourselves overusing our strengths, we can aim to draw them back and look for other strengths to emphasize instead.

Be careful not to have your client come to think that overuse is a "weakness." Remember that the spirit of this report is to help a person embrace his or her strengths and use them well. Overuse is a natural occurrence that can be managed.

- **HOT BUTTONS:** We all have points of particular sensitivity, which are referred to as pet peeves or hot buttons. When we encounter such experiences, we usually become emotionally upset, and we feel out of control – as if a force has automatically taken over to set us down a path of reactionary behavior. Try to come up with one or two examples of this with your client. Then try to explore ways that your client might take back control in those situations using his or her character strengths. Some possibilities include:
 - Recognizing that not everyone does or even should share your same sense of dedication to the character strength at the heart of the matter. For example, while kindness may be central to you, in others it may be surpassed in importance by honesty. A person who offends your sense of kindness by using “brutal” honesty may be seen as simply expressing a character strength.
 - Noticing that one of your values or core beliefs has been being challenged in terms of what should happen, how things should be, or how people should behave. Learn more about yourself by reflecting on which of your strengths might help you to not overreact to these things in the future. For example, if your value for kindness has been offended you might bring your curiosity forward to try to understand the other person’s point of view.
 - Talking strength-to-strength. In resolving things with the other person, try to acknowledge and validate the strengths that he or she may have and represent yourself in terms of your own. For example, “I recognize that it is important to you to be honest, and honesty is important to me, also. My reaction has to do with believing in being kind, and I struggle, too, in finding a good balance when the two are at odds with one another.”
- **SHADOW SIDE:** A character strength applied in the wrong situation or with too much intensity can have unwanted negative effects. Each strength has a shadow side and this report describes how this can happen for each of the top strengths reported. We all know people who go too far with their humor so as to become irritating and offensive to others. Explore with your client if and when he or she “overdoes” particular strengths, looking particularly at the signature strengths because they have the most automatic momentum. Once they have been identified, explore with your client ways to:
 - Modulate the intensity of expression so he or she can come to express the character strength in varying intensity vs. simply in its strongest form.
 - Choose situations in which the character strength is most appropriate and be able to identify when it may not be appropriate (e.g., telling jokes at a funeral).
 - Put other strengths forward while pulling back the expression of the strength that does not fit the situation well.

Reviewing the Issue of Underuse

All strengths, even those that are physical, can be both overused and underused. Though it may at first seem a bit of an oxymoron to talk about underused signature strengths since by definition signature strengths are highly used, it turns out that, upon reflection, there often are slices of our lives where we are underusing our signature strengths. For example, a people who are generally grateful with friends and coworkers may discover that they are not expressing much gratitude to their siblings or other family members who are important to them. Or people who express love routinely with their children may realize they are underusing this strength with co-workers or even spouses. It can be useful to explore with your clients their use of their top strengths in the following aspects of their lives:

- In relationships – family (nuclear and extended), friends, acquaintances, coworkers
- At work
- In the community
- In leisure/personal time

Further, expression of character strengths can lead to feelings of pleasure, engagement, and meaning – three important pathways to happiness and well-being. Explore with your clients how much pleasure, engagement, and meaning they derive by applying their character strengths.

Spotting Strengths in Others

Acknowledging and appreciating character strengths in others go a long way in building positive relationships at work and in one's personal life. This can become an acquired skill and habit.

The first step in acquiring the skill of recognizing character strengths in action is to ensure that clients are developing a language for strengths. Review the 24 character strengths with your clients so they have a good idea of what each means and what it might look like when it is being expressed. Have your clients keep a copy of the VIA Classification close at hand for reference. Figure out a method with your clients by which they can keep a heightened consciousness of observing character strengths in themselves and others, for example, keeping a log of behavioral expressions of their own character strengths. Encourage them to begin looking for expressions of character strengths in people they are close to and in those they've not met. Like any developing skill, observing for character strengths needs to become an ongoing practice or routine in order for it to build.

The second part of this skill is expressing appreciation of another's character strength. Many people are not practiced in giving or receiving positive feedback like this, and so working to diminish awkwardness can be helpful. Explore with your clients ways to express appreciation to another to minimize awkwardness and hopefully find a comfort level. One tip here is to encourage your clients not to feel that they have to use the character strength language but instead can put it in their own words. For example, instead of saying "I really appreciate your prudence," it might feel more natural to say "I really appreciate the way you are careful in thinking through all the risks." Work with your clients on finding a comfortable way to express appreciation.

Putting It All Together

What follows are some general ideas that can be used in full or in pieces to work with individuals and with groups. How you apply the following will depend on the client and your judgment, and should not be thought of as a rigid, step-by-step protocol. The process of working with a client on character strengths is one of exploration and discovery. Some general intervention principles to keep in mind are the following:

- ▶ **Redirection:** Many clients will have a tendency to go to the negative (e.g., weaknesses, problems/barriers), and your role is to help redirect their attention to the positive (strengths, possibilities).
- ▶ **Open-ended questioning:** Open-ended questioning (vs. questions that yield “yes” or “no” answers) based in true curiosity can open up an exploration, as opposed to leading questions that belie a hidden agenda or assumptions.
- ▶ **Environmental Cues:** Each of us has many things competing for our attention, and therefore it can be helpful to place cues in the environment to keep character strengths front and center. Such cues include strengths bracelets/jewelry, post-it notes, the VIA Classification, screen-savers, and so forth.
- ▶ **Self-monitoring:** Self-monitoring is a basic technique for changing behavior. Journaling is one method that has received much practical and research attention. Some people are not attracted to journaling and will need to find other ways of observing themselves (e.g., making mental notes or asking trusted others to make observations).
- ▶ **Brainstorming:** Brainstorming is a technique in which people suspend practical judgment while generating as many alternative solutions as they can. After generating ideas in a nonjudgmental process, then either alone or with your help, they can circle back and evaluate each idea in terms of its viability.
- ▶ **Reframing:** Reframing is an established counseling technique in which you offer your clients a different perspective—a character strengths perspective, in this case—for understanding themselves. When reframing works, the clients’ new self-perception becomes a platform from which they can build more positive and effective solutions. Reframing can be as simple as replacing a pejorative label such as stubborn with a more positive one such as perseverance. Or, it can take the form of pointing out the positive when the client sees only a negative, such as pointing out to a person who stays in an unhealthy relationship that he or she has levels of hope, persistence, and bravery in his or her expectations that things will eventually get better.
- ▶ **Goal setting:** People are more likely to make progress when they can specify their goals and the specific steps they are going to take towards those goals. You can help your clients articulate their goals and the character strengths and behaviors that will lead to achieving them.

Models for Use and Application

There are many ways to embed strengths work into your practice. There is no gold-standard approach; the idea is to integrate the core processes of working with strengths into your already-existing approach. Here are a few examples of models to consider:

1 AWARE-EXPLORE-APPLY

This is a general, VIA-based model used to capture three core processes to working with character strengths.

a. **Aware:** This phase involves helping your client build a general awareness of their character strengths, based on the assumption that most people do not have a deep and meaningful awareness of their strengths and could benefit from a higher dose of strength mindfulness. In this phase, a good start is taking the VIA Inventory and discussing the results. The “You at Your Best” exercise is another good step to take in a first session with a client. For this exercise, the client is asked to consider a time in the recent or distant past in which he or she was successful, happy, and doing well; he or she is then asked to write or tell the story and name the character strengths that were used in the story.

Questions to consider: What are you good at? What qualities do people compliment you for the most? What character strengths on your VIA Inventory do you resonate with the most?

b. **Explore:** This phase involves coexploration of the clients’ past and current strength use, as well as future potential strength use. Here you should use your own strengths of curiosity in the questioning as well as perspective in seeing the bigger picture of the client’s life, current issues, and goals. The intent is to help the client dig into what they are already using at home, work, and in social situations, what they could use more, and what they might need to use to balance overuse of strengths.

Questions to consider: What character strengths have you used in your past and current successes? What strengths do you seem to forget about when you are at your worst? What strengths have you used to manage a crisis or an everyday stressor? When you are happiest, what strengths are you deploying?

c. **Apply:** This phase involves helping clients use their character strengths to achieve their goals and/or to set plans for using their strengths more in their daily life. Here the emphasis is on not only taking action but maintaining successes.

Questions to consider: Would you rather work on building upon a signature strength or building up a middle/lower strength? Where do you need more balance in your strengths use? How might you use your strengths to achieve your goals?



APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative Inquiry is a process originated by David Cooperrider at Case Western University that is used to help organizations discover new potential and growth; however, it has also been used for working with individuals' character strengths as well. The process involves guidance along 5 Ds, or five general phases of positive inquiry:

- a. **Define:** Collaborate with your client on defining a purpose of your work together and how you might know that you are making progress towards this purpose. Part of this definition should include a focus on character strengths knowledge, leverage, and use.
- b. **Discover:** The purpose here is to help your clients become well-versed with their own character strengths and come to believe that character strengths are important levers they can use to reach their goals. Exercises here include reviewing of signature strengths, phasic strengths, and their underuse, overuse, and strength combinations, as well as enhancing the skill of strengths spotting—the recognition and appreciation of the character strengths of oneself and others.
- c. **Dream:** As your clients are becoming experts on their own character strengths via the steps above, have them be dreaming of what particular goals or achievements they might aspire to. Encourage them to think of possibilities unfettered in the moment by practical considerations or judgments. Brainstorming strategies are useful here. One popular exercise that has research support is called “Best Possible Self” in which clients imagine a time in the future when they are living their best life and are then asked to review the character strengths that can help them get there.
- d. **Design:** Help your client design a feasible plan that focuses on a particular goal and articulates specific steps towards achieving the goal. Use best practices for goal setting and action planning.
- e. **Deploy/Deliver:** Support your clients in deploying their action plan. Part of such support can be to provide your clients with constructive feedback about progress (feedback from you, from other trusted sources, journaling, data collection) and, of course, with frequent reinforcement and encouragement.



3 G.R.O.W.

This popular coaching model, developed by Alexander Graham and popularized by Sir John Whitmore, is particularly useful for setting goals and engaging in effective problem solving.

- a. **Goal:** This step involves looking at what the client wishes to achieve. Here it is important to decipher whether character strengths are the means or the ends of the goal. For example, Is the goal to be happier, (in which case character strengths are a means to get there)? Or is the goal to improve your character strength of hope, perseverance, gratitude, and so forth?
- b. **Reality:** This involves taking a close look at how far the client is from their goal, including the number of steps it would take to get there. For example, How are you doing right now in relation to your goal
- c. **Obstacles/Options:** Involves identifying barriers to reaching the goal as well as reviewing the various pathways that might be taken. For example, How might your signature strengths, phasic strengths, middle strengths, or lower strengths serve as options for you to reach your goal? Could any of your strengths be working against you (e.g., overuse of a strength)?
- d. **Way Forward:** Review of the above in order to form steps for action.