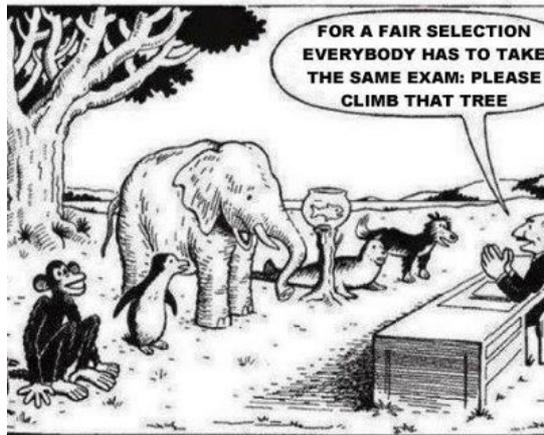


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### The Strengths Approach



## OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### Introduction

The strengths approach argues that people can become more successful, confident and happy by focusing on their strengths, rather than trying to improve their weaknesses. Although the research base is small, identifying people's strengths has been shown to increase business performance, and may also boost children's academic performance. This approach may also be beneficial in a clinical setting.

Below is a good starter reference which includes extensive information on the deficit based model, principles of the strengths approach, a glossary of strength-based terms and information on assessment and practice. Albeit a lecture with specific reference to social work, this information will be very useful in grasping an understanding of the strength-based approach.

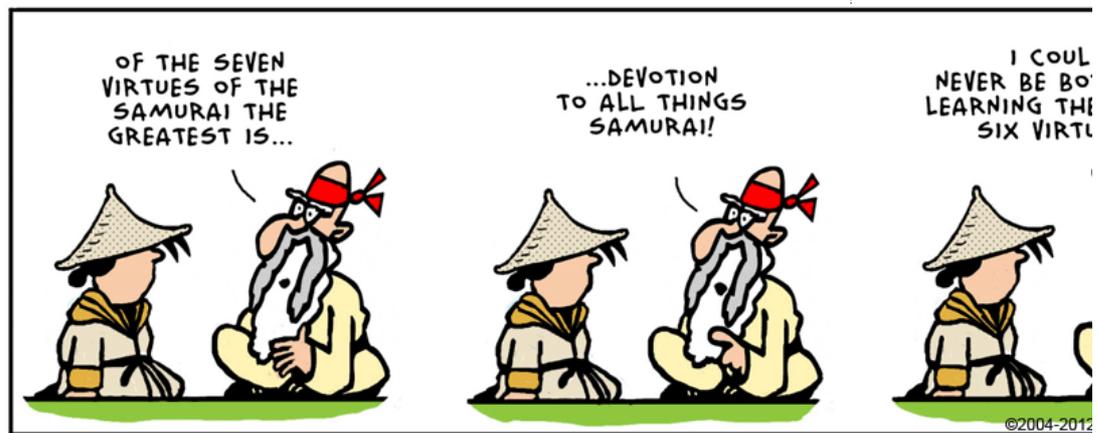
*Rankin, P. (2006) Exploring and Describing the Strength/Empowerment Perspective in Social Work. Lecture delivered for the course on Therapeutic Interventions at the Inter University Center, Dubrovnik, Croatia. 18th-24th June 2006.*

Or you can read it online by [clicking this link](#).

**FOR FUN** --> [Find your strengths](#), or try here for more [online assessments](#). If you fancy watching a slightly cheesy video on How to Build on Your Strengths

Once you have identified your strengths, [click here](#) for plenty of exercises on how to use your character strengths throughout the day.

### History of the strengths approach



Across cultures, folktales and religious scriptures are laden with protagonists and heroes whose character traits often represent a virtue to inspire and guide our behaviour. However, different virtues and human character strengths are valued differently across cultures. For instance, where many far Eastern cultures typically emphasise wisdom and transcendence (e.g. Jun, 1999), Western cultures, such as Athenian philosophy and Christianity, focus more on justice, faith and hope (Seligman, Dahlsgaard & Peterson, 2005). Nevertheless, despite some superficial differences, there appears to be some core virtues which are shared across cultures.

Seligman, Dahlsgaard & Peterson (2005) conducted a literature review of some major philosophies, concentrating on far Eastern philosophy (including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism & Hinduism) and Middle Eastern/Western philosophy (Islam, Judaism and Christianity) in order to discern whether these culturally distinct schools of thought had any shared virtues. Although the philosophies differed on some of the most valued virtues, justice, humanity and temperance were explicitly mentioned across the different philosophies as some of the most important virtues for leading a good and fulfilling life. Seligman and colleagues note that especially justice and humanity are explicitly named in each of the philosophies, and that these are also given the most emphasis. It is perhaps not surprising that these should be weighted more than other virtues, as the survival of each society depends on their prevalence. Wisdom, transcendence and courage were other strengths of character which are not only recommended on an individual level, but also deemed desirable in a partner, close family members and friends.

Based on their research on culturally and historically ubiquitous virtues, Peterson, Dahlsgaard & Seligman developed the Character Strength and Virtues (CSV) classification system which aims to describe desirable character strengths for individuals to develop and cultivate in order to lead a fulfilling and happy life. The CSV includes wisdom, humanity, courage, justice, temperance and transcendence, each with a subset of four character strengths, falling under the category of one of the six major ones. These virtues are said to be traitlike, morally valuable and measurable. Individuals can take a character strength test in order to discern their own trait-like character strengths. The authors suggest that rather than working on one's weaknesses, individuals can cultivate their existing strengths to help them live a pleasant and meaningful life.

However, the CSV assumes that each character strength (or virtue) is logically independent from the others. Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) argue that cultivating one strength and ignoring others could be problematic. They claim that in order for any of the virtues in the CSV to be effective in achieving individual happiness, one must first and foremost develop prudence, defined by Aristotle as the ability to make rational decisions with future consequences and overall wellbeing in mind. The ability to practically apply wisdom, acquired based on personal experience, in order to determine in what situation the application of a certain strength is suitable, is more important than focusing on the cultivation on individual strengths in isolation. For the full extent of their argument, we recommend you read the article, [downloadable as a PDF](#).

Nevertheless, there does appear to be a cultural and historical agreement on certain character strengths and virtues which are seen as essential for human happiness and well being. Though there may be slight differences in the

emphasis of certain strengths, there is an overall consensus - whether or not the cultivation of these virtues does indeed lead to individual happiness remains to be firmly empirically validated.

## Clinical applications

To simplify what is meant by using a person's strengths to aim for some level of development, we can look how a coach of a football team using strength based approach when deciding what position players will play in. For example a player who excels in defense will not be placed as a striker and vice versa. In sports, focusing on individual strengths is essential for the individual to be successful in their chosen field. I mean, how successful would Sir Chris Hoy have been if he focused mainly on 100 meter sprints than in his cycling? Or if Usain Bolt focused on the 100 meter hurdles rather than his sprints? The point that is being made here is that focusing on individual strengths can have positive effects within society, This may also be the case within clinical psychology?



This section of the wiki plans to briefly reviewing some of the literature surrounding the clinical application, that some psychologist have used to help improve the psychological well-being of the client, by focusing on the individuals own strengths rather than trying to "fix" what has went wrong.

Strength based approaches in psychology focus on people's individual strengths they possess, rather than trying to 'fix' things that have gone wrong in their past, i.e., traumatic experiences ( Harris, Brazeau, Clarkson, Brownlee and Rawana, 2012). Studies have shown that using positive strength based approaches in clinical psychology can be beneficial to the well-being of children and adolescents, by supporting the building of positive communication between parents or carers. These positive interventions have also been shown to have a direct effect on the problem behaviours, both internally and externally in youths (Buckley and Epstein, 2004; Beaver, 2008).

Promoting an individual's strengths rather than trying to change or control their weaknesses can be more effective than more traditional intervention techniques. Harris et al (2012) investigated interviewed youths in a strengths based substance abuse programme, to investigate if they felt they were benefiting from it. Most of the participants were often not aware of their own strengths, or how they could contribute to society, which influenced their likelihood of relapsing. However, the youths in this study reported that they felt this approach helped them to stay engaged in their treatment, as well as helping them identify their individual strengths rather than focusing on their dependence on drugs or alcohol. The strength based intervention was more beneficial than cognitive behaviour therapy or relapse prevention therapies in preventing relapse, showing that the strengths based approach has the potential to be clinically effective.

There are many different strength bases approaches that can be used within clinical psychology each with different adaptations for different strengths. These include:

- [Solution Focused Therapy](#) encourages individual to focus on what they want to achieve rather than what is stopping them from achieving their goals.
- [Strength Based case Management](#) combines focus on individual strengths with promoting informal supportive networks e.g. carers, community involvement and improving positive relationships with relevant bodies.

More approaches are outlined in Pattoni, 2012.

## Applications in business



The work place is often a highly pressurized environment: maximizing efficiency, hitting targets and making sure everything and everyone is working to their full potential. Many businesses aim to do this by identifying and focusing on improving the weakest areas. This focus on 'the negative' can be seen across most of western society's organisations from hospitals which treat the sick rather than promote health, to the tax system which aims to seek out tax avoidance rather than compensate those who have over-paid. This can mean organisations fail to build on what they are already doing well.

Business models have long focused on weakness prevention. CEOs, managers and business leaders spend time and energy trying to address and improve deficits in themselves and their employees. While doing this we completely overlook our most powerful assets; our strengths. Everyone has strengths, and when identified and nurtured they can have a dramatic effect on job satisfaction and organisational performance. Research suggests that by focusing on our strengths and building on them, people and businesses can become more successful.

#### Research In The Area:

It has been shown that employees who work to their strengths are more engaged. A 2007 poll (source) was conducted asking more than 1,000 people to comment on the statement "At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best." Among those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, not one reported being emotionally engaged on the job. Furthermore, in 2009 the consulting firm Watson Wyatt released a study concluding that employee engagement is a leading indicator of financial performance. It showed a direct correlation between companies that generated above-average returns and employee engagement.

Research from Gallup's Q12 survey (source) indicates that organisations focusing on maximising natural talents and strengths of their employees can:

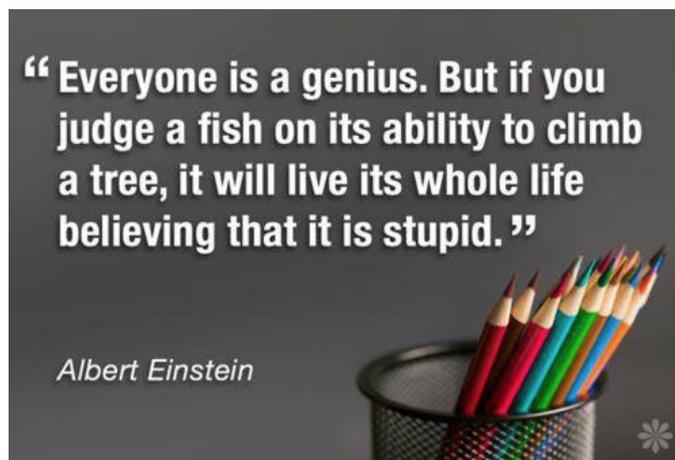
- Increase engagement by an average of 33% per year.
- Increase sales by 11% per year.
- Increase the profits by 10-15% in comparison to non-strengths oriented organisations.
- Reduce unscheduled absences by 24%
- Experience 13 percent lower employee turnover than the average.
- Can significantly reduce the number of health-related accidents in the workplace.

#### Ways Businesses Could Focus More On Strengths

- Rather than judging an employee's strengths based solely on anecdotal evidence, have leaders and employees complete objective assessments of their strengths (such as StrengthsFinder 2.0). This data can then be used in career and development plans.
- Open your mind to the possibility that an employee's optimal role (or your own) might be in a different job from their current one.
- Ask your employees, "Do you feel you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?" Listen to their answers and probe for understanding.
- Give positive feedback which is specific, targeted and with evidence.
- Use positive role models with the business that inspires people to believe that 'I could be like that'
- Incorporate an emphasis on strengths in your organization's performance management process, by adopting a growth mind set; believe that you can grow and improve strengths.

In short, strengths-based approaches in business have empirical support, and be very easy to implement. However, it's important to remember that focusing on strengths doesn't mean ignoring weaker areas. Marcus Buckingham suggests that both organisations and individuals should "focus on building strengths, and manage around your areas of weakness".

### Applications in Education



The strength-based approach values everyone equally and focuses on what the child can do rather than what they cannot do. This enables the child to build on their individual abilities, becoming a more successful learner and confident individual.

The strength based approach encourages educational establishments to understand that children's learning is dynamic, complex and holistic, and that children demonstrate learning in different ways. It moves away from a deficit-based approach, which can lead to a long list of a child's weaknesses and insufficient information about strengths to support the child's development. Instead, it acknowledges that children experience difficulties and challenges that need appropriate attention and support. Overall, this approach identifies when learning and progress is going well and then tries to reproduce this in order to further develop the child's learning.

It has been reported that the recognition of strengths in education is fairly narrow (Park ,2006). However, the strength-based approach is becoming increasingly popular. There is still a long time until this will be in place worldwide in education, but it does seem that this approach could have significant benefits in the development and learning of children.

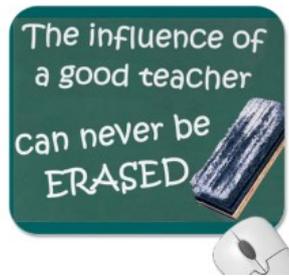
Using strength based measures could help each student excel in their most talented area. This could enable individuals who would otherwise do poorly academically to succeed in their field. However, to a limited extent, failure can be useful. By overcoming difficulties, children feel a sense of achievement and learn how they can achieve when faced with similar challenges in the future. Therefore, it is important to spend an appropriate amount of time to both your strengths and weaknesses. Too much concentration on a child's strengths may limit them from developing in other areas. The education system encourages children to excel in all areas, becoming a well-rounded learner.

#### Existing applications in schools

Strength based advising enables advisers to see diverse groups of students fulfill their potential and achieve excellence (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). The video below describes a school which follows a normal curriculum but also makes time for students to focus on their strengths, what each individual is good at. At the end of the session students present their strength/talent. Not only does this method allow students to work on their strengths and abilities, but makes them more confident individuals.

Another example of the strength approach in place in education. This video depicts a program in place in a primary school which builds on character strengths.

#### Turnaround Teachers



Applying the strengths approach in schools relies on teachers encouraging students, and reinforcing their growing sense of positive self-belief. Turnaround teachers act as positive role models outside of the child's family circle. They are interested in the child, get to know their strengths and gifts, and convey the message that "you matter". Turnaround teachers/mentors not only see the possibilities, but they also recognize existing competencies and mirror them back, helping students appreciate where they are already strong. BY using existing strengths as the foundation for learning, they tap the student's intrinsic motivation and existing innate drive for learning. It then becomes much easier for students to meet high expectations (Benard, 1998).

Here is a simple example of how expectations can have an influence on children's achievements. In 1968, Jane Elliott, an Iowa teacher, discovered this through a lesson on bigotry. She divided her class of all white students into two groups, those with brown eyes and those with blue eyes. She would alternate telling one group they were "superior" and the other group they were "inferior". The "superior" group would receive special treatment that the "inferior" group did not. She repeated the same lesson every year, and every year the result was the same. The "superior" group was confident and performed better academically than they had prior to the lesson. The "inferior" group was sullen and withdrawn, performing lower academically (Ferguson, 1998).

More recently, the strength-based approach has been put into practice when mentoring newly qualified teachers. They found this better prepared pre-service teachers for potential challenges in their first year of teaching, making them more confident in their abilities. (He, 2009). Therefore, not only does the strength-based approach in education benefit the students directly but also through the training of teachers, using this approach.

Chris Sarra, Executive Director of the Stronger Smarter Institute, talks about the importance of teacher expectations and support: [Click here to watch the video](#)

## Criticisms

### Point 1: Be careful what you wish for

The strengths approach suggests that we should seek to develop our strengths, implying that striving for excellence should make people feel better. Research suggests that in order for people to be happy and well adjusted they should cultivate virtues or strengths at moderate levels (for a review see [Grant and Schwartz, 2011](#)). Embracing one strength could impede on the development of others. For instance, a person who is very passionate about learning may lose focus on what is important regarding work performance. A study done by Bunderson and Sutcliffe (2003) at a business firm has shown that a work team with a strong inclination for learning achieved lower profitability than a team with moderate orientation for learning. Even extreme levels of love and compassion may be counterproductive. For instance, even though volunteering is thought to reduce negative affect and increase life-satisfaction, too much of it (more than 800 hours a year) was shown to reduce well-being (Windsor, Anstey and Rodgers, 2008). Increased responsibility, work-overload and distraction from other meaningful activities may be at the heart such adverse effects. Doctors, nurses, Lawyers may sometimes feel that being overly empathetic is likely to impede on their professional skills to provide the most efficient treatment and make informed decisions. Trying not to induce any more distress, a doctor may fail to diagnose a life-threatening illness (Groopman, 2007).

### Point 2: knowing versus doing

Knowing that you are creative or a good team player is one thing; knowing how to apply and develop those character strengths another. A strength-based intervention that focuses on identifying but not developing strengths may not yield any positive results with regards to well-being and life satisfaction. For instance, in a study by Gillum (2005) on low-scoring maths students, one group of participants received instructions to identify their strengths whereas another group received additional training as to how to use their strengths. The group which received additional instructions showed the greatest increase in efforts and performance in maths. Similarly, Louis (2008) investigated the influence of two interventions, one where a group of students identified their strengths with a focus on existing talents as innate tendencies and another group which received a strength development intervention. Participants in the strength development group scored higher on perceived academic control. Moreover, this group adopted a more malleable self-theory and a learning goal orientation, whereas in the identification only condition students showed a shift towards a fixed mindset and an orientation towards performance goals.

Having a malleable self-theory implies the belief that traits are amendable to change, whereas a fixed mindset assumes traits to be innate and stable. People who think abilities are fixed traits may believe that effort only reflects a lack of ability, whereas people who think traits are malleable believe hard work is necessary to further develop their strengths (Dweck and Molden, 2005). Therefore, commending people for their efforts makes people more open to learn, whereas praising their innate strengths may cause them to avoid challenges in the future. Mueller and Dweck, 1998; Kamrath and Dweck, 2006).

If you want to know how a strength development intervention should look like see [Biswas-Diener, Kashdan and Minhas, 2011](#).

If you are interested in Strength-based therapy [click here](#).

### Point 3: I've got better strengths than you!

Of the 24 strengths identified by the VIA strength inventory, some are likely to be of less value in our society than others and as such may become weaknesses. A modest, kind and fair person may not receive as much attention and as such reinforcement than someone who is energetic, brave and persistent, regardless of occupation or environment. For instance, teachers rated students who scored highly on strengths such as leadership, fairness and self-regulation as most popular, whereas strengths related to humanity such as love and kindness did not predict popularity (Park and Peterson, 2009). Moreover, how a certain character strength is valued is most likely dependent on how useful they are in bringing about outcomes in a certain context. For instance, strengths such as perseverance, gratitude, fairness, honesty, hope and perspective predicted GPA even after controlling for IQ (Park and Peterson, 2008; see Lounsbury et al., 2009 for similar results). On the other hand, strengths of the 'heart' (e.g., gratitude, love, kindness) are more strongly linked to

well-being than strengths of the 'mind' (e.g., love of learning, creativity, judgment). Life satisfaction was best predicted by hope, zest, gratitude, curiosity and love whereas character strengths such as modesty, appreciation of beauty and creativity showed only a weak association with life-satisfaction (Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2004; see Ruch et al., 2007, for similar results in other Western countries).

#### Point 4: Overcoming weakness is the greater concern

Re-mediating weaknesses has been the focus of therapy and interventions for centuries. Certain weaknesses can be very pervasive and interfere with normal day-to-day functioning; surely social anxieties and depression may prevent people from realizing their strengths and should therefore be addressed. Interestingly, participants who were asked to focus and work on one character strength and one weakness showed as much increase in life satisfaction as did participants who focused on two strengths (Rust, Diessner, Reade, 2009). Similarly, Haidt (2002) reports that whether participants worked on one strength or one weakness, both interventions improved levels of self-esteem, subjective well-being and physical health. However, the act of paying attention to one's experiences may have been responsible for positive effects.

#### Some thought-provoking questions

1. Could a strength approach inflate narcissistic tendencies, lead people to falsely ignore inescapable weaknesses and adopt a more external locus of control?
2. At one point or another, weaknesses will show. Trying to avoid dealing with them is futile; surely it's better to learn how to deal with it effectively?
3. Weaknesses may prevent us from pursuing our strengths in the first place.
4. Most people face a very different reality than college students in prosperous Western countries (where most studies have been conducted), a reality where a focus on individual strengths may not necessarily be of much use as existential needs have to be met first. However, a study by **Tweed, Biswas-Diener and Lehman**, 2012 showed that strength interventions among homeless people may facilitate escape from homelessness.
5. Are virtues universal? Consider the virtue of forgiveness. Whereas Western cultures may focus on forgiving others, more collectivistic cultures may pay more attention to seeking forgiveness (see the link for strength-based therapy; Wang, 2006)

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## Glossary of Strength-Based Terminology

### Glossary of Strength-Based Terminology

<p><b>At-Potential:</b></p> <p>The human potential for growth, development and/or change. Meant to counter the still popular focus on deficits and risk, this term re-orient's focus on the great potential of children and youth, including those viewed as "at-risk".</p>	<p><b>Developmental Strengths:</b></p> <p>The 31 research validated child and youth developmental sub-factors related to resilience and protective factors.</p>
<p><b>Collaborative:</b></p> <p>A philosophy and practice of working together toward a common goal.</p>	<p><b>Community:</b></p> <p>A group of people who share a common territory and/or characteristics (i.e. age, culture, religion, sexual orientation, language, interests).</p>
<p><b>Capacity-building:</b></p> <p>An approach focused on the enhancement of individual and/or community capacity.</p>	<p><b>Core competencies:</b></p> <p>Essential skills, abilities and knowledge that are central to health, well-being and success in life.</p>
<p><b>Empathy:</b></p> <p>The ability to accurately understand the experience and perspectives of others.</p>	<p><b>Empower:</b></p> <p>To give power and/or authority to another through insight and opportunity.</p>
<p><b>Engagement:</b></p> <p>The degree to which one bonds and builds rapport with another. Research supports this as the most</p>	<p><b>Participatory-approach:</b></p> <p>A philosophy and practice of inclusiveness and collaboration with individuals, families, groups other</p>

important factor in developing relationships that influence positive growth and change. It also counters the traditional expert driven model of intervention.	"community" stakeholders.
<b>Inclusiveness:</b> A philosophy and practice of being non-discriminatory – To include all.	<b>Influence:</b> The degree to which one affects the thoughts and actions of another. A positive outcome of meaningful engagement and relationship.
<b>Persistent:</b> Diligence and determination toward the object or activity of focus. Countering the traditional deficit based perspective as seeing others as resistant, this is seen as a strength that can be engaged in constructive ways through meaningful relationship and activities.	<b>Person-centred:</b> An evidence informed approach first developed by humanistic psychologists to engage people in positive development through authentic relationships and client-directed activities.
<b>Process-focused:</b> An approach that honours human growth and development as a process that may not appear to be linear in nature.	<b>Protective Factors:</b> The positive relationships, resources, activities and internal characteristics that enhance well-being and insulate individuals and/or communities from harm.
<b>Relationship-based:</b> A research validated approach that holds the quality of relationship and engagement as central to positive growth, development and/or change.	<b>Resilience:</b> Traditionally viewed as the ability to overcome adversity, research links the development of resilience with internal characteristics and the presence of important relationships, resources and activities.
<b>Resiliency Factors:</b> The 10 research validated child and youth factors related to resilience and core competencies.	<b>Strengths:</b> Inner characteristics, virtues and external relationships, activities and connections to resources that contribute to resilience and core competencies.
<b>Strength-based approach:</b> Focus on individual and/or community strengths that place emphasis on meaningful relationships and activities.	<b>Sustainability:</b> The ability to maintain the positive benefits, growth, development and capacity of an initiative when the temporary components of the project have expired/been removed.

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