

character strengths, 12 suggestions (12): building up specific strengths exercise

(this handout with active hyperlinks was posted as a blog at www.goodmedicine.org.uk on 16.08.16)

I've recently written three blog posts on how we might use our character strengths more deliberately - see "*Twelve practical suggestions for exploring our character strengths (1 to 5): learning, spotting, relationships, and writing*", "*Twelve practical suggestions ... (6 to 8): supports, wellbeing, and new ways*" and "*Twelve practical suggestions ... (9 to 11): jobs, reminders, and meditations*". These eleven ideas have mostly been based on identifying and connecting to the level of character strengths we already have. This twelfth suggestion in today's blog post explores how we can choose a specific character strength and encourage it to grow still stronger. This might be because we know that strengths like *zest, hope & curiosity* are particularly linked with higher overall wellbeing (Harzer, 2016), or because we know that a situational strength like *perseverance* is especially important for work success (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2016), or because there's a specific strength that we personally want to grow more in ourselves.

So how can one go about "*growing*" a character strength more strongly? Well first I'd like to make a couple of general points. Character strengths, like personality traits, are fairly stable but tend to evolve over time. Our strengths affect our life situation, and reciprocally our life situation affects our strengths. This means that it's very likely that the job we do and the people we spend most time with will affect how our character strengths (and personalities) develop (Le et al, 2014). So choose wisely. As the writer Cervantes wrote "*The brave man carves out his fortune, and every man is the son of his own works*" and "*Tell me thy company, and I'll tell thee what thou art*". I have written more about this territory and how attitudes & behaviours are infectious in the post "*Be the change you want to see in the world*". The second more general point is that, when working to grow a particular character strength, consider how you can use your signature strengths ... those that come very naturally to you ... to support this process. Now for more detail about the how-to-grow-a-strength exercise itself.

It is clear from a wealth of research studies that awareness & focus on our character strengths can be associated with numerous beneficial outcomes for coping better with challenges, improving relationships, and nourishing wellbeing. What's less clear is how much we can deliberately "*grow*" our strengths rather than, for example, appreciate & better use the strengths we already have. I don't think that many researchers have looked carefully at this rather obvious question. An exception is Weiss & Speridakos's 2011 paper "*A meta-analysis of hope enhancement strategies in clinical and community settings*" with its underwhelming comment that "*Analysis of 27 studies involving 2,154 participants showed significant, but small, effect sizes*" and that "*Results also suggested publication bias.*" The paper concluded that "*the current study provides only modest evidence for the ability of hope enhancement strategies to increase hopefulness*". Character strengths overlap with personality traits. Both show considerable consistency across time, suggesting change may not be easy. Last year Hudson & Fraley published what I think is a landmark paper - "*Volitional personality trait change: can people choose to change their personality traits?*". I wrote about this work in a couple of blog posts - see "*New research describes effective ways of changing long-term personality traits and other persistent behaviour patterns*". Fascinatingly, although the recent meta-analysis on hope enhancement strategies suggested only minor benefits, a further research paper using an approach much as described by Hudson & Fraley looked more encouraging - see "*Can hope be changed in 90 minutes? Testing the efficacy of a single-session goal-pursuit intervention for college students*". So what advice on deliberately improving personality traits or character strengths emerges from this research?

It's no big surprise that successful change is very likely to involve committed hard work over some time. For skilful goal setting (and an upgrade on the usual SMART goals acronym), It may be useful to have a look at the handout "*Goals - ACT WISeST*". There are also a whole series of relevant books (see at the end of this post). And here is a suggestion for a six stage change programme that I've adapted from Hudson & Fraley's research on volitional personality trait change:

a.) What does your overall goal involve? Take time to visualise & write about what the wanted end state actually looks like. When you've reached your change goal, how will you be feeling, thinking & behaving. Please write about this clearly & concretely. And as a second part of this goal visualisation exercise, please do your best to really feel what is likely to be so special about achieving this goal. How do

you think it might be to have genuinely & deeply made the changes you want to make. Allow yourself to get a sense of the joy, satisfaction, happiness, contentment or other feeling states that you hope this change could lead to.

b.) How can you measure your progress towards this goal? Here are three suggestions: If this wished for state qualifies as 100%, what percentage of this state do you feel you've currently achieved ... as an approximate, intuitive "*guesstimate*"? Or go back to the VIA-IS survey, retake it, and while doing so write down the five questions that are used to assess the strength you want to grow. How are you scoring on these questions at the moment and how would you ideally want to score on them? Or, for a third option, are there any other reasonably well validated scales that you could use to assess progress ... for example scales of wellbeing, flourishing, positive & negative feelings, happiness, self- & other-compassion, self-esteem, vitality, curiosity, conscientiousness, extraversion, self-esteem, self-determination, and so on (for examples see the "*Wellbeing*" sections in the "*Good Knowledge*" area of this website). How do you currently score on any relevant scale you choose, and how would you score if you had achieved the changes you want to make?

c.) What are the obstacles to reaching this goal? What needs to change? What needs to be increased or decreased or done differently? What gets in the way of you reaching your goal?

d.) Choose three intermediate goals for the coming week (and WOOP them): Choose three specific, measurable things you can do in this coming week that will move you towards your overall goal. It's fine if they're quite small intermediate goals ... better to move forward in small achieved steps than to make the steps too big and not manage them. Progress is likely to be achieved by working just beyond your comfort zone ... too easy and there's no progress, too far and there's danger that it becomes a break not a stretch. If you regularly achieve your weekly goals, start making them a little harder. If you find yourself not managing them ... OK ... this is helpful information, pull back a little and make the steps a bit smaller. It's very likely to help if you write these goals down including information about when & where you're going to act on them. The weekly "*Building up specific strengths record*" may well be useful here. Now set up *WOOP* or straightforward *Implementation Intentions* for any of these intermediate goals that this method is relevant to.

e.) Recommit each day: At least once daily (maybe as a short meditation/visualisation exercise), recommit to the overarching full change goal you have set yourself (including reminding yourself of how precious it will be to achieve it). Remind yourself of the obstacles to achieving this overarching goal. Remind yourself too of the current set of intermediate weekly goals and, for any relevant goals, relink to *WOOP* or *other Implementation intentions*. Make sure you have a recording system in place for noting how you do with these weekly goals (the "*Building up specific strengths record*" is fine for this), and probably weekly note your overall progress using the "*guesstimate*" 0-100% assessment and possibly too VIA or other well-validated general scales you might have chosen.

f.) Review and re-commit: As a rough suggestion, give this initiative two or three weeks' of work and then review how you're doing. Are you making progress? Does the progress feel fast enough? Is it a case of "*steady as she goes*" and re-committing to another two to three weeks of work before another review, or do you feel you need to alter how you're going about this initiative to try to boost its effectiveness. This committed work, and occasional review & recommit cycle probably needs to be followed over a couple of months or more to really give the change you're working for enough time to put down roots and become established as a new set of habits - see Lally et al's "*How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world*" and Huffington Post's related discussion "*How long does it actually take to form a new habit?*".

There are also many books that can be useful for this kind of change work. Three more general ones are Polly & Britton's "*Character strengths matter: how to live a full life*", Niemiec's "*Mindfulness & character strengths*" and Duhigg's "*The power of habit*". Then books with a more specific strengths focus include Emmons's "*Thanks! How practicing gratitude can make you happier*", Luskin's "*Forgive for good*", Goleman's "*Social intelligence*", Bryant & Veroff's "*Savoring: a new model of positive experience*", Frederickson's "*Love 2.0*", Seligman's "*Learned optimism*", Kashdan's "*Curious?*", McGhee's "*Humor: as survival training for a stressed-out world*", Lopez's "*Making hope happen*", and Duckworth's "*Grit: the power of passion & perseverance*".
