

character strengths, 12 suggestions **(6-8): supports, wellbeing & new ways**

(this handout with active hyperlinks was posted as a blog at www.goodmedicine.org.uk on 28.07.16)

I have been writing about possible ways of building on the personal character strengths report you can get after filling in the 10-15 minute survey at "*The VIA Institute on Character*" website. For an initial set of 5 ideas, see the blog post "*Twelve practical suggestions for exploring our character strengths (1 to 5): learning, spotting, relationships, and writing*". In this post I give suggestions 6 to 8:

6.) Think back over your life: Have there been people who really believed in you ... who cared about you, seemed to understand you, valued you, and saw good things in you? They could be or could have been a relative (maybe a parent, a grandparent, an uncle or aunt), a teacher at school or a lecturer at university, a sports coach, a boss or ex-boss, a good friend. Imagine this person. Write down how they would describe or would have described you, what they celebrated about you, and what strengths they saw in you? Maybe imagine them talking to you, reaching out to you warmly. What words of care & encouragement might they say? In particular what might they say about you connecting to & staying true to your key strengths? If it's helpful, return to this imagined dialogue every now and again in the future. You can ask their advice & use this inner connection as a source of hope, soothing & inspiration. For more on this kind of idea, see the post "*Boosting self-compassion & self-encouragement by strengthening attachment security: twelve practical suggestions*".

7.) Strengths most firmly linked to wellbeing: The strengths of *Zest & Hope*, and also *Curiosity, Love, Humour, Perseverance & Gratitude* have been found to be particularly strongly linked to higher levels of wellbeing - see, for example, Chris Peterson's 2007 paper "*Strengths of character, orientations to happiness, and life satisfaction*". The more recent & nuanced Willibald Ruch 2014 study "*Character strengths and well-being across the life span*" highlighted a somewhat shifting "*top group*" of character strength/wellbeing associations depending on factors such as age and the particular wellbeing measure that was assessed. *Hope, Zest & Humour* came out particularly well, with *Love, Social Intelligence, Perseverance, Gratitude, Open-Mindedness, Kindness, Honesty, Leadership & Love of Learning* all proving of particular importance in a variety of situations. The paper's abstract read "*Character strengths are positive, morally valued traits of personality. This study aims at assessing the relationship between character strengths and subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, positive and negative affect) in a representative sample of German-speaking adults living in Switzerland (N = 945). We further test whether this relationship is consistent at different stages in life. Results showed that hope, zest, love, social intelligence and perseverance yielded the highest positive correlations with life satisfaction. Hope, zest, humor, gratitude and love presented the highest positive correlations with positive affect. Hope, humor, zest, honesty, and open-mindedness had the highest negative correlations with negative affect. When examining the relationship between strengths and well-being across age groups, in general, hope, zest and humor consistently yielded the highest correlations with well-being. Additionally, in the 27-36 years group, strengths that promote commitment and affiliation (i.e., kindness and honesty) were among the first five positions in the ranking of the relationship between strengths and well-being. In the 37-46 years group, in addition to hope, zest and humor, strengths that promote the maintenance of areas such as family and work (i.e., love, leadership) were among the first five positions in the ranking. Finally, in the 47-57 years group, in addition to hope, zest and humor, strengths that facilitate integration and a vital involvement with the environment (i.e., gratitude, love of learning) were among the first five positions in the ranking. This study partially supports previous findings with less representative samples on the association between character strengths and well-being, and sheds light on the relative importance of some strengths over others for well-being across the life span.*" There are good reasons to believe that, if you're doing pretty well in your life at the moment, it may be most helpful to concentrate on building up personal strengths that aren't currently being expressed as fully as you would like. In contrast, if you're struggling a bit in your life just now, it may be better to work on boosting personal strengths that are already expressing pretty well in you. The paper "*Strengths-based positive psychology interventions: a randomized placebo-controlled online trial on long-term effects for a signature strengths- vs. a lesser strengths-intervention*" makes this point pretty well. So if you'd like to try working on one of these strengths that is particularly strongly linked with wellbeing, choose one that looks personally relevant but that you're weaker in if you're

doing well in your life at the moment ... but choose one that's personally relevant but that you're stronger in if you're going through a phase of your life that feels a bit of a struggle. Write about the strength as described in suggestion 5.) and also consider boosting it with ideas from suggestions 8.) and beyond.

8.) Use a strength in new ways: Choose a strength you have explored in suggestions 5.), 6.) or 7.) above. For a week use the strength (or if you like, on some days, other strengths you've chosen) in a new way each day - as described in a series of research papers like *"Strength-based positive interventions: Further evidence for their potential in enhancing well-being and alleviating depression"* and *"Character strengths interventions: Building on what we know for improved outcomes"*. Suggestions on how you might do this are given on the VIA website - for example see Tayyab Rashid's article *"Ways to use VIA Character Strengths"* - and the recent book *"Character strengths matter: how to live a full life"*. Ryan Niemiec of the VIA centre highlights how using a chosen strength in a new way each day can be fairly simple & straightforward in this 2 minute Youtube video. And while on the subject, I'll just put in a plug for *Zest & Curiosity* - two absolutely top contenders when it comes to character strengths most associated with high wellbeing. As Barbara Fredrickson pointed out at the recent *European Conference on Positive Psychology* in Angers, taking enjoyment seriously (!) is associated with increased happiness - see the paper *"Prioritizing positivity: An effective approach to pursuing happiness?"* with its abstract reading *"A decade of research reveals the benefits of positive emotions for mental and physical health; however, recent empirical work suggests the explicit pursuit of happiness may backfire. The present study hypothesized that the pursuit of happiness is not inherently self-defeating; in particular, individuals who seek positivity, as exemplified by how they make decisions about how to organize their day-to-day lives, may be happier. This individual difference is labeled prioritizing positivity. In a community sample of young to older adults (N = 233), prioritizing positivity predicted a host of well-being outcomes (positive emotions, depressive symptomology). In addition, people high in prioritizing positivity have greater resources, and these links are explained by more frequent experiences of positive emotions. In sum, the present study suggests that seeking happiness, although a delicate art, may be a worthwhile pursuit."* It isn't just that *"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy"* but as Wavy Gravy put it *"Keep your sense of humor, my friend; if you don't have a sense of humor it just isn't funny anymore."* Barbara, in a Positive Psychology conference workshop, highlighted the importance of making sure you have some *Ta-da!* items on your daily *To-do* list.
