

The [Professional Learning Hub](#), Griffith University, is proud to present **Positive on Purpose**, a podcast series by Mia O'Brien

Episode 7 – Strengths



I'm Mia O'Brien from the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, and welcome to my podcast: Positive on purpose – no magical thinking required.

Thank you for joining me, in this podcast we explore the intriguing role that strengths play in building and sustaining positivity in our lives, especially in the face of challenge or adversity.

Strengths, we all have them, and we all like the idea of using them, but what are they really, and how can they help us in our overarching aim to stay positive and thrive?

Strengths are at the very centre of the positive psychology field, and Martin Seligman's early work on character strengths and virtues really secured the place of strengths in thinking about positivity and well-being. However Seligman's initial work was quickly expanded upon or even construed quite differently by others. The notion of leading with our strengths is not new, but is widely embraced. And in that context, being good at something doesn't necessarily mean that's a strength.

Confused? Let's start by unpacking what is meant by 'strengths'.

Seligman's work on strengths drew from a review theological virtues articulated by ancient philosophers, Aristotle and Aquinas; in his Handbook of Character Strengths and Virtues co-authored with the late Chris Peterson, these virtues were reconceptualised into six classes of 'values' or 'values in action' within which the authors proposed measurable 'character strengths' could be categorised. These are said to be the strengths that, when enacted, facilitated the virtue or values within which they sat. So, those Values in Action, and their inventory of strengths can be found via an easy google search (look for VIA Character Strengths or similar) etc.

I'm going to talk through them quickly here, and as I do, try to identify the strengths that you possess or that characterise your modus operandi; Here they are in summary:

1. Wisdom and knowledge – entails the strengths of creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, innovation;
2. Courage – entails the strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, zest
3. Humanity – entails love, kindness, social intelligence
4. Justice – entails citizenship, fairness, leadership
5. Temperance – entails forgiveness, mercy, humility, prudence, self control
6. Transcendence – entails the strengths of appreciation of beauty, excellence, gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality.

These are Seligman & Peterson's six VIA or Values in Action with inventory of strengths – how did you go identifying your strengths? Did you find many that resonate? Perhaps a few; but if you had difficulty, you're not alone. The research shows that cross-culturally, many of us find it quite challenging to self-identify our strengths. That reflects a widespread reluctance to talk about ourselves in such a positive, affirming way; we're more comfortable talking about what we're not good at, than what we're good at. But its certainly worth taking a little time out soon to reflect on and identify some strengths you're already using regularly.

It's interesting to note however, that strengths don't necessarily equate to what we're good at. Seligman and Peterson's proposition was that this collection of strengths and virtues has application across a vast majority of cultures, and that, whether or not we have those strengths to start with, practicing them actively would lead eventually to happiness. That is to say, developing this array of strengths and virtues would in time, contribute to our overall well-being. However one aspect of the research suggested that working with the specific strengths that we have a natural affinity with, or predisposition to, paved the way for more effective and satisfying lives.

This area of positive psychology generated a lot of enthusiasm and interest, to the extent that Peterson and Seligman devised an instrument that asked participants an array of questions that upon completion, could identify 'signature strengths' (those strengths that were most prominent for the participant). You can find that instrument via quick search for VIA Character Strengths).

Just to keep things interesting, and from a slightly different perspective, Donald Clifton and colleagues were keen to discover what made people excel in what they did, particularly in professional working contexts. They interviewed thousands of 'top performers' across the globe, and from those interviews they devised a collection of the top 34 'talents/strengths' that are widely known as the Gallup Strengths. As with the character strengths, Gallup strengths are thematised into smaller organised groups for easier access and understanding. You can also find these a simple search for 'Clifton Strengths finder' or 'Gallup Strengths' but in summary these workplace strengths include themes like: achievement (which entails strengths such as pursuit of goals, productivity, satisfaction from accomplishments), focus (determining priorities, finding direction), adaptability (which entails self-regulation and flexibility) and being analytical ... just to name a few.

Here's a third perspective on strengths, and it's not entirely different to the previous two, but it does emphasise the very personal place that strengths can have in our lives. Alex Linley, on the other hand, describes a strength as "a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of

behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance” (2008).

This is one of my favourite definitions of strengths – and if you’re yet to explore the pre-existing lists of potential strengths, why not start with Linely’s suggestion and take a moment to identify that pre-existing capacity or ability that is your ‘go to’ strategy or way of thinking that feels authentic and energising. These are ways of working that you’re probably familiar with that serve you well in your day to day life.

In this view, natural ability is certainly necessary but not a sufficient condition for a strength to exist. Linely argues that if an area of potential strength is not energised, then it is likely to be merely a ‘learned behaviour’ and not a true strength.

What is the benefit of knowing our strengths or taking a strengths based approach?

As with the VIA Character Strengths, research into the Gallup Strengths continues and is widely acknowledged in the field. The key message from these researchers is that getting to know our strengths, further developing them, and effectively apply our strengths, means that we’ll

- Understand and believe in our own abilities and talents;
- Value our strengths and assume personal responsibility for them;
- Check in with and be aware of our motivation, and clarify why we are doing what we’re doing – what we’re wanting to achieve via our strengths, in terms of our broader life goals and aspirations;
- Always establish caring, facilitative relationships, relationships are everything and transcend strengths;
- We also need to relive our successes and revisit the moments that we applied our strengths and abilities effectively, to build momentum and affirm our confidence;
- And lastly, teaching others about those strengths and abilities will help us to understand our own strengths from a different perspective.

Indeed substantial cross-cultural research on the potential value of ‘strengths’ lies in our ability to know and action our strengths responsively, according to specific situations and circumstances. When we are able to draw on our strengths in that way, the benefits include:

- Gaining insight and perspective on your life;
- Helps to balance out potential oversensitivity to stress;
- Generates optimism and resilience
- Provides a sense of direction
- Helps to develop confidence and boost self-esteem
- Generates a sense of energy and vitality
- Engenders a sense of happiness and fulfilment
- We feel more able to achieve our goals
- Enables us to be more engaged at work and improve our performance.

How do we start with our strengths?

Starting with our strengths or taking a ‘strengths based approach’ is at the heart of contemporary positive psychology and reflects the core of philosophy of the positive

psychology movement, that we start with what's working and what helps us to flourish. So a 'strengths-based perspective' directs our attention to concentrating on the inherent strengths or abilities of individuals, families, groups or organisations as a starting point; where the key objective is to empower and enable others by starting with, and building on existing strengths.

In the same way, starting with our strengths is an empowering and enabling way to approach our day to day; and most certainly a positive way to face challenging or difficult situations. Starting with our strengths implies that we identify and build on those positive personal attributes that we already have, and feel confident and energised by: those strengths might include patience, optimism, and persistence or curiosity, courage and vitality. Whatever your unique combination of strengths is – get to know them and start by thinking about how to approach that situation making use of those strengths. Let those strengths lead your thinking...what does that challenging situation look like if you approach it with curiosity, courage, love of learning? How does that simple shift in perspective start to reframe the situation, and in turn, provide you with a point of leverage to begin to address it?

That's where the various lists of strengths come in handy – jump in and start identifying your strengths so you can put them to good use.

However, there's a second important step that's vital to taking a strengths based approach, particularly if you're facing a challenging situation.

Linley states that we need to match the right strength to the right situation at the right time in order for it to be effective. In other words, in any given situation some strengths will be essential, while others optional; and having the insight and judgement to fit *strengths to circumstance* is, in itself, a strength!

Next to this, researchers show that one of our most effective options in responding to challenging times is not only to use the strengths that we have – but to take the opportunity to cultivate some new ones. That requires that we take an initially optimistic, resilient view of the challenge we're facing, and consider the strengths that the situation is really calling for.

What is the nature of the challenge? Is the situation a challenge because it requires us to use a strength or set of strengths that we're not familiar with? What are our areas of vulnerability and how can we balance up by building new strengths?

The point is, this mindset positions us quite differently in terms of how we might see strengths; and that positioning reflects another really wonderful and empowering field of research within positive psychology led by Barbara Fredrickson, called the broaden and build theory. We reviewed this theory in an earlier podcast (why happiness is not enough). In that theory Fredrickson studied the mindsets of people who flourish compared to people who flounder. Both kinds of people face challenge; and the key difference was that flounders responded to challenge by withdrawing their reserves and being conservative with their resources; whereas flourishers actively broadened their perspective and built their resources (including building on and expanding their strengths).

So as you take some time in the near future to explore and reflect on your strengths, consider that key idea. Knowing and starting with our strengths can be energising and engaging, and contribute to our overall sense of wellbeing.

But working carefully to build on our strengths and to understand which strengths are of most value in a specific situation, is where the real strength in a strengths based approach lies.

Join me for the next podcast where we explore the broaden and build theory in more depth, and consider its application to our day to day lives for more positive and empowering responses to difficult times.

I'm Mia O'Brien and you can contact me on email via: mia.obrien@griffith.edu.au I look forward to your company in our next episode of Positive on Purpose: no magical thinking required.