

Exploring how awareness of character strengths can benefit mental health nurses

Abstract

This is the third article in a series of articles that explores the meaning of positive psychology and the importance of applying the latest related research findings for the wellbeing of the mental health workforce. It will focus on Character Strengths as a positive psychology intervention from its development to present day use as a natural link from Seligman's (2011) work on PERMA. It will explain the key terms and the complementary underpinning theoretical work of Ryan Niemiec (2009). There will be a personal perspective of how theory was applied as part of a PhD research project with a group of health care workers who completed the online VIA Character Strengths intervention and the results show the sample groups had significant traits of kindness, honesty, fairness, love and teamwork strengths. This is followed by how an explanation of how it is relevant to mental health nursing. The practical tasks provided in the boxes throughout the article will help the reader identify their own strengths and understand how to further develop their transferability to daily work, home life, education and recreation.

Author – Jan Macfarlane

INTRODUCTION

As a health and social care lecturer in higher education I am interested in positive psychology with its interventions and principles to inform how people learn and consequently improve their engagement in the classroom, in mental health clinical practice and flourish as human beings. The philosophy of a positive working environment and feeling valued in meaningful mental health work is an aspiring vision yet one that is achievable (Lomas et. al, 2014). When one's own strengths are utilised as just right for the situation then 'flow' exists and there is a real sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. As Macfarlane (2018) noted the art to finding this 'sweet spot' is by using strengths more consistently and adapting them accordingly through positive psychology interventions.

We can applaud the curiosity of Albert Einstein; the leadership of Martin Luther-King and the love to humanity shown by the Dalai Lama, but being asked to name one's own top five strengths as a popular but challenging interview question is often more difficult. Most find it easier to remember their areas for improvement more readily due to the brain's built in negativity bias. Linley (2008) shows that up to two-thirds of people do not have a meaningful awareness of their own strengths and Niemiec (2014) reports that 100% have some degree of strengths blindness. So it would seem that to be able to identify and discuss one's own strengths with knowledge and confidence would be a real asset in the workplace.

Research findings have shown that people who utilise their strengths have improved mental health (Seligman et al., 2005), buffer the effects of stress more readily (Wood et al., 2010) and feel healthier due to mindfully associating positive healthy behaviours (Proyer et al., 2013). In particular nurses improve their creativity and productivity at work experiencing more meaning and engagement and significantly demonstrate increased self-esteem,

confidence and self-acceptance (Harzer and Ruch, 2014). In addition there is positive evidence between connection of strengths usage in the work place and individuals, such as mental health nurses, who see their work as meaningful (Duffy et al. 2015).

What are character strengths?

Character strengths are the individual’s capacity for thoughts, emotions and behaviours and when these are in balance they help people to flourish in life (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). They are the things that positively come naturally to us and what we love to do (Niemiec, 2014). The brain has been hardwired to perform them due to constant practice (Linley et al. 2010). They are the building blocks of a flourishing life and the pathway to well-being as described by PERMA – positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) classified twenty-four distinct character strengths which were categorised into six larger virtues. These strengths were agreed and shown to be valued through gender, age, class and culture with a recognition that these traits will also vary individually in different degrees and within contexts.

BOX : A Classification of VIA Character Strengths and Virtues – Source: Values in Action (VIA) (2017)

WISDOM	COURAGE	HUMANITY	JUSTICE	TEMPERANCE	TRANSCENDENCE
Creativity	Bravery	Love	Teamwork	Forgiveness	Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
Curiosity	Perseverance	Kindness	Fairness	Humility	Gratitude
Judgement	Honesty	Social Intelligence	Leadership	Prudence	Hope
Love of Learning	Zest			Self-Regulation	Humour
Perspective					Spirituality

All 24 character strengths matter and they can all be used to improve self-development. Different strengths can be linked to different to different aspects and consequences (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Niemiec, 2014). For instance zest and hope are two strengths most strongly linked with happiness (Proyer et al. ,2013). Perseverance is particularly aligned with academic achievement (Lounsbury et al. 2009) and humour with the capacity to manage stress (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

In the landmark study carried out by Seligman et al. (2005) which looked at five positive psychology interventions the ones with the most lasting benefit were found in the ‘three

good things' group (explored in a previous paper in this series) and the ' using signature strengths in a new way' group. These groups had significant increases in happiness and decreases in depression lasting for up to six months. Further conclusions cited that those who decided to continue independently with developing their character strengths increased their positive outcomes showing the benefits of intrinsic motivation and the acceptance that behaviour change takes time and persistence.

Some research studies around character strengths have looked at aspects of PERMA and linked them to the various elements, for example: positive emotion and social support in employees (Lavy et al. 2016); engagement and well-being (Madden et al. 2011); relationships and intimacy (Weber and Ruch,2012); and meaning and spirituality and accomplishment in school (Wagner and Ruch, 2015). Nansook et al. (2004) and Proyer and Ruch (2013), investigated the relationship between character strengths and life satisfaction using the VIA inventory of strengths and found consistent and robust links between life satisfaction with zest, hope, gratitude, curiosity and love. Weaker links were appreciation of beauty, creativity, judgement and love of learning.

Vocabulary of character strengths

Signature Strengths

Out of the classified 24 character strengths identified, the most important aspect is the identification of the top five signature strengths, as these are the most important to the individual's identity. These are the ones that are the most natural fit and harmonious to use.

Middle Strengths

These lie at the middle of the individual profile and support the signature strengths.

Lower Strengths

These are placed in the bottom 4-7 of the person's profile and are perhaps the ones used least or not as valued at that time.

Phasic Strengths

These are the versatile, flexible strengths that can be utilised and adapted when a given situation is presented to the individual that needs immediate response.

BOX ACTIVITY

Watch this 8 minute film on character strengths to get an awareness and application of the concepts around neuroscience and how we can shape who we are.

<https://www.letitriple.org/films/science-of-character/>

Measuring character strengths

The VIA strengths were found to be similar across seventy five nations (McGrath, 2014) with over five million people from all over the world, who together spoke over 37 languages, completing the free online version (www.viacharacter.org) as a psychometric measure that emerged with the original classification. This measure is used by educators, academics, practitioners and interested parties alike and is now well established (McGrath ,2015). It is true that no psychometric instrument is ever perfect, but this indicates the VIA is a robust measure which demonstrates reliability and validity across cultures and across numerous translations fulfilling the original assurance that it is a suitable set of measures (McGrath, 2016).

Following completion of the online 240 item self- report questionnaire, a brief report ranking the user's strengths is immediately sent through. Gander et al. (2013) and Proyer et al. (2014) have carried out randomised controlled studies that have found that by using these signature strengths in a new way each day, there have been significant reductions in depression and increases in happiness. Strengths are thought to be relatively stable over time but can change dependent on events, so it is useful to take the survey yearly to get an ever increasing fuller picture of the real person. This is evidenced below by the recording of my own signature strengths over the last four years.

Box : My Top 5 Signature Strengths

2015	2016	2017	2019
1. Love	1. Love	1. Love	1. Love
2. Prudence	2. Prudence	2. Perseverance	2. Perseverance
3. Perseverance	3. Gratitude	3. Judgement	3. Judgement
4. Love of Learning	4. Perseverance	4. Love of Learning	4. Creativity
5. Honesty	5. Love of learning	5. Curiosity	5. Appreciation of beauty and excellence

What can be seen here is the stability of the love and perseverance strengths, the frequency of love of learning, prudence and judgement and the one off appearance of honesty, gratitude, curiosity, creativity and appreciation of beauty and excellence. On a superficial analysis this does relate to changes in my lifestyle, such as completing a goal to write a gratitude diary every day for a year in 2016, becoming more evaluative from a researcher's perspective in 2017, and being more aware of the environmental issues that are in the news currently.

It is also mindful to be aware that strengths can be overplayed and this may result in negative responses from others. Seligman (2014) named these as a 'shadow side'. For instance, overplaying bravery can turn into recklessness and unnecessary risk taking. Showing excessive leadership traits can be seen as being autocratic. Displaying overt love of learning can be perceived as being the 'know it all' and excessive teamwork attributes can lead to the viewpoint that the team is superior to all others and can do no wrong. The art is in

developing strengths more frequently and consistently to avoid under and overplay no matter what work role is undertaken.

It was once recommended that working on the top five ‘signature strengths’ gave the greatest benefit but Young et al (2014) suggest developing other middle ranking items can also have worthwhile outcomes. For example, a range of zest, hope, love, gratitude and curiosity (the top strengths for happiness) may be linked with being especially important for work and meaningful engagement, so self-prioritisation is encouraged. (Park, 2004). The increasing research base to promote strengths use has seen studies carried out in education (White and Waters,2015), clinical practice (Rashid, 2009) and health (Proctor et al. 2011).

BOX - ACTIVITY – IDENTIFY YOUR TOP 5 SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

Source: Niemiec (2017)

1. Log onto this website www.viacharacter.org
2. Read the top tabs and click on character strengths
3. Register online (make note of details so you can access again!)
4. Complete questions, save and download/print out your sheet
5. Look at the related information on movies, songs and mottos and enjoy the realisation of your positive qualities.

RESEARCH PROJECT

Part of my original research project involved delivering a one hour workshop on character strengths to four separate groups of health and social care students, which I believe is the first study of its kind with this cohort of staff. Input included an explanation of how to complete the online survey. The individual strength ratings from each participant were then collated into a group summary to show the total score. What was not initially thought of being an important measure, highlighted that overall there was a significant pattern of strengths emerging in that kindness, honesty, fairness, love and teamwork were strongest in each cohort (Macfarlane et al., 2017).

BOX : 2018 RANK ORDER Character Strengths

2018 Rank order from 184 students	
KINDNESS	130
HONESTY	104
FAIRNESS	98
LOVE	80
HUMOUR	78
TEAMWORK	52
LEADERSHIP	38

APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY	37
GRATITUDE	36
PERSEVERANCE	28
SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE	26
JUDGEMENT	26
HOPE	22
FORGIVENESS	20
BRAVERY	18
PERSPECTIVE	17
PRUDENCE	15
HUMILITY	14
ZEST	11
CREATIVE	9
SPIRITUALITY	9
LOVE OF LEARNING	5
SELF REGULATION	4
CURIOSITY	4

These were seen as natural strengths at first glance for the first cohort, but as the figures continued to demonstrate the same concentration it became clear that they were significant markers of signature strengths in this type of care worker. Further analysis is still being carried out, but reflection on the increasing evidence is suggesting that this data could be used further to enhance the individual, team and organisation's performance and success by focussing on how to further develop the strengths (Macfarlane, 2017).

For the majority of the participants there was evident and observational affiliation with the results and pleasure at being able to clearly read their positive attributes with affirmation of the content. For others there was some surprise at a strength that they had not considered being present or not in the order expected. These participants benefitted from reflecting on the knowledge that the ranking is flexible and they can choose to focus on any strength they wish to self-improve. Feedback was given on how they might want to consider other ways of spending time doing what they do best in a workable action plan to personalise their goals. From the workshop evaluation data this activity was the one learners enjoyed and the feedback received indicated that this was an interesting and worthwhile activity to encourage deeper reflection and self-awareness of positive qualities not previously considered from a research perspective. This is useful for the future application to its use in mental health nursing.

The importance of studying character strengths for Mental Health Nurses in the future

Working in mental health care is not for the faint-hearted. It is renowned for long hours, emotional demands and increasing pace, often in an organisation that is undergoing an increased pace of change. Longhurst (2016) has recognised the government response in their policy of urging over 54,000 former nurses to return to the profession following attrition and a surge in retirement rates (Dean, 2017). Equally, recent unexpected events in the news such as terrorist activity have also tested the resilience of mental health staff in ways they might not have expected, which makes it imperative positive organisational behaviour needs to focus on the welfare of the individual to benefit the organisation and maintain the delivery of high care standards.

There are some studies that show character strength applications with clients with depression (Huffman et al. 2014); in neuropsychology (Andrews et al. 2014); with psychosis (Riches et al. 2016); older adults in care homes (Ho et al. ,2014); social anxiety (Friedlin et al. ,2016); family therapy (Niemic, 2010) and counselling (Littman-Ovadia, 2014). There are studies which look at character strengths in nursing students (Yufang et al.,2015; Harzer and Ruch, 2015) and related health careers (Heintz and Ruch, 2018), but none that show a direct link between character strength research and mental health nursing yet, which makes it an area ripe for further investigation.

Therefore, a reasonable starting point might be to self-apply the strengths assessment to help discover individual strengths, for those who are interested and even for those who are sceptical, which may then begin creating the positive behavioural changes to further develop team maturity. The advantages to acting positively are clearly recognised but it is not necessarily something that can happen overnight and some individuals find it easier than others.

BOX – VALUE YOUR STRENGTHS

Source: Niemic (2017)

1. Complete the VIA survey and look at the top 5 strengths of your report
2. Consider your thoughts and feelings – are there any surprises, are you excited and pleased by the ones shown?
3. Choose 1 from the top 5 and think about how you could use it more to affirm it and improve your well being

BOX - TAKING IT ALL AWAY

Source: Niemic (2017)

We often take for granted what we have.

1. Choose the strength that you feel is most positive and meaningful for you.
2. Think about how you have used it in achievement and happy moments in your life.
3. Now imagine that you could not use it or have the ability to use it.

4. Reflect on the difference this would bring to your life

BOX – HOW OTHERS SEE MY STRENGTHS

Source: Niemiec (2017)

1. Show the list of character strengths to a range of people who know you from home, work, community etc.
2. Ask them to identify the five they think most suit you and give an example of when it was demonstrated
3. Collate the feedback and compare it to your own results and pick up any themes.
4. Put this new self-awareness to work

The skill set for most effective strengths use needs to be thought out and planned for by the individual and their manager. It has the potential to lend itself to 'new' leaders in mental health nursing, preceptors or those who are creatively considering a fresh approach to boosting healthy productivity in their clinical area. The concept can be particularly linked to coaching where agreed goals are cultivated and facilitated in a skilful way. It can be used as a workshop or departmental exercise to help others reflect on the team strengths and connect with what is appropriate and resonant. It could be an action to commence team meetings with what has gone well and highlight the strengths that were shown to help set expectations and encourage colleagues to share their achievements. A team strengths profile could be displayed so as not to assume that team members will remember their own.

It has the potential to be used in job interviews, added to C.V.'s or discussed in individual appraisals and explored longitudinally where giving honest, specific comments will increase self-esteem and improve creativity reinforcing positive behaviour. The activity could be included as part of professional educational programmes and part of professional development to support new and experienced members of staff as Wilkinson (2017) concluded.

Planning it as part of a team building event could encourage friendly working and build genuine relationships as well as considering how to strategically place members of the team on projects that offer natural opportunities to showcase their strengths and talents, all enhance building trust and understanding so that learning in relationships with other colleagues is validated and that the individual feels accepted and worthy.

It is worthwhile remembering that different people respond and cope differently to the same situation so the intelligent use of creating positive relationships, rewarding success, showing kindness, gratitude and compassion helps heal, give support and encourage own problem-

solving. This helps to close the gap between one’s perception of events and their ability to cope successfully, which is the key to resilience. To look for inspiration to put strengths to work look at some of these suggestions from McQuaid (2015)

Box – How you can you put your strengths to work

STRENGTH	DEVELOPMENT ACTION
Appreciation of beauty and excellence	Create a pleasant work space with photos of loved ones or special places.
Bravery	Note a colleague who stepped forward showing courage and compliment them – making you more likely to be brave when required.
Creativity	Push your brain to come up with 5 different solutions to a problem at work – often we stop at 1 or 2- push beyond the obvious.
Curiosity	Take 10 mins to learn one new thing by talking with someone new at work.
Fairness	Reflect on any mistakes you made today at work and take accountability for your actions.
Forgiveness	Be willing to forgive yourself as you would forgive others.
Gratitude	Genuinely thank a colleague for making your day a little better.
Honesty	Give a colleague respectful, constructive feedback.
Hope	On a piece of paper: Write down your goal, identify the pathways to it, note down any obstacles and then what you can do to maintain motivation and willpower.
Humility	If you have done wrong apologise readily and learn from the experience.
Humour	Watch a funny video.
Judgement	List the pros and cons of an important decision you need to make.
Kindness	Perform 1 act of kindness for a colleague without expecting a reward.
Leadership	Savour an example of leadership you have observed within your team.
Love	Check in with a colleague to show them they are appreciated.
Love of learning	Take 10 mins to learn one new thing that is relevant to your work and share it.
Perseverance	Take 10 mins to persist in a task that is important but challenging to you.
Perspective	Take 10 mins to consider the potential outcomes of the choices you made at work that day.
Prudence	Take 10 mins to look at the bigger picture at work and see if there are new opportunities you could utilise
Self-regulation	Identify your worst behaviours and think of ways you can manage these situations more effectively

Social Intelligence	Check out your team and see who might be experiencing difficult times presently and consider how you can support them.
Spirituality	Spend 10 mins focussing more of your time on the tasks and people that align with your values and purpose.
Teamwork	Engage in behaviours that demonstrate your loyalty.
Zest	Engage in 10 mins meditation to allow your body to restore itself

Leadership

As reflected in this article one of the most recognised, central and valuable of these interventions is the completion of self-assessed character strengths. As a leader encouraging staff to take the VIA survey and being involved in the results of both the staff and their own signature strengths helps give feedback on positive qualities and enables them to be seen in a more balanced way and be guided more effectively.

Box : Descriptions and 20 adapted development examples of the top 5 ranking strengths from earlier project results (McQuaid, 2014, Rashid and Anjum, 2005)

STRENGTH	Description	Examples for leaders/managers on how to develop further
KINDNESS	shows enthusiasm when doing positive things for others and not seeking personal benefits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Listen to a colleagues issue without judging or analysing 2.Carry out a kind deed without being asked to 3.Use kind words in emails and phone calls 4.Greet others with a smile
HONESTY	is authenticity in living by one's values and not compromising	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5.Promise to make a commitment and keep to it 6.Reset expectations if needed and communicate clearly to those affected 7.Give clear, genuine feedback in a respectful way 8.Monitor when you tell a white lie and shorten the list
FAIRNESS	relates to having a strong sense of acting in accordance with what is believed to be right and speaking freely if something is thought to be wrong	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9.Consider 1 way how to improve work area to increase equality 10.Discuss how the team can learn from mistakes 11.Praise someone who deserves it

		12. Consider if your decisions are on preference or fairness for the individual
LOVE	demonstrates the capacity to value relationships and reciprocity with close others	13. Ask a colleague how they are – in person, take time and listen 14. Be specific about what you appreciate about a colleague to their face 15. Care for yourself by taking a lunch break with a colleague 16. Celebrate mutually important dates
TEAMWORK	refers to belonging, working, commitment and allegiance to a well defined group	17. Volunteer for an action in the team that interests you 18. Work with a colleague in a way that will benefit them 19. In conversation be loyal about your team 20. Organise a social event

These examples above are simple, user friendly activities that are easily carried out no matter what level of seniority a person may be, but the cumulative effect is great and helps shape positive behaviour and expectations. Effective use of these interventions by forward thinking leaders and managers may benefit them by reduced staff turnover, higher levels of productivity as well as, perhaps more importantly, increased client satisfaction. Focussing on strengths will increase engagement and help develop a deeper connection between team members. On a more practical note it is free and easy to implement and gives immediate results and is therefore a very cost-effective staff development tool. This gives nursing leaders and managers an opportunity to empower their staff by providing an integrated picture of team understanding which increases and strengthens relationships.

The Change Lab's workplace survey (McQuaid, 2019) looked at the impact of organisational change on employee well-being using Seligman's (2011) PERMAH as a measure with an added H to represent physical health. The report showed it was not the amount of change that affects employees experience, but is the leadership approach that makes the difference between languishing and flourishing in transition (Buckingham and Goodall, 2019). Significant factors that supported change were when individuals had jobs where they could use their talents to have a positive impact and organisations that were focussed on building strengths rather than fixing weaknesses. Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) is a strengths based conversational approach to change and leaders who used this in conversations by reflecting, including stories of excellence, were aspirational and agreed clear actions (Holman, 2015) showed 90% success in change projects (McQuaid, 2019).

Managers and leaders who want to discuss the strengths and talents of their staff are very reassuring (Edmondson, 2018) and help staff realise they are valuable. Being involved in a positive team gives many mirrors for reflection to help balance the self-doubt with situations that are handled well and use their abilities. These strategies can contribute to reduce levels of burnout and attrition by changing perspectives and inspiring people to be motivated at work and looking forward to contribute to the organisation at large. The ongoing success of the intervention lies in following up after strength identification in a deeper way so that debriefing staff to understand how the information might be developed and utilised ought to be planned for.

Given that the NHS has a strategic development on wellbeing (NHS Employers, 2019) and also held its first ever UK Mental Health Nurses' Day on 21st February this year, to celebrate the work of mental health nurses in all settings, it seems sensible to include cost effective and user friendly interventions such as strengths assessment and strengths spotting to care for their most precious resource, their staff.

Conclusions

This article has looked at the development of character strengths as a positive psychology intervention from a theoretical and applied perspective. It considers how it may benefit being introduced more widely through an intrapersonal and interpersonal approach to mental health nurses. Developing evidence and common sense directs organisations to focus on employee strengths, as it is economically and emotionally intelligent to do so to improve retention and improve job satisfaction. The results of these activities demonstrate themes on character strengths that have potential to be developed for increased flourishing for both employee and employer. Different care contexts in mental health services will be able to apply individual and collective creativity to tailor further implementation by sharing the gifts and talents that teams have, how they can be enhanced and what may be required to further increase transferability and make it a reality. Identifying signature character strengths could be the key to finding 'happiness' at work in these current challenging times. It is a choice to make the most of the circumstances that an individual finds themselves in – so it seems obvious to make it a positive one.

Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to Professor Jerome Carson for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

KEY POINTS

- 1 Character strengths are the building blocks of a flourishing life and the pathway to well-being.
- 2 When one's own strengths are utilised as just right there is a real sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.
- 3 There is positive evidence between connection of strengths usage in the work place
- 4 Mental health nursing is ripe for further investigation into applying character strengths interventions.
- 5 The starting point might be to self-apply the strengths assessment to help discover individual strengths.

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Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, 12/2015, Volume 29, Issue 6