

## Resource Review

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### Strength Cards

This review is of a resource called “Strengths Cards” (which can be purchased from, amongst other providers, Positive Insights <http://positiveinsights.co.uk>; <http://mindspring.uk.com/shop/strengths-cards/>). These cards are based on the 24 human signature strengths first identified in Martin Seligman’s book (2002) *Authentic Happiness*.

The exploration into human signature strengths originates in the tradition of positive psychology. Seligman (2002) identified twenty-four human strengths which when drawn on, can lead to optimal functioning, development and performance and one of the direct routes to personal and professional fulfilment. Positive approaches are also very closely aligned to an EP’s use of solution-focused ways of thinking, so the use of strengths and successes to empower and mobilise the potential in a person is not unfamiliar territory to an EP.

The strengths cards are presented in the shape of postcards; a specific strength typically accompanies a photograph or image representing that strength in some way. For example, a soaring eagle is the symbol of integrity and honesty, while footsteps in the sand can symbolise leadership. The cards are usually represented as potent real life images, which are intended to be visually stimulating for the user. Users should also be mindful of the use of Seligman’s specific 24 strengths, as some resources advertised include various other abilities not based on the original strengths identified. This review is based on and makes reference only to Seligman’s original 24 strengths.

There are then endless possibilities of how EPs might use strengths cards. Whether with groups or individuals, the process may look something like identifying one’s own or another’s key strengths and talking about how the person has demonstrated the strength in some way in their lives. A person may also reflect on strengths that they do not clearly identify with but which they aspire to developing further. The discussion can then extend to ways the

strength can be realised in specific daily activities, for example, in the young person’s places of work and study.

Exploring a young person’s strengths and potential is among the key tasks of an Educational Psychologist. Focussing on strengths in a person is empowering, while also opening up opportunities for growth and change.

Communities of young people for whom the cards may need to be considered carefully are those with specific language needs; the vocabulary used may present as a barrier to their understanding of the concepts presented. Indeed, one of the prerequisite qualities is also the ability to self-reflect and have an awareness of self. Young people with social and communication difficulties may find the concept of strengths quite abstract; they may benefit from being given specific examples or the opportunity to practically demonstrate the strength through some very concrete experiences beforehand.

If used within the flow of natural communication, young people seem to report that they have learned something new about themselves, and were suddenly able to reflect with more clarity about their aspirations for the future.

In my experience, strengths cards are powerful when used with young people who are Looked After by the Local Authority or communities of children at risk of exclusion; those that may have had little chance to develop positive self-constructs, perhaps due to adverse life experiences. In my view, strengths cards are a powerful yet underused resource among Educational Psychologists. The nifty little resource typically appears to occupy a small space on an EP bookshelf, amidst other resources and books based on social and emotional wellbeing; however seemingly very few EPs draw on these cards given their versatility and simplicity when working with young people.

There is however, little guidance on how to use them; alternatively this can also be viewed as one of the features, since they leave room for innovation and creativity. There is also a wealth of resources on the web that are useful and have also helped the reviewer personally with a direction for use (see helpful sites like Positran or Positive Insights located at the web address

positiveinsights.co.uk). Some terms used (e.g. 'spirituality', 'perspective') may need to be explained to a young person, however in the context of things, it can be enriching for a young person to be able to characterise their strengths through the use of exciting new vocabulary. In addition, personal life examples work wonders with young people, particularly if the EP can share some of their own to inspire the young person.

Strengths cards can be enlightening for children and young people aged from about ten years onwards. Younger groups may benefit from being given practical opportunities to develop their signature strengths, and this should be seen as one of the extensions of their use. I might also add that since the remit of EP practice has extended to the young adult community there is incredible potential to explore signature strengths and assess things like job-readiness or ways a young person can contribute positively in the community.

Those who wish to learn the theoretical underpinnings of strengths-based interventions and their benefits may like to read further into positive psychology (please see below for suggested resources), an approach which has gathered a lot of empirical support for the humanistic theories on which the approach is based (for examples, factors which help in the experience of positive emotions, happiness and fulfilment). Identifying and applying signature strengths is seen as one of the key applications of positive psychology, and an avenue to building a person's skills and individual qualities.

A simple yet exciting resource for intervention, strengths cards can be purchased for as little as twenty pounds, yet in my view, an invaluable addition to an EP's toolbox.

## References

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### **Dr Tamara Hussain**

HCPC Registered Educational Psychologist