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Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities: Towards a Collective Model in Midland County, Michigan

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Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities: Towards a Collective Model in Midland County, Michigan

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Keywords

disabilities, flourishing, thriving, character strengths, self-determination, mattering, belonging

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A Service Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Amy Rosenthal

May 9, 2021

THRIVING FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

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Situation Analysis

Introduction

Midland County, Michigan, is centrally located in the Great Lakes Bay region with a population of over 83,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Midland is committed to helping all residents flourish, guided by the County's motto, "Together. Forward. Bold. An Exceptional Place Where Everyone Thrives" (Midland Area Wellbeing Coalition, 2020). Midland County's civic and community leaders have been working to infuse positive psychology into the community for several years. In their ongoing dedication to creating a thriving community for all, they aspire to improve the well-being of community members living with disabilities.

The Midland Community

Midland County has proactively established many organizations and committees to bring to life their vision in which all Midland County citizens flourish. Community-established groups such as The Midland Area Wellbeing Coalition supports Midland's bold community vision (Midland Area Wellbeing Coalition, 2020). The group of about 80 members is focused on helping all members of the community thrive. The Coalition combines Midland's various well-being initiatives into a "hub" model to ensure well-being programs are sustained across all community sectors. The Coalition is supported by the Midland County Community Success Panel (CAC), another community-based coalition focused on inclusion in the Greater Midland area. CAC leaders are dedicated to promoting inclusivity and creating a culture where all residents feel engaged and connected to the community (Treisman et al., 2019). CAC, for example, organizes an annual Neighboring Week dedicated to building inclusivity in the community by promoting friendship, social bonding, and support for all people in the community

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(Midland Area Community Foundation, 2020). Other community-organized groups can leverage the strength of their collectives to consciously make individuals with disabilities feel welcome and included. They can mobilize their members to broaden and focus their outreach on including persons with disabilities and self-organize to make any accommodations of activities wherever needed.

Dow, one of the largest employers in Midland County, has a long-standing commitment to inclusion and accessibility. They are a great asset to Midland County and can serve as a model for other community employers. With over 4,500 members in their Disability Employee Network and cross-functional teams that work to establish policies and practices supporting employees with disabilities, Dow is a leader in building inclusivity into the foundation of their business (Dow Corporate, 2020). Other employers in the Midland community can leverage their unique position and resources to expand employment opportunities and develop a more inclusive culture within their organizations. Talent management functions, for example, can commit to greater diversity hiring targets that include people with disabilities, and Human Resources as a whole can stand up inclusive practices and policies for employees.

Service Providers & Steering Committee

In general, a community requires a wide range of services to support individuals with disabilities, with organizations funded through various government tiers, philanthropy, and non-funded privately paid sources of support. Areas of support include an array of services from general advocacy, specialized education services, assistive technology, employment and business support, family and social services, to housing and long-term care, travel, transportation, sports organizations (National Center on Disability and Journalism, n.d.). Services can also be catered to specific disabilities. Many individuals with disabilities face significant barriers preventing

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them from participating in a flourishing life, often facing economic hardship. Equal access to education, training, and support programs is essential to increasing quality of life and ensuring a better economic future (Council of Canadians with Disabilities, n.d.).

For this Service Learning Project, we are working with a Steering Committee comprised of service provider leaders and community representatives across Midland who work to support individuals living with disabilities. The organizations represented on the Steering Committee and the focus of their work are as follows: Midland County Educational Services Agency (educational needs), Reece Endeavor (housing needs), The Arc of Midland (connecting people with the community), Arnold Center (vocational training), Independent Community Living (independent living options), Community Mental Health for Central Michigan (whole-person wellness service), Disability Network (quality of life in community), Personal Assistance Options (personal goal support), Michigan Rehabilitation Services (workforce solutions), and the United Way of Midland County (success from birth through career), alongside community member representation.

Through the Steering Committee, these providers in Midland County have established a foundation for collaboration with one another. There is an element of competition in that they provide similar services to ensure people with disabilities have the ability to make choices in regards to their care. However, they are motivated to align through a person-centric approach that minimizes duplication, drives efficiencies, and champions collaboration so they can elevate the ultimate goal of providing quality support and thriving for individuals with disabilities.

Individuals in Midland County Living with Disabilities

Disability touches every demographic category and extends broadly; according to RespectAbility (n.d.), 56 million Americans are considered disabled in some capacity, whether

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through conditions present at birth or occurring through accident, illness, or aging. "Disability" itself is a nuanced and multi-faceted term; it represents a diverse group of people with an extensive range of needs. The scope of our work includes those living with neurological and developmental impairments that make it difficult to do certain activities and to interact with the community and world around them, from birth and extending to all ages (U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services, 2005; WHO, 2001).

The nature and severity of disabilities vary. So, too, do the strengths and needs of the individuals within this population. Paramount to our work is balancing two realities that recognize the individuals' strengths within this population and another that acknowledges their authentic and distinct needs. More generally, those living with disabilities in Midland County benefit from being part of a community of both specialized and generalized support.

Questions to be considered by the Midland County communities – *How are individuals with disabilities perceived and treated by the abled population in Midland County? Do individuals with disabilities have opportunities to bring their strengths and skills to bear to support those beyond themselves? Do they hold roles in the community on whom others rely? Are they celebrated for who they are or seen as a burden? Do they have opportunities to build connections with others?* By developing a collective vision of positive psychology that can facilitate flourishing for individuals living with disabilities, the Steering Committee can collaboratively identify opportunities to enhance their quality of life.

Literature Review

Positive psychological frameworks, constructs, and methods provide helpful insight into how we can evaluate and seek to improve our focus population's well-being. Frameworks such as PERMA (Seligman, 2013) provide structure to the approach; critical for this target group is

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fostering relationships (R), meaning (M), and achievement (A) and a means to drive our partners' desired outcomes of mattering, belonging, and well-being more broadly. As a non-majority group due to limited ability, our focus group likely has a low sense of mattering or feeling valued or adding value within the greater Midland community (Prilleltensky, 2005). Leveraging a strengths-based approach, recognizing individuals living with disabilities not for their weaknesses but their strengths, can provide an excellent foundation to drive desired outcomes. Areas of positive psychology to be explored in this endeavor include, but are not limited to, character strengths, self-determination, mattering, and belonging. Through this literature review, we will explore how positive psychology research and application can provide an understanding of how individuals with disabilities can thrive.

The field of positive psychology highlights the importance of detecting and implementing individuals' strengths and abilities instead of solely focusing on deficits and limitations (Joseph, 2015). This is a fundamental shift from a problem-based perspective towards a resource-based approach. This new approach is reflected in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) developed by the World Health Organization (2001, 2007) and promotes the health and well-being of all, inclusive of individuals with disabilities. In this spirit, interventions for individuals with disabilities should not only remove and reduce barriers but also promote the personal and environmental resources that enhance an individual's ability to thrive (Joseph, 2015). Individuals with disabilities often find themselves excluded from community participation due to environmental barriers, especially stigmatization (Shpigelman, 2019). Positive psychology researchers have developed strengths-based approaches to well-being, such as increasing community connectedness to increase life satisfaction, which can have specific implications for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Shogren et al., 2017).

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Our objective is to provide a holistic understanding of what is necessary and what should be emphasized for individuals with disabilities to flourish. Our audience for the application of findings includes the service and support provider organizations for individuals with disabilities in Midland County as reviewed in our Situation Analysis. Considering our Situation Analysis and with a lens to our application plan, we have determined the following five areas of focus for our literature review to provide insight into how individuals with disabilities can best thrive: character strengths, self-determination, mattering, belonging, and resilience.

Character Strengths

Midland County's service provider organizations for individuals with disabilities strive to build a model which promotes individual and community flourishing. In order to achieve this model, a focus on character strengths is critical. Midland County fosters a culture of strength building and promotes the ability for all community members to have the right to choice (Public Sector Consultants, 2019). Finding a way to identify individuals with disabilities' character strengths and connect them to opportunities to engage in the community – whether for meaningful social interaction or employment – will help contribute to Midland County's flourishing model.

The study of character strengths builds on those positive traits that benefit individuals as they think, behave, and feel in ways that advantage themselves and others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Inventory of Strengths is used with the non-disabled population to identify a person's signature strengths. Researchers have begun to use the youth version of the VIA Inventory with young people with intellectual disabilities. Findings indicate that youth with disabilities rate themselves lower across the board on each character strength than youth without disabilities (Niemic, 2017). This could be due to environmental factors, such as not having the

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same level of experiences or support as youth without disabilities, reinforcing a lower view of self-capability and independence (Niemic, 2017).

Character strengths play a vital role in the flourishing of individuals with physical disabilities. Disabling conditions, whether congenital or developed due to an accident or onset of disease, can also have psychosocial impacts on a person's life and lead to social isolation, anxiety, depression, and reduced activities (Boeschoten et al., 2017; Schirda et al., 2015). Peterson et al. (2006) have identified the character strengths that most contribute to the recovery process for serious illness. They include appreciating beauty, bravery, curiosity, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, humor, kindness, love of learning, and spirituality. In a study of people living with Multiple Sclerosis, interventions that increase character strengths were also likely to improve quality of life (Smedema & Bhattarai, 2020). Service and medical providers and community organizations could help people struggling with disabilities by offering interventions that increase these character strengths: stress management, mindfulness, journaling, problem-solving, and positive cognitive restructuring (Smedema & Bhattarai, 2020). Helping individuals with disabilities to identify, build, and apply character strengths in new ways may also increase engagement and help reframe meaning in life (Seligman et al., 2005).

One critical phase of life for individuals with disabilities is transitioning from childhood to adulthood. This includes transitions of services and funding, such as transitioning away from school-structured support (Niemic et al., 2017) toward employment and other support provided for adults with disabilities. According to Buntinx (2013,) personalized life goals, preferences, interests, and strengths best inform an individual's support plans as they go through this period. This transition into adulthood might include the goal of obtaining employment. In 2015, disabled Americans aged 18-64 were employed 27.7% of the time, versus 72.8% of those without

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disabilities (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). With these statistics in mind, individuals with disabilities need hope and a sense of self-efficacy while trying to find employment.

Building and identifying character strengths and matching strengths with the needs of employers in the community promotes self-efficacy and fosters hope for individuals with disabilities.

Elizabeth Jennings (2017) identifies interventions that utilize character strengths to target job skills employers seek, with proactivity identified as a key capability. To strengthen proactivity, an intervention that encourages people to do things in new ways and increases one's character strengths of zest, creativity, curiosity, and bravery has been shown to be successful and further a sense of self-efficacy on the part of the disabled candidate and attractiveness of the candidate to the potential employer (Jennings, 2017).

As the research depicts, character strengths have a pivotal role to play in enabling individuals with disabilities to thrive. They can add value in developing a sense of hope and self-determination in all life stages and inform interventions to improve quality of life.

Self-Determination

Self-determination refers to our ability to follow our preferences (autonomy), satisfy our needs (competence), interact with others (relatedness), and participate in the community (Shpigelman, 2019). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), self-determination enables us to best fulfill our potential and increase our well-being. For individuals with disabilities, independence (of which self-determination is a critical component) is a specifically meaningful life domain and a key indicator of the quality of life and stresses the importance of examining self-determination in greater detail for this literature review (Gómez et al., 2011; Public Sector Consultants, 2019).

Historically, individuals with disabilities – particularly those with significant disabilities – have been given limited or no opportunity to make even basic choices. Direct care staff can learn

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to provide appropriate options within daily contexts and incorporate choice-making for positive life impact (Cannella, 2005; Algozzine et al., 2001). Midland County emphasizes a culture of self-determination by understanding the significance of individuals with disabilities being empowered to determine where they live and how to spend their free time (Public Sector Consultants, 2019).

As a critical component of well-being for individuals with disabilities, providing opportunities to elevate and employ self-determination, and enhance skillsets of self-determination, can be further explored through research and interventions. In a comprehensive review of choice and preference assessment research for individuals with severe to profound developmental disabilities, the main findings indicate that choice interventions (focusing on enabling autonomy) promote desired behavior and positively impact individuals with disabilities (Cannella et al., 2005). Cannella et al. (2005) also highlight the importance of identifying individual preferences and building preference awareness, as choices are often based on preference. For individuals with disabilities, preferences can be identified through existing research-based preference assessments, with assessment options ranging from identifying food choices to leisure activity options (Conyers et al., 2002; Reid et al., 1999). Following preference identification, Cannella et al. (2005) link the act of empowering adults with disabilities to make choices from a full range of options (rather than limited options) and the ability to be correctly prompted (by caregivers or support staff) with greater well-being. Several mechanisms can be used to give effective prompts for choice-making, including the specific use of verbal directives, with these mechanisms leading to higher engagement in the activity or identified object of choice (Cannella et al., 2005). The vast body of research regarding choice-making and individuals with disabilities provides a clear message that self-determination through choice is extremely

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meaningful for well-being. It can also be fostered by starting with preference identification and then teaching the ability to appropriately prompt choice opportunities.

Building on the importance of identifying opportunities for choice and preferences, life-coaching, an intervention that is person-centric, is one form of intervention that has been shown to elevate well-being for individuals with disabilities (Shpigelman, 2019). In Shpigelman's (2019) study, life coaching was shown to contribute to thriving by focusing on each individual's needs and competencies (strength spotting) and ultimately building self-determination skills. Coaching with a self-determination focus helped individuals with disabilities to envision their future, identify goals they would like to pursue (with or without aid), and empower them with the skills needed to make desired changes. Following the coaching intervention, participants had greater self-determination and greater well-being (Shpigelman, 2019). Giving individuals with disabilities the skills of self-determination through coaching helped elevate their ability to make choices about their lifestyles, focusing on the achievement of personally defined and meaningful goals (linking to preferences) aligned with their capabilities (Trani et al., 2011; Shpigelman, 2019).

The impact of self-determination for individuals with disabilities research continues to grow in volume. However, it is important to note that while general self-determination findings might apply across the spectrum of disabilities, context and specific scenarios should be considered when proposing and implementing self-determination interventions (Algozzine et al., 2001). Self-determination has a critical role in enabling individuals with disabilities to thrive both when considering the historical lack of self-determination that persons with disabilities have faced and how crucial positive psychology indicates self-determination is in the grand scheme of enabling well-being.

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Mattering

For individuals living with disabilities to thrive and flourish, they must fundamentally feel they matter. Mattering is a profound and fundamental human need essential to well-being consisting of two components: feeling valued and adding value (Flett, 2018; Prilleltensky, 2019). To feel valued means we are appreciated, respected, and recognized, while feeling like we add value means that our contributions make a difference for others (Prilleltensky, 2019). Predictably, individuals living with disabilities face strong headwinds to mattering, such as labeling, stereotyping, discrimination, and barriers, which inhibit these individuals from fully participating in their community and society at large (Green et al., 2005).

Mattering can be considered and understood in specific contexts (mattering at work, mattering in the community), in specific life roles (mattering to a parent, mattering to a friend), or with a broader, more global lens (mattering in society at large). Regardless of the frame, the impact of mattering on well-being and health more broadly is clear. An adequate sense of mattering is associated with several thriving outcomes, including happiness, life satisfaction, meaning in life, self-acceptance, autonomy, prosocial tendencies, and greater physical health (Flett, 2018). Conversely, being devoid of mattering is associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness, and even suicide (Flett, 2018; Taylor & Turner, 2001). In short, mattering matters for well-being.

To better contextualize these outcomes for individuals living with disabilities, it is essential to understand that mattering is itself complementary and interrelated: if one does not feel valued, one may struggle to add value, which in turn may continue to erode one's sense of feeling valued, and so on. Additionally, if one faces barriers to adding value in the community (such as a lack of employment opportunity), one likely may not feel valued. This

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interrelatedness of mattering explains in part why marginalization makes attaining mattering challenging, if not impossible. These downward spirals often erode an individual's sense of mattering and psychological and physical well-being over time (Prilleltensky, 2019). While research measuring mattering in individuals with disabilities is sparse, research shows that inequality negatively impacts mattering (Prilleltensky, 2019). Minority groups, including those living with disabilities, must be given fair treatment at school, work, and the broader community to support mattering and well-being (Prilleltensky, 2019). In other words, if individuals do not have fair opportunities to add value or are the victims of negative stereotypes, perceptions, and treatment that undermine their value, how can those individuals possibly feel that they matter?

Given the importance of mattering for well-being and the headwinds faced by individuals with disabilities, communities must recognize and fulfill their vital role in supporting mattering for all. Prilleltensky (2019) introduces the concept of a "We Culture" underpinned largely by fairness in politics and access, promoting policies that help people feel valued and add value. Analysis completed for the United Way of Midland County (Public Sector Consultants, 2019) provides insight into mattering for individuals living with disabilities in Midland County. Members of this population report feeling accepted by their community but highlight opportunities to build social connections beyond support staff and family, to have paid employment. These areas present ripe opportunities for Midland County to intervene to further support community members' mattering and well-being.

Given these areas of opportunity, we examined application research within communities that have successfully created social structures to enable individuals with disabilities to build and develop careers and foster community connections. For career building and leadership development, research highlights a need for a tailored approach to leadership development for

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individuals with disabilities that is collective, integrated, and action-oriented in design (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). Further research argues for customized employment for individuals with disabilities, requiring values-based human resources processes, executive leadership involvement to break down barriers to employment and advancement, and evidenced-based customized employment outcomes as performance indicators (Citron et al., 2008). For community-building, research highlights the importance of creating space using diverse technology to support regular social interaction and considering ways to create safe spaces for bonding within and across groups (Cole et al., 2008; MacGlone et al., 2020; Sweet et al., 2020).

The following section highlights a related construct, belonging, and introduces further mechanisms to foster a thriving community for individuals with disabilities in Midland County.

Belonging

Building better social well-being and relationships are essential for promoting a better quality of life for all people (Shogren et al., 2017). The concept of belonging is fundamental across the lifespan, particularly for those who have been socially excluded, including individuals with disabilities, and weaves across the aforementioned positive psychology elements of character strengths, self-determination, and mattering. Belonging is considered to be an intimate, personal sense of feeling 'at home' in one's community; it is a personal resource that can build forms of social or spatial inclusion and resist forms of social or spatial exclusion (Strnadová et al., 2018). In their research, Strnadová, Johnson, and Walmsley (2018) surveyed the literature of belonging, and proposed a framework of five interacting elements that, together, compose a sense of belonging. The five elements of belonging are: 1) positioned belonging – one's position in cultural and societal groupings; 2) belonging as identity – one's view of one's self; 3) belonging as relational – occurring out of intimate or group relationships; 4) belonging in

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relation to place – the town or physical home as a contributor to belonging; and, 5) belonging as a contributor to society – either through paid work or voluntarily caring for others (Strnadová et al., 2018). This framework of belonging may help service providers to consider specific forms of engagement and intervention when thinking about what individuals with disabilities need to feel a sense of belonging in their communities (Strnadová et al., 2018).

When the researchers conducted focus groups around these interacting elements of belonging with individuals with disabilities, three themes emerged. A sense of home, contributing to society, and developing a sense of identity were identified as particularly important to belongingness for this population (Strnadová et al., 2018). Specifically, having the choice (self-determination) of where to live and some element of felt ownership contributed to feeling belongingness (Strnadová et al., 2018). Additionally, feeling able to contribute to society and their community (mattering) also helped cultivate a sense of mattering, enabling belonging (Strnadová et al., 2018). Finally, developing a sense of identity (leveraging character strengths) emboldens individuals with disabilities to seek and flourish through living independent lives, as they are seen and identify as equal adult citizens (Strnadová et al., 2018). This insight can help service partners consider where to focus efforts when working with similar populations, and emphasizes the importance on collaborating directly with those they serve in the process.

In their research, Raver, Murchake, Chalk, and College (2018) explored belonging as identity, considering how positive disability identity – one's affirmative sense of identity as a person with a disability – contributes to a sense of belonging in young adults with disabilities (Raver et al., 2018). They found that those with disabilities who self-reported as having strong social support were more likely to report having a more positive disability identity, which contributes to their felt sense of belonging. This vital social support can be derived from family,

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friends, or a special person (Raver et al., 2018). After accounting for greater social support as essential to experiencing a sense of belonging, the authors found that developing a positive sense of self or identifying with the community of disability positively predicts a sense of belonging in emerging adults (Raver et al., 2018). Other research also supports organizing peer support group for individuals with similar disabilities, benefitting young adult women in particular (Mejias et al., 2014). Self-confidence and disability pride were, among other benefits, found to be outcomes of women's peer support groups which contribute to belongingness (Mejias et al., 2014). Support practitioners should foster social support and develop a positive disability identity within individuals with disabilities who experience a low sense of belonging. Hosting more family sessions to build social support and more peer support sessions to develop a more positive disability identity through normalization and similarity, for example, can be beneficial (Raver et al., 2018).

Understanding common barriers for individuals with disabilities in feeling a sense of belonging is also significant to consider when discussing intervention approaches. Research has shown that while issues are broad and varied, themes around stigma and social exclusion are substantial barriers to belongingness (Strnadová et al., 2018). For example, for young adults with disabilities, most experience rejection by peers at school and disability-related discrimination at work (Raver et al., 2018). People with intellectual and developmental disabilities also typically experience a lower sense of belonging due to less social connectedness and fewer close relationships than peers without a disability (Shogren et al., 2017). Individuals with disabilities also experience negative, prejudiced behaviors towards them, ranging from being told there is something "wrong" with them being pitied and coddled due to their disability (Strnadová et al., 2018).

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Overall, stigmatized attitudes and the socially exclusionary behaviors they provoke are significant barriers to social inclusion and belonging for intellectual and developmental disability populations. They can manifest in stigmas including exclusion, discrimination, marginalization and other forms of experiences of 'otherness' (Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020). Social exclusion draws a line between those who are within and outside 'normative' society, limiting opportunity and inclusion at institutional, social, and individual levels (Hall, 2010). Despite this prevalence, positive psychology's strength-based approaches are trending for promoting belonging in individuals with disabilities. For many individuals with disabilities, they often cannot participate in society in an identical way as those without, so social inclusion should be measured from the viewpoint of individuals with disabilities rather than other way around (Hall, 2010). When developing programming to increase belonging, partnering with individuals with disabilities while recognizing and respecting their expertise, choices, and priorities along with their cultural and contextual nuances is critical (Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020).

For individuals with disabilities to thrive, a resource-based approach must be utilized that enables a virtuous cycle for thriving, mobilizing support systems (community, service providers, and caregivers) while reducing barriers (Joseph, 2015). This literature review covered four key resource-based topics: character strengths, self-determination, mattering, belonging, and resilience. All four are critical for thriving, yet by no means all-encompassing. With the lens of enabling Midland Community service provider organizations to better foster thriving for individuals with disabilities, we will now look to apply these insights through our application plan.

Application Plan

Introduction

A resource-based approach that creates a virtuous cycle for thriving can truly enable well-being for individuals with disabilities – mobilizing support systems (community, service providers, and caregivers) while reducing barriers (Joseph, 2015). As noted in the literature review, four key concepts that foster thriving in individuals with disabilities include character strengths, self-determination, mattering, and belonging. Importantly, while research indicates that each of these topic areas plays a critical role in supporting well-being, they are often lacking or unsupported in the lives of individuals living with disabilities. These focus areas present a ripe opportunity for the Steering Committee's collaborative efforts in Midland County.

The Steering Committee is dedicated to ensuring that individuals with disabilities in Midland have equal opportunities to flourish and thrive. They are equally eager to implement positive psychology practices within their organizations to make their vision a reality. These conditions together create the potential for a broad range of application approaches. As the Steering Committee consists of various stakeholders – each with unique perspectives, resources, and roles in supporting individuals with disabilities – the entire group was surveyed to inform this application approach. The first four key resource-based topics were introduced in the literature review; then, the Steering Committee members were asked to indicate their preference for focusing and delivering the application plan to be most impactful. The input was obtained from 100% of the Steering Committee; their feedback, the situation analysis, and the research have greatly informed the format and content of the application plan.

In response to the survey, 67% of Steering Committee members indicated their preference for an application product that would provide an overview and guidance on all four

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topic areas, whereas 33% indicated their preference for in-depth enablement of one focus area. In terms of the potential application product format, over 83% indicated that they see the greatest value in combining individual and group-based learning opportunities to support their collaborative efforts. Finally, Steering Committee members expressed their desire for a plan they could easily integrate into the flow of their existing work together. Based on this feedback and the initial situation analysis, a system-oriented application plan has been created that includes all four topic areas. A comprehensive orientation is critical to delivering on the desired outcome: to jointly envision, build, action, and optimize a collaborative model to support flourishing for individuals living with disabilities in Midland County.

Method Description

To deliver the desired outcome, a workshop series was created. The series was intentionally designed to educate and unite the Steering Committee around a shared vision of success while providing tangible interventions for character strengths, self-determination, mattering, and belonging that can be actioned and contextualized within each separate organization. The workshop series will be seamlessly integrated into the Steering Committee's monthly meetings. The plan is for each meeting to begin with the lesson. All sessions are designed to be approximately 15-minutes long and will progressively build on each other. Each session will be delivered via PowerPoint slides and be supplemented by pre- and post-session workbook material. The sessions will be facilitated by a former MAPP student (Kathy Snyder) familiar with this Service Learning Partner and a member of the Midland community. The workbook material developed for this workshop will contain suggestions for content to read before each meeting, the slides for each session, question prompts for reflection, and ideas for interventions that can be applied immediately or in the future as their work continues to evolve.

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Delivering an application product in this manner will enable the Steering Committee to take joint ownership of the plan and build a collaborative working model together that draws on each of their organizations' strengths.

Four Pillars: Overview & Application Plan

Character Strengths

This workshop section includes five lessons delivered in five successive sessions:

Session 1– Introduction to Character Strengths

Session 2– Steering Committee Teams' Signature Strengths

Session 3–Character Strengths in Youth with Disabilities

Session 4–Character Strengths during Transition

Session 5–Character Strengths in Adults with Disabilities

As pre-work for this series, the Steering Committee members will be asked to take the free VIA Character Strengths Survey at [VIA Character Strengths Survey & Character Profile Reports | VIA Institute](#). This will serve as an interactive introduction to the tool that will be used throughout the sessions. Additionally, it will serve to prompt the Steering Committee to use their signature strengths as they collaborate. Further, a hands-on introduction to the website will provide many resources to leverage within each member's organization independent of these sessions.

The first session will include a contextual history of how character strengths were identified, how they map to the virtues, the research methods, and the universality of their application. The session will also discuss the importance of character strengths and include examples of the many ways to use and strengthen them.

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The second session will consist of a self-facilitated exercise where the Steering Committee members will share and map their character strengths as a group to understand areas of commonality and gaps to develop the relationships among the team members. Common character strength-based language generated will bolster and accelerate their realization of their shared goal for people with disabilities.

The third session will review the literature on using the VIA Character Strengths in youth, the research on character strengths for youth with disabilities, how to use in schools with education plans, and how to incorporate to find appropriate social activities. It will include one example of a sample intervention for youth with disabilities to stimulate ideas on how the agencies working with them can improve/increase their success.

The fourth session will focus on the transition period between the ages of 16 and 26 when youth with disabilities become considered adults with disabilities. This session will specifically target how character strengths can facilitate finding appropriate employment opportunities, career pathways, and socialization activities to promote thriving within this population.

The fifth and final session will focus on using character strengths among adults: those with disabilities, those who care for adults with disabilities, and members of the Steering Committee. Interventions are equally applicable among all adults within the community; internalizing the concepts and application of the interventions will aid the community as a whole to thrive.

Self-Determination

The workshop series will include five lessons delivered in five successive sessions:

Session 1– An Introduction to Self-Determination

Session 2–Self-Determination for Individuals with Disabilities

Session 3– Fostering Self-Determination for Children & Adolescents with Disabilities

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Session 4– Fostering Self-Determination for Adults & Seniors with Disabilities

Session 5–Fostering Self-Determination Across Disabilities and Life Contexts

Before each of the five sessions, Committee members will be given research-based readings or workbook content to review so that they are primed to engage in the self-determination learnings. After each session, Committee members will be given specific action tasks supported by prompts within their workbook to take their learnings even further. Tasks might include evaluating how they currently enable self-determination through their organizations for individuals with disabilities, considering potential actions and interventions they could take based on their learnings, or implementing self-determination interventions.

The first session will introduce the Steering Committee to Self-Determination Theory with prompts for the Committee to consider how self-determination plays a role in their well-being and the well-being of the Midland community. A self-facilitated exercise will be conducted for committee members to "map" how self-determination currently comes to life in their personal lives, in their roles at work, in the actions of the Steering Committee, and the Midland community. Committee members will be asked to consider their newfound knowledge of character strengths in how they can self-determine and express preferences.

The second session will build on the first session's foundational understanding, shifting into self-determination for individuals with disabilities. This discussion will cover why self-determination is critical for individuals with disabilities, contextualize the historical lack of self-determination for this population, and highlight the role family members, caregivers, organizational structures, and the community play in enabling self-determination for individuals with disabilities. Committee members will be asked to consider how individuals with disabilities are currently empowered to self-determine in Midland. They will also be asked who impacts

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their ability to self-determine by using their subject matter expertise and research conducted by Midland containing feedback directly from individuals with disabilities and their families (Public Sector Consultants, 2019). Committee members will also have time to consider where individuals with disabilities might not be as empowered to self-determine and question current assumptions on where they do not think it is possible to provide self-determination for this population. This session will allow participants to contemplate whether there are boundaries to self-determination for individuals with disabilities, what they are currently, and who puts these boundaries into place.

The third session will specifically focus on self-determination for children and adolescents with disabilities. This session will prioritize individual preferences in children/adolescents to help facilitate opportunities for greater choice, autonomy, and independence, again leaning on character strengths as one mechanism. The interventions and examples provided in the workbook will be specifically contextualized for common child and adolescent scenarios, including school and extracurricular activities.

Much like the previous session, the fourth session will focus on self-determination for adults and seniors with disabilities. This session will prioritize the identification of individual preferences in adults/seniors building on the previous session. The interventions and examples provided in the workbook will be specifically contextualized for common adult and senior scenarios, including the workplace, community-based groups, and assisted living situations.

The fifth and final session on self-determination will address how interventions and preference identification can be provided across the wide range of disabilities in existence. At this point, the Steering Committee will consider potential limitations to specific interventions for individuals with varied or severe forms of disabilities across age groups. This session will focus

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on different modes of preference identification and self-determination interventions available to more unique contexts. Committee members will have the opportunity to provide guidance as a group and ensure that self-determination is being fostered by their member organizations equally across the individuals with disabilities population in Midland County.

Mattering

The workshop series will include four lessons delivered in four successive sessions:

Session 1– Introduction to Mattering

Session 2– Mattering for Individuals with Disabilities

Session 3– How to Foster Mattering (part 1)

Session 4– How to Foster Mattering (part 2)

The first session will introduce mattering, discuss and explicate the relationship between feeling valued and adding value, and highlight the impact of mattering on well-being and health more broadly. This session will also include a brief overview of the different contexts in which mattering can be considered and understood, how it builds from and promotes self-determination, and will discuss how mattering can be measured, supported, and strengthened.

The second session will introduce the stark reality for individuals living with disabilities: they face very strong, very real headwinds to their sense of mattering across contexts, life roles, and in their communities and societies at large. This session will educate the Steering Committee about what gets in the way of mattering for individuals living with disabilities, priming them to think about how they might come together to intervene.

The third session will shift from education to application. It will lead the Steering Committee in understanding how to support mattering for individuals living with disabilities as they transition from educational services to adulthood. This session will focus on ways the

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Steering Committee might help individuals living with disabilities find ways to leverage their strengths to add value to the community.

The fourth and final session will continue to build on this application. In this session, the Steering Committee members will be guided through a collaborative exercise in which they will determine ways they can foster mattering within adult populations.

Belonging

The workshop series will include three lessons delivered in three progressive sessions:

Session 1– Introduction to Belonging & Social Inclusion

Session 2– Obstacles to Belonging in Individuals with Disabilities

Session 3– How to Foster Belonging in Individuals with Disabilities

Before each session, the Steering Committee will be assigned content-specific reading and reflection prompts in their workbook to prime their thinking around belonging's effects on well-being. After each session, the Steering Committee will use their workbook to guide their action and implementation planning. This post-session work will include identifying and reflecting on obstacles to belonging and brainstorming intervention ideas that support cross-Committee collaboration for fostering belonging and social inclusion in individuals with disabilities.

The first session will introduce the concept of belonging and social inclusion: what it is, why it matters for well-being, and the interacting elements that can be fostered to build belonging. The session will also include a silent reflection around one's personal feelings of belonging and a group discussion on how fostering belonging weaves in elements of self-determination, character strengths, and mattering.

The second session will examine key common obstacles that individuals with disabilities face in experiencing belongingness and social inclusion in their communities, and include a

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discussion around the nuance of social inclusion versus exclusion. The Steering Committee will be guided to discuss their pre-work reflections around social exclusion and consider examples of stigma that they've observed or experienced in working with individuals with disabilities.

The third session will turn towards intervention, discussing how the Steering Committee's organizations can foster belonging in individuals with disabilities by intervening across the five interacting elements that compose a sense of belonging. An intervention that promotes belonging as identity will be examined as an example: organizing a peer support group for young adults with similar disabilities. The group will explore how breaking down self-stigma by increasing positive disability identity and confidence building contributes to a sense of belonging. The remainder of the session will consist of a live group brainstorming activity for intervention ideas and opportunities where their organizations can collaborate to foster belonging in individuals with disabilities.

Sustainability & Implementation

The Midland County Education Services Agency and their partners on the Steering Committee use a framework to create well-being habits, attitudes, and actions. This is embodied in the acronym of **LEAD**: **L**iteracy, having a common language to describe well-being, **E**valuation, using meaningful data to drive decisions, **A**ctivation, experiment and take action, and **D**etermination, dedication to sustain the effort (K. Snyder, personal communication, March 11, 2021). The proposed workshop series and material are purposefully designed to follow this framework by first providing *literacy* on character strengths, self-determination, mattering, and belonging. It then progresses to aid the Steering Committee in using insights from research to determine what actions to take (*evaluation*) and suggests interventions to test and implement (*activation*). Ultimately, implementation and sustainability reside with the Steering Committee.

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To ensure success, the Application Plan is intentionally designed to meet members of the Steering Committee where they are and foster a sense of self-efficacy (*determination*). To further support the Steering Committee, high-level guidelines will be created to inform their implementation and post-implementation efforts. Finally, a close connection with Kathy Snyder will be maintained to support the facilitation of these sessions and ensure confidence and preparedness in the delivery of each session and a clear line of sight for continuity with the Steering Committee's work.

Assessment Recommendation

This application plan is designed to deliver on the project's ultimate aim: to enable individuals with disabilities living in Midland Country to thrive. The project is designed to approach this through creating and optimizing a collaborative model of support within the community, targeting interventions along four key concepts: character strengths, self-determination, mattering, and belonging. As such, the recommendation for assessing progress towards the desired outcome is for the Steering Committee to capture self-report data from the individuals their organizations serve via a five-point Likert scale questionnaire.

The questionnaire should seek to measure individuals with disabilities' assessment of their own thriving and well-being across the application plan's four key pillars, assessing the degree to which they agree or disagree with short statements. Questionnaire statements could include 1) I know what my strengths are and why they are valuable in my community 2) I feel like I am a valuable member of my community 3) I feel at home and welcome in my community 4) I am supported in making independent choices.

One centralized self-report questionnaire should be administered and managed across the partner organizations to encourage a collaborative model of success among the Steering

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Committee. It is recommended that baseline data is gathered before the first session of the application plan's workshop series. Appropriate disability accommodations for taking the questionnaire should be considered and arranged for before administration. After the workshop series and once the Steering Committee has moved fully into intervention execution, it is recommended that the same self-report questionnaire is administered a second time to the original respondents, approximately 4-6 months into active intervention rollout after the conclusion of the workshop series.

If successful, the project outcomes should result in a demonstrated increase in scores between the first and second data sets, indicating that individuals with disabilities feel a greater sense of thriving as individuals and members within their Midland community. If not successful, no meaningful change will be reported in the data.

It is further recommended that a questionnaire be developed for the Steering Committee itself using a five-point Likert Scale. A baseline survey would be conducted before implementing the workshop series and after the workshop series. Questions such as the following could be included: 1) I understand what character strengths are and how to apply character strength concepts for people with disabilities 2) I understand how self-determination concepts can be applied for people with disabilities 3) I understand how mattering concepts can be applied for people with disabilities 4) I understand how belonging concepts can be applied for people with disabilities.

If successful, the project outcomes should result in a demonstrated increase in scores between the first and second data sets, indicating that individuals in the Steering Committee have increased their knowledge of the concepts and how to foster thriving for individuals with disabilities. If not successful, no meaningful change will be reported in the data.

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Finally, quantitative data should be collected, such as how many new programs are created to serve individuals living with disabilities from the inception of the workshop series. Other measures could be tracked, such as how often the language of character strengths, mattering, belonging, and self-determination is used in person-centered plans developed in Midland County. If successful, both of these measures will increase.

Conclusion

Improving the well-being of individuals living with disabilities in Midland County requires a collaborative strategy led by the Steering Committee and its organizations. By understanding Midland County's situation and leveraging positive psychology research and application methods, a robust application plan has been created that will deliver tangible outcomes to the Steering Committee, individuals living with disabilities in Midland, and Midland County more broadly. The workshop series and surrounding content will educate and guide the Steering Committee on how to take action both in their own lives and through their leadership in their organizations and the community more broadly. This will, in turn, enable those living with disabilities to thrive and flourish in their community.

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Appendix A: Workshop Series Sample (Character Strengths)

Workshop Series Sample (Character Strengths) included below.

Appendix B: Workbook Sample (Character Strengths)

Workbook Sample (Character Strengths) included below.

THRIVING FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

A Well-being Workshop Series
designed to help you thrive so you can help all people thrive

TOPICS WE'LL COVER TOGETHER

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

Personality traits that capture
the best in you

SELF- DETERMINATION

Believing you can control your
own destiny

MATTERING

Feeling valued by others, and
adding value to others

BELONGING

Feeling included & "at home"
in your community

WELCOME! HERE'S ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

OBJECTIVES & COMMITMENTS

OBJECTIVES

To empower you by educating you in the science of Character Strengths, Self-Determination, Mattering & Belonging for yourself, your teams, and those you serve.

COMMITMENTS

- Be here fully
- Prepare for our time together
- (anything else?)

WELCOME

Module 1: Character Strengths

- This module includes 5 sessions:
 - **Introduction to Character Strengths**
 - Our Team's Signature Strengths
 - Character Strengths & Youth with Disabilities
 - Character Strengths during Transition
 - Character Strengths in Adults with Physical Disabilities
- Each session is designed to be 15-minutes in length
- Your workbook materials include pre-reading and post-session activities

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

WHAT ARE THEY?

A set of personality traits that describe what's best in us.

These traits:

- Refer to both *being* and *doing*
- Are generally stable, but can change
- Together define six virtues:
 - Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, Transcendence

THE 24 CHARACTER STRENGTHS

WISDOM

Creativity
Curiosity
Judgment
Love of Learning
Perspective

TRANSCENDENCE

Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence
Gratitude
Hope
Humor
Spirituality

TEMPERANCE

Forgiveness
Humility
Prudence
Self-Regulation

COURAGE

Bravery
Perseverance
Honesty
Zest

HUMANITY

Love
Kindness
Social Intelligence

JUSTICE

Teamwork
Fairness
Leadership

GROUP DISCUSSION

BREAK INTO GROUPS OF THREE & DISCUSS FOR **FIVE MINUTES**
EACH GROUP: NOMINATE ONE PERSON TO SPEAK UP & SHARE

Question 1

What was something you learned from the viacharacter.org website that was new to you?

Question 2

Disabilities can develop from illness or an accident. Which character strengths do you think can contribute to the recovery process?

NEXT STEPS & TAKEAWAYS

COMMIT

Learn more about character strengths by doing one activity @ viacharacter.org

REFLECT

Take time to reflect and synthesize your learnings. Use your workbook to capture your reflections.

PREPARE

- (1) Take the free character strengths survey @ viacharacter.org
- (2) Be prepared to share what you learned at our next session

WELCOME

Module 1: Character Strengths

- This module includes 5 sessions:
 - Introduction to Character Strengths ✓
 - **Our Team's Signature Strengths**
 - Character Strengths & Youth with Disabilities
 - Character Strengths during Transition
 - Character Strengths in Adults with Physical Disabilities
- Each session is designed to be 15-minutes in length
- Your workbook materials include pre-reading and post-session activities

RECAP

There are **24 character strengths** that define **6 virtues**.

Speed Share: Share one insight from last session or your homework (no repeats!)

Character strengths contribute to human flourishing:

- Enjoying life
- Connecting with others
- Overcoming difficulties
- Finding Success

OUR SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

- What stands out to you?
- What's affirming?
- What's surprising?

Insert spreadsheet pre-created from your group's homework submissions here.

GROUP DISCUSSION

BREAK INTO GROUPS OF THREE & DISCUSS FOR **FIVE MINUTES**
EACH GROUP: NOMINATE ONE PERSON TO SPEAK UP & SHARE

Question 1

How can this data inform how we might work together as a team?

Question 2

How might we use our most prevalent strengths as a team to benefit the people with disabilities in our community?

NEXT STEPS & TAKEAWAYS

COMMIT

Commit to using one of your personal signature strengths in a new and different way every day for seven days.

REFLECT

Take time to reflect about your experience. Use your workbook to capture your reflections.

PREPARE

Come to our next session prepared to share one insight that you learned from this experience.

WELCOME

Module 1: Character Strengths

- This module includes 5 sessions:
 - Introduction to Character Strengths ✓
 - Our Team's Signature Strengths ✓
 - **Character Strengths & Youth with Disabilities**
 - Character Strengths during Transition
 - Character Strengths in Adults with Physical Disabilities
- Each session is designed to be 15-minutes in length
- Your workbook materials include pre-reading and post-session activities

RECAP

Signature Strengths:

- Most natural to who you are
- Capture your essence
- Natural to express
- Energizing to use

Speed Share: Share one insight from last session or your homework (no repeats!)

Intervention:

Use a Signature Strength in a new way.

- Research shows this intervention can improve happiness and decrease depression for up to 6 months (!)

YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES RATE THEMSELVES LOWER ON
EACH CHARACTER STRENGTH THAN YOUTH WITHOUT DISABILITIES

INDIVIDUAL

(challenge)
Youth with disabilities do not have the same level of experiences as youth without disabilities

COMMUNITY

(opportunity)
Connect individuals' character strengths to opportunities to provide social interaction

EDUCATION

(opportunity)
Understand and embed character strengths in support provisions

GROUP DISCUSSION

BREAK INTO GROUPS OF THREE & DISCUSS FOR **FIVE MINUTES**
EACH GROUP: NOMINATE ONE PERSON TO SPEAK UP & SHARE

Background

Here are three exercises that leverage strengths to develop relationships:

- (1) Strength Spotting
- (2) Using signature strength in new ways
- (3) Count acts of kindness

Questions

How might we incorporate these activities within our organizations?

How might we incorporate these activities within our youth education systems?

NEXT STEPS & TAKEAWAYS

COMMIT

Practice strength-spotting this week using this framework:
Label the strength you observe
Explain evidence of strength
Express how you value the strength

REFLECT

Take time to reflect about your experience. Use your workbook to capture your reflections.

PREPARE

Come to our next session prepared to share one insight that you learned from this experience.

WELCOME

Module 1: Character Strengths

- This module includes **5** sessions:
 - Introduction to Character Strengths ✓
 - Our Team's Signature Strengths ✓
 - Character Strengths & Youth with Disabilities ✓
 - **Character Strengths during Transition**
 - Character Strengths in Adults with Physical Disabilities
- Each session is designed to be 15-minutes in length
- Your workbook materials include pre-reading and post-session activities

RECAP

Discovering **individuals' character strengths** and **matching them to community opportunities** promotes meaningful social interaction.

Strength-spotting: Learning to strength spot is a universally useful skill

Education systems can incorporate character strengths interventions into support provisions, like Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

Speed Share: Share one insight from last session or your homework (no repeats!)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN TRANSITION

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT

Support for youth ages 16+ from school to adult.

Must account for "strengths, preferences and interests"

RESEARCH

Strengths present in youth with disability can inform the transition process.

Can be used to develop meaningful IEP and transition goals.

STRENGTHS CAN GIVE HOPE THROUGH TRANSITION

Youth in transition can use strengths to navigate barriers.

Strengths can also be used to generate & implement solutions using the Aware-Explore-Apply model

CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN TRANSITION

TRANSITION PLANS OFTEN INCLUDE EMPLOYMENT

FAST FACTS

According to US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015):

28% of Americans with disabilities (18-64 years) are employed, compared to **73%** of Americans without disabilities

A NEW WAY

(opportunity)
Character Strengths can be matched to employer needs

(benefit)
Foster hope & self-efficacy in individuals in transition

INTERVENE

(opportunity)
Use interventions to foster character strengths employers seek

(example)
Encourage trying things in new ways to increase creativity, curiosity & bravery

GROUP DISCUSSION

BREAK INTO GROUPS OF THREE & DISCUSS FOR **FIVE MINUTES**
EACH GROUP: NOMINATE ONE PERSON TO SPEAK UP & SHARE

Question 1

Consider one position in the organization you work for. What makes for a viable candidate using character strengths?

Question 2

How might your organization use character strengths to make employment more accessible for individuals with disabilities?

NEXT STEPS & TAKEAWAYS

COMMIT

Think about how your unique role contributes to your team, then align your character strengths with your role. This intervention can help enhance your teamwork!

REFLECT

Take time to reflect about your experience. Use your workbook to capture your reflections.

PREPARE

Come to our next session prepared to share one insight that you learned from this experience.

WELCOME

Module 1: Character Strengths

- This module includes 5 sessions:
 - Introduction to Character Strengths ✓
 - Our Team's Signature Strengths ✓
 - Character Strengths & Youth with Disabilities ✓
 - Character Strengths during Transition ✓
 - **Character Strengths in Adults with Physical Disabilities**
- Each session is designed to be 15-minutes in length
- Your workbook materials include pre-reading and post-session activities

RECAP

Youth with intellectual disabilities in transition can **use strengths to give them hope:**

- Navigate barriers
- Generate solutions

Speed Share: Share one insight from last session or your homework (no repeats!)

Character strengths can be used to match with employers' real needs. This approach can help foster hope and self-efficacy in youth in transition.

CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN ADULTS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

DISABILITIES CAN HAVE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS

Social isolation, anxiety, depression,
reduced activities

CHARACTER STRENGTHS CAN BOOST RECOVERY

Appreciation of beauty, bravery, curiosity,
fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, humor,
kindness, love of learning, and
spirituality

POSSIBLE NEW INTERVENTIONS

Identify and use character strengths in
new ways to increase engagement and
meaning in life

GROUP DISCUSSION

BREAK INTO GROUPS OF THREE & DISCUSS FOR **FIVE MINUTES**
EACH GROUP: NOMINATE ONE PERSON TO SPEAK UP & SHARE

Question 1

What one change could your organization make that would enable adults with physical disabilities to participate more fully?

Question 2

What one change could your organization make that would enable adults with intellectual disabilities to participate more fully?

NEXT STEPS & TAKEAWAYS

REFLECT

Reflect on the concepts and ideas you generated from this module. What did you learn? How will you apply your learnings to help individuals with disabilities?

COMMIT

Take the next step from reflection to action. What will you commit to doing next? Who can help you?

CELEBRATE!

You just completed your first module on Character Strengths – great job! You’re on your way to helping all people thrive.

REFERENCES

HERE ARE THE SOURCES THAT SUPPORT CONTENT FROM **MODULE 1**

- Boeschoten, R. E., Braamse, A. M. J., Beekman, A. T. F., Cuijpers, P., van Oppen, P., Dekker, J., & Uitdehaag, B. M. J. (2017). Prevalence of depression and anxiety in Multiple Sclerosis: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of the Neurological Sciences*, 372, 331-341. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jns.2016.11.067>
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- Smedema, S. M., & Bhattarai, M. (2020). The unique contribution of character strengths to quality of life in persons with Multiple Sclerosis. *Rehabilitation Psychology*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/rep0000363>
- viacharacter.org. (rep.). VIA TOTAL 24 Character Strengths Report (pp. 1-46).

THRIVING FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

MIDLAND COUNTY STEERING COMMITTEE WORKBOOK

MAPP'16 Service Learning Project

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**MIDLAND COUNTY
STEERING COMMITTEE WORKBOOK**

**THRIVING FOR
INDIVIDUALS WITH
DISABILITIES**

**A Well-Being Workshop Series designed to help you
thrive so you can help all people thrive**

MAPP'16 Service Learning Project

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STEERING COMMITTEE WORKBOOK

Welcome to the Well-Being Workshop Series. This content + experience was created through close partnership with the Midland County Steering Committee & members of the University of Pennsylvania MAPP Program.

This workbook is designed to guide you on your journey through the Well-Being Workshop Series.

*in case you ever misplace me,
write your name here*

HELLO
my name is

Fill in the "objectives" and "commitments" sections below from your first Steering Committee group discussion

OBJECTIVES

COMMITMENTS

Steering Committee Workbook

HERE'S WHAT WE'LL COVER TOGETHER...

Four modules:

——— **Character Strengths**

——— **Self-Determination**

——— **Mattering**

——— **Belonging**

WITH ACTION PLANNING GUIDES,
LESSONS, & REFLECTIONS TO MAKE
IT IMPACTFUL & ACTIONABLE

1

Character Strengths

Workshop Sessions:

- INTRODUCTION TO CHARACTER STRENGTHS
- STEERING COMMITTEE TEAMS' SIGNATURE STRENGTHS
- CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES
- CHARACTER STRENGTHS DURING TRANSITION
- CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES



Character Strengths

What are they?

Character strengths are a set of personality traits that describe what is best in people, how they think, behave and feel. They are stable, but also changeable.

With a total of 24, here are the character strengths identified and sorted categorically by the six virtues:

WISDOM

Creativity
Curiosity
Judgment
Love of Learning
Perspective

TRANSCENDENCE

Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence
Gratitude
Hope
Humor
Spirituality

TEMPERANCE

Forgiveness
Humility
Prudence
Self-Regulation

COURAGE

Bravery
Perseverance
Honesty
Zest

HUMANITY

Love
Kindness
Social Intelligence

JUSTICE

Teamwork
Fairness
Leadership



Character Strengths

Deep-Dive

WISDOM

Creativity: seeing and doing things in different ways

Curiosity: openness to experience

Judgment: critical thinking

Love of Learning: mastering new skills and topics

Perspective: taking the big picture

COURAGE

Bravery: facing fear

Perseverance: overcoming obstacles

Honesty: authenticity

Zest: vitality

HUMANITY

Love: genuine warmth

Kindness: doing for others

Social intelligence: knowing what makes other people tick

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities



Character Strengths

Deep-Dive

JUSTICE

Teamwork: citizenship

Fairness: equality

Leadership: positively influencing others

TEMPERANCE

Forgiveness: second chances

Humility: modesty

Prudence: cautious

Self-regulation: self-control

TRANSCENDENCE

Appreciation for Beauty: awe & wonder at beauty

Gratitude: thankful for the good

Hope: optimism

Humor: playfulness

Spirituality: connected with purpose/meaning

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities



Character Strengths

Why do they matter?

Character strengths can enable well-being by helping us to:

- enjoy life
- connect with others
- overcome difficulties
- find success

.....

Why are **character strengths particularly important for individuals living with disabilities?**

- Helping people with disabilities identify & use character strengths may increase their engagement and frame/reframe meaning in their lives;
- Disabilities can have psychosocial impacts on individuals;
- Disabilities can lead to social isolation, anxiety, depression & reduced activities;
- Youth with intellectual disabilities rate themselves lower on each character strength than youth without disabilities; and,
- May not have same level of experiences/support as those without disabilities, reinforcing lower view of self-determination.

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities



Character Strengths

How can you foster them?

1. Identify your/their VIA Character Strengths Profile
2. Identify Signature Strengths (strengths rated highest on 5-point scale, with 5 = very much like me):
 - Essential: at the core of who you are
 - Effortless: comes natural
 - Energizing: leaves you feeling happy
3. Connect Character Strengths to individual goals: building confidence, relieve stress, build resilience, build hope, develop self-efficacy

SAMPLE INTERVENTIONS

- Practice strength-spotting: identifying strengths in others
- Use your signature strengths in new ways
- Use your signature strengths toward yourself
- Use your signature strengths others
- Enhance teamwork through role matching

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities

1

Character Strengths References

- Boeschoten, R. E., Braamse, A. M. J., Beekman, A. T. F., Cuijpers, P., van Oppen, P., Dekker, J., & Uitdehaag, B. M. J. (2017). Prevalence of depression and anxiety in Multiple Sclerosis: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of the Neurological Sciences*, 372, 331-341. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jns.2016.11.067>
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Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities



Character Strengths

Ready to learn more?

HERE ARE SOME MORE RESOURCES FOR YOU TO EXPLORE:

Website:

- Visit the viacharacter.org website where you can take the free survey, browse articles, and classes.

Books:

- Niemiec, R. M. (2018). *Character strengths interventions: a field guide for practitioners*. Hogrefe.
- Niemiec, R. M. (2020). *Strengths-Based Workbook For Stress Relief: a character strengths approach to finding calm in the chaos of daily life (16pt large print edition)*. VIA Institute on Character.
- Peterson, C., Park, N. S., & Seligman, M.E.P. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Articles:

- Niemiec, R. M., Shogren, K. A., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2017). Character strengths and intellectual and developmental disability. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 52(1), 13 - 25.
- Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). In *Character strengths and virtues: a handbook and classification* (pp. 3–32). essay, American Psychological Association.
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<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.60.5.410>



Character Strengths

Session 1

SESSION PLAN

Before the session:

- Spend at least 30 minutes exploring viacharacter.org to familiarize yourself with available resources.

In session:

- Review the introduction to character strength slide deck with discussion points as a Steering Committee.

After the session:

- Commit to one activity on the website, viacharacter.org. For example, you can sign up for their email, a webcast, or read one of the posted articles.

NOTES



Character Strengths

Session 1

REFLECTION

What did you find most meaningful this session?

What is one thing you will action between now and the next session?

What support do you need to hold yourself accountable? How will you set yourself up for success?

Any suggestions / things to keep in mind for the next session?

How satisfied were you with this session?





Character Strengths

Session 2

SESSION PLAN

Before the session:

- Take the free survey on viacharacter.org and send the list of your top 5 strengths to the Steering Committee facilitator who will develop a spreadsheet to share with group (include your name and strengths).

In session:

- Review the slide deck and discuss the Steering Committee strengths profile.

After the session:

- Commit to using one of your signature strengths in a new way for 7 days; journal about the experience (room in notes below / workbook)

.....

NOTES



Character Strengths

Session 2

REFLECTION

What did you find most meaningful this session?

What is one thing you will action between now and the next session?

What support do you need to hold yourself accountable? How will you set yourself up for success?

Any suggestions / things to keep in mind for the next session?

How satisfied were you with this session?





Character Strengths

Session 3

SESSION PLAN

Before the session:

- Read the excerpt, accessible on the next page (Appendix A).

In session:

- Review the slide deck and hold group discussions on learnings and content.

After the session:

- Practice the strengths-spotting intervention with others.



NOTES

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities

1

Character Strengths

Session 3

APPENDIX A

Excerpt from: Niemiec, R. M., Shogren, K. A., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2017). Character strengths and intellectual and developmental disability. Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 52(1), 13-25.

Preliminary work (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Lang, & Niemiec, 2014) has begun examining the use of the VIA-Youth in adolescents with disabilities, including youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Specifically, researchers have found that across youth with and without disabilities the same set of items can be used in meaningful and reliable ways, although specific modifications to the wording of questions and supports for responding may be needed for some youth with intellectual disability (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Forber-Pratt, & Palmer, 2015). However, youth with disabilities, across the board, rated themselves lower on each character strength (see Table 1) than youth without disabilities. While we would expect each student to demonstrate different profiles of character strengths, the finding that students with disabilities score less adaptively across all character strengths suggests that specific environmental factors may be influencing the beliefs youth with disabilities hold about themselves and their strengths. This replicates other research on constructs like self-determination that has also found that youth with disabilities rate themselves lower than their peers without disabilities (Shogren, Lopez, et al., 2006; Shogren et al., in press). Although the exact mechanisms for these effects are not understood, one hypothesis is that youth and adults with disabilities, particularly young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, are not given the experiences and supports to develop adaptive understandings of their self-determination and character strengths.

1

Character Strengths

Session 3

REFLECTION

What did you find most meaningful this session?

What is one thing you will action between now and the next session?

What support do you need to hold yourself accountable? How will you set yourself up for success?

Any suggestions / things to keep in mind for the next session?

How satisfied were you with this session?





Character Strengths

Session 4

SESSION PLAN

Before the session:

- Read the excerpt, accessible on the next pages (Appendix B).

In session:

- Review the slide deck and hold group discussions on learnings and content.

After the session:

- Practice the intervention for enhancing teamwork through role matching.



NOTES

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities

1

Character Strengths

Session 4

APPENDIX B

Excerpt from: Jennings, E. V., (2017). Character strengths as a pathway to obtaining and maintaining employment for job seekers with disabilities: a model for building job seeker hope and self-efficacy. Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) Capstone Projects. 132. http://repository.upenn.edu/mapp_capstone/132

Character strengths and employment:

Character strengths research has included the application of character strengths within several facets of employment. Although the majority of research has not assessed individuals with disabilities, we will review several findings with the consideration that job seekers with disabilities are job seekers first. Reflecting on the social model of disability, people with disabilities are more aptly characterized as people with physical ailments that are made disabling based on interactions with physical and social environments, including the attitudes of other people and the policies and practices of systems (Shakespeare, 2013). Therefore, with relative confidence, we can assume that the presence of a physical disability does not discount findings that would apply to job seekers without physical disabilities. As noted earlier, acquiring a disability and living in poverty have profound effects on individual's lives, including the stability of their environment, their views of their own capabilities, and the ways they are viewed by others. Aligning character strengths with hope and self-efficacy may ameliorate some of these challenges and act as facilitators to obtaining and maintaining employment. During the job search, the use of character strengths as a component of strengths-based career counseling led to increased employment rates (80%) compared to traditional career counseling (60%) (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2014).

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities

1

Character Strengths

Session 4

APPENDIX B (cont'd)

During a job interview, character strengths offer language to explain who we are at our core and why that matters in getting the job done. Kauffman (2010) suggests that job seekers create a one-minute narrative that uses character strengths to describe themselves in an interview. For example, an applicant for a receptionist position who ranks high in kindness can share with a potential employer that they “believe that others are worthy of attention and affirmation for their own sake as human beings, not out of a sense of duty or principle,” exemplifying their desire to treat others well (VIA Institute on Character, 2004-2017a). Understanding the strengths one relies on can also help in acclimating to a new job and workplace culture. If I know that I rank high in prudence, I may explore how I will use that prudence to make thoughtful decisions, but not allow it to be an impediment to action. De Botton and Armstrong (2013) may offer an explanation for this as they outline seven psychological frailties humans experience, including “We feel isolated and persecuted; we lose sight of our best side; and we do not know ourselves” (pp. 57-58). At the core of each of these frailties is a misunderstanding of ourselves, others, and our shared human experience. Because character strengths help us to better understand multiple aspects of our personality and behavior, and the characteristics of others, they provide the connection of who I am and what I do to who you are and what you do. They highlight the ways in which we are all the same, which can help to build positive relationships. Understanding character strengths can help one understand, celebrate, and support others by identifying and fostering their strengths (strength spotting). Character strengths can also facilitate job satisfaction. Harzer and Ruch (2015) found greater correlation between strengths and work satisfaction when signature strengths (four or more) were used. Signature strengths are those character strengths an individual most frequently uses, celebrates, and/or “owns” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 18).

Thriving for Individuals with Disabilities

1

Character Strengths

Session 4

APPENDIX B (cont'd)

Research suggests that the use of character strengths may improve several areas of well-being at work because the individual is able to leverage who they are at their core, which increases engagement (Crabb, 2011). Through the identification of character strengths, the individual has a clear purpose for exploring how they see themselves, a framework for identifying strengths in others, and a language to share their best qualities with others, along with examples of those strengths in action. Through the CS-Works model, we will learn more about the potential benefits of integrating character strengths into disability employment services. I hypothesize that being more aware of one's strengths, exploring ways to use one's strengths and signature strengths, strengths-spotting, and positive interventions designed to leverage character strengths to increase hope, self-efficacy will improve individual efforts to secure employment, performance in job interviews, connecting to peers on the job, and maintaining the job. But is this enough?

Character Strengths and Team Roles

As noted earlier, individuals with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than their non-disabled peers, and being unemployed for more than 36 months makes the individual 14 times more likely to be poor. Financial need often pushes individuals with disabilities to seek out survival jobs; jobs that may be below the job seeker's skill level, out of field, and/or low-paying. Survival jobs are typically meant to be temporary while a job seeker continues their job search. Individuals with disabilities are more likely to work part-time, to be paid hourly, and to have less desirable shifts (night, rotating, on-call) than their non-disabled peers, and are more likely to report that their schedule does not fit their needs (Galinsky, Goodman, Kim, & Bond, 2017). Yet, employees with disabilities are just as likely as those without to report that they plan to stay in their current job.

1

Character Strengths

Session 4

APPENDIX B (cont'd)

People with disabilities may stay in survivor jobs due to a multitude of reasons, including the barriers to employment we discussed earlier. Character strengths-defined roles may offer new insights to individuals with acquired disabilities about the way they use their character strengths in a range of team roles.

1

Character Strengths

Session 4

REFLECTION

What did you find most meaningful this session?

What is one thing you will action between now and the next session?

What support do you need to hold yourself accountable? How will you set yourself up for success?

Any suggestions / things to keep in mind for the next session?

How satisfied were you with this session?





Character Strengths

Session 5

SESSION PLAN

Before the session:

- Review the material we've covered from previous 4 lessons with a view toward action planning and making meaningful impact.

In session:

- Review the slide deck and hold group discussions on learnings and content.

After the session:

- Reflect on ideas that could be implemented by your organization to increase flourishing by people with disabilities as a result of new knowledge on character strengths



NOTES



Character Strengths

Session 5

REFLECTION

What did you find most meaningful this session?

What is one thing you will action between now and the next session?

What support do you need to hold yourself accountable? How will you set yourself up for success?

Any suggestions / things to keep in mind for the next session?

How satisfied were you with this session?





Character Strengths

Action Plan

TAKE TIME TO REFLECT ON THE FOLLOWING PROMPTS:

What did you learn in this module?

What will you do differently?

What ideas do you have to foster character strengths?

1

Character Strengths

Action Plan

TAKE TIME TO REFLECT ON THE FOLLOWING PROMPTS:

How can you (in your role / with your organization) help individuals living with disabilities to build, foster, and recognize character strengths for greater well-being?

How might you partner with other Steering Committee members and organizations to make that impact even bigger?

What first step will you commit to taking to move from idea to action?

Notes

use this section to take notes during the workshops.

2

Self-

Determination

Workshop Sessions:

- INTRODUCTION TO SELF-DETERMINATION
- SELF-DETERMINATION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES
- SELF-DETERMINATION FOR CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS WITH DISABILITIES
- SELF-DETERMINATION FOR ADULTS & SENIORS WITH DISABILITIES
- FOSTERING SELF-DETERMINATION ACROSS DISABILITIES & LIFE CONTEXTS

3

Mattering

Workshop Sessions:

- INTRODUCTION TO MATTERING
- MATTERING FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES
- HOW TO FOSTER MATTERING (PART I)
- HOW TO FOSTER MATTERING (PART II)

4 Belonging

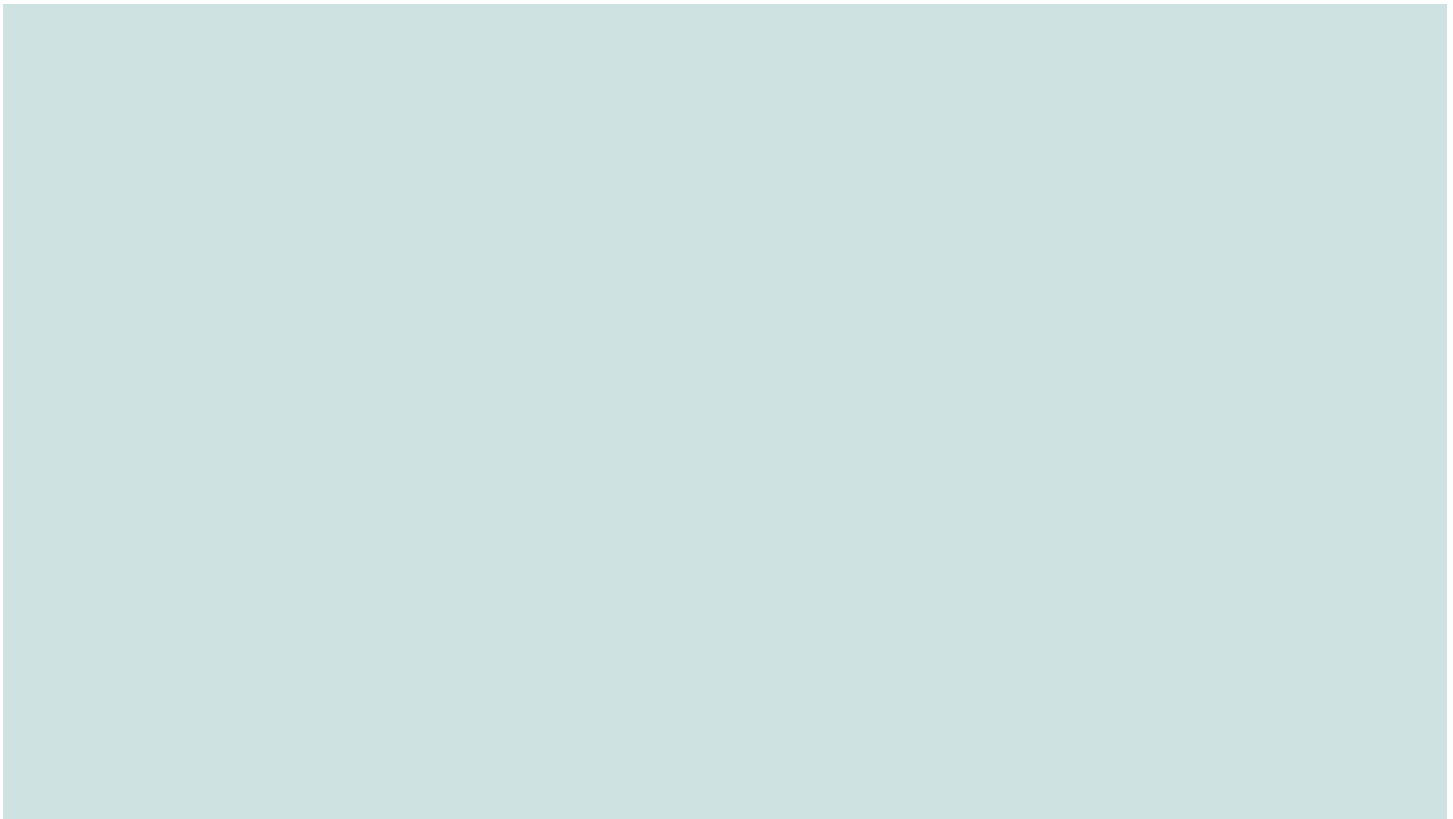
Workshop Sessions:

- INTRODUCTION TO BELONGING & SOCIAL INCLUSION
- OBSTACLES TO BELONGING IN INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES
- HOW TO FOSTER BELONGING IN INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

CONGRATULATIONS!

We hope you have found this workbook and the Well-Being Workshop Series valuable.

Use the space below to reflect on what you have learned, the impact you have made so far, and the action you look forward to taking as this workshop series concludes:



How would you rate your experience with this workbook?

