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FOUNDATIONS

Emotions, Motivation, and the Nature of Well-Being

6 USE YOUR STRENGTHS

This activity helps you to identify some of your strengths, virtues, skills, talents, and positive personality traits so that you can apply them to areas of life that you care about. Activities that ask people to use their strengths or positive traits were among the first interventions to be associated with positive psychology. The theory behind such activities is that most people attempt to improve their lives by trying to fix what is “wrong” with them. That is, people find their flaws and then try to change them. Instead, strength-based activities identify what you do right by finding your unique strengths and virtues and using them more often (Peterson & Park, 2009; Wan et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2022).

Step 1: Identify your strengths and virtues. Here’s what to do: Go to www.viacharacter.org and click on either “Take the Free Survey” (link on the left side of the page) or “Activate Your Strengths” (on the right, toward the bottom). You will be asked to register, but the basic VIA assessment is free. Next choose the adult version, verify you are a real person, and begin the VIA Survey of Character. Don’t spend too much time on each question, just answer with your initial reaction to the question. There are 120 questions, so it will take about 15–20 minutes. When you’re finished, you should get a list of at least your top five strengths.

Step 2: If you feel some of your unique strengths were not on the list, then add those strengths and virtues to your list of strengths.

Step 3: The instructions for the classic version of the strengths activity are to identify your top five strengths and for the next week “use them in new and different ways.” In other words, deliberately use your top five strengths, but use them in ways that are not part of your normal routine. For example, if one of your strengths is kindness and you normally apply it only to your friends, then try to be kind to a stranger.

However, there is another way to work with your strengths. When Aristotle proposed his theory of well-being over 2,300 years ago, he listed particular virtues or strengths that he believed created eudaimonia and wisdom. However, Aristotle insisted that *all* virtues or strengths were important and that *they all* had to be developed. Because Aristotle was one of the smartest men who ever lived, let’s use his ideas for this activity. Therefore, another option is to look at your top five strengths from the VIA

Survey and look at the list of 24 strengths evaluated on the VIA and use strengths that were *not* in your top five.

Step 4: For your journal, please keep a daily record of what you did and how you felt. Record your reactions to this activity, such as difficulty versus ease of applying your strengths, emotions experienced, and change in perspective and well-being. How did the activity impact other people in your life?

See the following journal article for research on strengths: Seligman et al. (2006).

Your Work: Please use this space, and additional journal space as appropriate, for your work.

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7 SELF-ACCEPTANCE

When people evaluate their lives in terms of satisfaction or happiness, they often compare themselves with other people. Many people have the mistaken impression that other people don't have problems, they are always happy, or their lives are totally fulfilling at all times. A common consequence of making these unrealistic comparisons with others is that people blame themselves for not living the ceaselessly wonderful life they imagine others live. Trust us when we say that everyone has problems, everyone has bad days, and everyone has difficulties in life that are challenging. On the other hand, self-acceptance is simply recognizing who you are with all your quirks and idiosyncrasies and then stopping being so hard on yourself.

You may wonder what this has to do with happiness. Actually, the path to self-acceptance is very important to happiness because we can't be authentically happy unless we allow ourselves to accept ourselves. Otherwise, we put on a "happy face" partially so we can hide our unacceptable parts from ourselves and from others. The path toward self-acceptance may actually lead through self-compassion. The activity presented here comes from the work of Dr. Kristin Neff who has focused her research on self-compassion (<https://self-compassion.org>). If you wish to explore this area further, please take a look at her work (for example, see Neff, 2022a, 2022b). This particular activity is called the "Letter to an Imaginary Friend." It works like this:

Think about an imaginary friend who unconditionally loves you and who is accepting, kind, and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and all your weaknesses. Reflect on what this friend feels toward you and how you are loved and accepted exactly as you are, with all your very human imperfections. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature and is kind and forgiving toward you. In his or her great wisdom this friend understands your life history and the millions of things that have happened in your life to create you as you are in this moment.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend. What would this friend say to you about your flaws from the perspective of unlimited compassion? How would this friend convey the deep compassion he or she feels for you, especially for the pain you feel when you judge yourself harshly? What would this friend write in order to remind you that you are only human, that all people have both strengths and weaknesses? And if you think this friend would suggest possible changes you should make, how would these suggestions embody feelings of unconditional understanding and compassion? As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of his or her acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. Know that love, connection, and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

8 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI)

Emotional intelligence (EI) can be defined as the ability to perceive one's emotions, assimilate emotion-related feelings, understand the information involved with those emotions, and manage one's emotions. Although research in this area is still progressing, there seems to be little doubt that the ability to understand and use our emotions wisely and creatively is related to personal and interpersonal well-being (Kaliska & Pellitteri, 2021).

The model presented by Peter Salovey and John Mayer proposes five characteristics of EI (see Salovey et al., 2009).

1. **Knowing one's emotions.** People high in EI should be able to accurately recognize what they are feeling and to accurately express their emotion as well.
2. **Handle interpersonal relationships well.** People high in EI should be socially competent and good at creating and maintaining effective interpersonal relationships.
3. **Use emotions to motivate oneself.** People high in EI should be able to control their emotions to help them reach their goals.
4. **Recognize emotions in others.** This refers to the skills of reading what other people are feeling and being empathetic.
5. **Manage one's emotions.** This can include the ability to regulate one's moods and rebound after an emotional setback.

Salovey et al. (2009) proposed that increases in EI come from increasing particular emotional abilities and skills. Their model predicts that high EI develops from (1) the ability to perceive and express emotions, which leads to (2) skills at assimilating emotions and cognitive processing of feelings, which leads to (3) a deeper understanding of the complexities of emotions as they relate to the social world, which leads to (4) being able to regulate emotions more effectively. Learning how to enhance and develop your EI is clearly a skill that develops over time. Therefore, we can't cover the whole process in one exercise. Nonetheless, an activity in recognizing emotions can begin the process of developing your EI.

Begin this activity by writing down significant emotions throughout the day. Next refer to the feelings chart posted by Momentum Counselling Services in Dundee, Scotland: <http://www.dundeecounselling.com/selfhelp/feeling-words-list.php>. After looking at the chart, substitute any emotional labels from the chart that are a better fit with what you felt. Continuing to do this throughout the next week should help you label your emotions more accurately. Next, write about how your significant emotions may be a blend of more than one emotion. For example, if you were just accepted into graduate school you may feel joy, relief, pride, and even a bit of apprehension. Finally, try to better understand the emotions felt by others. When talking with other people use phrases such as "How did you feel about that?" or "Tell me more about how you were feeling." You can also clarify your understanding by asking something like "So you felt ____ when that happened?" You fill in the blank with the emotion you believe the person felt and allow him or her to use an "emotion word"

9 MOVING TOWARD YOUR GOALS

Research is mounting that shows the importance of goal-setting in healthy psychological functioning (Kim et al., 2021; Wissing et al., 2019). Begin by thinking about how you actually spend your time on a daily or weekly basis. In the space below, list the activities on which you spend the most time every day. These can be aspects like studying, working, socializing with friends, socializing with family members, and so on. Try to be specific so that if you are with friends, indicate whether you are with your best friends or merely acquaintances. If you are with family members, then are you spending time with your parents, siblings, children, or other relatives? Please list at least the top eight **activities** that you do the most frequently on a daily or weekly basis.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

Next, change your focus a bit and please list two of your major **goals** for each of the below time periods. These should concern matters that you want to accomplish within the different time periods.

Goals for the next 6 months:

1. _____
2. _____

Goals for the next year:

1. _____
2. _____

Goals for the next 5 years:

1. _____
2. _____

Goals for the next 20 years:

1. _____
2. _____

Now please list your top three **values** in life. What character traits, values, or virtues do you admire the most when you see people express or hold those values?

If resources like time and money were not a consideration, what would be your highest priorities in life; what goals would you pursue?

Please rank your first four activities using the following scale.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Slightly false	Neutral	True	Very true
Activity Number:	1	2	3	4
1. This activity is my choice versus others say I must do this.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. This activity gives me intrinsic satisfaction.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. This activity fits my values.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. By doing this activity, I'm making adequate progress toward important goals.	_____	_____	_____	_____

Activity Number:	1	2	3	4
5. I do this mostly to avoid negative consequences.	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. This activity conflicts with my major goals.	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. This activity helps me with my need for competence.	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. This activity helps me with my need for positive relationships.	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. This activity helps me with my need for autonomy.	_____	_____	_____	_____

Review the information from our textbook on how the goals that people set and how they pursue those goals are related to increased well-being. You will see that the preceding questions relate to research on goals and well-being.

Finally, in your journal, please describe your reactions to this activity. Do your daily activities and ultimate goals match? Are you pursuing goals that research says will boost well-being? Are you using your time in a way that helps you meet important goals?

Your Work: Please use this space, and additional journal space as appropriate, for your work.

10 THE FAMOUS LAMP OF ALADDIN

For this activity please begin by recalling the story of Aladdin and his magic lamp. You may know the story from the highly popular animated version that was released by Disney Studios about 30 years ago. If you don't remember the story, here is a brief synopsis. The story comes from a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales titled *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. In this tale, Aladdin is a poor child of the streets who is tricked by a sorcerer into retrieving a magic oil lamp from an enchanted cave. When Aladdin rubs the magic lamp to clean it (in the original story, it is his mother who cleans the lamp), then a magical genie appears who will grant Aladdin three wishes.

Imagine that you have just found the famous lamp of Aladdin. The genie grants you three wishes. What would you ask for? (Sorry, you can't ask for more wishes or use any other clever trick to get more wishes.) Take your time with this task. You may want to list your three wishes and then put them aside for a day or two. Then, look at your three wishes again. Are they still the same? If not, change the list so the three reflect a more stable list of choices. When you are sure the list reflects what you really want then it is time to evaluate what is on your list.

Ask yourself questions such as these: What emotion(s) do I hope to foster with my choices? What behavior(s) do I hope to foster? What would I gain if this wish were granted that I don't have now? Can I realistically achieve this wish without the "magic" of the lamp? What would I choose if I could only have one wish granted?

Here are a few questions you might ask that could be helpful in evaluating your list of three wishes. Do your wishes reflect something to be gained by you or by other people as well? For example, if one of your wishes involved money, was it money for your needs and wants or was it money to help other people? Possibly, your wish is a combination of both. Do your wishes reflect a move toward positive emotions and behaviors more than a move away from negative emotions and behaviors? For example, a wish for greater income could be based on a desire to form a philanthropic organization to help out other people (a desire to foster a positive emotion), or it could be based on a desire to never feel anxiety about financial ruin (a desire to avoid a negative emotion). Once again, your wish may be a combination of both. What did you learn about your goals for well-being?

Your Work: Please use this space, and additional journal space as appropriate, for your work.
