

USING YOUR STRENGTHS CARDS

According to Professor Alex Linley, “a strength is a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance” In fact, the strengths concept is so central to positive psychology nowadays, that the knowledge and utilisation of one’s strengths is considered to be one of the most direct routes to personal and professional fulfilment.

So what is the value of strengths and how can they be applied to help us live our life to its fullest? Research has demonstrated that by simply following our strengths, we can gain insight and perspective into our lives, generate optimism, confidence and even enhanced sense of vitality. More importantly, strengths appear to have a preventative mechanism in terms of buffering against certain types of physical dysfunction such as allergies, diabetes, chronic pain and even some mental disorders. Finally, strengths help build psychological resilience, whilst the use of signature strengths in work, love, play and parenting generating positive emotions. Finally, the strengths approach is argued to be at the heart of successful psychological therapies and coaching.

So how can you use these cards to identify, develop and use the strengths to the max? The following activities can be carried out in one-to-one conversations and sessions, within a family circle, with friends, and of course, in many training and team building situations. These activities are written with the end-user in mind, so if you are a coach or a therapist, please note that by “you” we actually mean “your client”.

1. Who am I?

Simply identifying your signature strengths can significantly enhance your well-being levels (Seligman et al., 2005). Looking in the cards in front of you, pick the top five you feel are most authentic to you. When you are doing this, think about:

- Does this strength reflect who you really are?
- When you are demonstrating this strength, do you truly enjoy yourself?
- Are you energised during and after its use?

2. Strengths introductions

In groups of no more than 5-6, looking at the cards in front of you, pick three that you consider to be your top strengths. Have a brief look at the description and strengths questions at the back. Introduce yourself to the group giving concrete examples of using these strengths (not just “I think I am a creative person”). Each member of the group takes turns to do the same.

3. At your best

Please turn to the person on your left and ask them to describe a situation when they were at their personal best. What did it feel like? Ask them to describe the beginning, the middle and the end. They need to reflect on the personal strengths displayed throughout the event and pick them up from the strengths pack. Once they have finished, please switch the roles and do the same yourself.

4. Strengths nominations

Nominate one or more other strengths for other people in the group, giving concrete examples of when you saw them using this strength. This exercise is contagious; you will see the whole group nominating strengths for each other within minutes. It can be quite emotional as well.

5. Strengths sort

This exercise is best done on your own or one-to-one with a coach or a friend. Create five piles in front of you and place each of the cards from the pack into one of the piles.

- 1) **Not me** – a card that you see in front of you is neither your strength, nor your potential, competence or weakness. It simply does not apply to you.
- 1) **My strengths** are the strengths that you already are aware of and use frequently, which, in turn, enable you to be and perform at your best.
- 2) **My potentials** are strengths that you may not be able to express on a daily basis due to your environment and work situations. However, when you do display them you derive energy and satisfaction from exhibiting these attributes.
- 3) **My competences** are the behaviours that you have, over time, learned to do well, however you do not derive pleasure or energy from performing them. In fact, quite the opposite, they seem to suck the energy out of you, even when the results are perfectly satisfactory.
- 4) **My weaknesses** encompass the behaviours that you just can't do well and that seem to drain you. These attributes can create issues and need to be managed so that they do not hinder your success in life

Next, pile by pile decide what to do with the outcomes. Are you using your strengths well (see strengths-based work) or are you over-using them? How can you develop your potentials (see strengths stretch)? How can you minimise the use of your competences (if they drain you, they can't be that good for you)?

Finally, what would you like to do with each of your weaknesses? You can try to develop them (see activate your strengths), ignore them (if you can get away with it), or find creative ways to compensate for them (by using strengths partnering, for example).

6. Strengths stretch

You can try using your top strengths and potentials in a new way every day, for at least one week. Infusing your daily life with variety in how you express your strength has a lasting effect on increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for up to 6 months (Seligman, et al., 2005). You can see some suggestions for strengths stretch on the back of your strengths cards, or generate some new ones with your coach.

7. Make a beautiful day using your strengths

Try some other creative ideas around incorporating strengths into your daily live, for example, creating 'a beautiful day' or going on a 'strengths date'. To create a 'beautiful day', use your top strengths to create the perfect day (or even half day). Thus, if your top traits are love of learning and curiosity, your day might include a trip to a favourite museum or a few hours with a book that you've been meaning to read. If the capacity to love crowns your list, you might spend an evening with old

friends or summon family for a dinner. You can also take your 'strengths day' further and design a date with your significant other in such a way as to enable both of you to be within your strengths zone.

8. Strengths-based work

Examine how much you are able to exercise your top strengths in your current job. If you could start it all over, what job would you chose, taking your top strengths into account? For example, if your top strength is kindness, would you like a job with some form of mentoring element in it? If you are not using your strengths in your current job to the full, brainstorm together with your coach or your group/team how you can bring them in a little more, or how you can change your role somewhat to reflect your strengths better.

9. Activate your strengths

You can also choose five of your weaknesses (or lesser strengths) and try to cultivate them throughout the next seven days. Monitor the positive emotions, such as vitality, excitement, authenticity, etc., that you experience trying to put these lesser strengths to work. See some suggestions for activating activities at the back of the cards, or try to brainstorm some new ones with your coach or group.

10. Strengths partnering

This exercise is best done with your existing team. Introduce yourself to the group with both your strengths and some of your weaknesses that you prefer not to develop, if at all possible. Listen carefully to each other, examining how the strengths of one can compensate for the weaknesses of another, and vice versa. You might have to be creative in finding tangible solutions that could work for your team.