



3 STRENGTHS EXERCISES

FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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Welcome

It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of strengths exercises. During the past years, Positive Psychology has gained an increasing amount of attention, both from helping professionals and researchers. This attention has resulted in many valuable insights in what contributes to a happy, fulfilling life. In addition, positive psychology has given us many tools not only to flourish, but also to cope with difficult times in life.

Since 2013, our aim with PositivePsychology.com has been to contribute to this field by disseminating the science to psychology practitioners and educators alike.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you too to increase your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

<https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/>

All the best!

Seph Fontane Pennock
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.



Red and Green Activities

Strengths

Intervention

5-10 min/day

Client

No

According to Linley (2008), a strength is “a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic, energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance” (p. 9). In this definition, perhaps the most important characteristic of strengths is that they are energizing. Activities that rely on our strengths are enjoyable and feel as if our energy levels are being raised. While high performance can be the result of both strengths use and learned behavior, the experience of increased energy most often applies when using character strengths.

Moreover, the perceived amount of energy also provides information on weaknesses. According to Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener (2010), “Weaknesses are the things at which you both perform poorly and find de-energizing or draining. When weaknesses are used, they lead to feelings of negativity, disengagement, and lack of motivation” (p. 68). In this exercise, awareness of personal weaknesses and strengths is being increased by analyzing daily activities in terms of the energy levels that the client experiences.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to increase the client’s awareness of activities that rely on his/her strengths or weaknesses. An advantage of this exercise is that it relies on daily reflection to increase the client’s awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Rather than relying on general post hoc reflections, daily reflection is often more specific and accurate.



Advice

- To clarify the concept of energy, it is advisable to inform clients that we refer to mental energy here. Activities that allow clients to use their strengths may cause them to become physically tired but psychologically more energized than before.
- The current form of exercise requires clients to record activities for one week. However, the client may also decide to spread the reflections over a longer period. In any case, it is advisable to use multiple measurements because more measurements will provide more accurate and detailed information.
- Instead of using pen and paper, clients may also use an electronic device (e.g., a phone or tablet) to record their activities throughout the day.



References

- Linley, A. (2008). *Average to A+: Realising strengths in yourself and others*. CAPP Press
- Linley, A., Willars, J., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). *The strengths book*. CAPP Press.

Red and Green Activities

Instructions

Step 1: Introduction

A hallmark of strengths is “energy.” When we use our strengths, we feel energized and engaged. Activities that rely on our strengths are enjoyable and feel as if our energy levels are being raised.

In contrast, using weaknesses drains us. When we operate from our weaknesses, we feel negativity, disengagement, and lack of motivation. Activities that rely on our weaknesses feel as if our energy levels are being drained.

In this exercise, we call activities that rely on your strengths and provide you energy “green activities.” These are activities that:

- you genuinely enjoy doing
- make you feel energized
- make you forget the time
- you look forward to
- you can do well even under conditions of stress or fatigue

Activities that rely on your weaknesses and deplete your energy are referred to as “red activities.” These are activities that:

- you do not like doing
- make you feel depleted
- seem to pass very slowly
- you don’t look forward to
- require a lot of effort and self-control to do well

Step 2: Record Red and Green moments

During the upcoming week, record your “green” and “red” moments daily. Use the table in Appendix A. In the first column of this table, provide a brief description of the activity. In addition, indicate energy levels per activity by registering the extent to which the activity at hand enhanced energy or depleted energy. In the second column, put a sign next to each activity to indicate the change in energy level:

- required a lot of energy
- required some energy
- 0 did not require energy but did not give energy either
- + gave me positive energy
- ++ gave me a lot of positive energy

Step 3: Strengths reflection

After completing the reflections, closely examine your answers. Select the five activities that make you feel most energized and use the first column of the table in Appendix B, "My Top 5 Green Activities," to list them.

Next, use the second column of the table to indicate what strength(s) you may be using during each activity.

Step 4: Weakness reflection

Now do the same thing for the 5 activities that depleted your energy. Select the 5 activities that make you feel most depleted and use the first column of Appendix B, "My top 5 Red Activities," to list them.

Next, use the second column of the table to indicate, for each activity, which strengths you lack during this activity.

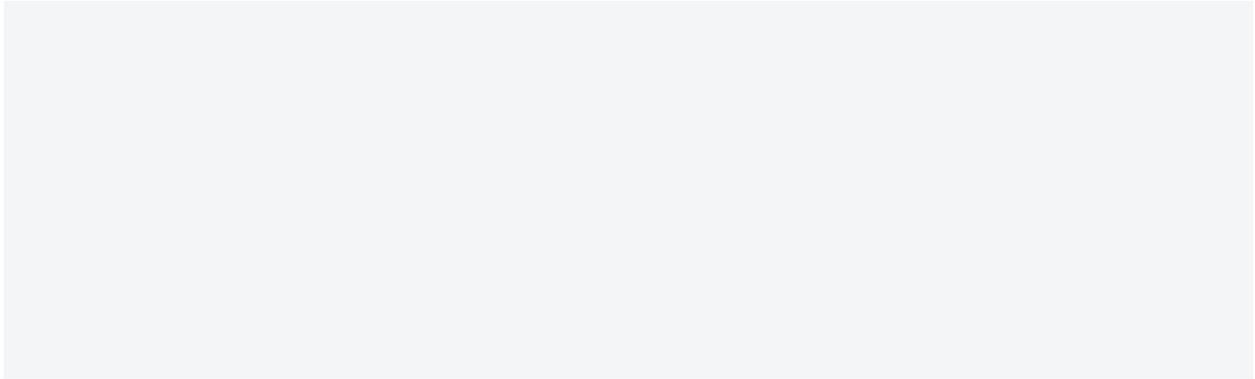
Step 5: Evaluation

What have you learned from this exercise?

How can you use your strengths more often?



How can you effectively deal with situations that deplete your energy? For instance, you can delegate your energy-draining areas to someone or reframe those tasks? Alternatively, you may marshal your strengths to help or build your energy ahead of time so that you have the baseline energy you need to get through an energy-draining task.



Appendix A: Daily Reflection Form

Date:

| Green Activities | | |
|------------------|---------------|------|
| Activity | Energy levels | Note |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

| Red Activities | | |
|----------------|---------------|------|
| Activity | Energy levels | Note |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |



Appendix B: My Top 5 Activities - Reflection

| My Top 5 Green Activities | |
|--|--|
| Activities that make me feel most energized: | Strength(s) that I am using during these activities: |
| 1. | |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |
| 4. | |
| 5. | |

| My Top 5 Red Activities | |
|---|--|
| Activities that make me feel most depleted: | Strength(s) that I am lacking during these activities: |
| 1. | |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |
| 4. | |
| 5. | |

You, At Your Best

Strengths

 Exercise

 45-60 min.

 Client

 Yes



Author

Ryan Niemiec (VIA Institute on Character, 2012).



Goal

The purpose of this exercise is to leverage the power of storytelling when working with clients to identify their unique strengths. By asking a client to draw upon an actual experience in his/her past, the process of strengths-identification becomes less daunting. In addition, by encouraging the client to relive an experience, he/she will in turn savour that memory of his/her best self.



Advice

- The “You, at Your Best” exercise is easiest to use as homework, for it is important that the client has some time to really think about and reflect upon an experience when he/she was at his/her best. It is also important that the client takes the time to pen his/her story as objectively as possible.
- Once the client has written his/her story, it may be beneficial to review the story together, first asking the client to highlight his/her strengths that are apparent to him/her. Then, if you see a strength that the client did not see in his/her own story, it may be beneficial to have a coaching conversation around that strength.

- This exercise may also be used in a group setting. A “Strengths Introduction” is a positive way to introduce members to each other when first forming a new group.
- It is important that being “at your best” is meaningful to your client, not an attempt to impress or conform to what others think.
- Note that “being at your best” is predominantly a subjective feeling/experience. Whether somebody actually delivers an outstanding performance is not of primary importance.



Suggested Readings

Biswas-Diener, R. & Dean, B. (2007). *Positive Psychology Coaching: Putting the Science of Happiness to Work for Your Clients*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Bryant, F. B., Smart, C. M., & King, S. P. (2005). Using the past to enhance the present: Boosting happiness through positive reminiscence. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 227–260.

Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press.

Whitworth, L., Kimsey-House, H., Sandhal, P. (1998). *Co-Active Coaching: New Skills for Coaching People toward Success in Work and Life*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black.

You, At Your Best

Instructions

Step 1: Find your story

Think of a specific time, recently or a while back, when you were at your very best. You may have been facing a particularly difficult situation, or you may have enhanced an already positive situation. You were expressing the qualities that make you feel the most authentic and energized. The experience made you feel proud and happy to be alive. Develop a story for that experience or for that moment in time.

Step 2: Write

Write your story as concretely as you can. Allow the facts of the story to demonstrate your strengths and values. What happened in the situation? What role did you play? What did you do that was particularly successful or useful to someone? What kind of feelings did you experience?

Step 3: Beginning, middle, end

Give the story a beginning, a middle, and try to close your story with a powerful ending. You might take the approach of reliving the positive experience in your mind, just as you were watching a movie of it. Write your story down.

Step 4: Read

After you have completed writing about your experience, go back and read your story. As you read through it, circle the words and/or phrases that you would consider to be related to your personal strengths.

Step 5: Find your strengths

Write down a list of your strengths that you identified as the result of reflecting upon a time when you were at your best.

Strengths

Exercise

10 min

Client

No

Strength Regulation

Our strengths reflect our capacity for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that facilitate the pursuit of valued outcomes (Linley & Harrington, 2007). The comprehensive study of strengths is a new initiative for psychological research and hallmark of the positive psychology movement. Examples of strengths include curiosity, kindness, fairness, perseverance, humility, and hope.

According to Niemiec (2014), strengths can be underused or overused, and this misuse leads to negative functioning and psychopathology. Niemiec suggested finding a balance between the underuse and overuse of one's strengths to achieve their optimal use (Niemiec, 2014). Optimal strength use is also referred to as the "golden mean," and one achieves the golden mean through strength regulation.

Our context and needs at a given moment in time influence our ability to use our strengths optimally. For example, your best friend asking you if you like her wedding dress moments before she walks down the aisle may require you to "dial down" your strength "honesty" and dial-up your strength "kindness." In this way, strength use can be compared to a volume control knob on a stereo, rather than an on/off switch. This exercise invites clients to examine times in their life where they misused a personal strength and what happened because of this. Clients are also asked to indicate visually, using the metaphor of a volume dial, the extent to which they misused the strength. Clients then examine a personal (or hypothetical) example of when they used this same strength optimally.



Author

This tool was created by Lucinda Poole (PsyD) and Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.).



Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients become aware of the consequences of underusing and overusing strengths and to examine the optimal use of strength. As such, this exercise offers a nice starting point for creating plans to increase or optimize strength use.



Advice

- Be aware that clients may have difficulty recalling a time in their life when they used their given strength optimally (Step 4). If this occurs, practitioners should help clients devise a hypothetical example of using this strength optimally in everyday life. It is important to keep the hypothetical example simple, realistic, and achievable, so as not to overwhelm the client or make him/her think that optimal use is unfeasible. The client can then use the insight gained from this hypothetical example to try to regulate his/her strength use to the optimal level in the future.
- Clients may benefit from taking home a few blank copies of this exercise so that they can continue to monitor the extent to which they are regulating their strengths in daily life.
- A prerequisite for this exercise is for the client to know at least one of their strengths. The following tools in the Toolkit can be used to identify client strengths: 30 Strengths-Spotting Questions, 5 Kinds of Strengths Questions, and The VIA Classification of Character Strengths & Virtues.



References

- Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Wood, A. M., Joseph, S., Harrington, S., Peterson, C., ... & Seligman, M. E. (2007). Character strengths in the United Kingdom: The VIA inventory of strengths. *Personality and individual differences*, 43(2), 341-351.
- Niemiec, R. M. (2014). *Mindfulness and character strengths: A practical guide to flourishing*. Hogrefe.

Strength Regulation

Introduction

The best way to play to our strengths in day-to-day life is to manage the way we use them mindfully because sometimes, overplaying or underplaying a strength can lead to problems. Take, for example, your best friend asking you whether you think her wedding dress is pretty moments before she walks down the aisle. At this moment, if you happened to dislike the dress, overplaying your strength “honesty” could have dire consequences. You (as well as your best friend) would benefit most from regulating your ‘honesty’ at this moment.

Like the volume knob on a stereo, playing to your strengths can be dialed up and dialed down for the best result in a given situation. In this exercise, you will choose a personal strength and explore the consequences of overplaying (i.e., dialing up) and underplaying (i.e., dialing down) this strength in a particular context. You will then explore what it would be like (and what the outcome would be) to use this strength in an optimal way (i.e., to set the volume at the perfect level).

Instructions

Step 1: Select a strength

First, select a personal strength for this exercise. You might like to choose one of your strengths that you wish to use more of or that you know you tend to underuse or overuse in your life (e.g., honesty, creativity, perseverance).

My strength:



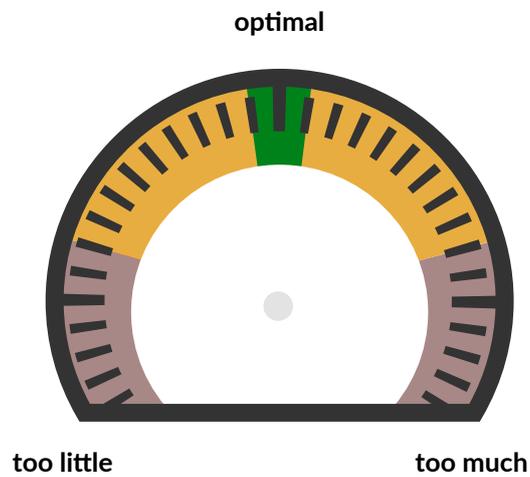
Step 2: Overplaying the strength

Can you think of an example when you overplayed this strength?

What did you do (i.e., what did overplaying this strength look like)?

What were the consequences?

In the illustration below, draw an arrow on the dial to indicate the extent to which you were overusing your strength (an example is shown in Appendix):



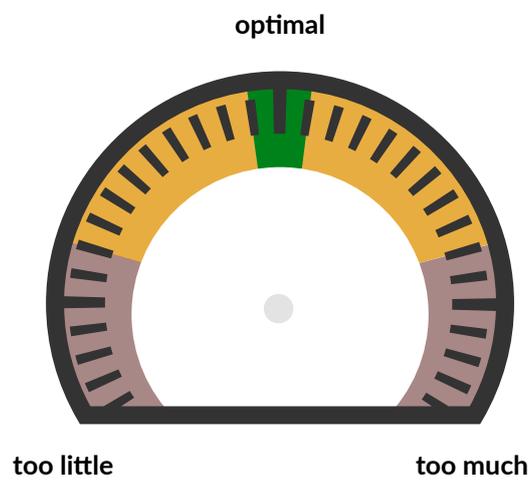
Step 3: Underplaying the strength

Can you think of an example when you underplayed this strength?

What did you do (i.e., what did underplaying this strength look like)?

What were the consequences?

Draw an arrow on the dial to indicate the extent to which you were underusing your strength in this situation:

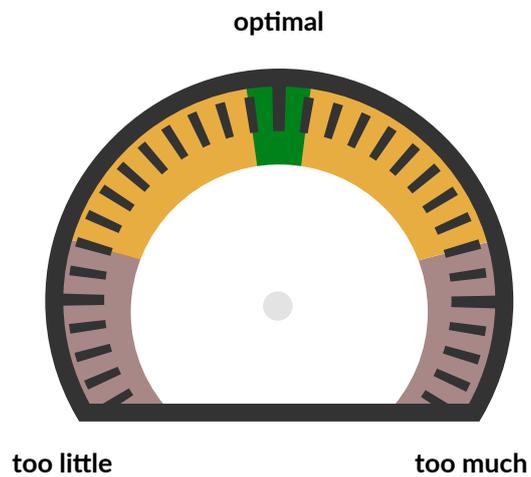


Step 4: Optimal use of the strength

Can you think of an example when you used this strength optimally? If not, what would the optimal use of this strength look like?

What was/would be the outcome?

Draw an arrow on the dial to indicate the extent to which you used or would use your strength optimally at this time:



Step 5: Reflection

1. Do you tend to misuse this strength in your day-to-day life? If so, is your tendency to overuse or underuse it?
2. What triggers you to misuse this strength?
3. What could you do to use this strength more optimally in the future?

Appendix: A graphic representation of strength overuse

