

strengths of character: head, heart & gut

character strengths have always been a major focus of research in the field of positive psychology (the study of how humans flourish). Character strengths are essential for successful functioning. They overlap with but are not the same as personality, attachment style, and ethical values. They are partly genetically transmitted – and probably selected for in evolution because of the adaptive advantages they promote. Character strengths are also transmitted by human society, through how we bring up our children, through education, & via role models & respected figures. They are supported by a variety of rituals & social practices, and are celebrated in films, stories, & other media. Excitingly, they are learnable – we can encourage character strengths to grow & balance better in ourselves, our children, & in others – contributing to flourishing all the way up from individuals & couples, through families & groups, to organisations & society at large.

the VIA classification of character strengths has been the most influential in this area of positive psychology – see the major 2004 textbook "*Character strengths & virtues: A classification and handbook*". VIA listed 24 character strengths identified through a 3 year process involving input from a group of over 50 researchers, reviews of historical sources & popular literature, and extensive discussion. These 24 strengths were themselves grouped under 6 higher order virtues – wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence – identified through study of the classic texts of eight cultural traditions: Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in South Asia, and Athenian philosophy, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in the West.

these strengths are valued: Fascinatingly when a group of nearly 600 mothers & mothers-to-be were asked what qualities they most wanted for their children – *love, kindness, integrity & social intelligence* came out top. Of the 24 character strengths overall, 14 were rated as more important than intelligence, 22 than good grades, and 23 as more important than attractiveness. Accumulating research provides a solid underpinning to this intuitive sense of character strengths' value. Higher levels of these strengths are associated with greater happiness and wellbeing in our lives, improved coping abilities, and deeper and more satisfying relationships (Ruch, 2016).

developments: It was always expected that further studies of character strengths would advance our knowledge and upgrade our classification. The main VIA-IS questionnaire, that is used to assess strengths, has now be completed by over three million people from every country in the world. The structure and pattern of answers has been explored in at least seven research studies. In 2015, Robert McGrath – senior research scientist at VIA – published a major paper identifying a three factor model in four samples involving over a million people. The model is:

inquisitiveness (head/learning) – *relationship to the world:*

curiosity, love of learning, appreciation of beauty, creativity, and perspective

caring (heart/humanity) – *relationship to others:*

capacity to love & be loved, kindness, fairness, forgiveness, teamwork, and gratitude

self-control (gut/doing) – *relationship to oneself:*

honesty, perseverance, judgment, prudence, and self-regulation

happiness, flourishing & adaptive functioning: As illustrated above, 16 of the 24 VIA character strengths fit fairly directly onto this three factor model. Overall happiness & flourishing are more strongly linked to "*strengths of the heart*" than to "*strengths of the head & gut*". **[PTO]**

However for adaptive, successful functioning in particular environments – for example, work, study or relationships – other “*situational*” strengths may come to the fore. In Harzer’s 2016 book chapter, she highlights that for successful close relationships *love, social intelligence & humour* seem of particular importance. In contrast, for autonomy *bravery, honesty & perspective* appear more central. Similarly different strengths may prove of particular help at different life stages (Martinez-Marti & Ruch, 2014). There’s research too suggesting some strengths are more helpful if well balanced with others – for example *kindness & honesty, love & social intelligence, and hope & gratitude* (Allan, 2015). Overall though, Harzer’s review highlights that, of all 24 character strengths, *zest, hope & curiosity* are most strongly associated with high levels of overall wellbeing.

Allan, B. (2015). “*Balance Among Character Strengths and Meaning in Life.*” *Journal of Happiness Studies* **16**(5): 1247-1261. Several scholars have suggested that character strengths are interdependent and should be in balance for a meaningful and fulfilling life, but this hypothesis has not been tested. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess if the degree of agreement between selected character strength pairs was positively related to meaning in life and if the level of difference between pairs was negatively associated with meaning in life. Using polynomial regression with response surface mapping, results indicated that honesty and kindness, love and social intelligence, and hope and gratitude had the strongest relations to meaning in life when both pairs were in agreement. When one character strength was higher than its pair, this predicted lower levels of meaning in life. The exception was bravery and fairness where the degree of discrepancy predicted meaning life when bravery was higher than fairness. These results suggest that balance among character strengths is important for meaning in life.

Harzer, C. (2016). “*The eudaimonics of human strengths: The relations between character strengths and well-being.*” *Handbook of eudaimonic wellbeing*. J. Vittersø. Berlin, Germany, Springer. The present chapter was aimed at presenting an overview of the findings on the relations between character strengths and well-being. In order to get a broader picture about these relations, not just eudaimonic well-being but also hedonic well-being was considered. Within the scope of the chapter at hand, focus was on subjective well-being as indicator of hedonic well-being as well as on psychological well-being as indicator of eudaimonic well-being. Following the definitions of these constructs, research findings on the correlations between character strengths and well-being (i.e., subjective well-being: positive affect, negative affect, and global life satisfaction; psychological well-being: environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, self-acceptance, and positive relationships) are presented. None of the character strengths systematically showed a correlation coefficient that indicated a detrimental relation between a strength and (indicators of) subjective and psychological well-being. On the contrary and as expected, character strengths seem to be important individual factors facilitating well-being. Across all indicators of well-being (i.e., subjective well-being and psychological well-being) *zest, hope, and curiosity* were the most substantial correlates among the character strengths. Moreover, in addition to *zest, hope, and curiosity*, further character strengths were relevant for specific indicators of subjective well-being and psychological well-being as well. In-depth interpretations of the most important relations are presented and discussed. Finally, concluding remarks and open questions are presented, and future directions for research are discussed.

Martinez-Marti, M. L. and W. Ruch (2014). “*Character strengths and well-being across the life span: data from a representative sample of German-speaking adults living in Switzerland.*” *Front Psychol* **5**: 1253. Character strengths are positive, morally valued traits of personality. This study aims at assessing the relationship between character strengths and subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, positive and negative affect) in a representative sample of German-speaking adults living in Switzerland (N = 945). We further test whether this relationship is consistent at different stages in life. Results showed that *hope, zest, love, social intelligence and perseverance* yielded the highest positive correlations with life satisfaction. *Hope, zest, humor, gratitude and love* presented the highest positive correlations with positive affect. *Hope, humor, zest, honesty, and open-mindedness* had the highest negative correlations with negative affect. When examining the relationship between strengths and well-being across age groups, in general, *hope, zest and humor* consistently yielded the highest correlations with well-being. Additionally, in the 27-36 years group, strengths that promote commitment and affiliation (i.e., *kindness and honesty*) were among the first five positions in the ranking of the relationship between strengths and well-being. In the 37-46 years group, in addition to *hope, zest and humor*, strengths that promote the maintenance of areas such as family and work (i.e., *love, leadership*) were among the first five positions in the ranking. Finally, in the 47-57 years group, in addition to *hope, zest and humor*, strengths that facilitate integration and a vital involvement with the environment (i.e., *gratitude, love of learning*) were among the first five positions in the ranking. This study partially supports previous findings with less representative samples on the association between character strengths and well-being, and sheds light on the relative importance of some strengths over others for well-being across the life span.

McGrath, R. E. (2015). “*Integrating psychological and cultural perspectives on virtue: The hierarchical structure of character strengths.*” *Journal of Positive Psychology* **10**: 407-424. The VIA Classification characterizes six culturally defined virtues as latent variables underlying 24 character strengths. Factor analyses of measures based on the Classification usually suggest 4–5 factors that do not correspond well to traditional lists of virtues. This article describes the identification of a three-virtue model across multiple measures of strengths in four samples encompassing 1,070,549 cases. The general pattern involved a first component representing good character that split into two components reflecting Goodness and Inquisitiveness. The former divided further into components reflecting Caring and Self-Control. This pattern recurred in all data sets. The model consisting of Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Control is proposed as a reliable latent structure for the VIA Classification strengths, an intuitive classification of traditional cultural virtues, and a framework for social efforts encouraging the development of virtue.

Ruch, W. (2016, June) “*Character strengths: Unresolved issues, new frontiers.*” Lecture at 8th European Conference on Positive Psychology, Angers, France.
