



Integration: SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

**“Knowing yourself is the beginning
of all wisdom.”** - Aristotle

We all have a unique set of strengths that impact how we think, feel, and behave. Scientists have codified these traits into [24 character strengths](#). To discover your distinctive strengths profile, take the [VIA Character Survey](#) and look at your top 10 results. Then choose 5-7 strengths that you consider the most important to who you are. These are your “signature strengths.” These strengths constitute core parts of you as an individual and are expressed across all domains in your life.

Your Integration for the week is to use these signature strengths in new ways. You can focus on one each day, or the same one all week. Research has shown that using your signature strengths in new ways boosts happiness and lowers depression. In addition, aligning your strengths with your job and life tasks can deepen your sense of meaning and fulfillment.¹

EXAMPLES

The examples below are all suggestions, not requirements. Try to lean into your strengths in a way that is most comfortable for you. In addition, you do not have to use the same strength or activity each day - do whatever works best for you!

- **Specific Strengths:**
 - *Gratitude:* Leave affirming sticky notes on the desks of friends or coworkers. Or in a physically distancing world, you can send brief texts of thanks to friends each morning on what they mean to you.
 - *Appreciation of beauty and excellence:* Take a picture of something beautiful each day, and then reflect at the end of each day and week on the beauty you noticed.
 - *Curiosity:* Try out a new food or restaurant, especially from a culture different than your own.
- **Spiritual Practices:** You can also pair matching [spiritual practices](#) for each strength.
 - For example, if curiosity or love of learning are signature strengths, try experimenting with lectio divina with various sacred texts (the Bible, Teresa of Avila, or scriptures from other traditions like the *Tao Te Ching*).
 - With gratitude, you can do the Examen.
 - For forgiveness, go to Confession or seek someone out and apologize to them.
- **Lists of Examples:** [340 Ways to Use VIA Character Strengths](#), the tips straight from the VIA [website](#), and the [handouts](#) for each strength for more examples.

¹ Niemiec, Ryan, *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners*, Ch. 2-3.

SIGNATURE STRENGTH TIPS

- **A Snapshot:** Your signature strengths are one aspect of self-awareness of you and do not do justice to your whole identity or experience as a complex human being.
 - The VIA survey is one of several methods we will use for self-awareness that ultimately combine to make a mosaic.
 - Character strengths are also dynamic interactions between being and doing. VIA uses a cyclical, three-part process of awareness-exploration-application for the integration of character strengths into everyday life.
- **Past Experience:** Think back to past times when you felt most engaged with your strengths and try to start those practices up again.
 - E.g., if appreciation of beauty and excellence is one of your top strengths, and you used to play music but haven't had the time lately, try playing and listening to more music, going to more live performances, or joining a low-stakes musical group with friends.
- **Journaling:** You can journal or set a verbal intention at the beginning of the day on how to use your strengths, and then review at the end of the day (e.g., in an Examen) how you did or how you missed opportunities to do so and/or resolve on how to use them tomorrow.
- **Synthesis:** *Ultimately, character strengths are more about synthesis than analysis.* Do not get caught up in endless loops of introspection - go out and use them!
- **Going Deeper:** Here are some other powerful [activities](#) based on your VIA strengths that you can try.

SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATIONS

- **A Common Language:** The VIA Character Strengths are a common language to describe what is best in human beings. Prior to the advent of the positive psychology movement² in the early 2000's, no such widely-used nomenclature existed.
- **Universal Validity:** The VIA survey has scientific, universal, and peer-reviewed [validity](#) that has been tested across many cultures. All their data is open to the public for perusal on their [website](#).
- **Core Psychological Needs:** Using your signature strengths correlates well with meeting your core psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness (purpose/relationships), and competency (mastery).³
- **Lower Strengths:** It is important to note that everyone possesses all 24 character strengths to varying degrees, and your lower ranked strengths are not weaknesses per se.
 - They may be traits that you have been avoiding or need to work on (e.g., if love or gratitude is at the bottom, perhaps you might struggle with expressing these emotions), or they might just indicate that you value the other traits more highly.
 - Moreover, while intuitively it might make sense to focus on your "weaknesses", the research has demonstrated weaker results compared to a focus on cultivating and using your signature strengths in new ways.
 - If you are interested in learning more, the VIA Institute has lots of good [research and tips](#) on the continuum of "overuse-underuse" of character strengths, as well as their connections with Aristotelian virtue ethics and the golden mean.

² This movement, led by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, aimed to codify and cultivate the positives of human life, rather than just diagnosing the negatives as psychology had mostly done up to that point.

³ Niemiec, Ch. 2.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” - 1 Corinthians 12:12

A NOTE ON OTHER STRENGTHS AND PERSONALITY SURVEYS

- **A Snapshot:** Take any strengths or personality survey with a grain of salt, as it cannot encompass the complex human being you are with a few traits based on a single, brief quiz. Moreover, since they rely on self-reporting data, they have a valuable but limited perspective that needs to be paired with other tools for self-awareness.⁴
- **Variability:** Moreover, your personality changes over time, especially during late adolescence and early adulthood (i.e., from eighteen to one’s late twenties). The correlation for a particular personality trait between someone’s teen years and their late life is usually between .2 or .3 out of 1.0. In general, people become more agreeable, conscientious, emotionally stable, less neurotic, and less open to new experiences as they age, though the degree varies and the only constant is change.⁵

Exercise Caution: Take any survey that is [not peer reviewed](#) (e.g., Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and StrengthsFinder) with a tablespoon of salt and skepticism.⁶

- **Other Reliable Surveys:** VIA will be the only self-reported survey that we will use, but feel free to try any of the others on your own.
 - Based on the best research available, we recommend the [Big 5](#) and the [HEXACO models](#).
 - Other respected and useful self-report surveys can be found at UPenn’s [Authentic Happiness website](#), UC Berkeley’s [Greater Good Science Center](#), as well as the [Emotional Intelligence Test](#) at *Psychology Today*.
 - Some people find a lot of meaning and use in the Enneagram, but the few studies on its validity and effectiveness show [mixed](#)⁷ [results](#).⁸

“God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ.”

- 1 Peter 4:10-11

⁴ Other methods that we use include time tracking (time and phone use log), surveys of those close to you (the Clearness Committee), and periodic journal reflections (the Examen).

⁵ Roberts, Brent W., et al., “Patterns of Mean-Level Change in Personality Traits across the Life Course: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies”, *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 132, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1–25. Study originally found in Epstein, David J., *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, Riverhead Books, 2019, pg. 157.

⁶ For more information, see Grant, Adam, “[Goodbye to MBTI, the Fad That Won’t Die](#)”, *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 18 Sept. 2013.

⁷ Godin, Jeanne, “[The effect of the Enneagram on psychological well-being and unconditional self-acceptance of young adults](#)” (2010), Graduate Theses and Dissertations, 11816.

⁸ Daniels, David, et al., “[Advancing Ego Development in Adulthood Through Study of the Enneagram System of Personality](#)”, *Journal of Adult Development*, Springer Open Choice, 30 Jan. 2018.