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Character Strengths and Positive Psychology: On the Horizon in Family Therapy



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I was first introduced to the field of positive psychology at the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in 2005 during a series of talks presented by Martin Seligman, Ph.D. Over the next five years I immersed myself in the literature, attended training, and began to apply the principles of positive psychology to my life, practice, and work with families. I am very pleased to bring this article and resource to the field of family psychology and family therapy.

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Positive psychology is the scientific study of what is best and strongest in individuals, families, and society. The best positive psychology is that which integrates with, complements, or improves traditional psychology. Positive psychology has exploded in the last decade with hundreds of scholarly articles, dozens of research groups around the world, hundreds of university courses, and hundreds of millions in grant dollars devoted to its pursuits. Perhaps the biggest initiative to emerge from this burgeoning science is the rigorous VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues that arose from years of historical analysis and study by 55 scientists. The result was a comprehensive typology of six virtues—wisdom, courage, humanity,

justice, temperance, and transcendence—and 24 corresponding strengths of character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Figure 1 outlines what is commonly referred to as the “6 and 24,” referring to the six virtues and 24 strengths. These have been determined to be universal across cultures, nations, and belief systems, and readily found in some of the most remote areas on the planet (Biswas-Diener, 2006). The VIA Survey a free measurement instrument designed to assess the 24 character strengths has been taken by well over a million people and has been used in over 150 scientific articles. Many practitioners find that working with a client’s character strengths is one of the most exciting areas in the field.

Sheridan and Burt (2009)

argue for a family-centered positive psychology that focuses on problem-prevention and is strengths-based, the latter of which builds on the family’s existing competencies and promotes the family’s motivation toward growth. This approach emphasizes “collaborating with” rather than “treating” families. The idea of working with strengths is not a new concept to most family therapists, however, working with a system of strengths and a validated assessment tool in a more systematic way brings a new dimension to most practices.

While character strength applications are a more recent area of study, here are a few examples of applications for the family therapist to consider.

First, consider your general

approach. Keeping a general system in mind for working with character strengths is a good idea. Character strengths practice has three overarching steps – aware, explore, and apply (Niemiec, 2009). The therapist first helps the individual, family, or group become *more* aware of their existing character strengths, and follows this with questions helping the client explore when they used strengths at the best of times

and the worst of times and how they might tap into strengths to create a best possible future. Exploration is followed by the application of an action plan or goal targeted to improve a particular strength.

Encourage each family member to learn one another's signature strengths. These are those strengths that are the core of who that individual is, are readily identified by other family members, and feel natural and energizing when expressed. One family member might have signature strengths of curiosity, creativity, kindness, and perseverance, while another might be characteristically grateful, hopeful, prudent, and loving. Each family member should memorize the strengths of one another. (A validated survey, the VIA Youth Survey, is available for kids ages 10-17).

Set up mutual validation systems. Knowing one another's signature strengths is not enough; families should regularly look for character strengths in any situation and then verbally label the strengths as they see them (e.g., "You were a real *team*-player today, Bobby," "Mom, I want to thank you for being so *forgiving* to me over the last few weeks," or "Susan, it is clear that you are very *fair* in how you treat your classmates.") This process is naturally referred to as strengths spotting (Linley, 2008). The family therapist can then help the family set up reminder systems and plans for implementing and maintaining these processes.

Teach active-constructive responding. Family members should be reminded that research shows it is beneficial to talk about positive events that occur, as this brings additional positive emotion and well-being to the speaker beyond the event itself; moreover, the benefits enhance further if the family member who is the listener is active, engaged, and positive in their response (Gable et al., 2004). Family therapists can help families practice active-constructive responding in role-plays and should encourage family members to seek one another out when good things occur to them. Researcher

“Encourage each family member to learn one another's signature strengths. These are those strengths that are the core of who that individual is. . .”

Shelly Gable has noted that the character strengths involved in this process are love, social intelligence, and self-regulation.

Look to exemplars in movies. Turning to movies for role models of healthy families, good communication, or character strength portrayals can add a new perspective for learning and growing together (see Niemiec & Wedding, 2008). A recent film displaying

several healthy family decisions and interactions is *The Blind Side* (2009). Movies engender opportunities for families to talk about important life issues, witness healthy and unhealthy communication patterns, exhibit what is possible, and show exemplars of courage, wisdom, and hope in action.

To recommend the VIA Survey to clients or to take it yourself go to www.viasurvey.org.■

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Classification of 6 Virtues and 24 Strengths ⁽¹⁾

Wisdom and knowledge

Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

- Creativity: Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
- Curiosity: Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience
- Open-mindedness: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides
- Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
- Perspective: Being able to provide wise counsel to others

Courage

Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

- Authenticity: Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
- Bravery: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
- Persistence: Finishing what one starts
- Zest: Approaching life with excitement and energy

Humanity

Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others

- Kindness: Doing favors and good deeds for others
- Love: Valuing close relations with others
- Social intelligence: Being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others

Justice

Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

- Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice
- Leadership: Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
- Teamwork: Working well as member of a group or team

Temperance

Strengths that protect against excess

- Forgiveness: Forgiving those who have done wrong
- Modesty: Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves
- Prudence: Being careful about one’s choices; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
- Self-regulation: Regulating what one feels and does

Transcendence

Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

- Appreciation of beauty and excellence: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
- Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
- Hope: Expecting the best and working to achieve it
- Humor: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people
- Religiousness: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

⁽¹⁾ Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.