On Heartfulness

Ryan M. Niemiec

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that following the description of a universal classification of character strengths, it is necessary to frame an intentional direction for its application. I refer to this framing of character strengths use as heartfulness. I describe this concept and offer practical ways to apply heartfulness both intrapersonally and interpersonally, catalyzed by mindfulness.

Introduction

In what is arguably the widest reaching and most impactful accomplishment of positive psychology to date, Chris Peterson, Martin Seligman, and 55 scientists, embarked on an ambitious, 3-year project to review and research those characteristics that are best within human beings. They discovered 24 character strengths, found universally across cultures, nations, and belief systems, which nested 6 overarching virtues. These character strengths describe what is best in us. They are a common language, a consensual nomenclature. The scientists were always clear that this work is descriptive – describing what is known about these ingredients of flourishing, these pathways to virtues, these elements of the good life, but not prescriptive – prescribing what individuals should do or how they must utilize their strengths.

The intention was to build the foundation for this new character science, and in a bit over a decade, hundreds of peer-review publications emerged. The framework, while imperfect, sits on solid ground. While some best practices with character strengths have emerged and practitioners in business, education, coaching, and psychology have been eager to apply these concepts, it’s important to consider an overarching frame for the intention and direction of these applications.

I can sum up the application of character strengths in one word: heartfulness.

When we use the word “heart” we tend to be referring to something that is meaningful, virtuous, and positive. We are serious and intentional. It’s a metaphor for positive action. Consider these everyday phrases we commonly use:

- To a friend making a difficult decision, we say: “follow your heart” or “what does your heart tell you?”
- When something is really meaningful and important, we say “I have my heart set on it.”
- When we’re feeling compassion for someone who is hurting, we say “my heart goes out to you.”
- When someone has made a mistake but their actions were well-intended, we say “your heart was in the right place.”
- When someone has acted in an exemplary, virtuous way, we say “they have a heart of gold.”

**Heartfulness**

Heartfulness means to take meaningful action with our character strengths to promote common goodness. It moves the conversation from description of character to beneficial action. Unlike neutral traits of personality such as extraversion and introversion, which are not inherently positive or negative, character strengths are decidedly north of neutral. It is usually good to act kindly or bravely or prudently – not always (because of character strengths misuse and overuse) but usually. Character strengths are positive and fulfilling and described as morally valued. These 24 character strengths are a “language of the heart” – they motivate human beings to improve, to connect, to assist, and to be good.

This “goodness potential” applies to all 24 strengths, even for those strengths described as cognitively based (the wisdom and knowledge category), one cannot evade the heart component when it comes to actually expressing them. One example comes from a counselor and professor who enjoyed mentoring, counseling, and supervising university students. He was upset to discover his top five character strengths on the VIA Survey were all in the wisdom virtue (i.e., creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective) and thus mind-oriented. But when he spoke about the action of these strengths – despite each having a strong “thinking” component – he noted he used these strengths to connect with feelings, to empathize with his clients and students, and to orient himself toward a “helping” approach. In other words, it is the heart that mattered to him, and the meaningful expression of these character strengths was heart-based.

**The Catalytic Effect of Mindfulness**

Mindfulness catalyzes heartfulness. Mindfulness sets up heartful action and differs in that heartfulness can be best viewed as a result of mindfulness practice. The explosion of research on mindfulness has led scientists to come to a consensus on what mindfulness is – it’s the taking control of our attention (self-regulation) with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and acceptance. When we are mindful, we are observing ourselves and others. Thus, mindfulness is mostly about learning to “just be.” As being is cultivated, insights emerge and we are called to act. Heartfulness, on the other hand, involves doing, taking over where mindfulness leaves off.

The story of the two monks exemplifies how mindful awareness can catalyze heartfulness.

Two virtuous, solitary monks walk together in silence, making their way from their monastery to the closest nearby store, several miles away down a windy dirt path. After walking a few miles, the monks come upon a babbling brook. On the other side is a woman carrying a large bag and appearing hesitant and fearful at the brook’s edge.
The younger monk, recalling his vow of silence and commitment to have minimal contact with the outside world, swiftly crosses the brook and passes by the woman averting his eyes from her, acting as if she does not exist.

The older monk follows the young monk across the brook. Upon reaching the other side, he stops, turns to the woman and asks if he can help her. He lifts the woman and carries her across the brook. He and the young monk then continue their journey.

About a mile down the road, the young monk stops and turns to the older monk, angrily exclaiming, “How could you pick up that woman? I can’t believe you disregarded our vows!”

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“Brother,” said the elder monk, “I let go of that woman back at the brook and you are still carrying her with you.”

Heartful action might be intrapersonal – improving oneself to be a better citizen, a more centered parent, a more focused worker – or it might be interpersonal – helping others, improving the community. In this story, the elder monk is mindful of his surroundings and the reality of another person who is struggling, while being present to the wider perspective that there is a tension between his solemn vows and the apparent needs of another person. This awareness calls him to action – he acts with heartfulness using a variety of character strengths. Interpersonally, he uses kindness, humility, and bravery in challenging himself to help the woman and compassionately communicate with his brother, while intrapersonally, he is forgiving to himself as he lets go of the situation and releases any self-judgment back at the brook.

In our daily life, we too face increasingly complex and challenging circumstances. Often, these are ethical and moral dilemmas. Other times, we are trapped in confusion. These are, in reality, perfect opportunities. They are opportunities for us to pause and mindfully reconnect with our breath – our present moment reality. This mindful attention grounds us, rooting us into stronger footing. It also gives us perspective – our vision widens and we reconnect with “what matters most” in our current situation. This is the foundation for heartful action. Our heartfulness can then explode on the scene. Our character strengths and virtues can be unleashed. We don’t just think and feel from strength. We act from strength – for the betterment of others. This is the heartful way.

Getting Practical - Interpersonal

When facing an interpersonal challenge, conflict, hot emotion, or problem, tap into mindfulness followed by heartfulness:

- **Step 1:** Pause. Reconnect with your breath and your whole present moment – both your inner landscape and the exterior world.

- **Step 2:** Ask yourself: What matters most in this situation? How might I contribute to the common good right now?
Step 3: Unleash your character strengths. Take action.

*Turning Character Strengths Inward*

The intrapersonal application of heartfulness, on the surface, is less obvious. Consider this story: Over a decade ago, I was counseling a young woman with chronic pain. She was a hardworking, single woman in her early 30s who suffered from the anxiety, depression, and catastrophizing thinking that compounds the struggles of many people with chronic pain. She was very judgmental of herself—her own worst critic—but not in a motivational/improvement kind of way. Instead, she was self-critical in a mean way that lowered her self-esteem and riddled her with worry and stress.

The behavioral medicine plan I worked with her on involved teaching her methods of self-regulation, including mindfulness meditation. I asked her to practice mindfulness daily in between our meetings. As she became more mindful of her wandering mind, she realized many of her thoughts had to do with failure. We labeled these thoughts as moments of “judging mind.” During mindfulness, she learned to use her character strengths of curiosity and critical thinking to objectively observe this “judging mind” as soon as it popped up. She learned to say—“Oh, there you are judging mind” or “That mean thought of ‘I’m worthless’ is just a thought. That’s part of my judging mind.” Then she’d let it go, and return to her present moment, feeling a bit more empowered.

After building in this mindfulness practice, I taught her loving-kindness practice, which involves attending to the love/kindness within yourself and consciously enhancing the positive feelings through loving imagery and phrases. After practicing this for a couple months, she returned to meet with me. I asked her how her loving-kindness practice was going. Her eyes widened and she noted with excitement: “I learned something important as I practiced—what I’ve been neglecting in my life is I can be my own best friend.”

She was, for the first time, directing character strengths inward. In starting to become a friend to herself, she was applying her character strengths intrapersonally. She saw that she was a person of value, that it was important to be kind to herself, and that she could be grateful for who she was. Her perspective was widening. She had come a long way in caring for her body over the recent months and managing her chronic pain.

No one would argue with the idea that the strengths of love and kindness build relationships, but, turning love and kindness inwardly can be equally powerful. These strengths build our relationship with ourselves, helping us to befriend ourselves. Researchers have only recently begun to unpack this idea that dates back to Buddhism 2,600 years ago—strengths can and should be directed to ourselves and it’s anything but selfish to do so because it makes us stronger and hence more available and present to others. Research on love_kindness turned inward has revealed improvements in anxiety, social support, life purpose, mindfulness, and even physical symptoms. Long-term effects have been shown. Even brief meditation practice on love can increase positive feelings and social connection to others.
**Getting Practical - Intrapersonal**

Intrapersonal heartfulness is often called loving-kindness practice. To practice, follow these steps:

1. Start with mindful breathing.
2. Image a situation in which you felt loved by someone. Take time to feel the emotion of love in that moment.
3. Mentally state and image these phrases:
   - May I be filled with loving-kindness.
   - May I be safe from inner and outer danger.
   - May I be well in body and mind.
   - May I be at ease and happy.

If you are looking for guidance in terms of how much time for each of the 3 steps above, consider something like 3 minutes for each of the 3 phases. After you practice a few times, increase to 5 minutes per phase.

**Conclusion**

Heartfulness involves the meaningful application of character strengths to bring benefit to the world. Mindfulness catalyzes heartfulness. When we are mindful, we are present to ourselves and others. When we are heartful, we are expressing our best strengths within ourselves or directly to others. Mindfulness and heartfulness create the ultimate virtuous circle that synergizes good within us and around us.

**References**


