

# Character strengths interventions: A field guide for practitioners.

by Ryan M. Niemiec

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Positive psychology is rooted in the idea that human beings want to thrive and engage in things that enrich their experiences and cultivate a meaningful life. In his 2014 book *Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A Practical Guide to Flourishing*, author Ryan M. Niemiec discusses how practicing mindfulness can help individuals identify, understand, and apply their character strengths and create a pathway to a fulfilling life. He takes readers through Drs. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman's program Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP), relays inspiring success stories about finding meaning via MBSP, provides useful handouts to guide readers through MBSP, and gives tips for practitioners such as how to apply MBSP to different settings and situations.

*Mindfulness and Character Traits* received praise for its revolutionary perspective. It reads like a self-help book, perfect for individuals who want to learn how to personally achieve mindfulness and discover their character strengths; however, it wasn't written with the goal of teaching practitioners how to implement MBSP in their practice with their clients. With that in mind, Niemiec (2018) wrote his recently published book, *Character Strength Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners* for practitioners. Additionally, he focuses more on the core of positive psychology, character strengths and less on how to achieve mindfulness. He educates the reader on the foundations of character strength interventions, relays evidence to support his claims about the usefulness of character strength interventions, and explains countless interventions step-by-step providing practitioners with a useful handbook.

Character strength interventions are about getting clients in touch with their strengths and finding ways to utilize those strengths to cultivate meaning and enrich their lives. Interventions specifically focus on character strengths, which Niemiec defines as "positive traits/capacities that are personally fulfilling, do not diminish others, ubiquitous and valued across cultures, and aligned with numerous positive outcomes for oneself and others" (2). As a baseline, before getting into specific interventions he outlines seven core concepts of the science of character. First, there are 24-character strengths that make up a "common language that describe what is best in human beings" (2). Second, character strengths are multidimensional therefore they are not discrete; rather, they exist on a continuum. For example, the character strength of creativity is not such that an individual is either creative or not, but rather indicates how much, to a certain degree, this person employ creativity in his/her day-to-day life. Additionally, each character strength is multidimensional so, for example, kindness involves a degree of compassion, generosity, altruism, etc. Third, character strengths will be expressed differently depending on the circumstances and are therefore "shaped by the context" (7). Culture contributes to context and can strongly

determine how character strengths are expressed. Fourth, people have many character strengths that are expressed in different degrees and different combinations. Fifth, all character strengths matter, and sixth, all character strengths can be developed. Finally, it is one thing to be in touch with our strengths and another to actively use those strengths but it takes both to achieve positive outcomes.

Niemiec explains the 24-character strengths and their dimensions. He shows practitioners via research-based interventions how to help clients get in touch with their own strengths and utilize their strengths to achieve positive outcomes. Niemiec presents the interventions organized into different categories based on how they help the client progress. The first category is ways to help the client become aware of his/her strengths. Niemiec suggests the first step is to take the VIA survey which assesses an individual's 24-character strengths. Then practitioners can conduct an intervention to help clients get in touch with their strengths. For example, they may have their clients identify one of their top character strengths that they value and write about why the character strength is important and meaningful in their life. This intervention is said to help clients understand and acknowledge their strengths and appreciate the importance of them in their life. Niemiec claims that this intervention supports self-affirmation theory and cites research that shows that value affirming exercises help increase self-clarity, improve health, education, and relationship outcomes, and protect against various stressors. The second category is ways to help clients use their strengths. For example, a practitioner may ask clients to choose one of their character strengths and find a new way to use that strength each day for one week. One study showed that participants who were assigned to use their strengths in new ways "experienced elevations in happiness and decreases in depression for 6 months" (172). Other categories include: finding meaning in their strengths and engaging with them; forming/enhancing/or restoring positive relationships; managing problems/developing resilience; setting goals and achieving goals; and boosting well-being via mindfulness. Additionally, interventions that focus on specific character traits like gratitude are included.

Niemiec offers 12 additional activities that better lend themselves to emerging ideas and theories. For example, one exercise asks clients to name one strength, list three healthy thoughts they have when experiencing that strength, name the emotion or feeling they have when they are expressing that strength and identify the sensations in their body that accompany that feeling, then determine what that strength looks like in action (240). Other exercises focus on helping clients get rid of bad habits, master strengths, and spot secret strengths they may not have known they had. Additionally, Niemiec includes troubleshooting, multiple appendices including one that explains the VIA classification of character strengths, and references to papers said to be relevant to character strengths interventions. Niemiec astutely points out that we still have much to learn.

*Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners* has received praise for its ability to connect science and practice by bringing research to life in practical ways. This book is a good tool for clinicians looking to deepen their knowledge, ground it in research, and build a repertoire of useful techniques to help clients via a character strengths approach. *Character Strengths Interventions* is a must read for clinicians who believe in using strengths-based interventions or who are interested in learning more about positive psychology in practice.

**BIOGRAPHY**

**Ryan M. Niemic** is Education Director of the VIA Institute on Character. He is the author of several other books, an award-winning psychologist, certified coach, international workshop leader, and is an adjunct professor/visiting lecturer at several universities.

**Monica Spafford** studies applied psychology at New York University and is set to graduate in May of 2018. She is a Research Assistant for the INSIGHTS into Children's Temperament research study at NYU's Institute of Human Development and Social Change testing the efficacy of the INSIGHTS program, an evidence-based intervention that works to support children's social-emotional development and academic learning. In addition to working for the International Journal of Psychology, she writes reviews for Somatic Psychotherapy Today. Email: mgs416@nyu.edu