

How do you manage to be and/or feel “your best” during stressful and uncertain times?







## What are “Signature Strengths?”

**Signature strengths** refer to the character strengths that are most essential to who we are.<sup>1</sup> Each individual has their own distinct profile and unique combination of strengths that make us, well, us! Strengths are not fixed traits across settings and time, but rather strengths are malleable, subject to growth, and context specific.<sup>2</sup> Some strengths may serve us frequently in our personal lives, such as humor or social intelligence, while others may be more prominent professionally, such as teamwork or judgment. We have ‘higher strengths’ - those that are the most aligned with an authentic sense of self - and ‘lower strengths’ - which maybe come less naturally but are nonetheless present and can be cultivated. ‘Lower strengths’ are not necessarily weaknesses. Additionally, these characteristics are not assigned a value judgment. It’s also important to consider that strengths can have maladaptive consequences as well, when in excess or with inappropriate settings. Ultimately, the goal is to find a balance in which you can use your top strengths to be your best, most authentic self, and thrive in your environment.

The **VIA Classification** was developed by positive psychology researchers as a means to provide a common language for character strengths and virtues that could be used across all nations and belief systems on the planet. The classification contains six virtues—*wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence* — which correspond with 24 character strengths, or pathways to achieving those virtues, which are summarized in the table.

In replicated randomized placebo-controlled trials, participants asked to **identify and use a top personal strength in a new way every day for 1 week** were found to have increased happiness and decreased depression up to 6 months later.<sup>3</sup>

Today, we will learn more about each strength, identify the strengths that we most see in ourselves, and spot strengths in our classmates. Deliberately using our top strengths during a stressful period of our lives is one way to reinforce a sense of mastery, find greater meaning, and experience more joy in our day-to-day lives.

<b>WISDOM</b>	<b>CREATIVITY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Originality</li> <li>Adaptive</li> <li>Ingenuity</li> </ul>	<b>CURIOSITY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interest</li> <li>Novelty-Seeking</li> <li>Exploration</li> <li>Openness</li> </ul>	<b>JUDGMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critical Thinking</li> <li>Thinking Things Through</li> <li>Open-mindedness</li> </ul>	<b>LOVE OF LEARNING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mastering New Skills &amp; Topics</li> <li>Systematically Adding to Knowledge</li> </ul>	<b>PERSPECTIVE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wisdom</li> <li>Providing Wise Counsel</li> <li>Taking the Big Picture View</li> </ul>
<b>COURAGE</b>	<b>BRAVERY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Valor</li> <li>Not Shrinking from Fear</li> <li>Speaking Up for What's Right</li> </ul>	<b>PERSEVERANCE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persistence</li> <li>Industry</li> <li>Finishing What One Starts</li> </ul>	<b>HONESTY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Authenticity</li> <li>Integrity</li> </ul>	<b>ZEST</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vitality</li> <li>Enthusiasm</li> <li>Vigor</li> <li>Energy</li> <li>Feeling Alive</li> </ul>	
<b>HUMANITY</b>	<b>LOVE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both Loving and Being Loved</li> <li>Valuing Close Relations with Others</li> </ul>	<b>KINDNESS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generosity</li> <li>Nurturance</li> <li>Care &amp; Compassion</li> <li>Altruism</li> <li>"Niceness"</li> </ul>			<b>SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aware of the Motives/Feelings of Self/Others</li> <li>Knowing what Makes Other People Tick</li> </ul>
<b>JUSTICE</b>	<b>TEAMWORK</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Citizenship</li> <li>Social Responsibility</li> <li>Loyalty</li> </ul>			<b>FAIRNESS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Just</li> <li>Not Letting Feelings Bias Decisions About Others</li> </ul>	<b>LEADERSHIP</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizing Group Activities</li> <li>Encouraging a Group to Get Things Done</li> </ul>
<b>TEMPERANCE</b>		<b>FORGIVENESS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mercy</li> <li>Accepting Others' Shortcomings</li> <li>Giving People a Second Chance</li> </ul>	<b>HUMILITY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Modesty</li> <li>Letting One's Accomplishments Speak for Themselves</li> </ul>	<b>PRUDENCE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Careful</li> <li>Cautious</li> <li>Not Taking Undue Risks</li> </ul>	<b>SELF-REGULATION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-Control</li> <li>Disciplined</li> <li>Managing Impulses &amp; Emotions</li> </ul>
<b>TRANSCENDENCE</b>	<b>APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY &amp; EXCELLENCE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awe</li> <li>Wonder</li> <li>Elevation</li> </ul>	<b>GRATITUDE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thankful for the Good</li> <li>Expressing Thanks</li> <li>Feeling Blessed</li> </ul>	<b>HOPE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Optimism</li> <li>Future-Mindedness</li> <li>Future Orientation</li> </ul>	<b>HUMOR</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Playfulness</li> <li>Bringing Smiles to Others</li> <li>Lighthearted</li> </ul>	<b>SPIRITUALITY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religiousness</li> <li>Faith</li> <li>Purpose</li> <li>Meaning</li> </ul>

©Copyright 2004-2014, VIA Institute on Character

<sup>1</sup> Peterson, C. & Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues a handbook and classification*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press and Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Biswas-Diener, R., Kashdan, T. B., & Minhas, G. (2011). A dynamic approach to psychological strength development and intervention. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(2), 106-118.

<sup>3</sup> Seligman ME, Steen TA, Park N, et al. Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions. *Am Psychol*. 2005; 60:410–421.

Briefly read the description of strengths below. As you read, consider which traits you identify with and which traits you see in others.

[1] Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	You appreciate <i>beauty, excellence or skilled performance</i> in all domains of life, from everyday experience, to nature to art, to math or science.
[2] Bravery	You are a <i>courageous person</i> who does not shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty or pain. You <i>speak up for what is right</i> even if there is opposition. You act on your convictions.
[3] Creativity	You are <i>original and adaptive</i> . Thinking of new ways to do things is a critical part of who you are. You are never content with doing something the conventional way if a better way is possible.
[4] Curiosity	You are <i>curious about everything</i> . You always <i>ask questions</i> and you find all subjects and topics fascinating. You like exploration and discovery, with a strong desire to increase personal knowledge.
[5] Fairness	<i>Treating all people fairly</i> is one of your abiding principles. You do not let your personal feelings bias your decisions about other people. You give everyone a chance.
[6] Forgiveness	You <i>forgive</i> those who have done you wrong. You always <i>give people a second chance</i> . Your guiding principle is <i>mercy</i> and not revenge.
[7] Gratitude	You are <i>aware of good things</i> that happen to you and you never take them for granted. Your friends and family members know that you are a grateful person because you always <i>take time to care for others</i> .
[8] Honesty	You are an <i>honest</i> person, not only telling the truth, but really living your life in a <i>genuine and authentic way</i> . You are <i>down to earth</i> and without pretense. You are a “real” person.
[9] Hope	You expect the <i>best in the future</i> and you work to achieve it. You believe that the future is something you can control.
[10] Humor	You like to <i>laugh and tease</i> . <i>Bringing smiles</i> to other people is important to you. You try to <i>see the light of</i> all situations.
[11] Perseverance	You work hard to <i>finish what you start</i> . No matter the project, you “get it out the door” in a timely fashion. You do not get distracted when you do work and you take <i>satisfaction in completing tasks</i> .
[12] Judgment	Thinking things through and examining them from all sides are important aspects of who you are. You <i>rely on solid evidence</i> to make decisions and <i>do not jump to conclusions</i> . You are able to <i>consider opposing viewpoints</i> to fairly evaluate your views or ideas.
[13] Kindness	You are <i>kind and generous to others</i> , and you are never too busy to do a favor. You <i>enjoy doing good deeds for others</i> , even if you do not know them well.
[14] Leadership	You excel at tasks of <i>leadership: motivating others to perform their best</i> and preserving harmony in a group setting. You do a good job <i>seeing the big picture, organizing activities and giving direction</i> .
[15] Love	You value <i>close relationships</i> with others, particularly those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated. The people to whom you feel most close are the same people who feel most close to you.
[16] Love of Learning	You love <i>learning new things</i> , whether in a class or on your own. You have always loved school, reading and museums - anywhere and everywhere is an <i>opportunity to learn</i> .
[17] Humility	You <i>do not seek the spotlight</i> , preferring to let your accomplishments speak for themselves. You do not regard yourself as specials and others recognize and value your <i>modesty</i> .
[18] Perspective	Although you may not think of yourself as wise, your friends hold this view of you. They value your perspective and <i>turn to you for advice</i> . You have a way of seeing the world that is <i>multidimensional</i> .
[19] Prudence	You are a <i>careful</i> person and your choices are consistently prudent ones. You do not say or do things that you might later regret.
[20] Self-Regulation	You <i>self-consciously regulate</i> what you feel and what you do. You are a <i>disciplined</i> person. You are <i>in control</i> of your appetites and your emotions, not vice versa.
[21] Social Intelligence	You are <i>aware of the motives and feelings of other people</i> . You know what to do to fit into different social situations and you know what to do to <i>put others at ease</i> .
[22] Spirituality	You have strong and coherent beliefs about the <i>higher purpose and meaning of the universe</i> . You know where you fit in the larger scheme. Your beliefs shape your actions and are a source of comfort to you.
[23] Teamwork	You excel as a <i>member of a group</i> . You are a <i>loyal and dedicated teammate</i> , you always do your share and you work hard for the success of the group.
[24] Zest	Regardless of what you do, you approach it with <i>excitement and energy</i> . For you, life is an <i>adventure</i> . These strengths manifest both inwardly or outwardly, and have the strongest ties to satisfaction.

Adapted from Simon A, *Positive Psychology for Residents*

Reflecting on the list of strengths, consider which traits you identify with the most.

*Which strengths do you identify with the most in yourself? Why?*

In the next part of this exercise, we will exchange feedback with peers. Think about your fellow classmates one-by-one and the strengths that you see in each person.

**Classmate 1:**

*Which strengths would you attribute to this person, & why?*

**Classmate 2:**

*Which strengths would you attribute to this person, & why?*

**Classmate 3:**

*Which strengths would you attribute to this person, & why?*

**Classmate 4:**

*Which strengths would you attribute to this person, & why?*

**Classmate 5:**

*Which strengths would you attribute to this person, & why?*

**Classmate 6:**

*Which strengths would you attribute to this person, & why?*

**Classmate 7:**

*Which strengths would you attribute to this person, & why?*

## Discussion Questions

How does this discussion of strengths relate (or not relate) to your experience at this point in the year?

What was it like to reflect on your strengths? Were your top strengths immediately obvious to you, or did it require some thought?

How might your view of your own strengths differ from feedback from your peers? Were you surprised by anything your peers identified? How so?

What strengths do you think are most valued and relevant in medical training? How might this pose challenges to living by your signature strengths?

How can you build your strengths into your existing routine? How can you use your strengths in new ways during this extraordinary time?

### Looking for more?

- Complete the VIA Survey of Character Strengths at [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org). Review your results.
- Think about ways to use your top strengths in new ways over the next several months. Browse the website for more information on signature strengths and strategies to utilize these strengths.
- Invite a family member or friend to complete the VIA survey – talk about your strengths and how you see yourself versus how others see you, versus how the survey picked up on your strengths!

## Target Change: Using your Strengths in New Ways

[1] Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Spend an hour in the park (with a mask!), visit a virtual art gallery or virtual concert</li><li>• Keep a beauty log: write a few sentences about something beautiful you saw or experienced</li></ul>
[2] Bravery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify an area that you might shy away from. Practice ways to effectively confront the situation</li><li>• Reach out to and befriend someone who is new and different from you</li></ul>
[3] Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write a poem or creative writing piece, or try making art or music</li><li>• When facing a problem, define the issue and brainstorm multiple possible solutions or outcomes"</li></ul>
[4] Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore your environment, paying attention to details you might not ordinarily notice</li><li>• Pick a new podcast to listen to</li></ul>
[5] Fairness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-reflect: do you treat other people and cultures stereotypically?</li><li>• Apologize to someone who you may have wronged or made a mistake</li></ul>
[6] Forgiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write about a negative incident or grudge and consider personal benefits that have come from it</li><li>• Think about someone who wronged you recently and try to look at the situation from their side</li></ul>
[7] Gratitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write down three good things that you are grateful for each day</li><li>• Savoring: set 10 minutes aside every day to savor a nice moment (can be a current moment, or something from the past or future)</li></ul>
[8] Honesty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Honor commitments in all of your relationships. Don't flake on plans you've made with others (Zoom calls, phone calls, etc.)</li><li>• Check in with yourself - are your actions consistent with your intentions and values?</li></ul>
[9] Hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write about a good event and why it will last or spread positivity</li><li>• Set positive goals for yourself and picture yourself overcoming obstacles</li></ul>
[10] Humor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write down a funny thing that happened each day, being aware of funny situations or comments</li><li>• Watch a comedy or sitcom, read a comic or a funny blog</li></ul>
[11] Perseverance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Set five goals per week and be pro-active in accomplishing them on time</li><li>• Keep a checklist and regularly update it</li></ul>
[12] Judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Play devil's advocate on an issue you have a strong opinion about</li><li>• Evaluate a past event that you are unhappy with and brainstorm alternative solutions</li></ul>
[13] Kindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Perform a random act of kindness every day, within the limits of physical distancing (ex. Volunteering for the student workforce, sending kind words to a loved one, calling an elderly member of the family, etc.)</li><li>• Speak kinder and softer words to people in emails and conversation and smile a little more</li></ul>
[14] Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mediate arguments between other people, encouraging them to share and find solutions</li><li>• Take the lead on an activity or project and actively ask for opinions for group members</li></ul>
[15] Love	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write a note to or plan a surprise for someone you love or appreciate</li><li>• Engage in a meaningful activity with a loved one (including someone you might be physically with or distanced from)</li></ul>
[16] Love of Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn five new words a day</li><li>• Read a non-fiction book every month</li><li>• Download a language-learning application and begin practicing a new language!</li></ul>
[17] Humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Resist showing off accomplishments for a week and notice changes in your relationships</li><li>• During conversations, pay attention to how much you speak relative to others</li><li>• Admit your mistakes and apologize when you are in the wrong</li></ul>
[18] Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on listening carefully and then share your ideas and thoughts</li><li>• Read an article by someone with a different opinion using an open mind</li></ul>
[19] Prudence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-reflect: do you treat other people and cultures stereotypically?</li><li>• Apologize to someone who you may have wronged or made a mistake</li></ul>
[20] Self-Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on positive attributes in a difficult situation to help regulate your emotions</li><li>• Set daily goals for disciplined living, ex. cleaning, doing laundry, eating well</li></ul>
[21] Social Intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Practice emotional awareness: notice it, label and express to others</li><li>• Write 5 personal feelings daily for several weeks and pay attention to patterns</li></ul>
[22] Spirituality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cultivate sacred moments to "just be" with a special object or space</li><li>• Build spiritual tools into your regular practice, ex prayer, meditation, nature</li></ul>
[23] Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Volunteer your time to an organization, or consider mentoring a younger classmate</li><li>• Start a virtual book club or journal club with friends or colleagues and set a time to meet</li></ul>
[24] Zest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Engage in physical activities (biking, running, yoga, singing, play) and take active study breaks</li><li>• Make plans to visit with friends virtually, or when the pandemic ends</li></ul>