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Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners

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I read, I review. I rarely comment. The difference? I offer glimpses into a book, noting the content, the writing style, the potential impact on a reader, often sharing my personal reactions to the material with a familiar first person writing style. An academic commentary proposes both a different tone and approach. One that offered a challenge until I realized that a commentary is just that, a personal reaction pinpointing part of the material that potentially impacts either me personally or my field of study and interest, in this instance psychotherapeutic interventions that offer clients and ourselves a way forward.

I read Ryan Niemiec's newest publication, *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners*, with no background experience in positive psychology, no concept of what character strengths are or how to integrate them into my life or my professional work. I quickly learned that character strengths are positive traits that are core to our being—our identity—and our doing, aka our behavior (pg. 2). There are 24-character strengths that represent a common language said to describe what is best in human beings; these then represent pathways to six virtues that are noted to be universal in human beings across religions, cultures, nations and belief systems, which are: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. It is important to note that these are not the type of strengths commonly thought of such as: talent, intelligence, skills, values, interests or resources. They don't happen in isolation—they are interwoven, they overlap in our lives. They happen in context, and they happen in relationships.

Within the first few pages of the actual body of the text (not counting the Forward or Introduction), I had the strongest impulse to take the Character Strengths Survey, offered "free" of charge online at www.viacharacter.org to "help individuals learn about what is best in them". There is, however, a catch. You can take the 120-item survey and receive a list of your 24-character strengths for free. The list comes in numerical order (1-24), with the top 5 to 7 noted as your 'signature' strengths, defined as a "part of the human psyche", "expressed through thoughts, emotions, volition and behavior", "naturally emerging in communications, verbally, nonverbally and written", and "expressed across all domains of life" (pg. 26). Other subcategories include phasic and lower strengths. Niemiec is clear that the list is not set in stone and that, in fact, therapists need to check-in with clients to confirm if the highest noted are indeed "essential and authentic to who they are, energizing and natural to use, and expressed widely across settings" (pg. 27). The list is not considered a matter of good versus bad but rather which character strengths do you, as an individual, use more frequently and which are perhaps overused and/or underused. The survey process, however, is not totally free. Aside from giving the organization your email address (opening yourself to the potential of more inbox clutter), if you want to use this information to make

changes in your life you need to purchase their report. Two options are offered, the VIA Me report (\$20.00) and the VIA Pro report (\$40.00), with a special deal for both at \$50.00 (which is promoted as the most useful way to work with the material).

According to their website: “The in-depth reports provide key research and in-depth information about signature strengths, tips for using your signature strengths in new ways, in-depth analysis on overusing and underusing signature strengths, and much more”¹.

Daily emails now arrive in my inbox from the VIA organization. This one arrived on October 3, 2017:

Dear Nancy,

Do you hope to get in better shape? Get a promotion at work? Meet new friends?

We all have goals; and research is now proving that linking your signature strengths with your goals increases attainment and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, when you reach a goal that is in line with your core values you will experience greater happiness than achieving a goal that is not consistent with who you are. Read more on the benefits of character strengths and goal-setting [here](#).

Our clients repeatedly tell us that the [VIA Me and VIA Pro Reports](#) provided them with a way to view themselves more fully and accurately. The reports helped them understand their own potential and see the tools they have to apply to their future goals. Learn about the tools you have with your own personalized [VIA Reports](#).”

Herein lies my comment, perhaps some would consider it a complaint, some more of a rant, some prudent (depends on your signature strengths and their place in your life!). For me, it's a matter of marketing and psychotherapy, about social media and psychotherapy (the VIA organization invites you to follow them on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and their VIA Blog). It's about being a therapist and promoting oneself, one's process, one's organization to earn an income, to support the structure, the people, the publications and so on. I see this free survey as a hook to gain access to my check book. It's a matter of morals, of ethics.

When do we, as therapists, cross a line between serving our clients' greater good, between being of service to others and being in service to ourselves, our organization, our methodology/approach?

If this survey truly has the power to positively impact peoples' lives to the depth that Niemiec writes, if it is being offered free online, then why withhold results in a format that are applicable in our lives? To say to someone that this report will be life altering, that using the results can change your life for the better including your job and your relationships but then hold the actual keys to success for ransom feels immoral to me, unethical. This free survey should be completely and totally free, with no strings attached. The daily emails marketing the reports, trying to motivate me to buy them as if the in-depth analysis and hands-on use of my

¹ Retrieved from http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Reports-Courses-Resources/Reports/Combo-Package-More-Info-Landing-Page?trk_msg=7M4R32I6D3F4711HK1CA2V18S4&trk_contact=TKPIMT9RCS32A5LIT3G9SGMSS8&trk_sid=5HS8EDH9QPPDBAMCQOBLFOCEF4&utm_source=Listrak&utm_medium=Email&utm_term=http%3a%2f%2fwww.viacharacter.org%2fwww%2fReports-Courses-Resources%2fReports%2fCombo-Package-More-Info-Landing-Page&utm_campaign=Completed+Survey%2c+No+Report&utm_content=Email+3

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signature strengths is the golden ring I used to reach for as a kid riding on the carousel—I loved sitting astride the white stallion, traipsing across the countryside in my imagination; and just as potently, I loved the thrill of reaching for the prize. If I could grab hold of that golden ring when I passed by and present it to the operator, I got a free ride.

In my mind, I have to wonder: have we gone so far astray from our oath to do no harm (oh, wait, is that only for medical doctors?) that we find it perfectly fine to promote our process using less than honorable marketing tactics? I receive emails, newsletters, invites to webinars daily, all therapist promotions. The time and money involved in writing all this material, posting it on websites, on social media, creating affiliate relationships with one another to share email lists, to promote one another's products for a slice of the take. It's become the norm, and it's truly bothering me.

I understand it's about making money, and I question if this is the root of our place and our work in this world. Do we focus on how to make money, how to promote ourselves to reach a larger audience, to gain more while working less, or on how to help people grow, learn, heal, flourish in their lives? Am I too naive to believe that if I put people first, the income will follow?

Honestly, I read the entire book and appreciated all that Niemiec offered. I've talked so much about my character strengths that my parents (in their late 80s) want to take the survey so we can discuss the impact of our particular strengths on our family system. I've shared information from the book with colleagues, and I've bookmarked protocols Niemiec offered to share with clients, with friends, and to practice myself. I learned much about positive psychology (its historical foundations and founders; its premise and practices) and about myself, my character strengths.

Initially, I wasn't clear how my signature strengths: (1) appreciation of beauty and excellence; (2) fairness; (3) forgiveness; (4) gratitude; (5) honesty; (6) curiosity; and (7) judgment—defined as “thinking things through and examining them from all sides, not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence and weighing all evidence fairly”—were applicable to my day-to-day life. I opted not to buy the VIA reports!

But with reflection over a week or so, I started to see how in fact I use them, and I even began looking at those at the end of the list and how to incorporate them, making choices and decisions based on mindful reflection (part of Niemiec's mindfulness-based strengths practice, MBSP). For starters, number 24 on my list is 'bravery' defined as “not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what's right even if there's opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it”. Here I am, being brave, writing this commentary, speaking my mind on what I consider right even if there is the possibility of opposition from readers, from the author, from the VIA organization. I'm integrating number 5: honesty—“speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions” in this commentary while also being prudent (number 18): “being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks, not saying or doing things that might later be regretted”. Well there is some fear here. I usually take the safe road and keep quiet about my opinions—I only review books I like, not wanting to say bad things about a book just because I did not resonate with it.

The book itself is well-written, offers in-depth information, direction, background, appendices, practitioner snapshots and oh so much more. I will continue to suggest it to colleagues who might be interested in the content because, in my experience, if you read

the book, take the time to reflect on the material, do the snapshot activities, practice the protocols yourself before client use, there's much to be gained. I will even recommend taking the survey to people who are going to read the book as well so they can personally integrate the two. As for purchasing the special reports? No way. This type of marketing goes against what I consider morally correct.

BIOGRAPHY

Nancy Elizabeth Eichhorn, PhD is a writer, an investigative journalist, and a credentialed educator with degrees in clinical psychology with a somatic psychology specialization, education and creative nonfiction writing. She is the founding Editor-in-Chief of Somatic Psychotherapy Today, co-editor of the International Body Psychotherapy Journal and an editorial assistance for *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*. She currently teaches and works as a writing coach, an editor and ghostwriter. Her writing resume includes newspaper and magazine articles, chapters in professional anthologies, including *When Hurt Remains: Relational Perspectives on Therapeutic Failure*, *About Relational Body Psychotherapy* and *The Body in Relationship: Self-Other-Society*. She is an avid hiker, kayaker, and overall outdoor enthusiast. Nature is her place of solace and inner expression.
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