

Extracting Strengths from Problems

Strengths

 Exercise

 10 min.

 Client

 No

In traditional psychology, problems tend to be approached with a weakness-focus, meaning that client and practitioner seek to extract what the client is doing 'wrong' in order to correct and solve the problem at hand. In positive psychology, a strength-focus is assumed, meaning that client and practitioner seek to identify what the client is doing 'right' in a given situation, and how these positive attributes can be utilized to solve the problem. The value in this approach is that the client views the problem more positively and constructively, which not only buffers against self-criticism but also promotes a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008). Take, for example, a client who is experiencing burnout at work; approaching the problem with a weakness-focus may shed light on the fact that the client is spending too many hours at work, not enough time with family, and not engaging in enough self-care. While such factors may be true, focusing only on these may lead the client to feel bad about himself. Comparatively, approaching the problem with a strength-focus may highlight that part of the issue is the client's tendency to overuse of his strength "perseverance." In this way, the problem becomes a problem of doing "too much of a good thing," which is undoubtedly a more encouraging and motivating starting place.



Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients extract a strength from a current personal problem. By doing so, clients learn to view problems from a positive, strengths-perspective rather than a negative, weakness-perspective.



Advice

- Some clients may need help identifying the strength that they are underusing or overusing (Step 4). Advise the client that strength-spotting takes practice, and provide guidance as needed. Clients can also refer to the strength list in the "Character Strengths Overuse and Underuse tool" (referenced in the next dot point) for ideas.
- This exercise could be used in combination with the tool "Character Strengths Overuse and Underuse" in the Toolkit, to help give clients more of an idea of what strength misuse looks like.



Suggested Readings

Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House Digital, Inc.

Grant, A. M., & Schwartz, B. (2011). Too much of a good thing: The challenge and opportunity of the inverted U. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(1), 61-76.

Niemiec, R. M. (2014). *Mindfulness and character strengths: A practical guide to flourishing*. Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe

Tool Description

Instructions

Strengths are things that we are naturally good at. Using our strengths energizes us and helps us to feel and perform at our best. Examples of strengths include curiosity, kindness, fairness, perseverance, humility, and hope.

Strengths, however, can be used too much or too little. Imagine that a friend is upset with you for being apparently overly inquisitive about a sensitive family matter. In this problem, you may have overplayed your strength “curiosity.” An example of underusing a strength would be to fail to laugh along when a friend shares a funny anecdote about you. Here, you would be underusing the strength “humor.”

In this exercise, we will look closely at a current problem in your life, something you are struggling with at the moment, and rather than focus on this problem by determining what you are doing ‘wrong’, we will focus on what strength you are doing “too right” or “not right enough.”

Step 1: Describe a current problem

What are you struggling with at the moment? Describe this problem in detail below:

E.g., I am feeling stressed about an upcoming presentation because I am underprepared.

Step 2: Identify problematic context or life domain

In what area of your life is this problem having the greatest impact? Friends, family, work, health, other? Please write down the context below:

E.g., At work

Step 3: Identify problematic behavior in yourself

Is there something that you are doing too much or too little of that may be contributing to this problem?
E.g., I am spending too much time perfecting my slides, and not enough time working on my actual speech.

Step 4: Extract your strength

How can you reframe the behavior identified in Step 3 as a strength being overplayed or underplayed? Remember that a strength is something that you are naturally good at, and in the context of this personal problem, you may have overplayed or underplayed one of your strengths.
E.g., Underlying strengths of mine in this situation are “attention to detail” and “conscientiousness.”

Step 5: Action(s) to remedy the problem

What can you do to help remedy the problem? Describe at least one actionable step that you could you take.
E.g., Accept that my slides are ‘good enough’ and save and upload to my USB; turn my full attention to speech writing and stay on this task for the next 30 minutes (set a timer if necessary).