



Women, Strength and Happiness By Tasha Walsh, LCSW

Do you have the strength to be happy? Positive Psychology researchers, Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman co-authors of Character Strengths and Virtues have classified character strengths and virtues in an attempt to establish a consistent language for use in the discussion of measurement and intervention in the science of happiness. Through their research, they have identified six core virtues and twenty four character strengths, across generations and cultures.

Virtues like Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence are observable characteristics that are valued over time and lead one to achieve excellence, according to Peterson and Seligman. They describe the twenty four identified character strengths as positive characteristics, which are the “distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues.

Virtues & Character Strengths

Wisdom and Knowledge

- curiosity/interest
- love of learning
- judgment/critical thinking
- originality/ingenuity/creativity
- perspective

Courage

- bravery/valor
- industry/perseverance
- integrity/honesty
- zest/enthusiasm

Humanity

- love/intimacy
- kindness/generosity
- social intelligence

Justice

- citizenship/duty/loyalty/teamwork
- equity/fairness
- leadership

Temperance

- forgiveness/mercy
- modesty/humility
- prudence/caution
- self-control/self-regulation

Transcendence

- appreciation of beauty/awe
- gratitude
- hope/optimism
- humor/playfulness
- spirituality/sense of purpose

It is through using strengths that virtues are exhibited in the world, and exercising them brings about good feelings and gratification.

For instance, Oprah Winfrey and Mother Teresa are individuals who are esteemed by millions and extol these virtues. Oprah Winfrey's establishment of a girls school in Africa, or her graciousness to guests on her television program, highlight her strengths of kindness and social intelligence which exhibit the virtue of Humanity. Mother Teresa was a woman who demonstrated great acts of mercy in her work and exhibited tremendous modesty and self-control throughout her life. She is a shining example of the virtue of Temperance, which include the strengths of Forgiveness & Mercy, Modesty, Prudence, and Self-control.

According to Peterson, character strengths are more like dimensions of character than absolute categories. "People have more-or-less all the strengths and not simply a set of discrete strengths versus weaknesses," he says. Strengths are shown through thoughts, feelings and actions which can be developed and increased. Strengths are like muscles, the capability to use any of them is there, some get used more frequently and naturally, others need intention and exercise to build up.

So which strengths do you need to be happy? Research comparing peoples natural top strengths to their sense of happiness have identified five strengths which tend to be most highly correlated with high levels of positive emotion and life satisfaction. These are: Curiosity, Gratitude, Enthusiasm/Zest, Optimism, and the Capacity to Love and Be Loved.

However, even if these strengths aren't your top 5, we each have what Seligman calls "signature strengths". These are the character strengths that you

yearn to use and it seems inevitable that you will. They demonstrate “the real you” and are often evident in various aspects of your life both within your personal and professional environment. Using signature strengths may take energy, but you feel inspired and invigorated rather than depleted and drained. Hence, the very act of determining and using your signature strengths will likely increase your happiness.

In 2003, Peterson examined the gender variances of the twenty four character strengths by reviewing thousands of respondents to an on-line strengths survey. He found that the most common top ranking strengths of women span the virtues and include three of the core strengths for happiness: Gratitude, Curiosity and the Capacity to Love and be Loved.

Most Common Strengths of Women

VIRTUE	CHARACTER STRENGTH	DEMONSTRATION
Humanity	Capacity to Love & be Loved	You value close relationships and are able to share reciprocal caring with others
	Kindness	You tend to be generous and are nurturing and helpful to others
Wisdom	Curiosity	You're fascinated by a lot of topics and are open to new experiences.
	Love of Learning	You systematically strive to add to what you know, on your own or through formal study
	Critical thinking & Open-mindedness	You think things through, examining them from all sides. You're able to change your mind in light of new evidence
Justice	Fairness	You believe in giving everyone a fair chance and tend not to let personal feelings become a bias
Courage	Integrity	You speak the truth and take personal responsibility for your feelings and actions
Transcendence	Gratitude	You are aware of the good things in life, and take time to express thanks
	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	You look for and value the beauty in all aspects of life, from sunsets to fine foods.

One way to build up a particular strength is to look for opportunities to use it. For instance, build curiosity by figuring out your own strengths. You can use your instincts to get a sense of your signature strengths, look at the list of strengths and notice which jump out at you. Ask yourself, “Does this strength feel natural to me?” “Does using this strength invigorate me?” Or, if you want to take a more scientific approach, you can go on-line to www.viastrengths.com and take the online survey. Regardless of your approach, by exploring this new concept and how it connects to you personally, you are exercising the strength of curiosity. And employing your curiosity in this way, you will discover your signature strengths to be happy, and you can exercise others that will add to your satisfaction with life.

(2004) Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. Character Strengths and Virtues: A Classification System
Oxford University Press
(2007) Christopher Peterson, Ph.D. The State of VIA <<http://www.viastrengths.com/StateofVia.aspx>>

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