

Vid 8: strengths

When I was only nine years old, my parents sent me to a “prep school,” a boarding school which was straight out of a Harry Potter movie, except it had no magicians and no magic.

It mainly had grumpy teachers who seemed to be very busy pointing out what I was doing wrong.

What was I doing right? I hadn't a clue. I felt depressed and downtrodden. School seemed meaningless. I probably would have stayed that way, but my English teacher, a tall, skinny man with a piercing gaze, discovered that I loved English composition.

That was very encouraging. I remember staying up at night writing a little book, with illustrations, about atoms. I was very excited about atoms. In my little book, I explained how wonderful they were, especially because they looked like miniature solar systems.

I won a tiny prize for that tiny book, but I felt as if I had won an Olympic medal.

So why am I telling that story? If that hadn't happened, if someone hadn't said something, my love of writing might have been buried, along with my self-confidence.

So many years later, I wasn't surprised to learn that the two great pillars of Positive Psychology are the discovery of one's strengths and the power of positive emotions.

In his groundbreaking book, called “Authentic Happiness,” Martin Seligman describes three kinds of happiness that we can experience. The Pleasant Life, the Engaged Life, and, finally, the deepest kind of happiness, the Meaningful Life.

The Pleasant Life is realized if we learn to savor and appreciate day to day things such as companionship, the beauty of nature, and the food that we eat, etc. It's about smelling the flowers and enjoying the present moment.

We can remain pleasantly stuck in the Pleasant Life, or we can go on to experience the Engaged Life, which is achieved through discovering our unique strengths, and using them creatively. By using our strengths, we become more engaged with what we do. We have more flow experiences.

The final stage is the Meaningful Life, in which we find a deep sense of fulfillment by using our unique strengths for something bigger than ourselves.

These three kinds of happiness are not separate stages. The Pleasant Life is part of the Engaged Life, and the Engaged Life is part of the Meaningful Life.

So why are strengths so important? The discovery of one's strong points, of one's unique strengths, is a key to long term well-being. It plays a major role in the Engaged Life as well as the Meaningful Life.

Let's take the example of a doctor. Let's say this doctor has two major strengths, curiosity and kindness.

Her kind personality motivates her to care for her patients, and her curiosity drives her to carefully examine the most mysterious cases and make an accurate diagnosis. She loves what she is doing because she enjoys using those two strengths creatively, to be a great doctor and to enrich the quality of her own life. As a result, she often experiences flow, and she is living the Engaged Life.

Now let's say that the same doctor goes volunteering instead of taking vacations. She is now using her strengths for a purpose much bigger than her own job. She is doing something that she deeply values. She is probably so busy taking care of other people that she doesn't think about her own happiness, but in fact, she's experiencing a deeper kind of well-being, the Meaningful Life.

In the case of the doctor, curiosity and kindness are her unique set of strengths, what Seligman calls her Signature Strengths. They are central to her identity, and, especially, her positive self-image. And she uses both to enjoy the Engaged Life as well as the Meaningful Life.

Different people have unique sets of strengths, and it's so important that we discover what our strengths are, because they can transform our negative self-image into a positive one. Finding and use our strengths can do wonders for our self-esteem and self-efficacy, the feeling that we are in control of our own lives, and that we are not being controlled by external circumstances. And that feeling of control is a big key to our well-being.

One interesting question is, can we recognize our own strengths?

A few years ago, one of my students took the VIA signature strengths survey, designed by Seligman, to find out what her top strengths were.

Her survey results told her that the top strength was kindness. But then she did something very interesting. She asked two close friends to take the same test, not for themselves, but for her. Their result showed that her top strength was wisdom, and not kindness.

The question is, does that matter? Was her key strength wisdom or kindness? Or can she simply be the person that she wants to be?

I don't think it does any harm to work on a strength that we admire, as long as we don't rely on it too much when we make career choices.

It takes a while to discover and use our unique strengths.

It's a huge step to take, not only for us, but for our teachers and for our employers. They're the ones who are in a great position to find out why we're special, and how we can make a unique contribution.

If only people would switch from weakness spotting mode to strength spotting mode, the world would be a different place.

I'm not saying that we should ignore weaknesses, but we shouldn't make weaknesses the center of our attention. If we focus on something, it tends to grow. If we focus on weaknesses, they get bigger, and then we end up with toxic workplaces and toxic schools.

So, before we point out a weakness, we may want to actively seek out and encourage at least two or three strengths. Strengths spotting is a wonderful way that we can increase the self-esteem, happiness, and the productivity of the people in our lives.

And by the way, what's a weakness anyway? It's a relative term. Sometimes what looks like a weakness can be a strength.

Zhuangzi, the famous Chinese philosopher, had a close friend called Huizi, who used to criticize his teachings.

While they were taking one of their usual strolls together, Huizi pointed to a tree saying, “This old tree is so crooked and rough that it is useless for lumber. In the same way, your teachings have no practical use.”

Zhuangzi replied, “This tree may be useless as lumber, but you can rest in the gentle shade of its big branches or admire its rustic nature. It only seems useless to you because you want to turn it into something else and don't know how to appreciate it for what it is. My teachings are like this.”

So, let's summarize.

The two pillars of Positive Psychology are strengths and positive emotions.

Strengths play a leading role in two of the three dimensions of happiness, and specifically, the Engaged Life, in which we identify and use our leading strengths, and the Meaningful Life, in which we use our strengths for a greater purpose.

Finally, signature strengths are central to our identity, and especially, our positive self-image.

So I think that spotting signature strengths should be a top priority for everyone.