

1 why focus on strengths?

If you have been drawn to strengths-focused thinking for some time, you may well have come to it out of a personal philosophy. The *idea* of working from strengths may have resonated with your own way of thinking about kids, life, relationships, etc. You may not have known *why* it seemed right or had the language to talk about it very clearly, but you still *felt* it was right. You may even have kept your ideas to yourself for fear of being seen as “soft” or “Pollyanna.”

You are not alone. Behind the scenes, an explosion of research and thinking has been going on with regard to the efficacy of focusing on strengths vs weaknesses, positive thoughts vs negative thoughts, etc.. The idea that developing strengths yields vastly superior outcomes is no longer a philosophy, but rather a well established set of principles, proven by research and application. This research has taken place in business (Gallup Organization), mental health (Steven and Sybil Wolin), psychology (Martin Seligman), education, athletics, optimal human performance and nearly every other field of human endeavor. Education and social services are no longer (if they ever were) at the forefront of this research. Its reach is broad and becoming deeper and more mainstream with each passing year. As we begin this journey, I encourage you to let go of any lingering sense that you are alone or that you don’t have the same kind of solid foundation as those who advocate deficit-focused practices.

Those days are over. The research is clear. The data is in. We now *know*...

- The greatest capacity for growth in human beings is not, as we have believed, in their weaknesses, but rather in their areas of greatest strength.
- Growing strengths requires significantly less time and fewer resources than fixing weaknesses (or deficits) – and yields significantly better results.
- Strengths are not something “out there” that one needs to “gain,” but rather something that already exists and simply waits to be found and nurtured.
- Each person has a unique and enduring constellation of strengths.
- There is nothing “soft” about these concepts and their application. They are not inconsistent with holding people accountable for their behavior, having high expectations or failing. In fact, they strengthen accountability, expectations and the ability to fail.

Sharing all this research is beyond the limitations of this workbook, but not beyond your ability to explore. So get started. Read, browse, surf, click, chat, listen, share and discover what we now know that fits *your* life or work or relationships.

Do

Have some fun online and in your local bookstore just perusing what is out there. The purpose here is not to absorb each idea or piece of research, but rather to get an overall impression of the milieu of ideas and terms floating around. Using whatever level of Internet research and reading/browsing skills you have, follow your nose and explore web sites and books that look interesting to you.. This is big picture stuff, so have fun.

Tip: Some of the language of this field is still in its infancy. We use many of the same terms to refer to very different concepts: assets, developmental assets, resiliency builders, resiliencies, talents, etc. Don't get too caught up in the language. We'll establish a working definition for this book, but it is more important to absorb the ideas.

Here are some places to start. You needn't hit them all – and there are certainly many, many more.

A few books: (I've included only a few likely to be on the shelf at your local bookstore, Borders, B&N, etc.)

Now, Discover Your Strengths, Marcus Buckingham, Donald O. Clifton (Gallup). Comes with code to take StrengthsFinder online survey. (See below)

Your Child's Strengths, Jenifer Fox, M.Ed.

Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood, Emmy E. Werner, Ruth S. Smith

Change the Way You See Everything Through asset-based Thinking, Kathryn Cramer, Hank Wasiak

StrengthsFinder 2.0, Tom Rath (Comes with code to take StrengthsFinder online survey. (See below)

Go Put Your Strengths to Work, Marcus Buckingham

The Struggle to be Strong: True Stories by Teens About Overcoming Tough Times, Al Desetta and Sybil Wolin (eds)

Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life, Martin E. P. Seligman

Recommendation: If you are particularly interested in the research, don't miss the resiliency research of Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith, and the incredible strengths research conducted by the Gallup Organization.

A few websites to get you started

www.projectresilience.com - Pioneer resiliency researchers Sybil and Steven Wolin.

www.strengthsmovement.com – Jenifer Fox and her strengths in education movement.

www.marcusbuckingham.com – Marcus Buckingham. His video, "Trombone Player Wanted."

www.strengthsfinder.com & www.strengthsquest.com - A remarkable strengths assessment designed just for adults and young people, respectively, by the folks at the Gallup Organization.

www.search-institute.org/assets - a listing of the Search Institutes developmental assets.

www.resiliencycenter.com - Resiliency Center, directed by noted resiliency author, Dr. Al Siebert.

www.positivepsychology.org - Martin Seligman, Ph.D.

www.reclaimingyouth.com - The Reclaiming Youth Network.

Tip: Think of your search as "pulling threads." You arrive at Site A, see a link to an interesting author and click on it. That author has a link to some fascinating research. The research contains links to organizations, and on it goes.

What terms did you come across for what we might generically call “strengths”? What differentiates them from each other?

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Based on your experience, knowledge and exploration of these ideas, take a shot at writing a brief working definition of “strengths.”

It is often in the midst of adversity that we come to know our strengths...

Read / Listen: Ch. 2, Bring it on!

Consider: This is the feeling, the self-perception we want to engender – in ourselves and in others. It isn’t that the hurt and harm go away. It is that we have sufficient knowledge of our own strengths to know we can stand tall in the face of adversity.

Write / Discuss

As a young person, did your roots run deep or broad? Who were the important people in that root system? What did they do or what characteristics did they have that made them valuable to you?

How do you anchor the young people and adults in your life so they can grow? Is what you do (or how you are) similar in any way to the people who were important to you?

Do you have the feeling that you can survive any adversity that comes your way? If so, how do you know this?

What are the strengths that served you before and that you know you could count on again? (Humor? Perseverance? Positive outlook? Faith? Insight? Adaptability? Tenacity?...)

If these strengths are unclear to you, think about the challenges you have faced, even if they don't feel as dramatic or "important" as those in this story. What personal characteristics got you through them? What relationships, objects, places or beliefs help you survive?

What do you imagine it would feel like to *choose* to focus on strengths; to be awed instead of annoyed, to be hopeful instead of drained? Describe this feeling. Does it seem possible?

Have you ever witnessed or experienced the impact of focusing on strengths? Describe the experience in terms of how it felt; how it impacted you energy, your spirit.

Do

Declare to a partner or group – or even just out loud to yourself - your decision to focus on strengths because it is better for *you*. E.g. “I choose to focus on strengths because it makes my job easier and more fun, makes me feel lighter and more joyful, and because I like results!” Any reactions?
