

Why Strengths? The Evidence

Many of us will be familiar with the old adage “play to your strengths.” In recent years, new research from the field of positive psychology and beyond has been providing the scientific underpinnings for why this matters and the benefits that using your strengths brings. Here is a summary of those benefits.

People who use their strengths more:

1. Are happier
2. Are more confident
3. Have higher levels of self-esteem
4. Have higher levels of energy and vitality
5. Experience less stress
6. Are more resilient
7. Are more likely to achieve their goals
8. Perform better at work
9. Are more engaged at work
10. Are more effective at developing themselves and growing as individuals.

Here is the original scientific source material from which those conclusions were drawn.

1. People who use their strengths more are happier

Govindji and Linley (2007), in a study of 214 university students, showed that people who used their strengths more reported higher levels of subjective well-being (i.e., happiness) and psychological well-being (i.e., fulfilment). Similarly, Proctor, Maltby and Linley (2009) reported similar findings with a study of 135 university students. Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005) found that people who used their strengths in a new and different way every day reported higher levels of happiness and lower levels of depression, and this lasted over time. Minhas (2010) showed that people who developed their realised or unrealised strengths reported higher levels of happiness and well-being over a four-week period. Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004) found that people who reported higher levels of character strengths also reported higher levels of life satisfaction, especially for so-called “strengths of the heart.”

2. People who use their strengths more are more confident

Govindji and Linley (2007) found that people who used their strengths more reported higher levels of self-efficacy, which is a scientific conception of confidence - the belief that we are capable of achieving the things we want to achieve. This finding was replicated by Proctor, Maltby and Linley (2009) in a study with 135 university students.

3. People who use their strengths more have higher levels of self-esteem

Minhas (2010) found that people who developed their realised or unrealised strengths reported increases in self-esteem over a four-week period. Govindji and Linley (2007) reported that people who used their strengths more reported higher levels of self-esteem. In a study with 135 university students, Proctor, Maltby and Linley (2009) found that strengths use was associated with higher levels of self-esteem.

4. People who use their strengths more have higher levels of energy and vitality

Govindji and Linley (2007), in a study with 214 university students, found that strengths use was associated with higher levels of psychological vitality, that is, having feelings of positive energy and buzz.

5. People who use their strengths more experience less stress

Over a six month time period with a community sample of 207 people, those people who used their strengths more reported lower levels of stress. This was the case at both the baseline period, where strengths use was associated with less stress, and also over the three-month and six-month follow ups, where higher strengths use predicted lower stress over time (Wood, Linley, Maltby, & Hurling, 2010).

6. People who use their strengths more are more resilient

Analysis of the Ego Resiliency Scale with Realise2 shows that strengths use is associated with higher levels of resilience for fifty of the sixty Realise2 strengths (CAPP, 2010). The two highest correlations were with Resilience (as you might expect) and Adventure, which suggests that stretching yourself outside of your comfort zone can be a way to build your resilience. The ten strengths where higher strengths use was *not* significantly associated with higher resilience were Adherence, Competitive, Detail, Humour, Order, Planful, Prevention, Scribe, Time Optimiser, and Work Ethic.

7. People who use their strengths more are more likely to achieve their goals

Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett and Biswas-Diener (2010) showed that people who used their strengths in striving to achieve their goals were far more likely to achieve those goals. When they achieved their goals, they satisfied their psychological needs and were happier and more fulfilled as a result.

8. People who use their strengths more perform better at work

In a study of 19,187 employees from 34 organisations across seven industries and 29 countries, the Corporate Leadership Council (2002) found that when managers emphasised performance strengths, performance was 36.4% higher, and when they emphasised personality strengths, performance was 21.3% higher. In contrast, emphasising weaknesses led to a 26.8% decline for performance weaknesses and a 5.5% decline for personality weaknesses. Data from our own work with Norwich Union shows that people working from their strengths perform better and stay with the company longer (Stefanyszyn, 2007).

9. People who use their strengths more are more engaged at work

The opportunity to do what you do best each day, that is, using our strengths, is a core predictor of workplace engagement, which in turn is a core predictor of a range of business outcomes (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Similarly, Minhas (2010) found that work engagement increased when people developed either their realised or unrealised strengths.

10. People who use their strengths more are more effective at developing themselves and growing as individuals

When focusing on self-development, people improve faster on areas where they are already strong, than they do in areas where they are weak, contrary to some popular perceptions that focusing on weakness development brings the greatest return (Sheldon, Kasser, Smith & Share, 2002). Case study evidence from our own work on leadership development with BAE Systems showed that business leaders who focused on developing themselves and their teams on the basis of their strengths were more effective and successful (Smedley, 2007).

References

CAPP (2010). *Technical manual and statistical properties for Realise2*. Coventry, UK: CAPP.

Corporate Leadership Council (2002). *Performance management survey*. Washington, DC: Author.

Govindji, R., & Linley, P. A. (2007). Strengths use, self-concordance and well-being: Implications for strengths coaching and coaching psychologists. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 2 (2), 143-153.

Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 268-279.

Linley, P. A., Nielsen, K. M., Wood, A. M., Gillett, R., & Biswas-Diener, R., (2010). Using signature strengths in pursuit of goals: Effects on goal progress, need satisfaction, and well-being, and implications for coaching psychologists. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 5 (1), 8-17.

Minhas, G. (2010). Developing realised and unrealised strengths: Implications for engagement, self-esteem, life satisfaction and well-being. *Assessment and Development Matters*, in press.

Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23, 603-619.

Proctor, C., Maltby, J., & Linley, P. A. (2009) Strengths use as a predictor of well-being and health-related quality of life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 10, 583-630.

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60, 410-421.

Sheldon, K. M., Kasser, T., Smith, K., & Share, T. (2002). Personal goals and psychological growth: Testing an intervention to enhance goal-attainment and personality integration. *Journal of Personality*, 70, 5-31.

Smedley, T. (2007, 1 November). The powers that BAE. *People Management*, 40-42.

Stefanyszyn, K. (2007). Norwich Union changes focus from competencies to strengths, *Strategic HR Review*, 7, 10-11.

Wood, A. M., Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., & Hurling, R. (2010). Use of positive psychological strengths leads to less stress and greater self-esteem, vitality, and positive affect over time: A three-wave longitudinal study and validation of the Strengths Use Scale. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.