

The Importance of using our Strengths

Being aware of our personal strengths can enhance our productivity when tackling our academic commitments. Most of us find it difficult to name or talk about our strengths and we often feel uncomfortable with positive feedback. Part of the reason for this is that we are adapted by evolution to be vigilant for problems and weaknesses. Also, social norms dictate that we retain some modesty. Many of us believe that it is our weaknesses, rather than our strengths, that are our areas of greatest growth and performance.

However, current research in the field of Positive Psychology (Linley, 2008) is showing that when we use and develop our strengths we are most productive, fulfilled and energized. People who use their strengths are happier, more confident, and have higher levels of self-esteem. They experience less stress, have higher levels of energy and vitality, as well as being more resilient. They are also more effective at developing themselves and growing as individuals, and are more likely to achieve their goals.

A strengths-based approach does not mean that we ignore our weaknesses, or pretend that they don't exist. If a boat has a hole in the bottom it will sink unless attention is paid to that trouble spot, just as our weaknesses may jeopardize us if unchecked. However, merely fixing the hole will not move the ship forward. To progress efficiently, the sails need to be rigged. Our strengths are like the sails, giving us added energy and performance when we tackle a task.

A strength can be thought of as a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behaviour that can be productively applied (Linley, 2008). Strengths are part of our basic human nature. Every person is born with a particular constellation of strengths which may recede or come into greater prominence, depending on the context. One of the quickest ways to recognize a personal strength is to notice which thoughts, activities or feelings energize us when we engage in them. When we are good at something, but doing it drains our energy, this is a learned behavior, not a strength. Strengths may be discernible in past achievements of which we feel most proud, and in the things we look forward to most in future. It is also possible to do a formal strengths assessment questionnaire to identify one's own personal strengths profile.

The evidence suggests that knowing our strengths and using them more frequently will enhance every dimension of our lives and that a strengths based approach is one of the most effective ways to prevent burnout. Next time you face a challenging situation, remind yourself of the things that you are good at, and see what a difference this makes to your energy levels and your ability to accomplish the task.

Reference

Linley, A. (2008). *Average to A+*. United Kingdom: CAPP Press