

## Positive Psychology and Virtue

A quarter century ago psychology saw the blossoming of a new direction with names like positive psychology and the science of happiness. The focus for this area of psychology was what makes happy, caring, effective people. A natural outgrowth included psychologists and other thinkers joining together to create a classification of human strengths or virtues. Not surprisingly, this work soon earned titles like “the Un-DSM” (refers to psychiatric diagnosis) and “a manual of sanities” in contrast to psychiatry’s obsession with sickness, perversion, despair and “mental disorders.” *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (2004) was written by Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman with the help of historians, philosophers, psychiatrists, and other experts.

The criteria for a virtue/character strength are these: trait like, contributes to a sense of fulfillment, a value in its own right, seeing it acted out raises the observer’s spirits, understood as a ritual to advance civic life, observable in consensually validated paragons, and not able to be subsumed by another virtue.

The six general strength areas identified by this classification system are: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Peterson and Seligman join with ancient wisdom in asserting that the virtues could take the place of and should at least supplement any classification and treatment of abnormal psychology. Each virtue lists its absence (A), opposite (O), and exaggeration (E). Try thinking of the absence of these strengths as the real *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the Mental Disorders* (psychiatry’s bible of psychopathologies). For example, what if “depression” was not a “mental disorder” but lacking the support to face life with “bravery,” “persistence,” and “perspective.”

### Wisdom and knowledge

- 1 *Creativity* is the quality of thinking of original ways of doing things in every area of endeavor. A-conformity, O-triteness, E-eccentricity.
- 2 *Curiosity* is taking an interest all of ongoing experience, exploring, finding, etc. A-disinterest, O-boredom, E-morbid curiosity.
- 3 *Judgment*, open-mindedness, and critical thought is thinking things through and from all sides, being able to change one’s mind in the light of new data, and weighing evidence fairly. A-unreflectiveness, O-gullibility, E-cynicism.
- 4 *Love of learning* is the mastering of new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge formally or informally. More than curiosity, it adds to knowledge systematically. A-complacency, O-orthodoxy, E-“know it all”ism.
- 5 *Perspective* or wisdom is the ability to “provide wise counsel” and having a way of “looking at the world that makes sense to oneself and others.” A-shallowness, O-foolishness, E-none

### Courage

- 1 *Bravery* is “not shrinking from a threat, challenge, difficulty or pain” and taking action based on conviction even if unpopular. A-fright, O-cowardice, E-foolhardiness.
- 2 *Persistence* is “finishing what one starts” and taking pleasure in completing a job. A-laziness, O-helplessness, E-obsessiveness.
- 3 *Integrity* is being “genuine, authentic, and honest” and taking responsibility for one’s feelings and actions. A-phoniness, O-deceit, E-righteousness.

- 4 *Vitality* or zest is going at life enthusiastically or with a sense of adventure. A-restraint, O-lifelessness, E-hyperactivity.

#### Humanity

- 1 *Love* is intimacy, “valuing close relations with others,” reciprocal caring and sharing. A-isolation, O-loneliness, E-emotional promiscuity.
- 2 *Kindness* is “generosity, compassion, altruistic love,” and the taking care of others. A-indifference, O-cruelty, E-intrusiveness.
- 3 *Social intelligence* or emotional intelligence is awareness of other’s motives and knowing what to do to “fit into different social situations.” A-obtuseness, O-self-deception, E-“psychobabble.”

#### Justice

- 1 *Citizenship* is “social responsibility, loyalty, and teamwork.” A-selfishness, O-narcissism, E-chauvinism.
- 2 *Fairness* is the virtue of avoiding personal bias and “treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice.” A-partisanship, O-prejudice, E-detachment.
- 3 *Leadership* is the ability to organize group action in such a way that things get accomplished and good relations are maintained in the group. A-compliance, O-disruptiveness, E-despotism.

#### Temperance

- 1 *Forgiveness* and mercy are “giving people a second chance” and avoiding vengeful behavior. A-mercilessness, O-vengefulness, E-permissiveness.
- 2 *Humility* and modesty are the virtues of letting “one’s accomplishments speak for themselves” and not “seeking the spotlight.” A-baseless self-esteem, O-arrogance, E-self-deprecation.
- 3 *Prudence* is simply exhibiting care about one’s choices. A-sensation seeking, O-recklessness, E-prudishness
- 4 *Self-control* or self-regulation are virtues of self-discipline and “controlling one’s appetites and emotions. A-indulgence, O-impulsivity, E-inhibition.

#### Transcendence

- 1 *The appreciation of beauty and excellence* includes experiences of “awe, wonder, and elevation” in the face of greatness in any domain of human endeavor. A-obliviousness, O-schadenfreude-ism, E-snobbery.
- 2 *Gratitude* is “being aware of and thankful for the good things” in life. A-rudeness, O-entitlement, E-ingratiation
- 3 *Hope* is “optimism, future-mindedness. . . expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it.” A-present orientation, O-pessimism, despair, E-Pollyannaism.
- 4 *Humor or playfulness* is the virtue of liking to “tease and laugh” and seeing the fun side of life. A-humorlessness, O-dourness, E-buffoonery.
- 5 *Spirituality* or sense of purpose is the virtue of seeing and believing in a “higher purpose and meaning in the universe.” A-anomie, O-alienation, E-fanaticism.

Practice: Discover your strengths by taking the “Values in Action Strength Survey” free at <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/> (under “Questionnaires”). The brief “GRIT survey” is also helpful. Read more in Seligman’s books Flourish and The Hope Circuit.

