Mental health and character strengths: the dual role of boosting well-being and reducing suffering

Ryan M. Niemiec

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine how character strengths have an important dual role in mental health in both promoting well-being and mental wellness and also in reducing symptoms and suffering. While there are many studies that have touched upon variables that character strengths can enhance for mental well-being or reduce for suffering, the author actually knows very little about how character strengths might relate to or impact mental health.

Design/methodology/approach – A large-scale study of 12,050 individuals was conducted to explore the self-perceived character strengths that are most helpful for mental health, for handling physical adversity, for handling social adversity and for fostering psychological well-being.

Findings – Some character strengths showed a general effect – showing a strong perceived impact across multiple domains – such as love, perspective, kindness, hope, humor and curiosity. Other character strengths showed a specific effect in that there was a strong perceived impact in one domain, such as perseverance and self-regulation for physical health, spirituality and social intelligence for social health and creativity for mental health. A strength-based approach to understanding and managing emotions was substantially more preferred than cognitive or behavioral approaches. Other findings examined the character strengths most desired to be improved upon for mental health.

Research limitations/implications – The research strategy was cross-sectional, thereby causality cannot be determined. Because of the large sample size, researchers are encouraged to consider examining the findings in intervention studies.

Practical implications – This study indicates that character strengths are highly relevant for mental health, all 24 character strengths are possible pathways to impact mental health (some more than others) and individuals can readily connect ways they can use their character strengths to positively improve their well-being and manage their suffering.

Social implications – Character strengths and their substantial positive potential provide an avenue for public impact on a large scale.

Originality/value – To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first known study to directly examine multiple intersections among mental health and character strengths in a large sample.

Keywords Character strengths, Mental health, VIA classification, Well-being, Adversity, Strength-based approach, Social health

Paper type Research paper

Ryan M. Niemiec is based at the VIA Institute on Character, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA.

Introduction

Suffering is reaching new heights. International data shows that mental health has been and continues to decline. There was an 8% global decline in 2020 and a 3% decline in 2021 (Thiagarajan and Newson, 2021). These researchers examined emotional, social and cognitive problems/symptoms across mental health disorders and positive attributes and computed well-being scores on a continuum ranging from "distressed" to "thriving" (with descriptors of "struggling," "enduring," "managing" and "succeeding" in the middle of the continuum). A staggering 44% of younger people (aged 18–24 years) were in the two

lowest ranges on the continuum (distressed or struggling). Other data sets which have looked exclusively at the USA found that nearly 20% of people experienced a mental illness in 2022 (Mental Health America, 2022).

Taking this data further, it is conceivable to extend the numbers to nearly 8 billion (every person on the planet) when one considers not only people who are experiencing mental problems/disorders but also people who have experienced substantial mental distress in recent past, those who have a family member or close friend who has experienced mental disorders or distress in recent years or those who will experience mental disorders or stress in the near future. In other words, no one is immune to mental suffering and its ripple effects.

The science of positive psychology is a relatively new field to consider with mental health. Unfortunately, there are a number of misconceptions about positive psychology research, one of which is that the field promulgates a mostly exclusive focus on the positive and thereby neglects problems. This myopic view reflects a poor read of the science as a large-scale review of positive psychology, involving more than 18,000 studies, found that suffering was a common feature in positive psychology research (Rusk and Waters, 2013). This finding is corroborated by the large number of studies on character strengths for adversity, conflict, psychopathology, disorders and illness (VIA Institute, 2023), explored later.

In the field, there are a number of well-being models that have strong relevance for mental health. Corey Keyes has championed a dual-continua model of mental health and mental illness positing that these are distinct constructs and therefore people can be high, moderate or low on both, either or neither which align with varying degrees of flourishing and languishing in life (Westerhof and Keyes, 2010). Carol Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being outlines six core well-being dimensions (autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery and positive relationships) with substantial theoretical underpinnings, strong empirical evidence, factorial validity and biological health correlates (Ryff and Singer, 2008). Other prominent well-being theories include Diener's (1984) longstanding work on subjective well-being and Seligman's (2011) popular positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and achievement (PERMA) theory, although some research has shown these latter two models are equivocal and the distinction is largely in the packaging (Goodman *et al.*, 2017). Additional models of well-being build or combine the previous models such as PERMA-H which adds physical health as a central well-being area (Niemiec, 2019b) and PERMA+4 which adds not only physical health but also mindset, environment and economic security (Donaldson *et al.*, 2020).

Why character strengths for mental health?

The hundreds of studies in the science of character strengths have culminated to the following, multifaceted definitions:

- character strengths are positive personality traits that *reflect personal identity* (i.e. who we are);

- *produce positive outcomes* (e.g. boosting well-being such as positive relations and meaning while managing adversity such as stress and illness); and

- *contribute to the greater collective good* (Niemiec, 2018).

The character strengths discussed here encompass the VIA classification of character strengths, a comprehensive consensual nomenclature of 24 character strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). This work involved examining what is best in human beings across the globe (Park *et al.*, 2006), including remote cultures (Biswas-Diener, 2006) and ancient philosophies, religions and contemporary scientific literatures (Dahlsgaard *et al.*, 2005).

Strengths are categorized under larger-order virtues such as creativity and curiosity (virtue of wisdom), bravery and perseverance (virtue of courage), love and social intelligence (virtue of humanity), teamwork and fairness (virtue of justice), forgiveness and self-regulation (virtue of temperance) and hope and gratitude (virtue of transcendence) (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The science continues to unfold, scrutinize and advance this work each month. There are other positive traits of character that are being studied in relation to these 24, such as the traits of gentleness (Niemiec et al., 2023) and patience (Schnitker and Emmons, 2007).

When we hear of mental health, we can think of both decreasing mental suffering and promoting psychological and emotional well-being; however, the majority of attention in the last century has focused on the former – the reduction of symptoms of psychological disorders. While that approach has been successful with a myriad of evidence-based approaches, it has led to an imbalance in the field of psychology. This is unfortunate because there is substantial value in boosting or increasing areas of well-being as shown in emerging evidence and meta-analyses of positive interventions (Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009; Schutte and Malouff, 2019). Moreover, when the two approaches of remediating deficits and amplifying positives/strengths are compared and intervened upon in randomized studies, it is the latter approach that has emerged with higher benefit. Consider the following seven studies that revealed more significant benefits for individuals amplifying positives/strengths in comparison to individuals remediating deficits/correcting weaknesses:

- A clinical study focusing on individuals diagnosed with major depressive disorder had therapists focus on building strengths or remediating deficits in the cognitive-behavioral treatment context. The group randomly assigned to building strengths led to better outcomes and quicker recovery than the group focused on deficit-reduction (Cheavens et al., 2012).

- In outpatient treatment centers, greater benefits for anxiety, stress, depression, suicidal ideation and positive affect were found for the positive affect treatment group in comparison with the negative affect treatment group (Craske et al., 2019).

- Among students preparing for exams, the prevention of negative emotions and distress prior to exams and optimism about the future were significant for only the strengths group (Dolev-Amit et al., 2020).

- Across five studies, individuals learned more from success than from failure, even when incentives were provided for learning (Eskreis-Winkler and Fishbach, 2019).

- In the work context, perceived organizational support for strengths use connected strongly with self-ratings and manager-ratings of job performance, whereas perceived organizational support for deficit correction was unrelated to job performance (Van Woerkom et al., 2016).

- Among graduate students, focusing on strengths led to greater increases in personal growth in the short term (but not the long term), whereas focuses on correcting deficits had no impact on personal growth. A second study found larger benefits in personal growth than deficit correction after three months (Meyers et al., 2015).

- Across two studies, individuals focused on professional development engaged in strategies to develop their relative strengths or to improve their perceived weaknesses. The strengths group consistently showed higher levels of competence, intrinsic motivation and effort intentions compared with the group focusing on weaknesses (Hiemstra and Van Yperen, 2015).

These important studies do not lead to a foregone conclusion of preferencing strengths over deficits nor do they suggest this is the optimal approach in all situations. Rather, they

encourage mental health practitioners and systems to infuse more balance in their approach, in contrast to the standard focus on correcting deficits and problems. The positive psychology field has championed the adage to move people from "what's wrong to what's strong"; that perspective, while critical, is only half of the equation of what character strengths can offer. Indeed, character strengths shift the mindset from weakness and deficit to what's best in a person, *and* they are equally beneficial in helping people to "use what strong to deal with what's wrong."

Evidence for these two perspectives is clear in the character strengths literature. With approximately 800 studies at the end of 2022 (VIA Institute, 2023), character strengths can be characterized as occupying two major streams – boosting well-being and managing adversity. One theory mapped six functions of character strengths across time orientations for well-being/opportunity and for adversity and articulated the priming, mindfulness and appreciation functions for well-being/opportunity and buffering, reappraisal and resilience functions for adversity (Niemiec, 2020). A summary of scientific studies showing the connection between character strengths and a panoply of well-being and adversity areas can be found in Table 1. This table limits the references to one example for each domain, yet for the majority, there are multiple studies supporting character strengths; for a more comprehensive list, see VIA Institute (2023).

Each of these areas of well-being and adversity relate to and impact mental health to some degree. Despite this emerging evidence, there remains far more that we do not know about the connection between character strengths and mental health. In addition, the majority of studies look tangentially at mental health or offer a limited scope (e.g. one variable), as opposed to a closer examination dedicated solely to the connection of character strengths and mental health. There are numerous questions that are unexplored:

Q1. Are all 24 character strengths relevant for mental health?

Q2. Which character strengths are most useful for mental health and related areas of social health and physical health, especially at times of adversity?

Q3. What character strengths do individuals aspire to build up for their mental health?

Q4. How might character strengths positively impact mental health by way of well-being activities?

With an aim to offer direct, unique contributions to mental health, a large-scale study was conducted. The study is described followed by findings, interpretations and future directions for the integration of character strengths and mental health.

Methods

To explore the connections between character strengths, mental health and related areas, a study was conducted over a period of six days in April 2022, using a convenience sample of individuals taking the VIA Inventory of Strengths (i.e. the VIA Survey) on the www.viacharacter.org website. The VIA Inventory is a 96-question, positive-keyed instrument that is a reliable and valid measure of the 24 character strengths (McGrath, 2019). After completing VIA Inventory, each user was given the option to answer seven additional questions (including one qualitative write-in question) pertaining to this research study. These items were created to target important areas of investigation for the integration of character strengths and mental health, with emphasis on examining new territory. Each user could opt-out of the study at any point, thereby answering any number of the research questions.

The participation by users was voluntary. The research items were preceded by the following introduction that subjects reviewed before participating: *We are studying the connection between character strengths and mental well-being and would like to ask 7 additional questions. You can "Skip" this if you wish or you can scroll down to "Continue" at*

Table 1 Examples of scientific connections between character strengths and well-being and adversity

Character strengths to benefit 15 well-being areas

Domain	Reference (limited to one)	Comment
Positive emotions	Wagner *et al.* (2019)	The character strengths most connected to positive emotions (per self-report and informant report) were zest, hope and humor
Engagement	Bakker and van Wingerden (2020)	Randomized study showing the impact of strengths training to increase work engagement, personal resources and strengths use
Positive relationships	Kashdan *et al.* (2017)	Recognition and appreciation of character strengths in one's relationship partner predicted greater relationship commitment, satisfaction, intimacy and needs met
Meaning	Peterson *et al.* (2007)	The character strengths most associated with meaning were spirituality, gratitude, hope, zest and curiosity
Achievement	Villacís *et al.* (2021)	Character strengths showed positive associations with academic performance among undergraduate students
Leisure	Wagner *et al.* (2021)	Character strengths profiles were significantly associated with the leisure domain and this was connected with flourishing
Physical health	Leventhal *et al.* (2016)	Randomized controlled trials of thousands of girls in impoverished areas of India found that programs with character strengths (as opposed to programs without character strengths) gave a greater boost to physical health and other outcomes
Social health	Wagner (2018)	This study found that certain character strengths (honesty, humor, kindness, fairness) were most desirable and important for peers to have in a friend, whereas other character strengths were more connected with higher peer acceptance
Spiritual health	Niemiec *et al.* (2020)	Explores the evidence for integrating spirituality and character strengths and proposes a theoretical model and practices for the mutual synergy of character strengths and secular spirituality
Autonomy	Harzer (2016)	A comprehensive review found the character strengths most connected with autonomy were honesty, bravery and perspective
Environment/nature	Merino *et al.* (2020)	Character strengths were strongly connected with nature, especially appreciation of beauty, followed by love of learning and curiosity
Mindfulness	Pang and Ruch (2019b)	The character strengths most connected with total mindfulness and most mindfulness skills were hope, bravery, curiosity, zest and social intelligence
Peace	Niemiec (2021)	Offers theoretical and initial empirical evidence for ways character strengths support levels of peace, especially personal peace, relational peace and the reduction of conflict
Healthy self-care	Weziak-Bialowolska *et al.* (2022)	The character strengths most connected with healthy self-care activities and routines were zest, hope, self-regulation, curiosity and gratitude
Healthy living	Proyer *et al.* (2013)	Character strengths were strongly associated with a wide range of healthy behaviors, including active way of life and healthy eating

Character strengths to benefit 20 adversity areas

Domain	Reference (limited to one)	Comment
Depression	Schutte and Malouff (2019)	Meta-analysis revealing that randomized-controlled trials using the intervention "use a signature strength in a new way" leads to greater well-being, flourishing, strengths levels and less depression
Suicidal ideation	Cheng *et al.* (2020)	Among older adults, character strengths were associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation
Anxiety	Freidlin *et al.* (2017)	Individuals with (and without) social anxiety disorder were able to be correctly sorted (with nearly 90% accuracy) based on their patterns of character strengths overuse and underuse
Paranoia	McTiernan *et al.* (2020)	Strengths use was positively associated with positive self-beliefs and moderated the relationship between paranoia and life satisfaction
Stress/resilience	Cherif *et al.* (2020)	Several character strengths were associated with bouncing back from stressors among military cadets
Psychological vulnerabilities	Huta and Hawley (2010)	Character strengths buffer people from vulnerabilities that can lead to depression and anxiety, such as perfectionism and the need for approval
Grief	Blanchard *et al.* (2021)	Character strengths showed stability across three time points among adults experiencing a loss; some strengths were associated with less impairment and depression
Coping in youth	Toback *et al.* (2016)	Randomized study creating interventions linking the top character strengths with coping strategies among psychiatrically hospitalized youth and finding sustained benefits to self-efficacy and self-esteem

(*continued*)

Table 1

Character strengths to benefit 15 well-being areas

Domain	Reference (limited to one)	Comment
Alcohol use	Logan *et al.* (2010)	Students who abstained from drinking alcohol had higher scores than drinkers on all six virtues of the VIA classification
Traumatic brain injury	Andrewes *et al.* (2014)	Randomized study found that a signature strengths activity boosted happiness among people with traumatic brain injury
Dementia caregivers	García-Castro *et al.* (2019)	Caregiver burden was connected with lower character strengths scores on hope, zest, social intelligence and love
Chronic pain	Graziosi *et al.* (2020)	Of the 24 character strengths, zest was the highest associated with pain self-efficacy and a zest intervention boosted this variable and the capacity to function despite pain
Childhood illness	Chaves *et al.* (2016)	Among children with a life-threatening illness, character strengths predicted positive change in life satisfaction over time
Chronic illnesses	Yan *et al.* (2020)	A systematic review found character strengths interventions helped chronic illnesses by boosting self-efficacy and reducing depression
Trauma	Peterson *et al.* (2008)	The more traumatic events reported by an individual, the higher the character strengths scores (with a few exceptions)
Homelessness	Cooley *et al.* (2019)	Signature strengths of character were connected with resilience, self-worth and well-being of individuals without a home
COVID-19 coping	Waters *et al.* (2021)	Reviews numerous ways positive psychology factors can buffer mental illness, bolster mental health and broaden capacities, especially during a pandemic
War and terrorism	Shoshani and Slone (2016)	Among more than 1,000 adolescents exposed to long periods of war, terrorism and political conflict, numerous character strengths were found to negatively relate to psychiatric symptoms
Natural disasters	Duan *et al.* (2015)	Among people in China who experienced a natural disaster, there was a strong relationship between character strengths/virtues and resilience and the former contributed strongly to posttraumatic growth
National adversity	Peterson and Seligman (2003)	Elevation of several character strengths in a US sample (but not a European sample) were found following the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11

any time to go to your free VIA Survey results. Thank you for your time and for helping to advance the science of character strengths!

For four of the seven research questions, the user was invited to select one character strength (or none) that best pertained to them for each question. Short definitions were deployed for each strength. This is important because it is estimated that the majority of participants were taking the VIA Survey for the first time and thereby their knowledge of the character strengths was likely low (strengths knowledge/experience were not assessed). While the 24 strengths reflect a user-friendly nomenclature, some strengths may not be immediately clear in terms of their meaning or relation to mental health and could otherwise be less likely selected for that reason. The short definitions bring each participant to the same place in regard to precisely what the term is referring to. The definitions used for these four items were the following:

1. Creativity: being original; seeing/doing things in new ways.

2. Curiosity: exploring; seeking novelty; open to experiences.

3. Judgment: critical thinking; rational-minded; thinking things through.

4. Love of learning: mastering new skills & topics; building knowledge.

5. Perspective: providing wise counsel; taking a big picture view.

6. Bravery: facing fears, threats, or challenges; speaking up for what's right.

7. Perseverance: persisting; finishing what is started; overcoming obstacles.

8. Honesty: telling the truth; being authentic; being sincerity.

9. Zest: being energetic; enthusiastic; doing things wholeheartedly.

10. Love: being genuine; showing warmth; valuing close relationships.

11. Kindness: being generous; caring; compassionate; nice and friendly.

12. Social intelligence: being aware of feelings & motives of self/others; acting accordingly.

13. Teamwork: being loyal; contributing to group efforts.

14. Fairness: acting justly; not letting feelings bias decisions.

15. Leadership: organizing a group to get things done; positively guiding others.

16. Forgiveness: being merciful; accepting others' shortcomings; letting go of hurts.

17. Humility: being modest; placing attention on others; not bragging.

18. Prudence: being careful about choices; cautious; not taking undue risks.

19. Self-regulation: being self-controlled; disciplined; manages impulses & emotions.

20. Appreciation of beauty/excellence: experiencing awe, wonder, admiration, elevation.

21. Gratitude: being thankful for the good in life; sharing thanks; feeling blessed.

22. Hope: being optimistic; positive; future-minded; expecting the best.

23. Humor: being playful, seeing the lighter side, bringing smiles to others.

24. Spirituality: searching for meaning; feeling purpose in life; connecting with the sacred.

25. None of the above.

The research questions used in this study included these seven, in the following order:

RQ1. Which character strength is most helpful for your mental health/mental well-being?

- Drop-down list of the 24 character strengths, definitions and an option for "None of the above."

RQ2. Please explain how the strength you chose is helpful to you.

- Participants were invited to write in their response, with no word limit.

RQ3. When you feel stressed, emotionally upset or experiencing a problem, to feel better, which of the following are you *most likely* to do?

- Use a character strength to challenge my thinking.
- Use a character strength to think in a new, positive way.
- Use a character strength to directly face/understand my feelings.
- Use a character strength to manage my feelings in a new, positive way.
- Use a character strength to take action.
- Use a character strength to try a new, positive behavior.
- None of the above.

RQ4. When you feel stressed, emotionally upset or experiencing a problem, which of the following will your character strengths best help you with?

- Creating/experiencing a positive emotion.
- Finding/experiencing an activity that is engaging.
- Building/experiencing a positive relationship with someone.

- Cultivating/experiencing some meaning in life.

- Working to achieve or accomplish a task or project.

- Improving/Focusing on my physical health.

- None of the above.

RQ5. Which character strength do you want/wish you could use more to help with your mental health?

- Drop-down list of the 24 character strengths, definitions and an option for "None of the above."

RQ6. Generally speaking, when you feel physically unwell, which character strength is most helpful to you?

- Drop-down list of the 24 character strengths, definitions and an option for "None of the above."

RQ7. Generally speaking, when you feel lonely, excluded or socially isolated, which character strength is most helpful to you?

- Drop-down list of the 24 character strengths, definitions and an option for "None of the above."

Following the research questions, each participant had the option to answer demographic questions. Then, participants received their free results on the VIA Inventory of Strengths, which includes a personalized rank order of their character strengths from 1 to 24, along with definitions for each strength.

Results

A total of 12,050 individuals answered the VIA Survey items during the six-day period of the study. To maintain validity of the results, participants taking the VIA Survey are required to answer all 96 items, which then enables them to view their results. As mentioned, the research questions and demographic questions were optional.

Age could not be calculated, however, in similar studies using this approach on the VIA site, the average age of participants is consistently around 34.0 with a standard deviation of 13.5.

The demographics of the participants are offered in Table 2 and reveal a wide range of respondents with females making up 65% of the sample, those with a bachelor's degree as the most frequent responders for education status at 30%, employed full-time workers at about 55% and married and never married as the most frequent martial statuses at nearly 46% and 45%, respectively. For the country analysis, there were 128 countries represented in those who took the VIA Inventory the week of this study. The USA had the largest representation (over 50%), followed by Australia (over 10%), the UK, Canada and the Philippines. All six major continents (except South America) were represented among the top ten countries with the most frequent responders. The percentages for the top ten countries can be found in Table 2.

VIA Inventory results

The results of the VIA Inventory of Strengths are found in Table 3. The highest character strengths in the sample were honesty, kindness, fairness, judgment and appreciation of beauty and the lowest character strengths were self-regulation, perseverance, zest, spirituality and bravery. The general frequency patterns of these strengths are consistent with findings in the literature (McGrath, 2015; Park *et al.*, 2006), although the versions of the

Table 2 Demographics

Demographic	Specifics	%
Gender	Females	65.0
	Males	33.0
	Nonbinary	1.4
	Prefer not to say	1.2
Education	<High school	2.5
	High school	11.5
	Some college	15.0
	Certificate, technical or associate's degree	9.8
	Bachelor's degree	30.2
	Some graduate school	6.6
	Graduate degree (master's, doctorate)	24.6
Marital status	Single/never married	44.9
	Married/domestic partnership	45.9
	Divorced/separated	8.7
	Widowed	2.0
Employment	Employed full-time	54.8
	Employed part-time	10.7
	Active military	2.7
	Full-time student	17.6
	Homemaker	1.7
	Retired	2.3
	Disabled or unable to work	0.8
	Unemployed	5.6
	Other	3.9
Country	US	53.7
	Australia	11.6
	UK	5.8
	Canada	5.3
	Philippines	2.6
	India	2.2
	New Zealand	2.2
	Ireland	1.3
	Singapore	1.2
	South Africa	0.8
	Other countries	13.3

VIA Inventory are different, in that these referenced studies used an older version that was 240 questions and the measure used in this study was 96 questions and has improved psychometrics (McGrath, 2019).

Mental health items

In examining the mental health research items, several tables are offered. Participants that skipped a given question were eliminated from the percentages for that question because the items already included an option for participants to select "None of the above" which are included in the analyses.

Three of the questions examined character strengths from a biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977) – a holistic way of considering interrelated areas of functioning including physical, psychological and social well-being – each considered important for mental health. These items (numbers 1, 6 and 7 described earlier) veer toward an adversity perspective and each takes the lens of character strengths that are perceived to be "most helpful." The data for these three items can be considered together in Table 4. Percentages were rounded to the nearest tenth.

Considering all three domains and looking at character strength ranked in the top seven for any domain, it was love that was the most common strength reported as helpful and was the

Table 3	VIA Inventory/VIA Survey results (N = 12,050)	
Character strength	*Average raw score*	*Ranking*
Honesty	4.11	1
Kindness	4.03	2
Fairness	3.99	3
Judgment	3.90	4
Appreciation of beauty	3.87	5
Perspective	3.87	6
Social intelligence	3.86	7
Curiosity	3.86	8
Love of learning	3.85	9
Humor	3.78	10
Hope	3.75	11
Teamwork	3.72	12
Love	3.69	13
Gratitude	3.66	14
Forgiveness	3.66	15
Humility	3.66	16
Prudence	3.62	17
Creativity	3.60	18
Leadership	3.55	19
Bravery	3.45	20
Spirituality	3.39	21
Zest	3.30	22
Perseverance	3.24	23
Self-regulation	3.20	24

highest reported choice for mental and social health and third highest choice for physical health. The strengths of perspective and kindness were consistently high and in the top seven across the three domains.

Other strengths were strong for two of the three domains such as hope for physical and social health, humor for mental and physical health and curiosity for mental and social health. Additional character strengths were uniquely high in one of the three domains. These were perseverance for physical health (1st), spirituality for social health (2nd), social intelligence for social health (3rd), self-regulation for physical health (4th) and creativity for mental health (4th).

With exception of self-regulation (and prudence for physical health), all character strengths in the virtues of temperance and justice scored low (infrequently selected as helpful) across all biopsychosocial elements.

Also noteworthy in Table 4 is the percentage of people who selected "None of the above." Those selecting "none" were quite a bit higher for the physical domain than the social or mental domain. This might point to the challenge that some people might have in connecting something abstract (psychological character strengths) with something concrete (the physical body). The domain of mental health had the lowest "none" which could reflect a greater ease in drawing connections between character strengths and psychological well-being.

When the research shifts to a mental health aspiration – those character strengths participants wished they could use more to help with their mental well-being – a different constellation of strengths emerges. Table 5 shows the character strengths most desired for mental health to be self-regulation, bravery, perseverance, creativity and forgiveness. Interestingly, these five strengths are all in the bottom ten of the rank order of this sample. The least desired strengths for boosting mental health were teamwork, fairness, humility, appreciation of beauty and prudence. Only about 1% reported none of the 24 strengths were most desired for their mental health.

Table 4 Character strengths and biopsychosocial well-being

Character strength	Most helpful for mental health (%)	Mental health ranking	Most helpful when physically unwell (%)	Physical ranking	Most helpful when socially unwell (%)	Social ranking
Creativity	7.3	4	2.1	15	5.0	9
Curiosity	7.5	3	1.8	18	5.8	6
Judgment	3.6	14	2.8	12	2.0	17
Love of learning	6.4	7	2.5	14	5.2	8
Perspective	6.7	5	6.1	7	6.2	4
Bravery	2.5	16	3.5	10	3.5	13
Perseverance	4.9	10	11.4	1	3.1	14
Honesty	5.6	8	2.0	17	2.1	16
Zest	2.3	17	2.8	13	1.6	20
Love	9.6	1	9.4	3	14.1	1
Kindness	7.6	2	6.2	6	5.3	7
Social intelligence	3.1	15	1.3	19	6.8	3
Teamwork	0.8	22	0.6	22	1.7	19
Fairness	0.7	23	0.4	23	0.8	22
Leadership	1.2	20	0.3	24	0.7	23
Forgiveness	1.7	19	1.1	20	2.0	18
Humility	1.0	21	0.7	21	0.9	21
Prudence	0.4	24	3.3	11	0.6	24
Self-regulation	4.1	13	8.8	4	4.5	12
Appreciation of beauty	1.7	18	2.1	16	2.9	15
Gratitude	5.2	9	5.2	8	4.9	10
Hope	4.2	12	10.2	2	5.9	5
Humor	6.6	6	6.4	5	4.5	11
Spirituality	4.8	11	4.3	9	7.4	2
None of the above	0.7	N/A	4.6	N/A	2.8	N/A

Note: Mental well-being (N = 9,766), physical well-being (N = 8,956) and social well-being (N = 8,988)

Table 5 Character strengths desired for mental health (N = 8,992)

Character strength	Wished for (%)	Ranking
Creativity	7.0	4
Curiosity	3.1	14
Judgment	4.5	9
Love of learning	4.1	11
Perspective	5.4	6
Bravery	10.5	2
Perseverance	7.4	3
Honesty	1.9	19
Zest	4.7	8
Love	5.2	7
Kindness	2.3	16
Social intelligence	3.5	13
Teamwork	0.6	24
Fairness	0.6	23
Leadership	2.1	17
Forgiveness	6.2	5
Humility	0.9	22
Prudence	1.4	20
Self-regulation	13.4	1
Appreciation of beauty	1.1	21
Gratitude	4.2	10
Hope	4.1	12
Humor	2.0	18
Spirituality	2.6	15
None of the above	1.3	N/A

The next two areas of study directly focused on using character strengths to create mental well-being at times of adversity. Table 6 shows the target of the psychological realms of thinking, feeling and behaving. For each, there was one option focused on addressing the area (understanding/challenging/using) and also one option on making a "new/positive" change.

The psychological realm of feelings/emotions occupied the top two approaches with nearly one-quarter of the sample noting they would use their character strengths to face or understand their feelings at difficult times. The least common mental health coping choices were challenging thinking and trying a new behavior.

When categorized dyadically across the three psychological domains, emotional coping with character strengths was the dominant preference at 42%, followed by coping through thinking at 25% and then making changes in behavior or taking action at 23%. The resonance of emotional coping is a substantial margin over the other areas by 17% and 19%, respectively.

Table 7 targets the five areas of PERMA well-being (Seligman, 2011), with the 6th addition of health, explored by some researchers as a set of six (Niemiec, 2019b). Here the variation across well-being areas is less distributed. Achievement and positive emotions were the top well-being areas to use character strengths, each nearing 20%. Engagement was next at approximately 17%, followed by meaning and physical health tied for 4th highest. Positive relationships were the least area of well-being reported for character strengths at 12%. The range of outcomes (12%–19%) for this well-being item is much less variable than the previous one.

Interestingly, those responding none of the above were nearly half for this item in comparison with the previous well-being items shown in Table 6. This may indicate that individuals find it easier to reflect on and consider their character strengths with a well-

Table 6	Using character strengths for mental health by targeting thinking, feeling and behaving ($N = 9,158$)
Well-being approach	*%*
Facing/understanding feelings	24.0
Managing feelings in a new/positive way	18.3
Taking action	16.4
Thinking in a new/positive way	16.2
Challenging thinking	8.5
Trying a new/positive behavior	6.8
None of the above	9.8

Table 7	Using character strengths for mental health by directly targeting well-being areas ($N = 9,012$)
Well-being approach	*%*
Achievement	19.0
Positive emotion	18.9
Engagement	16.7
Meaning	14.0
Physical health	14.0
Positive relationships	12.2
None of the above	5.2

being domain as opposed to the more abstract psychological item that explored thoughts, feelings and actions.

There was one qualitative item which was a follow-up question to the first question asking which character strengths are most helpful for mental well-being. Participants were invited to share how the chosen strength was helpful to them. A total of 6,905 people offered some explanation. Table 8 offers one example for each of the 24 character strengths, using the participants' own words (correcting grammatical/syntax errors) and the character strengths they selected. Participants' observations point to how character strengths operate as pathways to greater mental health. Some participants shared about mental distress

Table 8 Participants' examples of how the 24 character strengths are helpful for mental health	
Character strength	*How it is helpful for mental health*
Creativity	I feel like I use creativity specifically in the arts to help when I need an outlet for myself mentally. It makes me feel completed and relieves stress and anxiety
Curiosity	Experiencing new things makes me feel good. It increases my energy. Tasting a new delicious food, visiting a new place, meeting with different people, etc
Judgment	When faced with difficulties, thinking critically about how to solve problems helps me avoid getting depressed
Love of learning	I very much love learning about why a person, or even an animal, behaves in the manner that it does. The strength allows me to gain the knowledge that I need to break the cycle of dysfunction and abuse in my family
Perspective	Understanding the big picture and the significance of things really helps me stay even
Bravery	I have suffered many defeats in life and being brave enough to take the first steps is the most powerful way I have helped my health and mental well-being
Perseverance	Finishing what I have started or committed to is very important for my mental well-being as otherwise I would keep on thinking about that and that will impact anything else that I work on or think about
Honesty	I can sleep peacefully. I don't have to pretend to be something else
Zest	If I do things wholeheartedly it means that I'm doing them with pleasure and not as a task/job. It means I will care about what I'm doing and how it represents me
Love	Our closest connections are our support system, and telling those people that I love them is one of the best feelings, especially when I'm having negative or dark thoughts
Kindness	Doing for others gives back to me, sometimes in small ways but keeps the focus outward instead of inward thinking my life is so bad
Social intelligence	You can adapt to situations better when you're able to pay attention/acknowledge how YOU and OTHERS are feeling
Teamwork	Feeling connected to others and working towards a common goal. Feeling like I am contributing to something and being valued by others
Fairness	This strength is helpful to me because I try to be fair to everyone despite how I feel about them. I like to think and react with my mind instead of my heart
Leadership	It makes me feel good when I am able to lead a group towards a common goal
Forgiveness	This strength is helpful to me because I can let go of the hurt the person caused me which can help me feel lighter, but I won't forget so that it won't happen again at least with that person
Humility	For my mental well-being, I find that uplifting others is vitally important as seeing them shine brings me joy
Prudence	I calculate the outcome and results of anything and always imagine the worst-case scenario to be ready for it emotionally
Self-regulation	Self-regulation allows me to be in control of how I feel and how I subsequently act. And, it allows me to fully understand a situation before reacting
Appreciation of beauty	If I'm having a bad day or stressed out, looking at something beautiful or unique can snap me out of my mood very quickly
Gratitude	If I have gratitude every day, obstacles and hardships will not overtake my life. I will always find something to be thankful for, and it helps me keep moving forward in life and looking towards the positive
Hope	When times are tough, I need to be hopeful for a good outcome. This keeps my mind focused and mentally stable
Humor	Humor has always been my coping mechanism and keeps me from spending too much time dwelling on the negative
Spirituality	Thinking about my purpose and the meaning of everything happens to me help me cope with mental illness. It makes me happy to know that all my actions have meaning, and it allows me to move on from hard situations

prevention, some discussed enhancing mental health, whereas others spoke of how the strength helped them cope with or recover from depression, anxiety, and/or trauma.

Discussion

This study aimed to delve into the underdeveloped yet pivotal connection between character strengths and mental health by means of gathering data across a large international sample of adults. The data indicate character strengths have a pivotal role in mental health. Their impact and potential is substantial and multi-faceted.

All 24 are possible for mental health

When participants were invited to consider the character strength that is most important to them for mental health, physical health adversity or social health adversity, all 24 character strengths are reported by some people. This seems to indicate that – like in previous studies with different outcome variables (Niemiec, 2021) – all 24 strengths are possible pathways of benefit. The write-in question revealed a range of responses across the 24 strengths with 6,905 participants choosing to offer some explanation as to how they use their chosen character strength for their mental health. These findings support the adage that all 24 character strengths matter (Niemiec, 2018).

General and specific effects across mental/physical/social domains

While all strengths were chosen, at the same time, some strengths are highlighted far more than others. It seems that some character strengths are useful in a general or broad way, across all domains of mental, physical and social well-being. This *general effect* seems to be evident in the character strengths of love, perspective and kindness and to a slightly lesser degree, hope, humor and curiosity which were strong for two of the three domains. This indicates the importance of turning to closeness, warmth, attentiveness toward others and seeing the bigger picture as useful for all areas of health. Having an optimistic, future-oriented approach, keeping a lightheartedness about life and taking an approach of exploration also seem to be strong, broad contributors to health.

In contrast, there are strengths reported as uniquely helpful for one specific domain, but not, on average, for other domains. This reported usefulness may indicate a *specific effect* of that strength for that particular domain as opposed to a strength being generally useful in most situations. For mental health, it was creativity that stood out in this way. The utility of being able to come up with multiple ways to solve problems and to create new things in the world was reported as uniquely important for mental well-being. For physical health, it was perseverance and self-regulation that were uniquely high as strengths to turn to when confronting adversity in this domain (perseverance was especially striking at more than 11% of the sample reporting it). This seems fitting as overcoming obstacles and challenges and having self-discipline and self-management skills with daily activities are particularly important areas of strengths for overcoming physical adversity. For social health, the character strengths of spirituality and social intelligence were the second and third highest reported strengths and were uniquely high for this domain. These specific effects seem to indicate that when a person is feeling isolated, lonely or excluded, they might turn toward a search for or alignment with what is sacred or meaningful to them which might be nature, inner peace, a close relationship or pursuing something transcendent or they may turn toward the awareness of their own and others' feelings and finding ways to express those in relation to others. While not mutually exclusive, these might be seen as two distinct options individuals can turn to in handling social struggles.

It is also useful to discuss the character strengths that were not reported much across the domains. The strengths of justice (i.e. teamwork, fairness, leadership) were rarely selected

as helpful. These three strengths ranked in the bottom six across all three domains. The virtue of temperance was similarly low with humility, forgiveness and prudence not being selected often, with an exception of prudence which showed some importance for physical health and the strength of self-regulation which, as mentioned, was particularly important for physical health and was moderately helpful for the other domains. The moderate ranking of prudence for physical health is likely aligned with people being cautious about their choices to not take risks or overdo their actions when they are suffering. For the other mentioned strengths, it appears that although they are possible to deploy in these situations, they are not strengths people immediately consider turning to in the face of adversity to cope or boost well-being.

Most desired strengths for mental health

The findings on the character strengths that participants most desired for their mental health revealed self-regulation, bravery, perseverance, creativity and forgiveness at the top of the list. These are effortful strengths – strengths that people want more of yet are not typically high in (indeed these strengths were in the bottom ten for this sample). It is not uncommon for people to want to boost up the character strengths they perceive they are low in (Niemiec, 2018). It is natural to want to boost one's willpower or effort with these strengths – to have more courage, self-discipline, the capacity to create, to let go of resentments and to be able to keep pushing despite difficult challenges.

The largest percentage of participants said the main character strength they wished they had more of to help with their mental health was self-regulation. This self-control can take many forms – to have more control of feelings, impulses, bad habits, and word choice – but such vices, habits and problem behaviors are ingrained, amorphous, hidden, confusing and often victorious. Next highest was the desire to be braver for mental health. Bravery requires the universal challenge of moving out of one's comfort zone, challenging the system or the status quo, speaking an unpopular opinion or facing fears.

Participants also wanted to be more perseverant – to not give up as easily. When someone is trying to reach a goal, obstacles get in the way, such as mental fatigue, physical fatigue, negative judgments, people getting in the way and daily life hassles and routines. Creativity was the next desired strength – to be able to readily come up with ideas. This shows the value of the mind to desire to open to new ways of doing things, think of new solutions to problems and take action that is novel. Participants also wished they could be more forgiving. The mental burden of holding onto resentment, anger and hurt feelings can be overwhelming. Studies consistently show that forgiveness takes time as an ongoing process involving effort and should not be viewed as "one and done" (Baskin and Enright, 2004).

Activities and interventions can target any of these desired strengths (see "Practical implications" section for examples). It might be overwhelming for individuals to focus on all five at once (Dalton and Spiller, 2012), therefore targeting one or two might be the optimal choice (Niemiec and McGrath, 2019). As only about 1% of participants selected "none of the above" to this question, this indicates that participants seem to know what they need to positively contribute to their mental health.

Well-being pathways to overcome adversity

The use of character strengths in the emotional realm – facing/understanding feelings and managing feelings – was the dominant area of coping with stress, in comparison to strategies focused on thinking or behaving. This is surprising considering character strengths are often discussed in terms of concrete behaviors and actions participants report (e.g. kind acts, using signature strengths in new ways, counting blessings, writing forgiveness letters). The literature has underexplored the ways character strengths can face

feelings, challenge thinking and confront adversity through "character strengths thinking" and "character strengths feeling."

The other item explored the use of character strengths within six well-being areas to help with stress and problems. The majority of participants selected one of the well-being areas which points to the theme of character strengths being substantial pathways to well-being, with or without duress (Niemiec and Pearce, 2021; Seligman, 2011; Wagner et al., 2019). Participants most clearly resonated with using character strengths to create/experience a positive emotion and using character strengths to achieve or accomplish a task/project. These selections seem to align with approaches of positive reappraisal (reframing a negative to perceive the positive) and self-efficacy (generating small successes to feel effective in one's life) to handle stress. While positive reappraisal and self-efficacy are established as beneficial areas, the use of character strengths as pathways to each has some exploration (Niemiec, 2014) but remain in need of further empirical examination.

Practical implications

When considering ways to apply this research, one might take a wide lens of the word "practitioner" – someone who helps others in their well-being or adversity management and might be a mental health counselor, coach, manager, educator, teacher, parent or oneself (for self-development). A number of practical strategies for practitioners to positively impact mental well-being and adversity are shared considering both the new lenses offered in this study and the larger context of the character strengths literature.

Apply signature strengths to mental health

Because of the popularity and success of signature strengths interventions, it is reasonable to consider an intervention on signature strengths directly applied to mental health. Meta-analysis showed this intervention boosted life satisfaction, flourishing and lowered depression (Schutte and Malouff, 2019), all of which are important for mental well-being. Therefore, a signature strengths intervention might be adjusted for mental health, such as "use a signature strength in a new way to boost your mental health" or "use a signature strength to manage an adversity/stressor you are facing that impacts your mental health." Table 8 offers a starting point for any individual to reflect on their top strengths and understand ways they might be used or be relevant for mental health.

Target the top five mental health strengths

Studies have shown it can be beneficial to directly target an outcome that is being pursued by focusing interventions on character strengths most highly correlated with the outcome; for example, many studies have shown certain character strengths (e.g. zest, hope, curiosity) to be consistently the highest correlated with happiness, and studies have also shown these strengths can be targeted to cause greater happiness (Proyer et al., 2013). A similar approach might be taken with the character strengths people reported as most important for their mental health – love, kindness, curiosity, creativity and perspective. This study was a collection of highest percentages, as opposed to correlational data, however the large sample offers important insights as to what individuals believe are already successful for their mental health.

Pursue a mental health "aspiration strength"

It is a common adage to go where the motivation is (Miller and Rollnick, 2002). Clients will often know what they are looking for or know what they are wishing they had more of. Character strengths are capacities that can be boosted, each to some degree for a given person (Niemiec, 2018), therefore as opposed to helping a client blindly boost their lowest

strength (a fairly common practitioner approach), a practitioner might query the client about their mental health aspiration strength (which, per this study, might also be a lower strength).

If the client is unsure which strength they aspire toward for their mental health, professionals might support clients in boosting one or more of the strengths most desired in this study – self-regulation, bravery, perseverance, creativity and forgiveness. Collectively, these five strengths made up 44% of the desired strengths reported. As a set of practical examples, Niemiec (2018) turned specific scientific findings into concrete practices to boost each of the 24 character strengths; here are examples of specific strategies for these five strengths:

1. *Self-regulation*: Start a daily self-monitoring log, using your smart-device or computer. Keep track of how you are feeling mentally and the food, drink, activities and people you interact with. Make note of patterns that show up before you feel a certain way.

2. *Bravery*: As you consider using your bravery strength, focus on the outcome of the courageous act, for example, think of the person you would be helping or remind yourself of the goodness of the action you would be taking.

3. *Perseverance*: As you work on a project, pay attention to how you have put forth good focus, effort and energy with the task/project. Reward yourself when you "try your best" as opposed to when you reach the end of the project.

4. *Creativity*: Develop divergent thinking, which means to generate multiple alternate solutions, instead of searching for one "correct" solution. After you name a problem, brainstorm a list of ideas of potential solutions.

5. *Forgiveness*: After someone offends you, take time to think about how the offender is a complex human being who needs to experience positive growth and transformation, rather than seeing them in all-or-none/good-or bad terms.

Use character strengths as pathways to boost a well-being area

Participants in this study resonated with the use of character strengths to boost a well-being area at times of stress and adversity. While the preference for certain well-being areas was not overwhelming, there was some preference for benefiting oneself by using strengths to accomplish a project or to generate more positive emotions. A practitioner working with a client might invite the client to name the well-being area they most want to improve and the well-being area they are strongest with. This could be followed by considering the character strengths that make the latter area successful and those character strengths needed as a pathway to boost the former area.

Explore the interconnection of character strengths and emotional well-being

As participants considered the use of character strengths for their thinking, feelings and actions, the category of feelings was substantially higher than the others, occupying the top two choices. Participants interested in improving their mental health – especially at times of stress – noted strengths could best help them to face/understand feelings and to manage feelings in a new/positive way. These areas of emotional health will be familiar to the majority of counselors, psychologists and social workers, however, are a mostly unexplored terrain in the science and practice of character strengths. Practitioners can use character strengths as an overlay to any approach or theoretical orientation they implement (Niemiec, 2018), and from the perspective of people in this study, it might be that there is a high motivation for that approach to pertain to the emotional level. Strategies involving exploration might help clients in a number of ways. For example:

- *Understanding emotions*: for example, how might you use your curiosity or love of learning to better understand where your anxiety and anger are coming from?

- *Facing emotions*: for example, how might you use your bravery to face the sadness you are currently feeling?

- *Accepting difficult emotions*: for example, how might you turn your strength of fairness, forgiveness or kindness inward to accept the upsetting feelings you are having?

- *Discussing difficult emotions*: for example, how might you turn to your strength of teamwork or social intelligence to share your feelings with a trusted person?

- *Feeling the emotions*: for example, how might you use your strength of self-regulation to "breathe with" and be present to the emotion you are feeling?

- *Taking action with the emotion and self-care*: for example, how might you use your strength of creativity or perspective to take care of your anger and take care of yourself amidst your current suffering?

Weave in character strengths in the treatment of mental disorders

Character strengths have been a popular and successful addition in the psychotherapy context as championed by Tayyab Rashid (2014) who has deeply woven character strengths into positive psychotherapy with good success. The integration of mindfulness and character strengths has been popular among mental health practitioners and the addition of an evidenced-based, manualized program called mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP, Niemiec, 2014) is showing superior results in multiple studies when compared with the most popular mindfulness programs (Monzani *et al.*, 2021) among nonclinical populations. Systemic reviews of MBSP (Prasath *et al.*, 2021) and mixed methods studies of MBSP (Whelan-Berry and Niemiec, 2021) show consistently beneficial results for well-being and adversity, yet the clinical studies using MBSP have not yet been published at the time of this writing.

One of the focal points of MBSP includes the concepts of character strengths overuse, underuse and optimal use and the emerging language therein (Niemiec, 2019a), which are popular among mental health professionals who wish to reframe some of the mental illness labels as well as to offer empowering pathways by which clients might engage in their treatment and personal growth. Studies are beginning to conceptualize and understand different mental illnesses through a constellation of character strengths overuse and underuse, for example, social anxiety disorder (Freidlin *et al.*, 2017) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Littman-Ovadia and Freidlin, 2019).

Limitations, future directions and conclusion

One limitation of this study is the data collected are from a convenience sample including those individuals coming to the VIA Institute website to take the VIA Survey, rather than a representative sample. At the same time, the VIA Institute website population does not exceedingly differ from a representative US population. The VIA Institute population tends to skew toward higher levels of education and toward more women, which were true for this study. This concern is partially offset by the large sample size which helps to provide compelling insights in regard to the variables in question.

Future studies might investigate each of the strategies offered in the preceding Practical implications section. In addition, randomized-controlled, intervention studies on character strengths subsets (e.g. signature strengths) and specific character strengths (e.g. curiosity) to positively impact well-being and manage adversity for general psychological health are needed. Such studies might also focus on mental health disorders. A large number of interventions with supportive evidence are outlined in Niemiec (2018).

At these times of increased suffering, practitioners, educators, policymakers and researchers are encouraged to pursue new, science-based pathways to have an impact on people on the individual level and societal level. The integration of character strengths into mental health for the general consumer as well as within mental health treatment is an opportunity for application expansion and depth.

Character strengths offer an important dual role of reducing symptoms and suffering while also boosting well-being and enhancing the good. Practitioners would do well to maintain a character strengths mindset of helping individuals shift their focus from what is wrong to what is strong, while also supporting them in using what is strong to deal with what is wrong.

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Corresponding author

Ryan M. Niemiec can be contacted at: ryan@viacharacter.org