

The Mindfulness and Character Strengths Workbook

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I reviewed Ryan Niemiec's textbook, *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners*, in 2017. Part of my comments included the need for hands-on activities for readers to use, access to audio meditations, and so forth.

And here we have it: *The Mindfulness and Character Strengths Workbook* is everything I hoped for and more. It is a well-written, easy-to-follow, detailed to the nth degree workbook with extensive, free online materials to support the process including audio-guided meditations. Congratulations Ryan on a much-needed workbook to support people exploring character strengths and their integration with mindfulness.

Why write a workbook?

The reasoning for this workbook was two-fold. The first was to fill a gap. It seems there were no books for readers (a general audience) to learn about and practice working with the integration of character strengths and mindfulness. Yep. I agree. Second, practitioners clamored for a user-friendly book for their students, clients, and employees who were studying mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP). I understand why after going through this workbook!

Readers might wonder: why should I integrate character strengths with mindfulness? Some might even wonder what character strengths are and why they matter in our lives. According to Ryan, one without the other is “deflated” and “hollow” (pg.2). I offer two quick definitions for each, per Ryan, and then I’ll dive into the workbook.

Mindfulness: open awareness and curiosity.

Character strengths: the core (best) parts of you.

The Set Up

The workbook flows sequentially with an 8-week MBSP program. Readers are encouraged to spend one week per session giving time and space to listen to audio meditations, read the information, write responses, and be present with what is happening. The process is exploratory. Readers have the opportunity to experience mindfulness and character strengths through a series of questions, activities, and reflections on their feelings, ideas actions, and behaviors while immersed in the process.

What outcomes can a reader expect? Per page 2 of the workbook:

- (1) Discover and understand your inner capacity to be mindful and see and use your character strengths.
- (2) Identify your signature strengths (the top five character strengths as determined by an online assessment—you can receive a free copy or pay for a more detailed discussion of your results) as well as your over and underused strengths and how to improve this pattern
- (3) Examine how mindfulness and character strengths can enhance your health and well-being and aid you in times of conflict and distress.
- (4) Apply the lessons/strategies to your everyday life.
- (5) Add practical strategies to your toolbox.
- (6) Take immediate action to address what’s happening in your life.



Each session has a focus point. They start with a quote, “a story to remember”, definitions, and a detailed discussion about the concepts being presented. Spaces are provided to write responses to the questions. There are shadow boxes to highlight pertinent facts or note time to pause and reflect. Next is the MBSP Toolbox noting: Key Insights, From the Science, For Your Exploration, Pearl of Wisdom, and Expand Your Toolbox. The following are included in each session as well: an MBSP Activities and Tracking Sheet, Audio Activities (downloaded from an online source), Practice Activities, worksheet pages to write responses and informative Reading Activities.

This comprehensive program offers information in a variety of formats for readers to learn about and experience the content. Honestly, there is so much data that I think your average reader might want two weeks per session to thoroughly digest everything being offered, plus listen to the audio recordings several times, practice the skills, and write their reflections.

The Eight Sessions

Session 1: Mindfulness and Autopilot

Session 2: Your Character Strengths and Signature Strengths

Session 3: Obstacles and Struggles are Opportunities

Session 4: Strengthen Mindfulness in Everyday Life

Session 5: Your Relationship with Yourself and Others

Session 6: Mindfulness and the Golden Mean

Session 7: Authenticity and Goodness

Session 8: Your Engagement with Life



A Closer Look

Session 1

Session 1 addresses mindfulness and autopilot. Ryan explains the two core parts of mindfulness: self-regulation, which he calls the ‘what’ of mindfulness, and then curiosity with openness and acceptance—the ‘how’. He recommends that people start practicing mindfulness in small steps, creating a daily ritual (same time, same place, same duration). Have fun. Practice imperfectly. It’s not about dissociating, he stresses, but rather it’s about immersing yourself and taking control of what you focus your attention on.



For starters, he suggests focusing on your breath or maybe eating something mindfully or mindfully walking. Regardless, notice, and observe without judgment. Be present. If you are following your breath, perhaps start with three minutes. Note your in-breath and out-breath. When thoughts float through, let them pass. Don’t pay attention to them. And if you find a thought capturing your awareness, accept it without

judgment and return your focus to the breath.

You have the choice of what you pay attention to. That’s the key here. You can be with something now or you can wander (chicken tracking, following thoughts, bodily sensations, sounds, etc.) and be all over the place. Mindfulness is choosing the here and now because we can’t change the past (it only exists as a memory) and the future doesn’t exist (except in our imagination). It’s only here and now in this moment that we are. And in this instant, we can make a conscious choice, we determine what we pay attention to. We are not victims of intrusive thoughts, sensations, etc. We can practice being present and notice when we are present and when we veer into our autopilot zone.

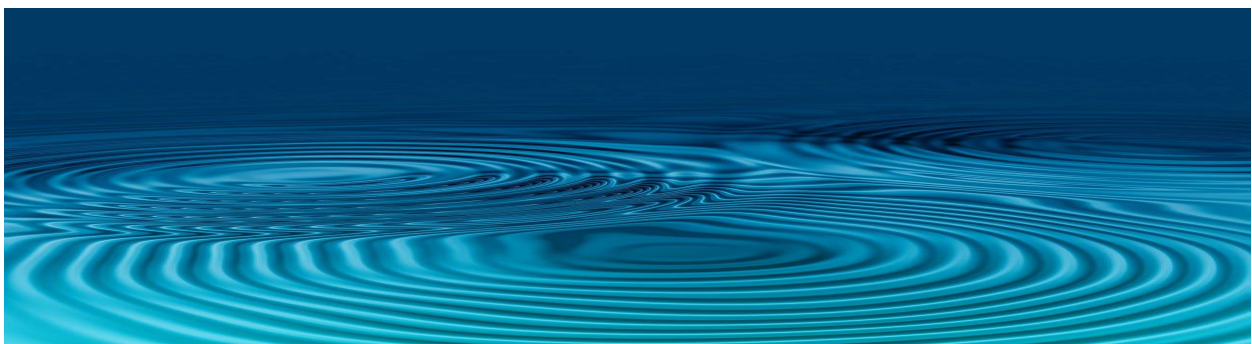
Three audios are offered: Beginner's Mind-Activity, Body-Mindfulness Meditation (a body scan), and You at Your Best and Strengths Spotting. I listened to the audio describing a process I've used in workshops in the past to explore our beginner's mind: eating a raisin. Ryan also adds drinking a glass of water to the experience.

The voice on the audio is comfortable, calm, easy to listen to and follow along with the experience. It demands patience however as most people tend to just grab a handful of raisins, pop them into their mouths, chew, and swallow. Autopilot.

It's hard to take time to look at one raisin and experience it in its entirety. Readers are guided to pay attention to how it feels to look at it, notice the folds, wrinkles, the color, see what it looks like, then touch it, smell it, listen for any sounds, and notice any thoughts that come. Chewing is slow and methodical. Swallowing takes your attention down your throat and then you are asked to notice any lingering pieces or tastes in your mouth. It is a long slow process. This alone might challenge some readers. It's worth taking the time because it sets you up for the practice activity: choosing one activity you do daily, like brushing your teeth, and being mindful of what you are doing. Bringing your presence and attention to something you normally do on autopilot.



It's recommended that readers listen to the audio for Beginner's Mind at least once. Then listen to the Body-Mindfulness audio daily. Listen to the third audio at least once and write your reflections. Track your experiences, practice one mindfulness routine activity daily, and record your observations. No small order.



Session 2: Your Character Strengths and Signature Strengths

There are 24 character strengths noted to exist across all human beings in our world that are categorized into six virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These are not talents or skills we develop, nor are they interests or external resources we can access. Character skills are “strengths that can be deployed to create a full life and to improve the lives of others” (pg. 20).

Examples:

Virtue of Wisdom: Strengths that help you gather and use knowledge

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

Curiosity: exploring; seeking novelty, open to experiences

Love of learning: mastering new skills & topics, building knowledge

Virtue of Courage: strengths that help you exercise your will and face adversity

Bravery: facing fears, threats, or challenges

Perseverance: persisting, finishing what is started overcoming obstacles

Zest: being energetic, doing things wholeheartedly

Virtue of Humanity: Strengths that help you in one-to-one relationships

Love: being genuine, showing warmth

Kindness: being generous, caring compassionate

Social intelligence: being aware of feelings & motives of self/others

Virtue of Justice: Strengths that help you in community or group-based situations

Teamwork: being loyal

Fairness: Acting justly

Leadership: positively guiding others

Virtue of Temperance: Strengths that help you manage habits and protect against excess

Forgiveness: being merciful, letting go of hurts

Humility: being modest, not bragging

Prudence: being careful about choices

Self-regulation: being self-controlled, disciplined, managing impulses & emotions

Virtue of Transcendence: strengths that help you connect to the larger universe and provide meaning

Appreciate of beauty/excellence: experiencing awe/wonder

Gratitude: being thankful for the good in life

Hope: being optimistic, positive

Spirituality: searching for meaning, feeling purpose in life

I originally took the character strength assessment test in 2017. I was curious if (a) they would let me take it again (at the free level) and (b) if my results would be the same. There was a shift. This time my top strengths included gratitude, appreciating beauty/excellence, honesty, love of learning, and hope. Seems I'm moving more into transcendence, wisdom, and courage. My lowest were noted as prudence, teamwork, self-regulation, and bravery.



Naturally, I started to wonder and question the questions. Then I read the Do's and Don'ts when looking at your character strengths. ". . . remember you answered the questions. These captured the 'real you' in some ways" (pg. 21). Thankfully, Ryan acknowledged that our lowest strengths are not indicative of a defect or a weakness. Glad to know I'm not a dysregulated coward albeit taking unnecessary chances in my life! The purpose, he writes, is to learn how to pay attention to how we use our highest or signature strengths each day.

Once readers have their profile, the next step is to focus on two questions: "how it connects with your identity" and "why it means something to you" (pg. 23). I was intrigued because I'm in a phase of my life where I'm focusing on gratitude and hope as a daily practice. I love learning (look at my bio and you'll see what I mean) and my love of all things outdoors is magnified by my appreciation of nature's beauty. And yes, honesty and integrity matter deeply to me.

Yet I don't know if these are my total daily focus. I think some of the middle strengths come into play more than not, especially curiosity (fueling my love of learning), kindness, perseverance, creativity, and social intelligence. I do my best to find the humor in situations like my 94-year-old mother (with end-stage Alzheimer's disease) standing up at the kitchen table, reaching inside the back of her pants, pulling out poop bullets, and throwing them around the room. Better to laugh with love and compassion than react with frustration and anger.

I believe that our behaviors matter more than categories and labels. And if I were to take the test again tomorrow, I might have different results. It all depends on how a person answers the questions. What's happening at home, my stress level, and what my focus is on will impact test results of any kind.

I found it interesting that once we know our character strengths, we're asked to imagine life without them. Their presence becomes more potent when you imagine life without humor, hope, perspective, social intelligence, and so forth. Readers have the chance to see the use and disuse of these ways of being and how we might want to seek a balance (what Ryan notes as the Golden Mean).

The practice for this session is immense: learning how to use your strengths. He offers a list of examples, i.e., to use your love of learning: do an online search of your favorite subject matter and surprise yourself by learning something new about it; or fairness: include someone in a conversation who is typically excluded . . . Two audios for this session guide readers further into the how-to-use experience.



Synthesizing

There is much to learn in this book. And my review max length is already over the limit. So, in short, a few snippets. And believe me, if I had the time and space and readers' attention, I'd write more.

In Session 3 readers learn how to bring their signature strengths to their meditation practice and how to practice mindful listening and speaking. Mindful speech is critical from my perspective. I have a cheat sheet I share with people to consider before speaking (I captured it from somewhere so it's not original, but I can't cite it at this point, been with me too long):

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

Is it true?

Is it helpful?

Adding toxic words to a situation doesn't help anyone, yourself included. Looking closely at our words, stepping back, and pausing before reacting, giving full attention to someone, and hearing them moves a conversation forward. Listening to the chorus in our mind already defending ourselves, or discounting/judging the speaker isn't helpful. I think this skill is essential.

Another practice activity I want to highlight before I close is offered in Session 4: Strengthening Mindfulness in Everyday Life. The practice involves developing 'Gathas'. According to Ryan, 'Gatha' is a "Sanskrit term meaning song, poem, or verse"; they were popularized by Thich Nhat Hanh to create "awareness in the present moment and a connection with the immediate future based on their content" (pg. 73). Gathas are said to help us "catalyze moments of mindful living and positive actions for the immediate future" (pg.73). They are sort of like a poem. There are four steps to create a Gatha:

- Choose a specific character strength (i.e. gratitude) or a mindfulness or character strength concept to focus on (i.e. mindful eating).
- Create two to four lines to capture the essence of the strength or concept.
- Weave in elements of mindfulness i.e., clear seeing, slowing down.
- Memorize and practice the 'Gatha' daily.

Ryan shared an example on page 73:

"Breathing in, I see my strengths,
Breathing out, I value my strengths,
Dwelling now in my strengths,
I express myself fully."

I appreciated the practice because it weaves together concepts and behaviors, creating a concrete moment with verse and rhyme. I felt a sense of rocking back and forth which was comforting/soothing; playing with words changed the tone as well which impacted my bodily sensations. Instead of feeling like 'work', I enjoyed the playfulness and creativity.



Ending

The book ends with extensive resources including websites, recommended readings, online materials, information about the VIA Institute on Character, and a poem that Ryan wrote in March 2020 to inspire people early on when COVID-19 ruptured our lives to encourage us to stay engaged with life. Titled, *The World Needs You*, it is a touching reminder that we all matter, and our energy contributes in small and unknown ways to the whole. Without us, the world would not be the same.

For someone to go through this process alone, well, their core character strengths might need to include: a love of learning, perseverance, curiosity, judgment (defined as thinking things through, critical thinking), and self-discipline. I see this being perfect for a group setting where people can support one another; they can read and learn together as they share their experiences and keep each other motivated during challenging experiences. Maybe a Facebook Group? Maybe join an MBSP group? I'm not saying someone couldn't do it alone from start to finish, it clearly can be done. And at the end of the 8 weeks or perhaps longer, when done, the results have the chance to be life-changing.



About the Author:

Ryan Niemiec, Psy.D., is the Education Director of the VIA Institute on Character, a nonprofit organization in Cincinnati, Ohio established to advance the science and practice of character strengths. He authored *Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A Practitioner's Guide to MBSP* and coauthored *Positive Psychology at the Movies* and *Movies and Mental Illness*. Ryan is a psychologist, certified coach, international workshop leader, IPPA Fellow 2017, and an adjunct professor at Xavier University, University of Pennsylvania.

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