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## Character Strengths as an Antidote to Burnout Among Healthcare Trainees

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# Character Strengths as an Antidote to Burnout Among Healthcare Trainees

## Abstract

Burnout among healthcare workers is a particular kind of occupational stress characterized by emotional fatigue, loss of energy and withdrawal from work. A character strengths-based intervention was designed to mitigate the effects of burnout upon medical trainees at Cincinnati Children's Hospital and Medical Center. Over the course of a year pediatric anesthesia fellows will participate in four training sessions in character strengths with the intention of giving them increased tools for personal support and improved team dynamics. An introduction to character strengths, appreciating character strengths, mindfulness and character strengths, and character strengths at work and at home were the topics covered. The goal is to improve well-being by better appreciating the strengths in both themselves and others. Results of the intervention were assessed by self-report.

## Keywords

Burnout, Healthcare, Character Strengths, Well-being, Cincinnati Children's Hospital, Positive Psychology

## Disciplines

Medical Sciences | Psychology

**Character Strengths as an Antidote to Burnout Among Healthcare Trainees**

Kristin Jonason

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University of Pennsylvania

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Victoria Roebuck

May 9, 2021

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## Situation Analysis

### Overview of the Sector

Roughly 42% of physicians across the United States experience burnout (Berg, 2019). Burnout is described as a particular kind of occupational stress that occurs predominantly among human service professionals and is characterized by emotional fatigue, loss of energy, and withdrawal from work (Borritz et al., 2005). Other symptoms may include feelings of lack of accomplishment and empathy for patients (American Medical Association, n.d.). Exhaustion from increased workloads and extended work hours combined with heavy cognitive demands in emotionally charged situations contribute to its occurrence (Lall et al., 2019). Additionally, burnout is often associated with ever-increasing responsibilities and regulatory pressures, as well as frequently changing care and delivery models (American Medical Association, n.d.).

The toll from burnout has multiple cascading adverse effects. For example, patients may experience increased medical errors, lower quality of care, longer recovery times, and lower satisfaction (West et al., 2018). Additionally, the healthcare system is impacted by reduced physician productivity, increased physician turnover, increased costs, and decreased access to care for patients (West et al., 2018). For physicians, the consequences include high rates of substance abuse, depression, suicidal ideation, poor self-care, and an increased incidence of motor vehicle crashes (West et al., 2018). The impact of burnout is unfortunate and sometimes even fatal.

Physician burnout was a problem long before COVID-19 was a household word (American Medical Association, n.d.). With the additional stress, social isolation, unpredictability, and long work hours that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, burnout among physicians has gotten even worse (Kannampallil et al., 2020). Inevitably, those hit the

hardest are the lowest on the totem pole, such as medical trainees and fellows (Gross, 2020; Kanampallil et al., 2020). Residents making a salary of \$60,000 a year with an average debt load of \$250,000 while working sixty-plus hours per week struggle with all the same additional stressors that the community at large has to deal with. Like most people during the pandemic, they've dealt with social isolation, decreased childcare options, home-schooling their children, personal finances and work-family balance while also enduring increased risk of disease exposure and longer work hours (Gross, 2020). Yet, when residents at N.Y.U. Lagone asked for hazard pay and additional life and disability insurance, their request was not simply turned down, they were shamed and silenced (Gross, 2020). Because of factors such as these, prevalence and severity of burnout has only been getting worse.

After years of training, long work hours, and overwhelming amounts of stress, approximately 28,000 young doctors graduate from medical and osteopathic schools every year. They enter residency with the hope of establishing a career that offers the rare promise of work that is intellectually gratifying, spiritually fulfilling, and economically secure. Unfortunately, time demands, time spent on planning and organization, and inherently difficult job situations and interpersonal relationships contribute to trainee burnout (IsHak et al., 2009).

Thus, it is essential to prevent burnout as much as possible. Many healthcare systems have already implemented interventions to help mitigate physician burnout that include person-directed interventions, organization-directed interventions, and a combination of the two (Awa et al., 2008). Person-directed interventions tend to use cognitive-behavioral techniques to improve job competence and personal coping skills, enhance social support or offer relaxation activities (Awa et al., 2008). Activities aimed at restructuring the organization tend to offer task restructuring or work evaluation in such a way as to decrease job demand, increase a sense of

control or participation in decision making (Awa et al., 2008). A combination of both types of tactics are ideal at improving or preventing burnout for physicians.

### **Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center Background**

Established in 1883, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (C.C.H.) is one of the oldest and most distinguished pediatric hospitals and nonprofit academic medical centers in the United States (Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, n.d.). C.C.H. is ranked No. 3 in U.S. News & World Report's 2020-2021 Best Children's Hospitals list and provides the best medical and quality of life outcomes, patient and family experience, and value. C.C.H. has just over 16,000 employees, 1,500 of whom are staff physicians, 272 clinical fellows, 181 postdoctoral fellows and 200 are residents (Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, n.d.). Dr. Jennifer Lam, our service partner, serves as the Director of the Cardiac Anesthesia Fellowship and is responsible for training and educating pediatric anesthesiology fellows as they train in the subspecialty of pediatric cardiac anesthesiology.

The culture among physicians, nurses, technicians, administrators, and all other hospital staff at C.C.H. is quite typical for hospitals. In general, there is a lot of camaraderie and a sense of community within C.C.H. The desire to care for and improve the lives of children is what brings people together (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021). However, like many hospital systems, the culture is broken down into multiple silos, each presenting its opportunity and challenge (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021). The department that we will be working with the most is the Department of Pediatric Anesthesia.

We identified three main opportunities to improve the pediatric anesthesiology department's culture. First was the hierarchical culture. This hierarchy can cause a lack of empowerment or respect among team members. When not all team members are treated equally

and fairly, it may cause feelings of negativity or frustration and might lead to burnout (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021).

Another area for improvement was creating a more equal culture of accountability. As in most fields and workplaces, accountability is critical for success, growth, and improvement. In the pediatric anesthesiology department, everyone is held accountable for their actions, but not equally (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021). For example, the leadership position that surgeons hold within the operating room can deflect accountability when mistakes are made. Anesthesiologists, nurses, technicians, or other critical team members may experience criticism or humiliation when they speak up. This can be frustrating and demoralizing (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021). It can also have life-threatening consequences for patients if a surgeon makes a mistake because his or her team did not feel comfortable calling it out.

Preventing burnout was the third critical area for improvement in the C.C.H. culture. Several components can be addressed within burnout. First, there is a lack of appreciation and recognition for all team members caring for patients. From the nursing staff to environmental service workers to cafeteria personnel, it truly takes a village to take care of a child in a hospital. Often, the recognition goes directly to the lead surgeon or physician even though an entire team of caregivers work hard behind the scenes, 24 hours a day, tending to the patients. Many of these individuals are underappreciated and go unnoticed even though they consistently go above and beyond their call of duty (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021).

Another contributor to burnout that many hospitals workers face is difficulty separating their "work selves" from their "home selves." Oftentimes their "work selves" trickle into their home life, and vice versa. Given the challenging nature of the work, it is difficult for many

people to take care of themselves mentally, physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Overall, gratitude, appreciation, kindness, and respect can go a long way for all team members within the hospital system and can improve performance both at work and home. Many of these cultural challenges are not unique to C.C.H. and are shared by many hospital systems and operating rooms.

With these areas for improvement in mind, Dr. Jennifer Lam and the pediatric anesthesia fellows were interested in partnering with the University of Pennsylvania, Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program as part of its semester-long Service-Learning Project. Over the course of four months, three MAPP students engaged with the Cincinnati Children's Hospital pediatric anesthesia fellows, under the guidance of Dr. Lam, to address and prevent physician burnout using the science, research, and interventions from the field of positive psychology.

### **Potential Applications of Positive Psychology**

Cincinnati Children's Hospital has implemented several programs over the years to foster a positive and supportive culture. These various initiatives, such as a meditation and mindfulness-based program have focused on creating safe, supportive, and empowering cultures. Though well-received, only a small subset of groups has been utilizing them. Dr. Lam noted that a common theme of these initiatives was their simplicity (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021). Our group planned to create interventions that are not time consuming nor tiring and we hope that they are used as tools that help foster the more positive environment that they envisioned. In order to successfully implement our plan, the application must be simple and accessible. The group of individuals we are serving is extremely busy and we recognized the difficulty of big, abrupt, and time-consuming changes. We considered utilizing common spaces

such as elevators or the cafeteria, or building our interventions into pre-existing rhythms, rituals, and processes. To ensure success, we needed to devise a plan that was simple and scalable to the entire hospital system.

C.C.H. was looking to foster a more favorable environment for physicians and other medical staff across the institution. There were quite a few areas in which positive psychology could be useful. Since the institution is solely responsible for children's care, the stakes and pressure on the physicians and clinical teams are unsurprisingly high. Although the staff at C.C.H. are remarkably resilient, positive psychology techniques are imperative for the institution's success.

As mentioned, the Anesthesia Fellows are subjected to long hours and are under immense pressure. Within this division, Jennifer mentioned an extreme hierarchy in which members of the team were afraid to speak up due to voices historically falling on deaf ears. There was a general sense of underappreciation and high burnout rates amongst the group. Furthermore, the intensity of the institution's environment trickled into other areas of the physician's life. The concept of a work-life balance is a fantasy to some (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021). While many of these physicians are incredibly talented and driven towards the common goal of helping other people's children, many of them have children and families themselves.

Given these obstacles, we aimed to create positive interventions for the pediatric anesthesia fellows during their early days within the institution. Through these early interventions, we hope that these individuals would be given the tools needed to avoid the onset of burnout before it happened. Furthermore, we see the potential for positive psychology in the following ways:

1. Cultivate an environment in which individuals are empowered to speak up and utilize the resources available to them. Through appreciative inquiry, we hoped to nurture an environment that is accepting, understanding, and appreciative (Cooperrider, 2001).
2. Promote stress reduction in the operating room by implementing a mindfulness practice using various meditation techniques (Hilton et al., 2019).
3. Improve collaboration through team-building techniques and recognizing strengths within one another. The goal would be to cultivate belonging and relationships to help achieve goals. Through this character strengths intervention, we would share strategies to improve collaboration by recognizing and appreciating individual contributions.

Our research into physician well-being and burnout was the basis upon which we created our intervention for the C.C.H. pediatric anesthesia fellows. It deepened our understanding of their daily life and the unique needs of the fellows. We hoped to utilize positive psychology techniques to address the burnout of these physicians as well as eventually, those in the hospital at large.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Our team planned to propose useful initiatives that would address and prevent critical contributors to burnout. After discussing and sharing possible interventions with Dr. Lam, we mutually decided to focus on three areas: Appreciative Inquiry, mindfulness, and character strengths. By teaching the pediatric anesthesiology fellows the theories and skills of Appreciative Inquiry, mindfulness, and character strengths, they would learn early in their career how to take steps to prevent emotional and physical exhaustion and manage extreme and persistent stress, all of which contribute to burnout.

Appreciative Inquiry would help the fellows create a compelling vision to drive the organization forward to actively address burnout. Mindfulness would provide the fellows an opportunity to take care of themselves in the present moment to help maintain positive mental health. Character strengths would give the fellows an opportunity to recognize their strengths and utilize them more frequently in the workplace to enhance their well-being. These skills are easy to understand and apply, do not require too much time or training, and can even be practiced at home in addition to the workplace. Ultimately, these skills can be shared across the institution, changing the system from the ground-up to create a more positive culture that emphasizes well-being and self-care in individuals and across relationships. These three interventions would all help fellows address or prevent burnout in the workplace.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizational change that does what its name suggests: it looks at what we value and do well in order to create a compelling vision and design for the future (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). Its basic premise is the assumption that a

meaningful, hopeful conversation is the foundation upon which a shared positive vision of the future can be built (Cooperrider, 2017). It offers those who utilize it a method for creating change in a manner both positive and generative. One does not know the answers at the start of the inquiry process; it is through asking positive and thoughtful questions the possibilities may be revealed. The intention is *not* to corral an organic work environment toward adherence of a predetermined outcome. It is to discover possibilities for growth and change that must be derived from the contributions of all members of the collaborative body. A community's plans are strongest when they are created by the collective strengths of its constituents. Fundamentally, action follows thought. Attempts to fix systems by primarily focusing on fixing the problems will get mired in solving problems. In AI, plans that are premised on a shared vision of a promising future, inspire members to draw upon their strengths to create a more positive and generative future (Stavros & Torres, 2018).

The process of Appreciative Inquiry consists of four phases known as the 4 D cycle: discovery, dream, design, and destiny (May et al., 2011). In the **discovery phase** participants from all levels of an organization explore those things most positive about an organization. What is it like at its best? What is at the heart of its positive core? During the **dream phase**, appreciation is used as a tool to promote discussion that creates possibility and potential previously not seen. Participants create a vision of a better world, a powerful purpose, and a strategic statement of intent. In the **design phase**, attention is directed toward how one might ideally change or redesign the organization so that it is able to realize this new, shared vision. Finally, during the **destiny phase**, the dream is realized by empowering the individuals involved to share in the implementation of the work (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003).

There are several applications of Appreciative Inquiry in healthcare. In fact, AI was essentially created at the Cleveland Clinic when David Cooperrider asked physicians to tell stories of their biggest successes and failures at the hospital. Cooperrider, the founder of AI, found the positive stories to be a source of possibility and culture change (Cooperrider et al., 2003). In *Appreciative Inquiry in Healthcare* the authors describe numerous ways that the process has been used to generate discussion and collaboration throughout the University of Virginia's healthcare system to drive the school toward the best possible future while building on the existing strengths of the organization (May et al., 2011). Appreciative Inquiry is a structured process through which people with different perspectives can work together to create a unified vision of the future, which has been a successful process at other hospital systems.

As stated, Appreciative Inquiry suggests that conversation is the basis upon which our worlds are created (Cooperrider et al., 2008). As such the power of language should be considered in all aspects of people's interactions. As physicians-in-training, understanding the power of the language that they use with patients and fellow staff members has profound and positive consequences. Appreciative Inquiry has the potential to help physicians listen, support, empower each other while envisioning a path forward through the challenges they face together – whether that be illness, loss, or healing (May et al., 2011). Teaching and guiding the principles of Appreciative Inquiry to the pediatric anesthesiology fellows will help them see challenges as opportunities for growth and improvement. Engaging in AI would ideally change the culture, preventing burnout before it occurs.

### **Mindfulness Training**

Mindfulness can be defined as specific attention to the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) and is a process of training the mind to hold stable focus to deepen awareness to the

present moment (M. Baime, personal communication, November 20, 2020). Rooted in Buddhist and Hindu teachings, mindfulness practice can facilitate self-awareness and is positively correlated with intrinsic motivation. Most importantly, it can be learned and developed (Brown & Ryan, 2015). Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are designed to aid an individuals' purposeful self-regulation of thought from moment-to-moment. It promotes a deliberate focus of awareness to relax and calm the mind and body (Burton et al., 2016).

In recent years, research and practices surrounding mindfulness have broadened and taken hold due to its benefits. Mindfulness practice can act as a buffer against several ailments in addition to enhancing well-being through awareness and acceptance of one's moment-to-moment experience (Keng et al., 2011). Being mindful can strengthen the immune system, improve brain activity, and brain structure, and decrease anxiety and depression (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Mindfulness can increase attention and creative problem solving (Dahl et al., 2015), help manage impulses and intense pressures, and help make positive changes (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Meditation, a form of mindfulness, also impacts motivation, executive function, decision making, learning and memory, and empathy (Baime, 2019), all of which would positively impact physicians and ultimately the patients in their care.

Mindfulness-based interventions, whether offered individually or in a group setting, offer various benefits to fellows in stressful circumstances. Specifically, anesthesia fellows are under a great deal of pressure; they work long hours in a very high-stakes environment. Within the anesthesia division, there is an extreme hierarchy, leading to members of the team being afraid to speak up due to voices historically falling on deaf ears (J. Lam, personal communication, January 21, 2021). MBIs geared toward group cohesion, and stress reduction would be most beneficial for C.C.H.

Utilizing mindfulness urges one's mind back to the current moment despite what may have just occurred or what might happen. In a review by Kriakous et al. (2021), it was found that mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is a practical intervention that can help enhance medical professionals' psychological functioning. Furthermore, Kriakous et al. (2021) found that MBSR programs that are woven into medical professionals' daily schedules work best, rather than conducting programs outside of work. The review also emphasized the value of MBSR programs nudging the medical professionals to participate in daily mindfulness practice to amplify the long-term outcomes of the MBSR program. Reported long-term outcomes include decreased rates of depression and emotional exhaustion amongst medical professionals and increased levels of personal accomplishment (Kriakous et al. 2021).

Implementing mindfulness into the busy life of fellows requires intentional thought and planning. A mindfulness practice where an individual experiences sincerity and nonjudgment can alleviate indicators of stress and burnout (Gilmartin et al., 2017). Steady mindfulness practice is appropriate for health care providers due to the intensity of their responsibilities; however, a lengthy time commitment would be considered a barrier for most fellows. A review conducted by Gilmartin et al. (2017) concluded that a brief mindfulness intervention with hospital providers resulted in a calculated change in well-being (e.g., depression) or behavior (e.g., patient-related errors). Teaching the pediatric anesthesiology fellows the practice of mindfulness may help prevent the onset or reduce the symptoms of burnout.

Work-related stress and burnout amongst medical professionals have been associated with physical and mental health problems, including anxiety and depression (Kriakous et al., 2021). In a typical MBI, individuals practice bringing awareness to feelings, physical experience, and thought patterns (Trowbridge et al., 2017). Trowbridge et al. (2017) concluded

that commanding greater attention to frequently ruminative thoughts about patients and work-related events could solidify the medical professional's boundaries, therefore, affecting anxiety and depression levels. Additionally, the MBI could further encourage self-acceptance and lessen the self-judgment often inflicted upon burned-out medical professionals (Trowbridge et al., 2017). Implementing the ideologies of mindfulness to the pediatric anesthesiology fellows would help them navigate the intense nature of the hospital system and in an ideal world, prevent burnout before its onset.

### **Character Strengths**

Character strengths are positive traits that are fulfilling, independent, valued across cultures, and are associated with positive outcomes (Niemi, 2018). These positive characteristics are core to individual identity and behavior and contribute to the collective good. After several years of research and exploration, scholars and scientists found 24 different character strengths organized under six virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) that were valued universally across history, time, philosophy, culture, religion, education, and belief systems (Niemi, 2018). Using character strengths can be associated with greater happiness, subjective well-being, achievement, and better physical health (Niemi, 2018). Specifically, research has shown that using character strengths at work can increase employee well-being (Höge et al., 2018).

Using character strengths can be useful in a variety of ways for different types of people, including physicians. Specifically, the application and use of character strengths may influence well-being, mental health, and physical health, all of which impact the likelihood of experiencing burnout. One correlational study found that when first-year medical students saw opportunities to apply their character strengths at work, measured by the *Applicability of Character Strengths*

*Rating Scales*, their well-being and mental health improved, but their physical health did not significantly improve (Hausler et al., 2017). The same researchers evaluated resident physicians working in hospitals and found that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between application of character strengths at work and psychological well-being. Meaning, the less exhausted a physician is, the more capacity they may have to apply character strengths, ultimately increasing their psychological well-being. Further, both studies found that the more the medical students and physicians reported using their character strengths at work, the higher levels of well-being and mental health they had (Hausler et al., 2017). Awareness of the benefits of applying character strengths at work may have the ability to prevent physician burnout.

Certain character strengths are more commonly found, and can be somewhat more valuable, in the medical field. One literature review found that the character strengths of fairness, honesty, kindness, and teamwork were most valuable in the medical profession (Huber et al., 2020a). A cross-sectional and longitudinal study revealed that fairness, honesty, judgment, kindness, and love were the most common strengths among 584 medical students and 274 physicians. Interestingly, the strength of hope was significantly associated with positive well-being in physicians, but negatively associated with work engagement in medical students (Huber et al., 2020a). This may suggest that the working conditions for medical students are not conducive to hope and may be worth considering as it relates to burnout. Another study by the same researchers revealed that possessing fairness, honesty, or kindness were positively associated with subjective well-being and judgment and kindness were negatively associated with personal accomplishment (Huber et al., 2020b). Further, this study found that applying character strengths of fairness, honesty, judgment, and love was essential for psychological well-being and work engagement. Additionally, a study found that those who were experiencing

burnout scored lower in the character strengths of hope, perseverance, and zest (Huber et al., 2020b). Separately, yet important, character strengths of curiosity, hope, love, and zest are strongly associated with life satisfaction (Huber et al., 2020b). It is important to be aware of how applying different strengths at work yields different types of outcomes.

There is a lot of potential for well-being when an individual can see opportunities to apply their signature strengths at work. One reason this may work could be related to the broaden-and-build theory which suggests as people experience positive emotions, they will build their personal resources (Fredrickson, 2004). In fact, when people use and apply their character strengths, they experience positive emotions, improve their well-being, and ultimately perform better at work by creating upward spirals (Strecker et al., 2020). A meta-analysis found that character-strength interventions which include applying signature strengths had a significant positive impact on positive affect or happiness, showed decreases in depression, increased life satisfaction, increased flourishing, and increased future use of strengths (Schutte & Malouff, 2019).

All individuals possess three to seven top signature character strengths. These signature strengths are typical of the individual, they are associated with passion, authenticity, learning, desire, and power (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Furthermore, opportunities to use and apply signature strengths at work are associated with job satisfaction, engagement, and productivity (Strecker et al., 2020). One study revealed that physicians found it easier to apply their character strengths at home in their personal lives rather than at work, which can increase subjective well-being (Huber et al., 2020b). One way to improve well-being in the hospital setting would be to help physicians first understand and become aware of their signature strengths, and then give them opportunities to apply those strengths at work while also helping them determine how to

use them at home (Huber et al., 2020b). Additionally, Blanchard et al. (2020) discovered that not only is it important for one to recognize their own signature strengths, but it is also valuable when people acknowledge and appreciate the signature strengths in others. The acknowledgement of signature strengths by others is a strong predictor of subjective well-being and may improve the relationship itself. Perhaps training physicians how to recognize and appreciate signature strengths in themselves and others may help develop better relationships and ultimately prevent future burnout.

Another way in which signature strengths have been used has been to measure the effect of their use upon the socio-moral climate at work. Socio-moral climate at work can be defined as a discursive, participative, appreciative, supportive, and caring environment and interactions among colleague (Höge et al., 2018). Organizations with this type of culture tend to have positive associations such as more prosocial behaviors, more personal ownership, more meaning at work, and less cynicism and deviance. One group of researchers wanted to evaluate if physicians who applied their top signature strengths at work created a more socio-moral climate at work thereby increasing well-being, subjective well-being, and psychological well-being. This study found a positive correlation between physicians realizing how to apply their signature strengths at work and perceived socio-moral climate of the department, work engagement and psychological well-being (Höge et al., 2018). Strategies like applying character strengths in the workplace can contribute to preventing burnout and may promote better health and well-being (Hausler et al., 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The theories and practical application of Appreciative Inquiry, mindfulness and meditation, and character strengths have tremendous power for the physician in training. They

empower the individual to balance the causes of stress on a personal, interpersonal, and systemic level. The study of AI gives trainees skills for cultivating institutional change and encourages them to work together to create something greater than themselves. Appreciative Inquiry is a collaborative effort that cannot be done in silos. It is fundamentally about shaping the world through positive relationships and conversations. Mindfulness can prevent burnout by helping individuals stay present. Mindfulness and self-awareness are the foundations upon which wholehearted conversations can occur. Finally, character strengths help to name, recognize, and appreciate that which is positive both in individual selves and in others. They are powerfully employed in conversation and through application both at work and at home. When a person's strengths are named, they feel seen and valued. Exposure to a combination of Appreciative Inquiry, mindfulness and character strengths can help add depth to trainees understanding of both themselves and each other. They add richness and humanity to the experience of people who often feel trapped in a system outside of their own control.

## **Application Plan**

### **Character Strengths**

Our situation analysis, literature review, and discussions with our liaison, Dr. Jennifer Lam, revealed that many physicians at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and other hospital systems worldwide suffer from burnout. Burnout can be both treated and prevented. Our project aims to avoid burnout by training physicians early in their careers to manage and minimize the risk of developing burnout. We researched different ways to approach burnout prevention, such as utilizing Appreciative Inquiry or mindfulness training. In the process we realized that AI really required too much time to be practical. We also learned that there was a biannual "Fellow Wellness Seminar" that already introduced the fellows to meditation and mindfulness practices. We decided that one potential approach to prevent emotional fatigue, loss of energy, and withdrawal from work (Borritz et al., 2005) is recognizing and appreciating character strengths in the self and others. As previously mentioned, character strengths are positive characteristics of individuals that are associated with greater well-being.

After speaking with Dr. Lam, we agreed the pediatric anesthesiology fellows would benefit from participating in a series of four sessions focused on character strengths. Using character strengths as a positive intervention, compared to Appreciative Inquiry and mindfulness training, seemed simple, easy to implement, and benefited both the individual and the greater team. Additionally, time constraints are the most significant barrier for the fellows. Character strengths-based interventions require minimal time and training yet still yield a positive, long-term impact. These sessions will take place quarterly, starting at the beginning of their one-year fellowship training. Each session will be 60 minutes and will be facilitated by Dr. Lam using PowerPoint presentations (see Appendix A) and will be a combination of content, reflection, and

discussions. The objective of each session is to deepen their self-awareness of their strengths while also recognizing and appreciating others' strengths – both in the workplace and at home.

### **Session #1: Introduction to VIA Character Strengths**

Character strengths are at the heart of positive psychology and help individuals identify the best part of themselves and others (Niemiec, 2018). The objective of the initial session would be to provide a brief yet informative introduction to the 24 VIA character strengths. Before the first session, we would invite the pediatric anesthesiology fellows to take the VIA Survey – Total 24 Report (49 USD for the extended version) and review their results before the meeting (see Appendix B). Dr. Lam may also opt for the group to take the basic version of the VIA survey, which is free for all users.

During the hour-long session, the fellows will spend time engaging with the content, reflecting on themselves, and discussing concepts with others. Participants will learn about the research and motivation for creating the 24 VIA character strengths and their application. For example, it would be valuable to share that using signature strengths is associated with greater work satisfaction, greater well-being, and higher meaning in life (Niemiec, 2018). Further, research has shown that using character strengths in new ways can increase well-being and decrease depression for up to 6 months (Niemiec, 2018). Additionally, fellows may be interested in learning that the strengths most associated with life satisfaction are zest, gratitude, hope, and love (Seligman et al., 2005). Finally, using character strengths is associated with increased productivity at work, less stress at work, improved relationships, and positive physical health outcomes (Niemiec, 2018). See Appendix E for more positive correlates of character strengths. These benefits are critical when attempting to prevent burnout.

Throughout this session, the fellows will engage in self-reflection and discussions with peers to evaluate their signature strengths and consider how they are using, or perhaps not, their signature strengths at work. Some discussion questions may include: What are your reactions to your top five strengths? What are your responses to your bottom five strengths? Which strengths are energizing, easy, and essential? Which strengths are draining? How can you apply your signature strengths more frequently throughout the day? How can you use your character strengths in new ways?

This first session aims to build awareness around character strengths, helping the fellows begin to recognize when and how they are using strengths that encompass the “Three Es” (easy, energizing, and essential) to their well-being. Although it may seem like a basic exercise, Seligman et al. (2005) found that the simple act of identifying personal character strengths is a positive experience.

Following this session, fellows will be encouraged to pay attention to the character strengths they are using and applying in their daily lives. Dr. Lam may consider incorporating smaller interventions between to keep the fellows familiar with the use of character strengths (see Appendix C).

## **Session #2: Appreciating Character Strengths**

Identifying and appreciating one's assets is imperative for working from a strengths-based perspective (Niemiec, 2018). To help foster a community that recognizes and celebrates its members' strengths, they need to know and appreciate their unique strengths. In Session Two of our character strengths intervention, the objective will be for the fellows to leave feeling as if they have a better understanding of themselves and each other.

Due to the fellows' time constraints, we will not require them to complete an extraordinary amount of prework. Instead, they will be asked to review the topics covered in Session One of the interventions. The first fifteen minutes of the session will be geared toward reviewing the basics of character strengths and why they are essential. Once the review is completed, the session will transition into identifying and appreciating character strengths to help one better understand himself.

Research on character strengths has demonstrated that recognizing character strengths within oneself is a positive experience for most individuals (Seligman et al., 2005). The fellows will be broken up into pairs to cultivate the recognition and appreciation of their character strengths. While in pairs, each fellow will take a turn speaking for five minutes about their top five-character strengths (one minute per character strength), after which the fellow assigned to listen will have five minutes for follow-up questions.

This exercise aims to encourage the fellows to understand better and appreciate what makes them who they are. Spending time speaking about why they believe they are brave, for example, may unlock extraordinary realizations. In tandem with the self-discovery, the exercise also aims at building mutual respect and understanding between the pair.

Following the exercise, the group will reconvene, and Dr. Lam can facilitate a conversation. Upon reading the room, she may ask one person from each pair to identify something that they learned from their partner or about themselves through the exercise. To conclude the session, Dr. Lam may speak briefly about the next session (Mindfulness and Character Strengths) and can share some closing remarks with the fellows about appreciating one's strengths.

**Session #3: Mindfulness & Character Strengths**

Both mindfulness and character strengths have been shown to decrease stress and contribute to overall well-being (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Wood, et al., 2011). Proponents of either would argue that in the face of increasingly complex, conflicted, or challenging circumstances, the utilization of either character strengths or meditation becomes increasingly critical for optimal performance (Niemiec, 2014). Mindfulness in and of itself represents a powerful ability to focus the mind. The question then becomes, upon what does one choose to focus? Amid high-stress experiences and demanding work schedules, the choice to optimize those opportunities for mindfulness with a special focus upon one's character strengths has the potential for profound rejuvenation and empowerment (Niemiec, 2014). The practice of deliberation combined with the deliberate use of one's strengths is synergistic. An awareness of character strengths can be used to strengthen a mindfulness practice, and mindfulness practice can increase the power and frequency with which one works with her character strengths. The objective of Session Three on character strengths will focus on the practice of the two.

The prework for the session is minimal. The pediatric anesthesia fellows will already have been introduced to the topic of mindfulness at the “Fellow Wellness Seminar.” They will have received instruction in meditation. Having already done the VIA survey, they will be challenged to consider:

- Can you find a way to use one of your signature strengths to strengthen your understanding of mindfulness?
- Likewise, have you had a moment in the past week where you have been mindful of one of your signature strengths at work?

- Insert one of your signature strengths into the following sentence and try to answer for yourself: "What would... (curious/honest/loving/grateful/ *insert signature strengths here*) mindfulness look like? (Niemiec, 2014)"

During the actual session, the fellows will reflect on their awareness of mindfulness and signature strengths. The class will join in a meditation led by Dr. Lam that will encourage them to envision their world from the point of view of the signature strength that they depend upon the most. What would life be like without their unique relationship with whichever trait they value most (for example, honesty, gratitude, or curiosity)? How much does the presence of that strength add to their life? To what extent has it given them unique power? After the shared, communal experience of group meditation, the fellows will break out into four groups to discuss their revised appreciation for this precious strength. The exercise deepens their connection to themselves, each other, and their sense of their part of the larger whole. While some mindfulness-based programs aim to decrease or manage a problem like stress, pain, or addiction, the point of this session is to deeply appreciate their own and others' strengths (Niemiec, 2014).

The expected outcome of the third session is primarily a deepened understanding of themselves in a positive light. The many perspectives through which they will have considered their positive traits - in meditation, in dialogue with others, and in regard to the strengths of the group as they move through a shared experience, serve to strengthen the relationships between them.

#### **Session #4: Utilizing Character Strengths at Work and At Home- Wrap Up**

In the final session of the intervention, the fellows will reflect on what they have learned about character strengths and learn how to utilize character strengths at home and work. The conflicting demands of work and home can lead to burnout, exhaustion, and depression. This

session will serve as an application plan for them by which they can bring their character strengths knowledge into the world.

For the first fifteen minutes of Session Four, Dr. Lam will recap the three previous sessions. From the first session, she will remind the fellows of the "Three Es" (easy, energizing, and essential) and will summarize the self-reflection activity they completed during that first session. For the second session, Dr. Lam will remind them of the discoveries they made about themselves and why appreciating character strengths is imperative for appreciating oneself. For the third, she will recap the role mindfulness plays with character strengths.

To tie it all together, Dr. Lam will then transition into presenting how character strengths can build team camaraderie and high-quality relationships. After being introduced as a larger group to the relevant research, fellows will break into small groups to discuss ways in which they can imagine using character strengths at work. In small groups they will discuss how they hope to use character strengths to improve their work relationships and the conditions at work. What kinds of strengths would they like to see developed as part of their work culture? Which of their character strengths is best suited for improving the way that medicine is practiced? Pediatric anesthesia fellows are constantly working as members of teams. They begin as mentees and evolve into mentors, and always work amongst a complex web of colleagues and departments. Character strengths can be used to strengthen interpersonal dynamics in many ways, such as their utilization in team building, providing a language for the description and cultivation of shared values, and work performance enhancement and empowerment (Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017).

There are many ways that the fellows can be encouraged to use character strengths as part of team building in the future. They can remember to look for and name the strengths in the individuals and patients they interact with. They can help colleagues and patients to search for

strengths within themselves. They can remind others of the many and varied strengths they have to draw from. In sum, to be seen as strong and capable by another person can be life changing. These are important reflections because many people are not aware of the many ways in which a trait can manifest as a strength.

Just as they have been educated about character strengths, they can inform others. They can use the discussion of character strengths as a tool for building teams at their future workplace. Additionally, the fellows will be encouraged to bring what they learned about character strengths home with them. After a brief introduction to history and research behind character strengths, they can lead others through small group discussions that help breed respect, dialogue, cooperation, and trust. Through this, it is our prediction that the fellows will feel even more connected with their partners or families.

The final minutes of the character strengths session will help obtain feedback on how the fellows liked the series. They will be given a survey that will ask them to anonymously answer questions about the series (see Appendix D).

### **Anticipated Results & Conclusion**

We believe character strengths interventions will be ideal for the pediatric anesthesiology fellows for several reasons. First, there is a lot of existing research around the benefits of recognizing character strengths in yourself and others, and we believe these positive benefits will prevent burnout in physicians. Further, the studies mentioned in the literature review are primarily based on physicians, so we expect to see similar, positive benefits for these fellows. Because the most significant barrier or resistance we will likely face is time, we needed to select brief yet powerful interventions for these fellows. Using four one-hour quarterly meetings, with suggested mini-interventions in between sessions, will allow the fellows to quickly and deeply

learn about themselves, recognize how to use different strengths at work, and appreciate others' strengths at work and home. C.C.H. has implemented other well-being programs and initiatives that have been well received, and we believe these interventions will have a lasting, positive impact on the pediatric anesthesiology fellows. Ideally, these initiatives will be easy to implement, improve well-being and reduce or prevent burnout, such that other departments within C.C.H. can create similar programming for their teams. This would help make a system-wide change to create a strengths-based culture.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to consider in this application plan. First, because the fellows are meeting only for one hour once per quarter, it is possible that they will not gain the full benefits of utilizing and applying character strengths in such a short period. Ideally, fellows would apply their learnings from each session beyond the designated time to meet. This might ensure that they gain maximum benefits.

Another limitation is that given their challenging and demanding work, the pediatric anesthesiology fellows may not see the opportunities available to them to use and apply their top character strengths. They will not learn to use their character strengths if they do not feel that they have time to consider their use. For example, prudence may be necessary for their daily life, yet it is lowest on their strengths. This may be exhausting for fellows to continually use strengths that are not energizing, easy, or essential to themselves.

In addition to the limitations listed above, the fellows are experiencing some of the most trying times of their careers and lives. They are working extremely long hours and are often under-appreciated for their efforts. The fellows may not see the importance of utilizing their character strengths and may be skeptical of the intervention.



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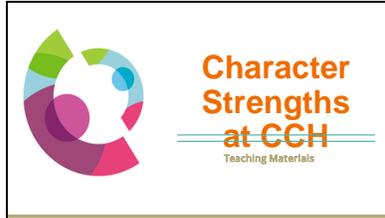
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## Appendix A

### Application Materials

#### Slide 1



This is a four-part series geared towards the education and usage of character strengths.

Part 1- Introduction to VIA Character Strengths

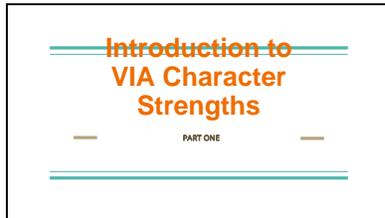
Part 2- Appreciating character strengths.

Part 3- Mindfulness and character strengths

Part 4- Character strengths at work and at home

**Speaker Note:** Please see additional attachments for instructions on how to take the VIA Character Strengths Assessment, a 24-Strengths “Cheat Sheet,” and a list of other ideas to use and utilize character strengths in between sessions.

#### Slide 2



**Session #1** – Should be about 1 hour.

Slide 3

**Objective**  
 To build awareness about character strengths and recognize how you utilize your strengths.



**Script:**

- Thank you for being here and thank you for taking your individual character strengths assessment before meeting today.
- In this one-hour session, we will aim to build awareness about character strengths and begin to recognize how you utilize your unique strengths.
- We will spend some time learning more about character strengths, but we will also spend time reflecting and sharing with one another.

Slide 4

VIA Classification of Character Strengths



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**Script:**

- Today is an introduction to the 24-character strengths.
- Quick raise of hands - who here has heard of the 24-character strengths? Who has taken the assessment before?
  - **Speaker Note:** This will help gauge how “new” this is to some people. You may choose to skip over some content or elaborate further depending on their needs.

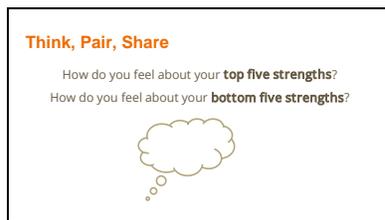
**Slide 5**



**Script:**

- Character Strengths are Positive traits that are fulfilling, independent, valued across cultures, and are associated with positive outcomes. (Niemiec, 2018)
- These positive characteristics are core to individual identity and behavior and contribute to the collective good. (Niemiec, 2018)
- Everyone has all 24-character strengths within them, just in different orders.
- Character strengths can be developed. They are different from talents and skills because they are morally and socially valued, and you still have them if you are not actively “practicing” them. (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

**Slide 6**

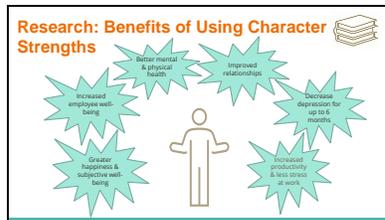


**Script:** I want you to think about these two questions on the screen. What was your initial reaction and thoughts about your top five strengths? What about your bottom five strengths? We will briefly reflect on our own, and then we will go into pairs to have a discussion.

**Speaker Note:** First, give participants 1-2 minutes to reflect on the questions on the screen. Then, break the group into pairs for about 10 minutes. Ask each partner to make sure they give the other person enough time to talk (each person should have about 5 minutes to share) . Participants should consider each of the questions on the slide. When the group comes back together, ask if anyone would like to share their

responses with the larger group. This entire activity should take about 15 minutes.

**Slide 7**



**Script:** Character Strengths are one of the most prominent features of positive psychology. There are hundreds of research studies about character strengths and the benefits of using them intentionally in your daily life.

- Using character strengths is associated with greater happiness, subjective well-being, achievement, and better physical health (Niemiec, 2018).
- Using character strengths at work can increase employee well-being (Höge et al., 2020).
- When medical students and physicians report using character strengths at work, they have higher levels of well-being and mental health (Hausler et al., 2017).
- Using character strengths in new ways can increase well-being and decrease depression for up to 6 months (Niemiec, 2018).
- Using character strengths is associated with increased productivity at work, less stress at work, improved relationships, and positive

health outcomes (Niemiec, 2018).

**Slide 8**

**Think, Pair, Share**

Which strengths are **energizing**, **easy**, and **essential** for you?  
 Asked differently, if you could only **pick three strengths to use for the rest of your life**, which would you choose and why?



**Script:** We will now spend some time reflecting on our individual profiles. As you look at the rank order of your character strengths, which ones are energizing, easy, and essential to you? Asked differently, if you could only pick three strengths to use for the rest of your life, which would you choose and why?

**Speaker Note:** First, give participants 1-2 minutes to reflect on the questions on the screen. Then, break the group into pairs (new partners from the previous round so they can get to know each other) for about 10 minutes. Ask each partner to make sure they give the other person enough time to talk (each person should have about 5 minutes to share) . Participants should consider each of the questions on the slide. When the group comes back together, ask if anyone would like to share their responses with the larger group. This entire activity should take about 15 minutes.

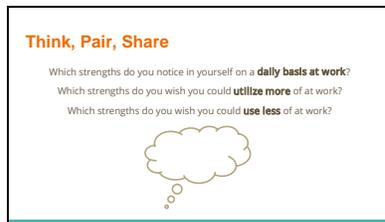
Slide 9



**Script:** In addition to general research about character strengths, there are quite a few research studies about character strengths and physicians and/or medical students.

- A cross-sectional and longitudinal study revealed...Most common among strengths medical students and physicians: fairness, honesty, judgment, kindness, and love (Huber et al., 2020a).
- According to a literature review...Most valuable in the medical profession: fairness, honesty, kindness, and teamwork (Huber et al., 2020a).
- One study found...burnout was associated with low scores of hope, perseverance, and zest (Huber et al., 2020b).
- Several studies have found that curiosity, hope, love, and zest are strongly associated with life satisfaction (Huber et al., 2020b).
- **Speaking notes:** We want to acknowledge that people may react differently to these statistics. For example, they may feel bad about themselves because they do not see their character strengths listed here. Use your best judgment on how to react and respond. Below is a possible script in how to close out this section.
- **Script:** At the end of the day, remember that these are just statistics. There is no right or wrong way to practice medicine, and there is no right or wrong way to live your life. You can be a valuable

Slide 10



physician with different signature strengths than what was shared, or you could have a wonderfully happy life without the strengths listed here. You will be your best self when you are bringing your own signature strengths to your everyday life at work and at home. And some of the best work done when people bring a diverse set of skills to the team. If we all showed up using the same strengths, we may not be as strong of a team.

**Script:** I would like you to reflect on how you show up at work - for the job you have, the people you interact with, and the work you have to get done. What strengths do you typically lean on? What strengths do you enjoy using and wish you could use more every day? Which strengths are really draining for you when you have to use them?

**Speaker Note:** First, give participants 1-2 minutes to reflect on the questions on the screen. Then, break the group into pairs (new partners from the previous round so they can get to know each other) for about 10 minutes. Ask each partner to make sure they give the other person enough time to talk (each person should have about 5 minutes to share) . Participants should consider each of the questions on the slide. When the group comes back together, ask if anyone would like to share their responses with the larger group. This entire activity should take about 15 minutes.

**Slide 11**

**Conclusion & Forward Thinking**

- As you go about your day, pay attention to the different strengths you are using. Which strengths are energizing and which strengths are draining?
- How can you bring more of your signature strengths to work?
- Next time, we'll dive even further into individual character strengths.

**Script:** Today we spent some time reflecting on our own character strengths, considered which strengths we use most frequently at work, and briefly touched on the benefits of why it is valuable to be talking about character strengths and using them more intentionally. In between now and our next session, I want you to spend time recognizing and reflecting on which strengths you bring to work - which ones are energizing and which ones are draining? Which strengths would you like to incorporate more in your daily life?

**Slide 12**

PRESENTATION  
BREAK

**Slide 13**

Appreciating  
Character Strengths

PART TWO

**Session #2** – Should be about 1 hour.

**Slide 14**

**Objective**  
 To leave this session with a better understanding of yourself and others.



**Script:**

- Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to learn more about yourselves and others.
- In this one-hour session, we will aim to build an appreciation for our own character strengths as well as our teammates.
- We will spend some time learning more about what appreciating character strengths looks like and why it is useful.
- The *objective* for this session is to leave with a better understanding of yourself and others.

**Slide 15**

**Refresher**  
 Every individual has some combination of these 24 character strengths within them, they just appear in different orders.

VIA Classification of Character Strengths



**Script:** Before we get started, lets refresh what we learned last time. As discussed, every individual has some combination of these 24-character strengths within them, they just appear in different orders.

**Slide 16**

**Think, Pair, Share**  
 Since the last session, have you observed your usage of your **top five character strengths in your daily life**? How so?  
 How do you think your **character strengths** have played a role in getting you to **where you are today**?

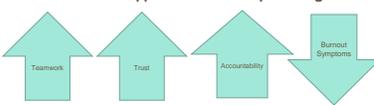


**Script:** I want you to think about the questions on the screen. Since the last session, have you observed your usage of your top five-character strengths in your daily life? How so? How do you think your character strengths have played a role in getting you to where you are today? We will reflect on our own before breaking into pairs for a discussion.

**Note:** First, give participants 1-2 minutes to reflect on the questions on the screen. Then, break the group into pairs for about 10 minutes. Ask each partner to make sure they give the other person enough time to talk (each person should have about 5 minutes to share). Participants should consider each of the questions on the slide. When the group comes back together, ask if anyone would like to share their responses with the larger group. This entire activity should take about 15 minutes.

**Slide 17**

**Why is This Useful?**  
 In order to help foster a community that recognizes and celebrates its members' strengths, individuals must **understand and appreciate their unique strengths**.



**Script:** In order to help foster a community that recognizes and celebrates its members' strengths, individuals must understand and appreciate their unique strengths. Recognizing character strengths in ourselves and others can also improve teamwork, cultivate higher levels of trust, implement accurate accountability and reduce the effects of burnout.

Question for the group- Which part of our day do you believe this will be most useful?

**Slide 18**

**Research:**  
 Recognizing character strengths within oneself is a positive experience for most individuals.



*After discovering your character strengths, did it make you more proud to be who you are?*

(Petigian et al., 2015)

**Script:** Research on character strengths has demonstrated that recognizing character strengths within oneself is a positive experience for most individuals.

Pose the question to the group for a large group discussion: After discovering your character strengths, did it make you prouder to be who you are?

**Slide 19**

**Think, Pair, Share**

In your pairs, each of you will take turns speaking for 5 minutes about your top five-character strengths (1 minute per character strength), followed by 5 minutes for questions.

Then *switch* partners!



**Note:** This activity will take a total of 20 minutes to complete. Below are some question suggestions in the case there is a lull in the conversations:

- Which character strength are you most proud of?
- Are you surprised at any of your top five strengths?
- Which strength do you feel you use the most?
- If given the opportunity, would you switch any out for another of the 24-character strengths?

**Slide 20**

**Group Discussion**

- Which strengths were the **easiest to describe**? Which ones were the **hardest to describe**?
- Was there a part of this exercise that you found **particularly challenging**?
- Imagine you had to go an entire day **without that strength**, what would that look like for you?



**Script:** Let us talk about that experience as a group while considering some of the questions on the screen.

**Speaker Note:** The previous exercise aims to encourage the fellows to understand better and appreciate what makes them who they are. In tandem with the self-discovery, the exercise also aims at building mutual respect and understanding between the pair. Feel free to use the questions on the screen to guide the discussion, but let it flow organically if it goes another direction.

**Slide 21**

**Conclusion & Forward Thinking**

- As you navigate your days, think about **how your unique combination of character strengths make you YOU** and how they are important to who you are at the core.
- Reflect on the exercise and take a moment to **appreciate the qualities you bring to the world**.

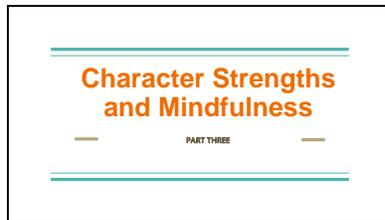
**Speaker Note:** Give the fellows a moment of pause to reflect on what they have learned so far and to plan out how they will utilize their strengths in the future. Pose the following prompts to them:

- As you navigate your days, think about how your unique combination of character strengths make you unique and how they are important to who you are.
- Reflect on the exercise and take a moment to appreciate the qualities you bring to the world.

Slide 22



Slide 23



**Session #3** – Should be about 1 hour.

Slide 24

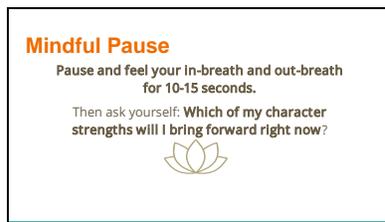


**Script:**

- There are many benefits to the practice of mindfulness.
- It increases well-being, reduces stress and improves relationships.
- Character strengths are the examination of what is best in us.
- In general, when we focus on our strengths, we feel happier and more energized (Niemiec, 2014).
- When we express our strengths to others, the people around us feel supported and valued.

- When we blend the practices of mindfulness with a focus on character strengths, we are choosing to be our best selves in the present moment. We are available to the people we care about in as generous and courageous a manner as we can offer. It is a powerful combination.
- When we witness another's strengths in as mindful a manner as possible, we see them as their best selves, which can be life changing for the person who is seen.
- This training session is about bringing our best selves to the present moment.

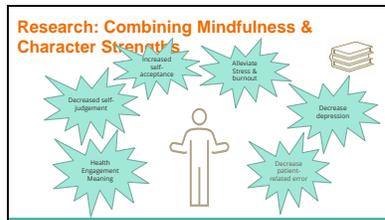
Slide 25



- **Script:** Mindfulness promotes self-awareness and change activation by bringing your character strengths more clearly into view. It serves as a path to see yourself as you really are.
- A mindful pause has two simple steps: 1) Pause and feel your in-breath and out-breath for 10-15 seconds. 2) Conclude with a question: Which of my character strengths will I bring forward right now?
- **Speaker Note:** A mindful pause is an exercise from Ryan Niemiec's (2014) *Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A practical guide to flourishing*.
- A description of it can also be found online at: <https://www.viacharacter.org/t>

opics/articles/a-mindful-pause-to-change-your-day

Slide 26



Script: The practice of mindfulness combined with character strengths has been linked to multiple benefits:

- An increased amount of time spent using character strengths has been linked to mindfulness (Niemiec, 2014).
- The integration of mindfulness and character strengths creates a synergy of mutual benefit that can foster a virtuous circle in which mindful awareness boosts strengths use which, in turn, enlivens mindfulness (Niemiec, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012).
- Randomized controlled trial of Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) found MBSP led to significant improvements in health, engagement, meaning, and well-being; additional benefits for loneliness and negative emotions; and higher student retention rates the following year (Wingert et al., 2020).

**Slide 27**

**Think, Pair, Share**

As you prepare to meditate, consider the signature strength that you value the most. In what ways does that character strength give you the energy, grit, or hope that you need to continue to grow and move forward?



**Script:** We are going to go through a meditation together. As you prepare to meditate, consider the signature strength that you value the most. In what ways does that character strength give you the energy, grit, or hope that you need to continue to grow and move forward?

**Slide 28**

**Guided Meditation**

Which character strength do you value the most?  
What would your life be like without it?



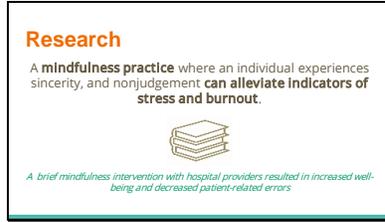
**Speaker Note:** Lead the group through a shared meditation that encourages them to envision their world from the point of view that they depend upon the most. What would life be like without their relationship with the trait that they value most (for example, gratitude, honesty or curiosity?) How does the presence of that strength add to their life? To what extent has it given them unique power?

Alternatively, select one of the guided meditations below:

<https://www.viacharacter.org/resource/s/videos/curiosity-meditation>

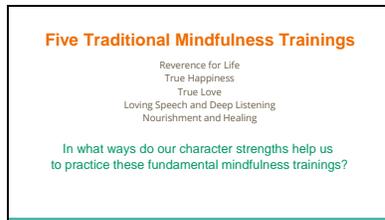
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCsk-bLe9yM>

**Slide 29**



**Script:** A mindfulness practice where an individual experiences sincerity, and nonjudgement can alleviate indicators of stress and burnout (Gilmartin et al., 2017). A brief mindfulness intervention with hospital providers resulted in a calculated change in well-being (e.g., depression) or behavior (e.g., patient-related errors).

**Slide 30**



**Note:** There are five traditional mindfulness trainings: are Reverence for Life, True Happiness, True Love, Loving Speech and Deep Listening, and Nourishment and Healing

“Reverence for Life: Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and to learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals” (Nhat Hanh & Cheung, 2010, p. 210).

True Happiness: “Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting” (Nhat Hanh & Cheung, 2010, p. 210).

True Love: “Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society... cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness—which are the four basic elements of true love” (Nhat Hanh & Cheung, 2010, p. 211).

Loving Speech: “Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace.” (Nhat Hanh & Cheung, 2010, p. 211).

Nourishment and Healing: “Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming.” (Nhat Hanh & Cheung, 2010, p. 212)

In small groups discuss how might you use your character strengths to practice these teachings.

**Slide 31**

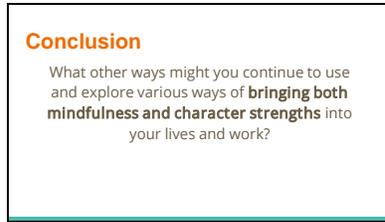
**Group Discussion**

Come together as a whole again and have individual representatives from each of the small groups **share insights gained and discussed.**



**Speaker Note:** Instruct the group to come back as a whole and ask a representative from each small group to summarize big takeaways from their group discussions.

**Slide 32**

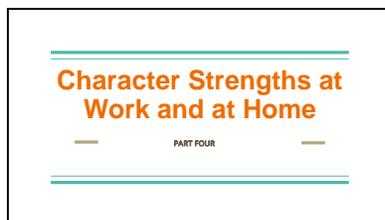


**Script:** Keeping the next and final session of this course in mind, pose the question- What other ways might the fellows continue to use and explore various ways of bringing both mindfulness and character strengths into their lives and work?

**Slide 33**



**Slide 34**



**Session #4** – Should be about 1 hour. This is the final session.

**Slide 36**

**Objective**

To reflect on your experience with character strengths and to identify areas in which you can **utilize character strengths at home and at work.**



**Script:** Today we will reflect on your experience with character strengths. We will also discuss and share ideas how you can utilize character strengths at home in addition to the workplace.

**Slide 37**

**Research**

Research has shown that using **character strengths at work can increase employee well-being.**

**Using character strengths can result in:**

- Increased Confidence & Happiness
- Reduced Stress
- Accomplished Goals
- Amplified Meaning and Purpose



(Hogge et al., 2020)

**Script:** Research has shown that using character strengths at work can increase employee well-being. Additionally, utilizing character strengths in your everyday life can result in; increased confidence and happiness, reduced stress, accomplished goals and cultivates meaning and purpose.

**Slide 38**

**Think, Pair, Share**

In what ways **have you changed the way you work** with your new appreciation for character strengths?

How do you **see yourself differently** because of character strengths?



**Script:** I want you to think about these two questions on the screen. How are you different after spending lots of time thinking about your unique character strengths?

**Speaker Note:** First, give participants 1-2 minutes to reflect on the questions on the screen. Then, break the group into pairs for about 10 minutes. Ask each partner to make sure they give the other person enough time to talk (each person should have about 5 minutes to share). Participants should consider each of the questions on the slide. When the group comes back together, ask if anyone would like to share their

responses with the larger group. This entire activity should take about 15 minutes.

**Slide 39**

**Research**

Utilizing character strengths at work results in:

- Improving team camaraderie
- Developing high quality relationships
- Optimizing team work
- Improve Work Performance



*Imagine a workplace in which every member of the team is fully utilizing their greatest strengths. Does this seem like an environment you'd enjoy working in?*

(Hogg et al., 2020)

**Script:** Research on character strength utilization at work shows an improvement in team camaraderie, the developing of high-quality relationships, optimization of teamwork and improvement of work performance. It is valuable to spend time recognizing and appreciating the character strengths in yourself and in others when at work.

**Slide 40**

**Think, Pair, Share**

How have your relationships changed at work because of character strengths?

How can you continue to use character strengths to improve working relationships or conditions at work?



**Script:** I want you to think about how recognizing character strengths has impacted your relationships. In what ways would you like to see them incorporated even more in the workplace?

**Speaker Note:** First, give participants 1-2 minutes to reflect on the questions on the screen. Then, break the group into pairs (new partners from the previous round so they can get to know each other) for about 10 minutes. Ask each partner to make sure they give the other person enough time to talk (each person should have about 5 minutes to share). Participants

should consider each of the questions on the slide. When the group comes back together, ask if anyone would like to share their responses with the larger group. This entire activity should take about 15 minutes.

**Slide 41**

**Group Discussion**

Knowing what you know about character strengths, **how might you bring this knowledge to your relationships at home/personal life?**



**Script:** Knowing what you know about character strengths, how might you bring this knowledge to your relationships at home/personal life?

**Speaker Note:** Ask the group if anyone has noticed character strengths in their family members or friends. Have they had discussions about them? What do they think their spouse/partner/best friend/child’s top strengths are? How might you manage your relationship differently? How do you think they would feel if you acknowledged their signature strengths? How can you and your spouse/partner/best friend/child mutually recognize and appreciate each other’s signature strengths to have an even stronger relationship? Do you have any ideas on how to have a stronger relationship with your spouse/partner/best friend/child using character strengths?

Slide 42

**Forward Thinking:**

- What strengths do we want to see more of as a culture?
- What is the character strength that you would like to bring forth that would contribute the most to improving the way medicine is practiced?

**Script:** Before we close out our time together, I want to hear how you would like to use character strengths to strengthen our CCH culture. Reflect on the questions on the screen and share with the group.

**Speaker Note:** One thing to contemplate is that people have extraordinarily little time at home with their families. You can encourage participants to pause for a moment to focus on the humanity character strengths in your profile like love, kindness, social intelligence before going home and interacting with your family as a good way to get grounded and reset.

Slide 43



**Script:** Thank you for dedicating the time over the last few months to learning about character strengths. As covered over the four units, the study of character strengths is potentially life enhancing discoveries. It is my hope that you feel empowered to use your strengths as well as recognize strengths within your teammates to foster a positive culture at CCH. Thank you again for your time and effort!

Slide 44

**References**

**Relationship to Character Strengths**

Woods, M., Peterson, C., Steiner, A., Peterson, B., Hogg, T., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2017). Associations between the application of signature character strengths, health and well-being of health professionals. *Personality & Individual Differences, 101*, 1-11. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2017.02.027

Hogg, T., Peterson, C., Steiner, A., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2016). Resilience, emotional distress and the application of signature character strengths in a health-care setting. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 111*(1), 1-11. doi:10.1037/xap0000014

Hogg, T., Peterson, C., Steiner, A., Seligman, M. E. P., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2016). Resilience and application of signature character strengths: their association with well-being, work engagement, and burnout. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 111*(1), 1-11. doi:10.1037/xap0000014

Hogg, T., Peterson, C., Seligman, M. E. P., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2016). Character strengths predict medical professionals' and their impact on well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences, 101*, 1-11. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2017.02.027

**Application to Character Strengths**

Hogg, T., Peterson, C., Steiner, A., Seligman, M. E. P., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2017). Associations between the application of signature character strengths, health and well-being of health professionals. *Personality & Individual Differences, 101*, 1-11. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2017.02.027

Hogg, T., Peterson, C., Steiner, A., Seligman, M. E. P., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2016). Resilience, emotional distress and the application of signature character strengths in a health-care setting. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 111*(1), 1-11. doi:10.1037/xap0000014

## **Appendix B**

### How to Take the VIA Character Strengths Assessment

1. Go to [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)
2. Create an account. This will allow ViaCharacter to save your results and reports so you can always easily access your report in the future.
3. Go to Reports.
4. Select “Total 24 Character Strengths Report”
  - a. This should be \$49 USD.
5. Click “Buy Now”
6. The survey will take about 10-15 minutes to complete.
7. Click here for any other FAQ: <https://www.viacharacter.org/faq>

## Appendix C

### Other Intervention Ideas to Recommend or Implement in Between the Quarterly Sessions

- Create character strengths accountability partners among the fellows. Example: Sharing top strengths with partner and encouraging each other to use their strengths in new and unique ways at work. Ask each other about their experience using their signature strengths at work.
- Focus on one signature strength per week. Be intentional and go out of your way to use your signature strength at work.
- Begin each surgery, or team meeting, recognizing each other's strengths.
- Conclude each surgery, or team meeting, recognizing, and appreciating the strengths you saw your teammates display.
- Create a reward system for fellows using their signature strengths.
- Begin each team meeting recognizing and verbalizing how you used your strengths at work.
- Ask fellows to describe the character strengths they are most proud of.
- Ask fellows to describe which strengths they use every day at work and at home.
- Ask fellows to introduce themselves by sharing a story of "Me at My Best" in which they highlight a situation (personal or professional) when they were using their signature character strengths.
- Invite fellows to share their character strengths with their loved ones at home.
- Recommend fellows to utilize both their own signature strengths in new ways at work and applying character strengths associated with higher subjective well-being (curiosity, hope, love, and zest) or strengths associated with lower burnout (hope, perseverance, and zest).
- Incorporate character strengths-based meditations in the workplace.
- Use the VIA Team Report to assess character strengths across the entire team. This report combines the individual profiles into one comprehensive report of the team's strengths. Can incorporate 3-15 people per team. Cost is \$15 USD per team member. Click here for more information: <https://www.viacharacter.org/reports/the-via-team-profile-report?source=reports-page&position=3>

## Appendix D

### Character Strengths End of Year Survey

Participation in this year's character strengths workshops gave me an enhanced sense of my strengths and abilities.

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neither agree nor disagree
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

Discussion with my fellow residents about their character strengths helped me to appreciate them better and enhanced our working relationship.

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neither agree nor disagree
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

I plan to use my training in character strengths in my future work with residents, fellows, and trainees.

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neither agree nor disagree
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

Education in character strengths was an important part of this year's wellness curriculum.

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Neither agree nor disagree
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly agree

**Appendix E**

Positive Correlates of Different Character Strengths

<b>Character Strength</b>	<b>Positive Correlates</b>
Creativity	Openness to new experiences; cognitive flexibility
Curiosity	Positive affect, willingness to challenge stereotypes; creativity; desire for challenge in work and play; goal perseverance; adept at making complex decisions; excitement / enjoyment/attentiveness; engagement and achievement in academic settings; sense of subjective well-being.
Judgement	Adept at problem solving. Increased cognitive ability; more resistant to suggestion and manipulation; more effective in dealing with stress
Love of Learning	More adept at navigating obstacles / challenges; autonomy; resourcefulness; increased sense of possibility; self-efficacy; healthy, productive aging; more likely to seek/accept challenges; decreased levels of stress
Perspective	Successful aging, life satisfaction; maturity; open-mindedness; even-temperedness; sociability; social intelligence
Bravery	Prosocial orientation; internal locus of control; self-efficacy; ability to delay gratification; tolerance for ambiguity/uncertainty; capacity to assess risk; capacity for reflection; involvement in socially worthy aims; capacity to create and sustain high quality connections with others
Perseverance	Achievement/goal completion; resourcefulness; self-efficacy
Honesty	Positive mood; life satisfaction; openness to new experiences; empathy; conscientiousness; capacity for self-actualization; agreeableness; emotional stability; effort/goal attainment
Zest	Autonomy; connection with others; goal attainment
Love	Positive relationships with others; healthy balance between dependency and autonomy; positive social functioning; higher self-esteem; less susceptibility to depression; capacity to cope with stress
Kindness	Overall mental and physical health; longevity
Social Intelligence	Smooth social functioning; life judgement, lower levels of aggression; lower incidence of substance abuse
Teamwork	Social trust; positive view of human nature
Fairness	Perspective; self-reflection; cooperation; leadership; altruism; prosocial behavior
Leadership	Cognitive skills / intelligence; flexibility / adaptability; emotional stability; internal locus of control; integrity; interpersonal skills; creativity/resourcefulness
Forgiveness	Prosocial behaviors; agreeableness; emotional stability; lower levels of anger, anxiety, depression, and hostility
Humility	Perspective; forgiveness; self-regulation; capacity to attain self-improvement goals

Prudence	Cooperativeness; interpersonal warmth; sociability; assertiveness; positive emotion; imaginativeness; curiosity; insightfulness; physical health; longevity; optimism; internal locus of control; high achievement/performance; lower levels of anger expression
Self-regulation	High levels of academic achievement; self-esteem; self-acceptance; capacity to control anger; secure interpersonal attachments; high levels of satisfaction with social relationships; lower levels of anxiety and depression; perceived by others as more likable / trustworthy
Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	Openness to experience; altruism; devotion to others/larger community; capacity for change/self-improvement
Gratitude	Positive emotion; life satisfaction; optimism; prosocial behavior; increased cardiovascular and immune functioning; longevity; lower levels of anxiety and depression; openness to experience; agreeableness; conscientiousness; less neuroticism
Hope	Achievement; positive social relationships; physical well-being; active problem-solving; lower levels of anxiety and depression; conscientiousness; diligence; ability to delay gratification
Humor	Positive mood: capacity to manage stress; creativity; intelligence; less neuroticism
Spirituality	Self-regulation; lower levels of substance abuse; positive social relationships; marital stability; forgiveness; kindness; compassion; altruism; volunteerism; philanthropy; happiness; sense of purpose; life satisfaction; capacity to cope with illness and stress

From: Niemiec, R.M.(2018) Character Strengths Interventions: A field guide for practitioners. Hogrefe, pg. 11-12 originally printed in Peterson, C. & Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press.