Praise for Happiness, Healing, Enhancement

“Filled with good strategies based in research, compelling case material, and most importantly, practical advice, this book belongs in the library of everyone interested in what it means to live well. It provides not only ample food for thought, but for action.”

—Christopher Peterson, Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan

“If you are a therapist, a coach—or if you want to help yourself and others flourish—then this book is a must-read. It is an important theoretical and practical contribution to the field of positive psychology—and, in fact, to the field of psychology as a whole.”

—Tal Ben-Shahar, author of Happier and The Pursuit of Perfect

A practical guide to applying the principles of positive psychology in your mental health practice

Edited by internationally recognized psychologist, author, and therapist trainer George Burns, Happiness, Healing, Enhancement: Your Casebook Collection for Applying Positive Psychology in Therapy provides thought-provoking yet realistic and practical contributions from practitioners of positive psychology from around the world who share how they have translated solid, positive psychology research into sound clinical practice.

Organized to make searching for a particular diagnostic category or therapeutic outcome fast and easy, this guide features:

• Contributions from some of the world’s foremost positive psychology clinicians, researchers, and teachers, including P. Alex Linley, Betty Alice Erickson, Robert Weis, Antonella Delle Fave, Richard G. Tedeschi, Robert Biswas-Diener, Michael D. Yapko, and Bill O’Hanlon
• Examples and strategies including a “Putting It into Practice” feature that illustrates how readers can immediately apply the therapeutic applications covered in each chapter

Building on the proven benefits of the positive psychology movement, Happiness, Healing, Enhancement will teach you new skills that will strengthen your practice of therapy and equip your clients with the pathways to overcome challenging problems and live a full, satisfying life.

GEORGE W. BURNS is an internationally recognized clinical psychologist, author, and therapist trainer. He is Director of the Milton H. Erickson Institute of Western Australia and The Hypnotherapy Centre of Western Australia. He lectures around the world and is an adjunct senior lecturer at Edith Cowan University. He has published several books, including 101 Healing Stories, Healing with Stories, and 101 Healing Stories for Kids and Teens, all published by Wiley.
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Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan, MI

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Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD
Author of _Happier_ and _The Pursuit of Perfect_

George Burns and the contributors to this volume have created the most useful manual ever developed for therapists. Strengthspotting, enabling, and developing change the focus of therapy as well as the process and outcome. Using this approach not only benefits clients, but will force the therapist to become healthy as well.

Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD, ABPP
Distinguished Professor, Governors State University, IL

George Burns has assembled a group of sensitive, seasoned therapist-scholars, like himself, to present a treasure trove of ways to add positive psychology to clinical practice. The approaches are cutting edge. They are what we need to bring our clients to a new level of feeling, functioning, and flourishing.

Michael B. Frisch, PhD
Professor of Psychology, Baylor University, TX
Author of _Quality of Life Therapy_ and _Creating Your Best Life_

Join this international assembly of experts on an enlightening expedition that explores a vast panorama of new visions of promoting therapeutic change. Recommended for the novice and the experienced explorer of clinical resilience and hope.

Jeffrey K. Zeig, PhD
Director, The Milton H. Erickson Foundation, AZ
Happiness,
Healing,
Enhancement

Your Casebook Collection for Applying Positive Psychology in Therapy

Edited by
George W. Burns

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
This book is printed on acid-free paper. ☺

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
There are many dear friends and family
who contribute so much to my personal happiness,
but it is enriched very specially in the love and contentment
I share with Sue.
    So, Sue,
this book is dedicated to you
    . . . with love.
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One summer’s evening I decided to get my head out of pulling the final threads of this book together by having a sunset picnic on a riverbank with Sue—a little practicing what I preach! The sun was a ball of gold. The sky was subtly washed with many hues from pink through blue, and dotted with moody gray clouds brightly rimmed with gold. The reflections of bronzed trees rippled in the water, and ducks made V-shape wakes as they paddled across the river. A pair of eagles soared toward their roost for the night, and a flock of squawking white cockatoos slalomed along the meandering course of the river. The grassy ground felt warm at the end of the day, while the gentle breeze that lightly rippled the river’s surface held a refreshing coolness. As I looked at the many parts that made up the scene, each was uniquely beautiful in itself. But each contributed to a big picture that was immeasurably more overwhelming and spectacular than each of its parts.

I confess I was not completely in the moment and had not gotten my head totally out of the book. Here was the metaphor I wanted for these acknowledgments. Like the various elements of our sunset scene, this book has happened through the contributions and efforts of so many beautiful people. Each part, no matter how little or large, has enriched the whole picture.

First, and foremost, I cannot express adequate gratitude to the deeply valued contributors who have so generously given of their time, knowledge, and wisdom with the aim of enhancing the practice of therapy and the lives of their fellow beings. Please accept this as a personal expression of my gratitude to each and every one of you.

Thanks go to our therapeutic clients and research subjects who have shared their stories with us, informed us about life’s challenges, and shown us the amazing resilience of human nature. I hope our professions never lose sight of just what a privilege it is to join a fellow being on his or her journey through life’s trials and triumphs.

I am not sure how I would survive without Julie Nayda. My professional and personal happiness bear a direct correlation to her skills, competence, and humor. Thank you, Kym Nayda, too, for your input and help with the challenging references. Helen Street, PhD, is valued not only as a contributor but also as a discussant of ideas, peer reviewer of certain chapters, and, along with Neil, Lucia, Molly, and Tess, a dear friend. Sue Thomas has patiently read every word, then reread them some more, correcting grammar, offering...
suggestions, and providing loving support. I am also indebted to my endorsers for their most kind words.

They say when you are on a good thing, stick to it. That is how I feel about working with everyone at John Wiley & Sons. This book got off the starting block with Lisa Gebo’s helpful ideas and encouragement: I wish you health and happiness. Sweta Gupta picked up the baton: Congratulations on the promotion. Rachel Livsey carried it down the final straight: Thanks for the challenging, creative ideas and pleasant company over our halibut dinner in New York. Kara Borbely and Kim Nir, along with the rest of the Wiley team, have competently seen it across the finish line. Thank you, one and all.

When Tam asked, “Can we be in your book?” I said, “Sure. What do you want me to say?” She dictated simply, “To the four grandchildren of Suzanne Thomas: Sarsha, Tamika, Indiana, and Chlo.” You are now as warmly incorporated in my book as I feel warmly incorporated in your family.

Indeed, friends and family can be one of our greatest sources of happiness. And here I feel blessed to be no exception to the statistics. Thank you to all my dear friends for just being who you are. Special gratitude goes to Phyllis and Ken for their generosity, lasting friendship, and love of everything that is important—including our extending family, Philip, PK, Delila, Robbie, and Bella.

But just as the river picnic would not have been complete without the setting sun, so the picture of my life would not be complete without Leah, Ian, Oscar, Taran (who gets his first mention in a book!), and Tom. The love of family is beyond comparison and the joy of grandparenthood is simply the best stage of life.

We know that being grateful, that counting one’s blessings, is also good for one’s happiness. I feel truly blessed by and grateful to you all . . . and that surely enhances my happiness. Thank you.
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Introduction

George W. Burns

WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS

“Please present a clear case example of how you translated solid, positive psychology research into sound clinical practices.” This is what I asked contributors when inviting them to submit chapters for this book.

Can we apply the growing body of research from the field of positive psychology to our work with clients who are suffering the distressing challenges that life inevitably seems to present? Can we have therapeutic practices that are positive in their paradigms, applications, and outcomes? How can we assist someone not to just eliminate the symptoms of depression, anxiety, anger, or trauma but also to move on to a life that is flourishing or being well lived? And what are the step-by-step strategies to do so effectively?

Following a workshop I conducted on using positive psychology in therapy, a participant e-mailed me. He wrote:

I often tell the story of seemingly successfully using a CBT [cognitive-behavior therapy] approach to therapy with a young woman with depression some years ago. Her Beck Depression Scale scores had lowered from the severe to the normal range and I was feeling great about a job well done, only to hear her say to me, “I am not depressed anymore, but I don’t feel happy. Can you help me with that too?” I had to confess that I couldn’t and discharged her from our care. In retrospect, it has always seemed such an inadequate response!
His e-mail was one of the stimuli behind the evolution of this book that you now hold in your hands.

The term positive psychology was coined by Martin Seligman. Using his 2000 term as president of the American Psychological Association to highlight psychology’s traditional focus on pathology and challenge it to examine more about human functioning, he laid a solid, scientific, research foundation to a field that is now burgeoning. While traditional psychology continued to trundle along the freeway of examining and treating the problems and foibles of human misery, Seligman sought to divert the discipline down a path that examined well-being, happiness, flourishing, and the life well lived. This is not to say that psychology and psychotherapy have not had positive orientations prior to Seligman’s presidency. Among other approaches, Carl Rogers wrote about self-actualization, solution-focused therapy has—as its name states—actively moved from a problem to solution-oriented approach, and Milton Erickson eagerly sought out resources that clients could utilize toward healthier and happier functioning.

What is new is that we have now gathered a strong body of research evidence in fields such as optimal functioning, hope, altruism, goal setting, and strengths that can usefully inform therapeutic practice. However, there seems to be a gap (which perhaps widens to a chasm at times) between the growing body of knowledge on one hand and the therapeutic applications on the other. Some invited contributors to this book came back with such comments as “I research, write, and teach positive psychology but I don’t do cases.” One said, “There are two groups in this field: those that know and don’t do, and those that do but don’t know.” While there may be some truth in this, I hope the contributions in the following pages will show that the field is certainly not as bipolar as suggested.

THE CONTRIBUTORS

The contributors of chapters include researchers and teachers who are keen to see their well-informed evidence communicated into helpful therapeutic practice. There are also clinicians whose work is well informed and well grounded in both scientific evidence and wisdom. I have invited some whose names are well known in the field and others who may be less well known but who are doing good and valuable work at the interface of therapy and research.

The e-mail from my workshop participant raises important questions about the goal of therapy. Is therapy’s purpose to reduce suffering and pathology, as my colleague had done successfully with his depressed client, or is the goal of therapy to enhance flourishing, happiness, and well-being, as his client requested? How you answer this, what you focus on, and what your own philosophies of life are will determine not only how you do therapy but also what outcomes your clients are likely to receive. However, the question may not be as dichotomous as suggested in his e-mail or as I have reproduced it here. Reducing suffering and pathology does not necessarily increase optimism, hope, and happiness. Eliminating the negative does not necessarily give the skills to create the positive. Yet building skills in the positive may well reduce or eliminate the negative. If therapy is oriented toward happiness, healing, and enhancement, clients are likely to gain freedom from their presenting problems and gain a happier life.
If this is the case, the question then becomes: How can we as therapists best facilitate a happier life or a greater sense of well-being for our clients? “Show our readers how you do this,” I asked the contributors. “Give them the evidence your work is based on and take them step-by-step through your processes for applying this in a real case example.” In doing so, contributors were asked to adhere to the American Psychological Association’s ethical principles and code of conduct regarding confidentiality. They may have obtained client consent, appropriately disguised identifying features of the case, or compounded material from several cases. Unless stated, we do not know what approach each contributor has taken, and that further adds to the confidentiality.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The title, and corresponding three sections, of this book, Happiness, Healing, Enhancement represents three core processes and outcomes in the application of positive psychology into psychotherapy, counseling, and coaching practice. Part One, Happiness, moves beyond traditional therapy’s aim of eliminating dysfunctional symptoms. Happiness here refers to more than hedonic pleasure. It is perceived in a eudaemonic sense, including Seligman’s concepts of pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Subsections discuss how to assess your clients positively and orient them toward happiness, how to instill hope, and how to access and use client resources.

Part Two, Healing, offers ways to assist your clients to make the transition from unhealthy psychological, physical, or psychophysiological states to the attainment of health and well-being. Its subsections provide samples and strategies for how to move from depression to happiness, how to build mindfulness and acceptance, and how to transform trauma and pain into well-being.

Part Three, Enhancement, explores the means to help clients discover better ways of being, enjoying life, and flourishing. The subsections cover novel approaches in ecotherapy, neuroscience, and play therapy, finding beneficial tools and techniques, and effectively communicating positive therapeutic messages.

Of course, there is much overlap between the book’s three parts and the titles I have allocated to them. They are offered merely as a guide, and the division of chapters into each section is not intended to suggest that this is their sole function. Enhancement, for example, can and does contribute to a person’s happiness and, in turn, to healthier attitudes and behaviors. Likewise, happiness is known to have direct benefits on both psychological and physical health and, indeed, enhances the quality of our lives.

At the end of each chapter, the contributors and I have worked collaboratively to add a text box titled “Putting It into Practice.” This box takes the main therapeutic applications presented in the chapter and presents them in a point form for practitioners to follow easily and replicate quickly.

Another feature of the book is two Quick Reference Guides at the beginning. If you wish to quickly access information about dealing with a particular clinical problem or use a specific intervention, this section directs you to the relevant chapters.
On the right-hand edge of the pages you will find tabs to each section. These are included to allow you to access a section or chapter quickly, such as just before seeing a depressed client to look at how others have applied positive psychology in similar cases.

I hope you find as much enjoyment and benefit for you and your clients in reading this book as I did in reading, editing, and compiling it . . . and then in applying the new things I had learned with my clients, and in my own life.
PART ONE

Happiness
CHAPTER 1

Strengthspotting
Finding and Developing Client Resources in the Management of Intense Anger

P. Alex Linley and George W. Burns

MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS

P. Alex Linley is the founding director of the United Kingdom–based Centre of Applied Positive Psychology (www.cappeu.com), focused on the applications of strengths in organizations and schools as well as to individual and community development projects in the United Kingdom and Kolkata, India, through the charity The Strengths Project, of which Alex is a founding trustee. Alex holds the position of visiting professor in psychology at the University of Leicester and is an international speaker on strengths and positive psychology, having delivered keynote presentations throughout the United Kingdom, Europe, the Caribbean, the United States, and India. He has written, cowritten, and/or edited more than ninety research papers and book chapters and five books, including Positive Psychology in Practice (Wiley, 2004) and Average to A+: Realising Strengths in Yourself and Others (CAPP Press, 2008). His time outside work is spent with his wife and four children, listening to The Cure, and supporting the Nottingham Forest Football Club.

George W. Burns is an Australian clinical psychologist whose innovative work as a practitioner, teacher, and writer is recognized nationally and internationally. The author of numerous articles and book chapters, he has authored or edited seven books that have been widely translated, including Nature-Guided Therapy, 101 Healing Stories, and Healing with Stories. He is director of the Milton H. Erickson Institute of Western Australia and the Hypnotherapy Centre of Western Australia, is an adjunct senior lecturer at Edith Cowan University, and has a busy private practice with a brief, solution-focused, positive psychology orientation. He has served on the Practitioners Advisory Board of the (Continued)
Is psychotherapy a place where clients would consider going to talk about their strengths? Is psychotherapy a place where therapists would routinely inquire about a client’s strengths as a part of their initial assessment and ongoing therapy? It is unlikely this is what Emma was expecting when she presented to therapy with a slight weight problem, saying “I eat when I am bored, frustrated, anxious and angry—for psychological reasons. It makes me happy.” However, it was not until the second session that she revealed the real, embarrassing, and distressing reason for attending.

What she believed made her happy was quite specific: chocolate. With almost any emotional swing she would gorge on a family-size block of chocolate, a full package or two of chocolate cookies, or a container of chocolate milk. Trying to stop any long-established behavior can be difficult, especially if it is an approach behavior, meets a psychological need, and offers such strong rewards as the chocolate was doing for Emma. It provided instant pleasure when she was in distress, and she had empowered it with the ability to “make” her happy. To direct therapy toward stopping something that served as an effective, though maladaptive, coping strategy with such powerful rewards was obviously going to be an uphill battle.

With the exception of one or two therapeutic approaches, such as Ericksonian or solution-focused therapy, or with the occasional therapist, few therapies or therapists have oriented themselves toward spotting, enabling, and developing client strengths. Therapists and therapeutic models usually are very well versed in, and have good clinical strengths in, problem-spotting and weakness-spotting.

This being so, what might psychotherapists need to know about strengths, how might they go about spotting strengths in the therapeutic session, and what can they do with those strengths once they have been spotted? And, perhaps most important of all, is there any evidence that it is worthwhile for them to do this with clients like Emma in the first place?

In this chapter, we first offer some evidence to show why it is worthwhile spotting, enabling, and developing strengths in the context of therapy. Then we explore several questions relevant to this: How do you spot strengths in a client? How do you help a client spot strengths? How do you enable and develop strengths? Most of the discussion in answer to these questions is provided by Alex (PAL) while a therapeutic example (the evolving case of Emma) is presented by George (GWB).

When talking of strengths, we are using this definition: “a strength is a preexisting capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance” (Linley, 2008, p. 9). Simply put, strengths are natural propensities that each of us have—so natural, we argue, that they are evolved adaptations. When we are using our strengths, we are feeling in touch with our “true selves,” are doing the things that are right for us to do, and
from them we derive a sense of energy as a result. When these factors coincide, as they do in strengths use, optimal functioning is enabled. Given that psychotherapy often is focused on undoing dysfunction and enabling more optimal functioning, helping clients to identify and use their strengths more would seem to be indicated.

WHY IS STRENGTHSPOTTING WORTHWHILE?

In a study with 214 university students, Reena Govindji and I (PAL) were interested in the question of whether using strengths was associated with greater levels of well-being, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. We found that it was: People who used their strengths more reported higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, subjective well-being, psychological well-being, and vitality (Govindj & Linley, 2007). Further, they reported higher levels of organismic valuing, the Rogerian concept of being in touch with one’s inner nature and organismic valuing process (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

When we statistically controlled for self-esteem and self-efficacy, the use of strengths was still a significant predictor of psychological well-being and subjective well-being, indicating that the effect of using one’s strengths on well-being went over and above existing levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy. This is good news for psychotherapists, since it suggests that whatever a client’s current level of self-esteem and self-efficacy, using strengths is likely to lead to increased levels of well-being.

Further, in a study of positive psychotherapy with a clinically depressed population, Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2007) found that identifying one’s signature strengths and finding ways to use them more led to clinically significant and sustained decreases in depression. And in my own (as yet unpublished) research, I (PAL) have been able to demonstrate that people achieve their goals more effectively when they are using their strengths. While, of course, it is still in the early days, the emerging evidence suggests that strengths may well have a place to take in the therapy room.

Given this evidence, mobilizing Emma’s strengths toward more desirable behaviors for managing her emotions and eating patterns seemed an appropriate therapeutic direction. To this end, I (GWB) first needed to spot what strengths she had. In the process, I learned that after graduating college, she committed herself to developing an academic career before having children. She had been married for 12 years and was in her late 30s when she had her first child. She was now a full-time mother of a 4-year-old daughter, Samantha, and 1-year-old son, Jason.

HOW DO YOU SPOT STRENGTHS IN A CLIENT?

Listen for Strengths

Hearing the passion and energy that strengthspotting ignites in people, I (PAL) began to wonder what strengths “sound like.” Are there identifiable differences that we can listen for when people are talking about strengths, compared to other topics or other types of conversation? To explore this, I developed an exercise for a class that I used to teach by telephone to members from half a dozen countries around the world. First, I asked someone to speak for five minutes about a weakness or about something with which they were struggling. Then I asked them to spend the same time talking about a strength or about when
they are at their best. As the exercise was by telephone, there were no additional physical cues, such as body language or facial expressions (Linley, 2008).

Other listeners in the telephone class were asked to describe their observations of what characterized the answers. In sum, they noticed that when people are talking about weaknesses, they are more negative, hesitant, and disengaged. Their energy levels drop and they sound more withdrawn. If we have access to body language, we might also notice they are more closed and defensive, and their attentional focus is narrowed.

When asked what she was good at, Emma replied in the negative. “Not much. All I seem to do is change poopy diapers and think about what to feed the kids next.” Her voice was flat and monotonal, her arms folded across her chest, her body hunched forward.

When people are talking about strengths, however, they are more positive, energetic, and engaged. They sound happier, more confident, and more relaxed. There is a passion in their tone, their conversation is free flowing, and they explain things graphically. If we were to observe body language—as one can in therapy—it is likely to be open and receptive.

When discussing singing, one of Emma’s strengths, there was a marked difference. Her voice was animated, her energy levels increased, she sat more upright and made eye contact—all signs of greater engagement and confidence.

Listening for, and observing, these shifts in your clients’ conversation and body language is a good indicator of when they are revealing a strength. However, this leads us to an important caveat. While there are certainly remarkable consistencies across these different groups and diverse populations, there can also be important individual differences. Not everyone responds in the same way, and it is very important to keep this in mind. If we do not, we run the risk of misinterpreting the responses of people who are simply different. Psychological research is almost always nomothetic in that it seeks to create generalized laws that apply across the majority of people. These laws, in turn, are generally applied in idiographic ways that are specific to a given individual—such as in a therapy session. As therapists we need to (a) be aware of the general trends and (b) be conscious that the person sitting with us in any one session may respond quite individually.

**Inquire about Self-Perceived Strengths**

A simple way to find out about a person’s strengths is to ask—just as you would discover a person’s history by asking standard questions about family of origin, education, relationships, and the like. All that is different with strengths spotting is that the nature and orientation of the questions shifts the therapeutic dialogue to a greater focus on strengths. Here are some of the questions that we have used to elicit strengths with people in challenging life circumstances:

- What are you good at?
- What do you enjoy doing?
- Tell me about the best experience you have had.
- What do you admire about other people? Do you see any of that in yourself?
- When do you think you have been at your best? What enabled that to happen?
- What are your aspirations for the future? What can you do to make them happen?

When Emma responded to the first question by saying she was not good at much (in the present tense), I (GWB) shifted direction to inquire about what she had been good at in the past.
“I think I was good at supervising research,” she answered. “I loved to challenge students, to ask questions, to ensure that their research design was sound. I think I was also good at lecturing. My courses were commonly rated highly by students, and I achieved several teaching awards.”

“Congratulations,” I validated, and leaned over to shake her hand as an action of affirmation for her abilities. With each strength she described, we spent some time discussing and affirming it before moving onto the next question.

“What would you say you enjoy doing most?” I continued.

“Research and supervision have to be high on the list. I enjoy the intellectual challenge. But I think my greatest enjoyment came from singing. I belonged to the university choir, and a quartet from the choir formed a small group. We used to sing for weddings, conference dinners, and those sorts of things.”

“When do you think you have been at your best?”

“Definitely when I was singing. I used to get a bit nervous before a performance, but once I started to sing it was like every other worry and thought just floated away.”

“That sounds like an important skill to have. How did you enable that to happen?” I asked.

“The four of us in the quartet were great friends, we had a lot of fun rehearsing and practicing and, I guess, I was so focused into what we were doing.”

“And what are your aspirations for the future?”

“I am planning to go back to teaching next year perhaps part time, and it would be nice to start singing again. But I don’t know if I’m going to have time now that I am a mom.”

Watch for Telltale Signs of a Strength

As you listen for and inquire about strengths, it is helpful to watch for the telltale signs of a strength, such as:

- A real sense of energy and engagement when using the strength
- Losing awareness of time because the client is so engrossed and engaged in the activity
- Very rapidly learning new information, activities, or approaches that are associated with the strength
- A repeated pattern of successful performance when using the strength
- Exemplary levels of performance when using the strength, especially performance that evokes the respect and admiration of others
- Always seeming to get the tasks done that require using the strength
- Prioritizing tasks that require using the strength over tasks that do not
- Feeling a yearning to use the strength while also feeling drained if you have not had the opportunity to use it for a time
- Being irrevocably drawn to do things that play to the strength—even when you feel tired, stressed, or disengaged (Linley, 2008, pp. 74–75).

In conversation, not only did Emma reveal a number of strengths, but she affirmed them through the telltale signs. There had been a shift in the tone of her voice and the degree of animation that she showed. It was possible to hear the difference between when she was talking about changing kids’ diapers and when she was talking about singing in her quartet. The signs were there in the sense of energy and engagement that was communicated about
using her strength of singing. She spoke of being engrossed and engaged in her activities of supervision, teaching, and singing.

These telltale signs are not necessarily always found together, at least at any given moment in time. Over time, however, it is likely that patterns will emerge. Thus, throughout the course of a series of psychotherapy sessions with a client, as therapists we have ample opportunities to become effective strengthspotters.

In each of these steps—listening for strengths, inquiring about self-perceived strengths, and watching for telltale signs of a strength—the therapist’s ear is attuned for any response that offers a glimpse into another, more positive side of their clients than that which brought them into therapy in the first place. While we know that negative mood primes negative memories, shifting our focus onto strengths and success helps engender more positive emotions that, in their own turn, prime more positive memories and more positive aspirations for the future.

**A SURPRISING REVELATION**

It was at the second consultation that Emma revealed the embarrassing and more pressing problem. She had unsuccessfully tried to keep it secret from her husband and had not told anyone else. It is hard to know, of all the things that happen in a therapeutic session, just which factors may influence a person to reveal and talk about a difficult subject or not. We would like to think that taking a positive, strengthspotting approach in the initial consultation gave Emma both the confidence and the hope to be able to approach the topic. Tearfully, she revealed that there were times when she got angry with her daughter, Samantha, her behavior contradicted all her principles and conflicted with the image that she had of herself as a mother. So difficult was this subject to discuss in detail that she had put it into writing and passed me the handwritten letter.

“Life fucking sucks,” I read. “Anger is everywhere. The rage has got to go. I hate this, I am out of control and our kids are coping it. I don’t have the energy or feel that I care (but I do very much). I hate this. Samantha is being yelled at, screamed at, pushed, shoved, poked. Gosh, no wonder she doesn’t know how to handle herself when she gets frustrated. What is going to become of our family? It’s not feeling very good at the moment. I have to change or I am going to have to leave for the sake of the children. Samantha needs her space and it’s only going to get worse as she gets older. I can’t keep it all together, our poor darling Samantha. Please let this stop!!”

A prime concern here in terms of one’s professional and ethical duty of care is, without question, the protection of the child. While Emma’s letter referred to pushing and shoving Samantha around, I was assured by the conviction of her comments to my inquiries that she had never hit or struck her, and vowed she never would. Herein was perhaps an indication of another of Emma’s strengths: She could choose how far she went in her anger and when she stopped. She had the strengths of choice and control at a particular given point, despite the level of her rage. She was not concerned about physically harming Samantha but rather about psychologically harming her. Two key questions in regard to client care and professional responsibility are to ask yourself: Does this issue fall within my field of professional competence? and, Can I provide the best source of assistance to this client? If there had been any question of physical abuse, my response to those questions then, or at any stage during therapy, would have been to refer her immediately to an agency that could ensure the protection of the child.