

THE TEACHER SELF-CARE MANUAL

Simple Strategies for
Stressed Teachers

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age to ask questions that no other students wanted to ask. Another student, who had hounded me via email for two weeks about making up a missed assignment, had fairness as his top strength. He felt that my denial of his request was unfair and that made sense to me, so we talked one day after class and I changed my mind about the make-up test.

Meeting forty students in one class requires time that we often do not have, but I wanted to be able to personally connect with each student. So I set up individual interviews with students after they completed the VIA Character Strengths Survey. During those interviews, I noticed two things. First, when I asked each student to tell me about their top five-character strengths and how they demonstrate them as a student, they immediately came to life! Normally in my EAP classes students are very quiet, but the same learners beamed and spoke with a sense of excitement as they talked about their strengths.

The second thing was a change in me. When I looked out at the sea of student's faces after the interviews, I saw their strengths instead of thinking about their writing skills. Character strengths such as curiosity, teamwork, leadership, kindness, and zest helped me to see these young people in a positive light.

Students had learned what they were good at and what was positive about themselves and so had I!

CHARACTER STRENGTHS FOR STUDENTS ACTIVITY

Noticing the good stuff as teachers is a sure way to increase our own well-being, but it also helps our students. Here is a mini-lesson plan on how to use the character strengths survey in class.

- 1. Pre-writing activity.** First, we watched the video *The Science of Strengths* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq-rOeLLciE>) in class. Students discussed the content in small groups exploring such

questions as, “How are character strengths like super-powers?” and “What do you think your top strengths might be?”

- 2. The survey.** The character strengths survey is free, takes about 10 minutes, and is available at <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths-Survey>. I set up a free teacher account on the website with a designated link for the survey for each class. In this way I could get the survey results emailed to me and I could also verify that the students did actually complete the survey.
- 3. Face-to-face interviews.** I set up a schedule with 10-minute time slots to talk to students about their top five-character strengths and how they use them specifically as a student. I created a form for this task which they were required to complete and bring to the interview. Reflecting on the survey results before the interview and being asked questions during the interview was part of a pre-writing exercise for their writing assignment.
- 4. Writing assignment.** Students were required to write a 5-paragraph essay about their top three-character strengths. Although the top five are considered Signature Strengths (and the ones that are most easily and often used), choosing just three made it easier for the essay format.

Here are a few comments from the essays written by my students.

“In conclusion, identifying and building on your own unique character strengths can help make a better and happier person. I agree with the top three results of my VIA Character Strengths Survey (love, fairness, and kindness). Although I suppose I was aware of these traits, the survey made me stop and think about my character. In the future I will use these character strengths to bring out the best in me and help me to achieve the goals I set for my life. After all, it’s what inside a person that counts.”

“The three-character strengths of curiosity, love of learning, and leadership have aided me by providing me access to work opportunities, helping my performance in school, seek out learning opportunities, and increase the quality of my interpersonal relationships at school.”

“My top three-character strengths are love, prudence and teamwork. I was not surprised to discover what they turned out to be. I would not even have changed the order in which they were given. It was reassuring to know what I thought I already knew.”

Why Use Character Strengths?

There are many reasons why it could be a good idea, but I think the most important is that students should learn about their strengths and reflect on how they can use them (or how they have been using them in the past) to achieve results inside and outside of school. We know that our language learners can feel frustrated in their ability to learn English, so focusing on strengths could give them confidence. It is important to remember that all character strengths have downsides if overused, so that should be discussed as well. Overall, using our character strengths makes us feel happier, more confident, increases our energy, lessens our stress, helps us to achieve goals and grow as individuals. What teacher doesn't want that for his/her students?!

Mindset 7: "No" Is a Complete Sentence

How many times have you blurted out "yes" only to regret your decision later? I've lost track of the number of times that I have. It is ok to say no! If you are one of those teachers who cannot say no, trust me that if you do, the world will not open up and swallow you. Here's some great advice that buys you some time:

When asked to do something, you can respond by saying "Thank you for the opportunity. I'm not sure I can do this now. Let me get back to you in a few days." By doing this, you are giving yourself time to make a wise decision and more importantly, preparing the person that you may say no.

Mindset 8: Teaching Is a Career, Not a Lifestyle

The bottom line is that I deserve a personal life and so do you! I remind myself that time is nonrefundable and that teaching will expand to fill whatever time I give it.

If you are not ready to embrace new mindsets, then it will be very difficult to practice self-care. Feel free to use or adapt any of my new mindsets. Or design your own set of mindsets that will work for you.