

Character Strengths in Autism

Are we missing character in strengths-based approaches to coaching and therapy for autistic people?

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Abstract

The move towards a social model of disability in autism has generated more interest in “strengths-based” approaches in research and practice. Definitions of what constitutes as strengths varies, often conflating skills, talents, or interests that can be harnessed for functional purposes, such as boosting employment outcomes. Whilst such strengths-based approaches have merits, we highlight that the limited focus on skills and talents may not be inclusive of all autistic individuals, and harnessing focused interests for functional outcomes may run the risk of turning everything an autistic individual enjoys into a therapeutic opportunity to reinforce behaviour change. We propose that Character Strengths, stemming from Positive Psychology, offers: 1) a shared language paradigm when communicating strengths across different stakeholder groups; 2) distinguish between an individual’s intrinsic values that motivate them to act, versus extrinsic motivations that may be more akin to social camouflaging and masking, and 3) provide a systematic way to identify and explore strengths profile within every individual. In this perspective piece, we first describe Character Strengths and the research to date in its application with autistic adults. We describe Character Strengths use in autism coaching and share practical interventions aimed at supporting autistic wellbeing and mental health. Finally, we propose how Character Strengths work may complement mental health treatment through reflecting on one’s personhood through strengths use, when woven into routine assessment, treatment formulation and delivery, and potential mechanisms of change.

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Community Brief

Why is this topic important?

The focus on strengths-based approaches in autism literature and practice has often been limited to skills, talents, and interests of autistic individuals that support access to employment and education. Such a focus does not capture qualities that speak to an individual's personhood and identity beyond skills and talents, such as "love", "kindness", and "humour" as reported by autistic individuals and their family members. Identifying strengths that reflect individual characteristics and personal values beyond skills and talents might guide an individual's behaviours in a meaningful way that is beneficial to themselves and others.

What is the purpose of this article?

We highlight that Character Strengths framework has the unique ability to provide shared language when describing an individual's strengths from different stakeholder perspectives and across contexts (school, employment, personal life). Character Strengths can be harnessed in clinical and coaching work to help autistic individuals develop a better sense of personal identity and good mental wellbeing.

What personal or professional perspectives do the authors bring to this topic?

JL is a clinical psychologist and autism research, currently completing a clinical research fellowship on strengths-based approaches in autism. JL led a virtual summit together with Dr. Ryan Niemiec (Chief Scientific Officer at Values in Action Institute on Character, USA) on Character Strengths in Autism and Intellectual Disability in 2024 that attracted over 200 professionals, researchers, and autistic individuals from 18 countries. AN is an accredited professional coach with a Master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology from University of East London. AN found Character Strengths to be personally beneficial in understanding her own identity as a late-diagnosed autistic woman and she now adopts this framework in her private autism coaching practice.

What is already known about this topic?

Character Strengths have been applied in research to support good mental health and wellbeing, although research on its use with autistic people is limited. Strengths-based approaches have been used in professional coaching in general, with growing interest and evidence of using Character Strengths to support autistic adults in

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exploring their personhood and identity by developing an awareness of their individual Character Strengths profiles.

What do the authors recommend?

We propose that clinicians working in mental health settings may adopt Character Strengths to complement their work, learning from the applications of this approach in coaching practices. We hope professionals working in mental health, coaching, and specialist mentoring can adopt Character Strengths language. Supporting autistic individuals to reflect on personal values in action can foster development of positive self-identity over time.

How will these recommendations help autistic adults now or in the future?

Through gaining an understanding of their Character Strengths, autistic individuals can develop a more coherent sense of who they are, what motivates them to act across contexts, and to employ their strengths more flexibly in a way that is beneficial to themselves and others.

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In recent years, the field of autism research and practice has begun to shift towards adopting a strengths-based narrative and away from the more deficit focused medical model of autism.^{1,2} Such a shift is consistent with the neurodiversity movement, where strengths, differences and difficulties associated with neurodiversity are all perceived to be central to an individual's identity, and individual differences should be accepted and celebrated within society.^{3,4} The neurodiversity movement^{6,7} has called for the use of strengths-based approaches to ameliorate challenges of those living with a neurodevelopmental disability.^{7,8} The neurodiversity movement has been driven forth by many self-advocates who promote the understanding and enhancing of subjective well-being for neurodivergent individuals,^{9,10} and strengths-identification is crucial for supporting autistic individuals to build a more positive autistic identity.^{4,11} However, the definition of what constitutes as "strengths" across "strengths-based" approaches seemed to be inconsistent across literature. For example, Burnham Riosa and colleagues¹ completed content analysis of articles published between 2004-2014 and found that despite 37.3% of the randomly selected articles claiming to have a focus on wellbeing in autistic individuals, the majority of the papers adopted deficit focused-language followed by a mixture of deficit- and strength-focused language, and a very small proportion of articles were exclusively focused on strengths. Moving beyond research to clinical practice, there also seems to be a disconnect between clinicians who report they are writing from a strengths-based perspective when communicating evaluations with autistic children and their families, despite writing predominantly from a medical model and drawing on deficit-based language that is focused on diagnosis rather than individual's abilities.¹²

In an expert round-table discussion on strengths-based approaches in autism, Urbanowicz and colleagues² noted a number of questions ranging from establishing a consensus position on what is meant by strengths-based approach and potential downsides to using strengths-based approaches, to considering how such approaches will affect autism research and clinical practice, and have an impact on autistic individuals' everyday lives. Experts discussed the position of defining strengths by asking the question "what can the autistic person do", and being able to leverage strengths for functional contexts such as for employment being key to identifying strengths in autism.² Benchmarking strengths based on their utility has been echoed in research focused on skill and talent-based strengths in autistic individuals, such as hyper-focused attention, attention to detail, pattern recognition, memory, and tolerance for repetitive tasks, which can all be advantageous for employment.¹³⁻¹⁸ The focus on skill-based strengths has led to the development of strengths-focused clubs and

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activities that draw on stereotypical strengths associated with autism such as technology.¹⁹⁻²¹ Although such activities provide a safe space for autistic youths who share the same interest to connect with one another to develop their skills and build positive social connections,^{22,23} it is also important to acknowledge that not all autistic individuals will have such skill-based strengths or share an interest that can be leveraged for employment purposes, and that focused interests can also change over time.²⁴

The potential conflation between focused interests and strengths when developing and conducting interventions may also run the risk of turning everything an autistic individual enjoys into a therapeutic opportunity to reinforce behaviour change.²⁵ Such behaviour change can increase pressure for autistic individuals to “pass” and “cover up” autistic differences in a way that is cognitively effortful^{25,26} and perpetuates internalisation of stigma by placing demands on the autistic individual to change,^{25,27} rather than acknowledging social communication differences to arise from lack of mutual understanding across neurotypes as outlined by Milton in the Double Empathy Problem.²⁸ More importantly, an exclusive focus on skill or talent-based strengths only partially reflects the narrative that parents/carers and siblings report as strengths they notice in autistic children.²⁹ The missing part of personality-based strengths such as love, affection, creativity, strong sense of justice and fairness, and honesty that showcase individual differences in strengths via anecdotal accounts of autistic individuals and their family members^{30,31} are less well captured in research and clinical context when strengths are framed in terms of what can be leveraged for employment purposes.^{6,15,17,18,19,20} The need to place the individual’s perspective of reality at the centre, to adopt a language framework that posits that everyone has potential, to focus on capacity building and recognising individual differences is core to the principles of strengths-based practice, with the primary goal of increasing self-esteem and sense of competence, and building resilience based on the recognition of one’s strengths.^{33,34} This is particularly pertinent as autistic adults show poorer knowledge and use of their personal strengths compared to non-autistic adults,³⁵ and qualitative accounts suggest that autistic adults are reluctant to label skills as strengths as they may also relate to difficulties depending on the context in which they are used.³⁶

Finding a strengths-based framework which can: 1) account for how strengths may be used differently across contexts; 2) speak true to the person’s values and identity; and 3) is inclusive of everyone’s ability^{37,38} may be key to advancing conversations around strengths-based approaches in autism. In this perspective piece, we propose that Character Strengths framework from Positive Psychology may be a pathway to enable individual

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differences to be recognised and embraced. A recent roundtable discussion on integrating Positive Psychology and Autism highlighted that as a new and evolving field, Positive Psychology helps individuals, organisations and communities find what allows them to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives.³⁹ As a framework that stems from Positive Psychology, Character Strengths framework enables individuals to reflect on each person's unique positive qualities and values that motivate people to act in a meaningful way in their personal lives.⁴⁰ We will first outline what Character Strengths are and how they relate to other types of strengths such as talents, skills, interests, and resources. We will describe the limited literature to date on how Character Strengths have been assessed in autistic adults and the growing use of Character Strengths in professional coaching, including its practical use in coaching late-diagnosed autistic adults. Finally, we will discuss clinical and practical implications of adopting Character Strengths when working with autistic individuals.

What Do We Mean by Character Strengths?

The *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths*,⁴⁰ emerged from a three-year project intended to be a positive version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.⁴¹ Character Strengths were developed to provide a common language *framework* that allows people from different cultures and backgrounds to communicate their shared understanding of aspects of personality that are morally valued,^{40,42} and which underpin a life well-lived.⁴³ The conceptualisation of Character Strengths encapsulates a broad range of human qualities that encompass cognitive (Wisdom), emotional (Courage), social (Humanity and Justice), self-regulation (Temperance) and spiritual (Transcendence) strengths⁴⁴ (see Table 1a for a list of 24 Character Strengths and descriptions). A core principle of Character Strengths is that everyone has all 24 strengths, and there are no set “norms” or “standards” for what is a “good” or “typical” Character Strength profile.⁴⁴ In contrast, everyone may display different combinations of strengths depending on the values they hold and perceive to be core to their identity, and the situational context they are in.⁴⁴

Although similar to value-based frameworks that focus on supporting individuals to identify what is most meaningful to them, Character Strengths place a greater emphasis on how such values are embodied in the individual's actions in daily life (values-in-action), and support the individual to develop a stronger sense of personal identity as well as contributing towards positive outcomes for themselves and others in the community.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ Character Strengths differ from talents, skills, interests, and resources (see Table 1b for definitions) that form different types of strengths. Character Strengths are perceived to be innate qualities that

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can be nurtured over time to form the building blocks that enable and enhance the development of other strengths,^{47,48} and an internal resource that can be relied on when external resources may not always be available.⁴⁹ For example, the development of skill-based artistic or musical talents may rely on fostering Creativity and Love of Learning, hyper-focused attention may relate to Perseverance, and attention to detail may rely on Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence. Character Strengths bear face validity by resembling the personality-based strengths recognised by family members of autistic individuals identified in qualitative literature, such as kindness, love, creativity, honesty, and fairness.^{14,29-32} Recent studies have also found that autistic children self-report as being kind and caring,⁵⁰ and kindness is also one of the most common qualities reported in autistic children by their parents.⁵¹

Character Strengths framework also honours autistic individuals' experience that the boundary between strengths and weakness may be blurred.³⁶ For example, a Character Strength that is either under- or over-used may no longer benefit the individual and/or others in a situation, and instead can lead to non-optimal outcomes.⁵² For example, the optimal use of Curiosity to explore new experiences relies on striking a balance between potential under-use which may come across as looking bored and self-involved, and over-use which can be perceived as nosy and intrusive.⁵² Supporting individuals to develop mindfulness awareness of and explore how they use their Character Strengths in daily life and helping them to use strengths in new ways may enable that individual to form a closer connection with their personal values and live in a way that is both authentic and strengths-based.^{47,53}

In research to date, using Values-in-Action (VIA) surveys to formally identify Character Strengths in autistic individuals is somewhat limited. Three studies have been conducted with autistic adults.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ Similar to non-autistic adults, autistic adults also express high levels of Judgement (encompassing critical thinking and open-mindedness) as a top Character Strength.^{54,56} Autistic adults also show Love of Learning, Curiosity, Fairness, Honesty, and Creativity as some of the commonly occurring top Character Strengths,^{54,56} as well as Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Kindness and Honesty.⁵⁵ One study also found that Intellectual strengths (Creativity, Curiosity, Judgement, Love of Learning) are more commonly identified as top strengths compared to Emotional (Zest, Hope, Bravery, Humour, Love, Social Intelligence) and Interpersonal strengths (Kindness, Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership, Forgiveness, Humility) but only at the aggregate category level rather than individual strengths within each category.⁵⁵ At the individual top strengths level, top strengths spanned across restraint,

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theological, intellectual and interpersonal domains.⁵⁵ Highlighting group-based similarities and differences in Character Strengths between autistic and non-autistic peers may also provide insight into different strengths and perspectives that each person brings to a situation and may facilitate communication and bridge the double empathy problem^{28,57} by approaching different viewpoints through recognising each person's Character Strengths at play.

[INSERT TABLE 1a AND 1b]

Use of Character Strengths-based Interventions in Coaching

The use of strengths-based approaches in the field of coaching is long established, with its earliest mention going back to 2006⁵⁸ and following on from the Positive Psychology movement.⁵⁹ Research into Character Strengths-based coaching specifically is now starting to emerge. For example, Character-Strengths based practice is defined as “in which practitioners [...] educate clients on strengths and support clients in cultivating their Character Strengths for boosting well-being and handling adversity”⁶⁰ and a recent paper explores the integration of Character Strengths in coaching relationships.⁶¹ To the best of our knowledge, no research looking into (character) strengths-based coaching with autistic people yet exists.

Receiving an autism diagnosis can help make sense of one's difficulties, develop self-acceptance and understand oneself and one's needs and strengths.⁶² The knowledge of one's strengths can be particularly beneficial for late-diagnosed adults, who due to a lifetime of masking or camouflaging might have a negative self-perception, feel disconnected from their true identity, have poor mental health and experience burnout.^{26,63,64} Using the language of Character Strengths can reframe autistic differences more positively, for example by viewing “fixated interests” as an expression Love of Learning and Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, insensitivity to social reputation⁶⁵ as an expression of Fairness (see ⁵⁵ for more examples), and discover the positive qualities that are core to one's identity.

One of the most well-established applications of the VIA methodology is that of identifying and using the signature strengths.⁶⁰ Typically the first 5-6 Character Strengths in one's VIA profile,⁶⁶ signature strengths are defined as being essential to one's identity and, when expressed, resulting in higher energy levels whilst being effortless to express.⁶⁷ A meta-analysis of signature strength interventions⁶⁸ shows their potential in increasing happiness levels and reducing depressive symptoms. Given that Honesty, Love of Learning and Fairness have

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consistently ranked as signature strengths in autistic adults⁵⁵, exploring with a coachee the contexts in which these strengths can be applied could be a means of promoting autistic wellbeing and good mental health.

Although coachees are often invited⁴⁴ to imagine being unable to use an individual signature strength to deepen the appreciation for the impact it has on one's life through experiencing its absence, there is little mention of what I (AN) like to call camouflaged signature strengths, that is Character Strengths that rank highly on one's profile but are learned behaviours that don't have the essential, energising and effortless qualities. Given the high incidence of masking in the autistic population compared to non-autistic people,^{69,70} this topic is of high importance, but is yet to be addressed in research. In my practice, I have seen two types of learned behaviours that rank highly in one's VIA Character Strengths profile. First and the most common type comprises Character Strengths that are applied consciously or subconsciously because of past negative experiences, for example Prudence (being too careful about one's choices, inability to decide, "once bitten, twice shy"), Self-regulation (inhibition of one's views, emotions and stimming behaviours) or Social Intelligence (constantly trying to "read" other people). The second type of learned behaviours includes qualities that are employed to be effective in one's environment, such as Perspective (gathering other people's opinions to mitigate monotropic focus and tunnel vision). Therefore, having many learned behaviours ranking highly in the VIA profile might indicate high levels of masking or camouflaging, though it could also indicate successful adaptability to one's environment. It is important for conversations to be scaffolded here to assist deeper investigation of how the autistic individual perceives the relevant strength in action within a specific context; without blindly assuming that all the Character Strengths that have been ranked highly are indeed essential, energising and effortless for the coachee, as doing so could be ineffective in the long-term, if not harmful. This is particularly important if the Character Strength reflects a masking behaviour that has been learnt and internalised over time, as autistic masking may have stemmed from past interpersonal trauma and is associated with lower self-esteem, authenticity, and participation in the autistic community,^{27,64,71} as well as poorer mental health outcomes.⁷²⁻⁷⁴

Rather than conflating Character Strengths and masking behaviours, practitioners should recognise that constant over-using of certain top strengths may reduce flexibility in how autistic individuals may choose coping strategies to employ in a context-specific way, and prolonged masking may increase vulnerability to autistic burnout and increase mental health difficulties.⁷⁵ The coach can support the coachee with evaluating the benefits and costs the current strength use brings in a given context and exploring opportunities to increase use of other

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strengths to help individuals approach the situations in a more effective yet still authentic manner. For example, balancing Honesty and Fairness with Love and Kindness may allow individuals to provide honest feedback to others in a way that communicates that they care. This may provide an alternative strategy compared to rigidly relying on qualities such as Self-Regulation, Prudence, and Social Intelligence that may result in holding back on one's honest feedback for fear of upsetting others.

As well as using the signature strengths, investigating strengths over/under/optimal use offers another lens to understanding one's use of Character Strengths.^{76,77} Although the 24-Character Strengths are positive qualities, they can be over-used if not balanced with other Character Strengths. For example, being Honest is a good quality but without also using Kindness and Social Intelligence, Honesty can come across as being blunt and insensitive. Similarly, expressing Love of Learning can support autistic people in experiencing flow states,⁷⁸ which are pleasurable, but can also lead to negative consequences including exhaustion and neglecting other duties.⁷⁹ Therefore, exploring the optimal use of signature strengths may have the potential to improve psychological flexibility that may consequently have a positive impact on satisfaction with life for autistic people, and warrants future research.⁸⁰

Clinical Implications and Recommendations for Professionals

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on supporting individuals to explore, elaborate, and develop their autistic identity when accessing mental health support,^{11,81} and clinicians seeking a way to identify and harness autistic individuals' strengths to work collaboratively in therapy.¹⁷ We recommend that Character Strengths may provide a unique framework that allows autistic individuals, their family members, and clinicians to share a language to enable them to develop **awareness** of an individuals' Character Strengths, **explore** how Character Strengths may be used different ways across contexts, and support autistic individuals to **apply** their Character Strengths in a way that benefits the autistic individual and others, building on the application of the framework in coaching.⁴⁴ We propose that Character Strengths can be incorporated into clinical settings during:

1. **Initial assessment:** Include a Character Strengths assessment such as Signature Strengths Survey⁸² or VIA Character Strengths Survey⁴⁷ to support autistic individuals develop awareness of their strengths, including those that are core to their identity, and not only challenges and deficits.

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2. **Formulation and treatment planning:** Share reflections on the Character Strengths report, paying close attention to which strengths may be true to the person's character and are perceived to be an essential, effortless and energising part of who the autistic person is. Discuss other strengths in the individual's profile that may reflect learned behaviours and extrinsic values that have been internalised over time, perhaps through masking/camouflaging or social learning, which may be both helpful at times and more effortful and less energising when used over time. Scaffolding a strengths-focused conversation can support wider reflections on the individuals' values and identity, what constitutes as masking/camouflaging for that specific person and consider whether any strengths may be over- and/or under-used and as a result contribute towards exhaustion and/or maintenance of co-occurring mental health difficulties.

3. **Weekly homework setting:** To continue building on development of Character Strengths, clinicians could ask the individual to select one or several Character Strengths that they would like to focus their attention to this week, and perhaps try to use in new and creative ways to support them in daily life, including during homework completion if in the context of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy or home-based practice. Recognising that some individuals may experience difficulties with executive function that can get in the way of homework completion, clinicians need to work with individuals to consider how to build in structure and reminders to increase the likelihood of home-based practice.⁸³ There may be some Character Strengths that lend themselves more easily into certain tasks, such as drawing on Courage and Bravery when completing an exposure-based task in anxiety treatment or drawing on Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence or Zest when completing behavioural activation task to improve low mood, and other Character Strengths that may require more nuanced discussions. A weekly diary card, akin to the skills tracking diary cards used in Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, could be used to track changes in the identification and use of Character Strengths over the course of therapy on a weekly basis. It could also generate fruitful discussions on when the client may be getting stuck – and whether strengths are being under- or over-used – and help establish a more flexible and optimal use of a combination of strengths for a given situation or context.

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4. **Outcome monitoring:** Given that Character Strengths are conceptualised as *Values in Action*, identification and development of one's personal values through action may result in changes in mechanisms such as **autistic identity, self-determination self-esteem, and authenticity** over time, all of which may or may not co-occur alongside changes in co-occurring mental health symptom reduction over the course of therapy. Including measures such as Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale,⁸⁴ Authenticity Scale,⁸⁵ measures that evaluate Autonomy, Connectedness and Competence in self-determination,⁸⁶ and individual (one's own autistic identity) and collective identity (in relation to autistic community)⁸⁷ may be helpful to capture alongside standardised and routine symptom trackers over time. It is important to note that although standardised measurements for the above constructs have been used with autistic individuals,^{64,88,89} such measures derived in the general population may still miss nuanced individual differences that speak true to autistic individuals' lived experiences. Clinicians and researchers can benefit from using mixed methods in outcome monitoring and include qualitative components to capture individual experiences, as well as aim to develop new measurements in consultation with autistic communities that can better capture changes in mechanisms that relate to their lived experiences such as self-determination, self-esteem, and authenticity.

Recommendations for Autistic individuals

For autistic individuals who wish to learn more about Character Strengths and draw on this approach in their daily life, we recommend following the Aware-Explore-Apply (AEA) Model, and a detailed description of how to apply the AEA model has been described by Niemiec et al. (2017):⁴⁴

1. **Aware:** Build awareness of your own Character Strengths profile and familiarise with the common language framework of all 24 different types of character strengths. Reflect on whether your strengths profile describes who you are, and whether the top or signature strengths capture your values, what you find energising, and what motivates you to take action in everyday life. If not, reflect on where these strengths may have come from, have they developed based on external influences rather than what intrinsically motivates you?
2. **Explore:** Connect with your Character Strengths profile by thinking about examples from your everyday life in different contexts and domains. Take time to notice your successes, which strengths did you draw on to help you achieve your desired outcome, and stay true to who you are? Consider moments where

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you experienced difficult situations in your life, are there strengths that helped you move forward and build resilience? Are there strengths that you might overly rely on (over-use) or not use frequently enough (under-use)? Which strengths might you see in people you look up to in your life? What strengths might others see in you?

3. Apply: Through understanding and exploring different ways you may use your strengths; it is important to plan future action by proactively thinking about how you can draw on your strengths to live a more fulfilling life in the future. How might you wish to continue using your strengths in everyday life? Are there opportunities where you can use your strengths in a new way? How might using your strengths help you move towards your goals? What might get in the way of you being able to use your strengths? Who / what might help you navigate these situations, and what strengths might you need to seek out such resources?

The AEA model can provide a helpful way for autistic individuals to engage with the character strengths framework in a person-centred way. Drawing on examples of their own lived experiences, AEA model may enable individuals to better understand and actively connect with their personal character strengths in a way that allows them to live in a more mindful and authentic way.

Conclusion

We propose the use of Character Strengths framework as a novel way to approach strengths-based narratives in autism research and practice, by establishing a consistent language framework that identifies strengths in every individual by looking at characteristics underlying the development of skills, talents, and values. Building on developments in professional coaching, we highlight that identification and reflection on one's Character Strengths profile may scaffold conversations around what are perceived by the autistic individual to be core to their sense of self and identity, and which behaviours may be learnt from the environment and extrinsically valued that may be more akin to camouflaging or masking. Although preliminary research and more extensive coaching work on Character Strengths in autistic adults shows the potential merit in this work, we want to call on researchers and practitioners in the fields of Positive Psychology, Character Strengths, and Autism practice to further explore whether questionnaire items that assess Character Strengths and their descriptions honour the lived experiences of autistic and other neurodivergent individuals. We hope that further co-production work with the autistic and neurodivergent community can enhance the face and construct validity of Character Strengths

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framework by creating new autism-specific conceptualisations of Character Strengths that can be more neuro-affirming and encompass a broader range of individual differences that can foster growth and acceptance.

Finally, we describe how Character Strengths may be viewed as a complementary approach that can be woven into assessment, formulation, and treatment of co-occurring mental health difficulties in a clinical context and enable clinicians to simultaneously support autistic individuals to identify their internal values and resources through awareness of and exploration of Character Strengths use over time. Given that recent literature highlights an association between positive autistic identity and improved mental health and wellbeing¹¹ and conversely higher self-reported camouflaging being associated with worse mental health outcomes,⁷⁵ we propose that the Character Strengths framework may enable clinicians a novel way of approaching conversations around identity and camouflaging through a strengths-focused lens while acknowledging difficulties through evaluating strengths under- and over-use and promoting psychological flexibility. We hope that through clinicians adopting a strengths-based Character Strengths assessment tool that moves beyond symptom characterisation and honours individual differences, autistic people are empowered to flourish by putting their values in action.

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Table 1a. The VIA Classification of 24 Character Strengths as noted in R. M. Niemiec and Casioppo⁶¹

Virtue	Character Strengths
Wisdom and knowledge: cognitive strengths – acquisition and use of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity: being original; seeing/doing things in new ways • Curiosity: exploring, seeking novelty, open to experiences • Love of Learning: mastering new skills and topics, building knowledge • Judgement: critical thinking, rational-minded, thinking things through • Perspective: providing wise counsel, taking a big-picture view
Courage: emotional strengths – drive to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honesty: telling the truth, being authentic, being sincere • Bravery: facing fears, threats, or challenges, speaking up for what’s right • Perseverance: persisting, finishing what is started, overcoming obstacles • Zest: being energetic, enthusiastic, doing things wholeheartedly
Humanity: interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindness: being generous, caring, compassionate, nice and friendly • Love: being genuine, showing warmth, valuing close relationships • Social Intelligence: being aware of feelings and motives of self/others, acting accordingly
Justice: civic strengths that underlie healthy community life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairness: acting justly, not letting feelings bias decisions • Leadership: organising a group to get things done, positively guiding others • Teamwork: being loyal, contributing to group efforts
Temperance: strengths that protect against excess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forgiveness: being merciful, accepting others’ shortcomings, letting go of hurts • Humility: being modest, placing attention on others, not bragging • Prudence: being careful about choices, cautious, not taking undue risks • Self-regulation: being self-controlled; disciplined; manages impulses and emotions
Transcendence: strengths that forge connections to the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence: experiencing awe, wonder, admiration, elevation

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larger universe and provide meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gratitude: being thankful for the good in life, sharing thanks, feeling blessed • Hope: being optimistic, positive, future-minded, expecting the best • Humour: being playful, seeing the lighter side, bringing smiles to others • Spirituality: searching for meaning, feeling purpose in life, connecting with the sacred
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Table 1b. Definition of different types of strengths as noted by R. M. Niemiec

Strengths Type	Strengths Definition
Talents	Hardwired abilities such as spatial intelligence and mathematical or logical intelligence.
Skills	Proficiencies people develop such as typing or painting houses.
Interests	Passions people are pulled towards such as artwork and playing sports.
Resources	External strengths that support people such as having a caring family.
Values	Beliefs that we hold in our thoughts and emotions.
Character	Bringing the values we hold in our thoughts and emotion into our behaviours in the world. Perceived as the driving force that propels the development of other types of strengths.

Note. Definitions of strengths types here refer to what is commonly referenced in Character Strengths literature, and provides a way to differentiate and understand the interactions between Character and other types of strengths, emphasising that Character Strengths are capacities that can be developed and improved on.⁵²