POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PRACTITIONER'S

Tools

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Index

Foreword	3
Chapter 1: Strengths	4
The Strengths Wheel	5
Chapter 2: Values	9
The Bull's-Eye Values Survey	10
Chapter 3: Self-compassion	15
Compassionate Chair Work	16
References	18
Afterword	20

Foreword

It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of positive psychology tools. During the past years, Positive Psychology has gained an increasing amount of attention, both from helping professionals and researchers. This attention has resulted in many valuable insights in what contributes to a happy, fulfilling life. In addition, positive psychology has given us many tools not only to flourish, but also to cope with difficult times in life.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you to increase your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

https://positivepsychologytoolkit.com/join/

All the best!

Seph Fontane Pennock & Hugo Alberts

chapter 1
Strengths

Strengths can be defined as "a pre-existing 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). They are distinguished from other kinds of strengths, such as skills or talents. Whereas strengths are assumed to come natural to a person, skills are learned through training or experience. Talents on the other hand are innate abilities which are characterized by a strong biological background (Niemiec, 2013). According to this definition, talents do somehow come natural to a person however they do not necessarily evoke feelings of energy, joy, or authenticity, as the use of character strengths does.

Although every person has certain signature strengths, it is argued that most people are not truly aware of the strengths they possess (Jones-Smith, 2011; Niemiec, 2013). This assumption has been supported by a research finding which revealed that only 1/3 of the participants asked were aware of their strengths (Linley, 2008). It is suggested that this lack of awareness originates in different factors. For example, Jones-Smith (2011) argues that people are unaware of the pure fact that they possess strengths because they feel so ordinary to them that they stay outside their conscious awareness. Niemiec (2013) calls this "the taking-strengths-for-granted effect" (p. 29). Another reason for this so called strengths blindness can be ascribed to today's culture. It is argued that people's awareness of strengths is biased by significant others, such as teachers, family, and friends, who mainly focus on a person's weaknesses rather than on the promotion of his or her strengths (Jones-Smith, 2011).

It is suggested that a person cannot only possess strengths, but also enhance his or her own strengths as well as develop new ones (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011). However, if ignored "our strengths can atrophy, much in the same way that a muscle, if not used, may wither" (Jones-Smith, 2011). Thus, the aforementioned factors may lead to a strengths estrangement, leaving the individual alienated from his or her own strengths, which in turn may result in a disconnection between the individual and his or her own character strengths (Jones-Smith, 2011).

As research has suggested that strengths use is linked to higher levels of well-being, strengths estrangement is assumed to be accompanied by experiences of unspecified unhappiness (Jones-Smith, 2011). Further, as strengths are suggested to reflect people's individual and true core and allow them to be their best selves (Niemiec, 2013) a state of unhappiness appears to be the logic consequence when not living in accordance with one's strengths. The tool in this chapter can help to increase awareness of strengths and create a pathway for developing and optimising strengths.

The Strengths Wheel

- **Strengths**
- Exercise
- 20-30 min.
- Client
- No

After a client is aware of his strengths and the way they are manifested in his or her life, the next step is to explore ways to optimise strength use. In order to optimise strength use, it is important to become aware of the potential for growth in a given context. For some strengths, there may be sufficient room and opportunities for using them more frequently and/or more intensely. For other strengths, certain limitations may prevent the strengths from being used more. The present exercise can be a valuable tool for gaining access to this information.

Author

The current exercise was developed by Matt Driver (http://mattdriverconsulting.com). The current tool was included in this toolkit with permission of the author.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to create a graphical representation of the possibility for existing strengths to be used more or less. The advantage of using this approach is that a client can immediately see what strengths are used too little, or too much. In addition, this exercise offers a nice starting point for creating future plans to increase or optimize strengths use.

Advice

Obviously, asking clients to indicate the extent to which they currently use a strength and the room they believe that exists for using the strength more is a very subjective estimation. Rather than providing an objective indication, the goal of this is exercise is to create a global insight in the strengths that can be expanded in a given context (e.g. work or private life).

For clients, it is nice to receive a copy of this exercise. For instance, they can use it to discuss and explore possibilities with other people that maybe involved in the context at hand (e.g. their employer).

Suggested Readings

Driver, M. (2011). *Coaching Positively – Lessons for coaches from Positive Psychology.* Maidenhead: Open University Press /McGraw Hill

Tool Description

Instruction

After identifying the strengths of your client, it can be helpful to investigate if there is room to use the strengths more often. The Strengths Circle on page 4 can be used to make a graphical representation of the extent to which strengths are used (current use) and the room that exists to use the strengths more (scope). The centre of the circle represents a score of '0' and the outer rim a score of '10'. Ask the client to place two marks in each segment of the circle indicating (1) to what extent they currently use that strength in the chosen context (e.g. work); and (2) how much scope there is for using that strength more in that context. Next, draw a triangle that connects the two marks. The bigger the gap between the current use and the scope, the bigger the triangle should be and the more potential there is for using that strength more.

Example

On the next page, you will find an example of a completed graph. In this graph, it becomes immediately obvious that the chosen context (work) is far from ideal for expressing and building the strengths of social intelligence and leadership. This is indicated by the small arrows close to the core of the circle. These arrows indicate that the current strength is not used much and that there is not much potential for growth. Often, when this pattern applies to three or more strengths, it is very likely that the current context of the client is far from ideal. For instance, from experience I know that these patterns are often visibile for clients who don't like their jobs. It can be both an eye-opening and confronting experience for clients to plot their strengths in this way.

What is more visible in the graph, is that gratitude and love of learning represent area's for growth. Both area's are used to a certain extent, but there is ample room for using them more, as indicated by the bigger grey triangles.

Finally, in this graph, there is one arrow that points in the opposite direction. It is possible that some strengths are overused in a given context. In the case of this client, it seems that he may use humor too much at the workfloor. Although humor has been associated with many benefits (like for instance more active and confrontative coping styles (Lazarus, 1966; Janis, 1958) and optimism (Carver et al., 1993)), when overplayed it can become a weakness. Note that this applies to all strengths; every strength that is used too much, or used in the wrong context loses its adaptive value. As indicated by the grey arrow that points towards the core of the circle, it appears that humor is used a lot by the client, but the scope is not that that big. In this case, it is important to marshal this strength, by using it appropriately according to the situation and context.

Evaluation

As noted before, this exercise provides a nice starting point for creating a plan to optimise strength use. Here are some questions that you can ask your client when the graph is completed:

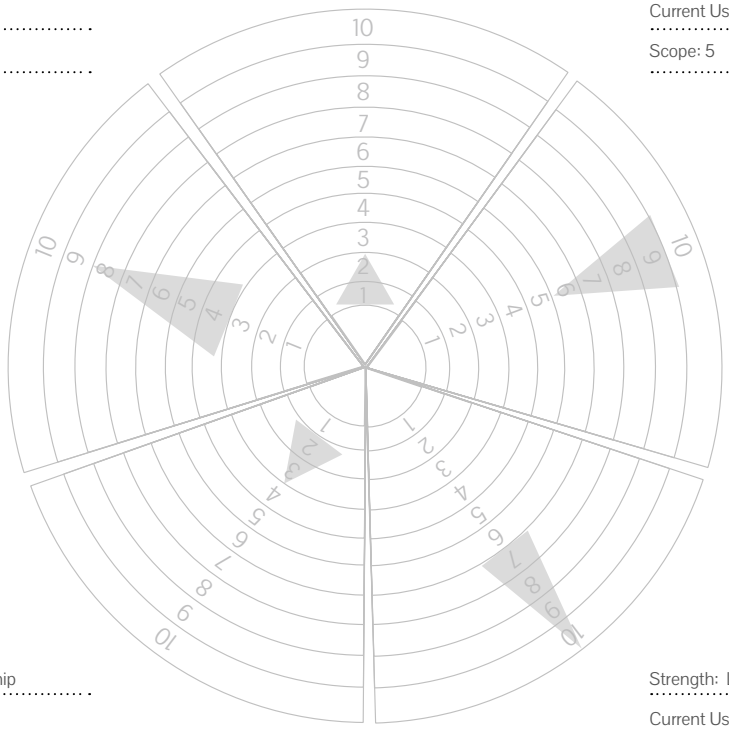
What do you notice when you take a look at the graph?
Overall, how would you consider your strengths to be useful in this context?
Which strengths allow to be used more?
Which strengths leave little or no room for expansion?
What could you do to start using your strengths more in this context?

Context: Work

Strength: Social Intelligence
Current Use: 1
Scope: 2

Strength: Gratitude
Current Use: 3
Scope: 8

Strength: Humor
Current Use: 9
Scope: 5



Strength: Leadership
Current Use: 2
Scope: 3

Strength: Love of Learning
Current Use: 7
Scope: 10

Context:

Strength:

Current Use:

Scope:

Strength:

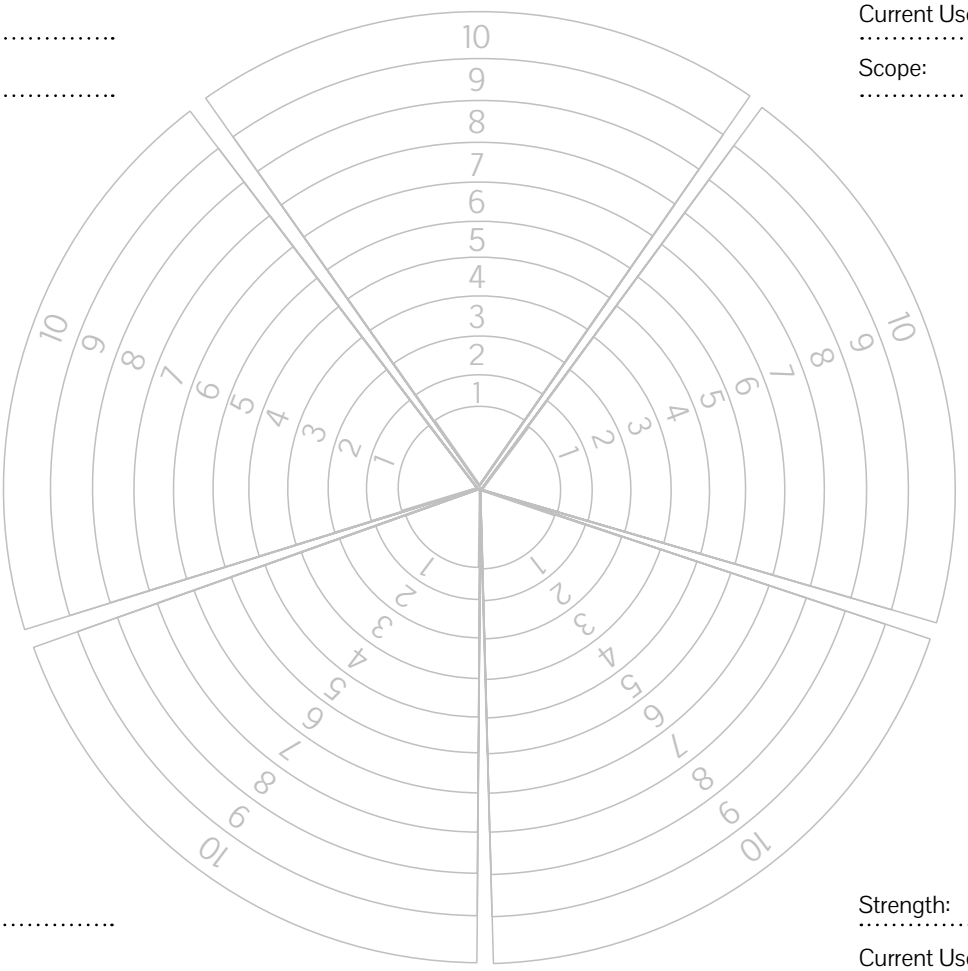
Current Use:

Scope:

Strength:

Current Use:

Scope:



Strength:

Current Use:

Scope:

Strength:

Current Use:

Scope:

chapter 2
Values

Values are the answer to the question: "In a world where you could choose to have your life be about something, what would you choose?" (Wilson & Murrell, 2004, 135). Values are defined as „verbally constructed global desired life consequences" (Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson, 1999; p. 206), or in more simple words: what people find important in life.

Values are chosen actions, that can never be obtained like an object, but can only be concretised from moment to moment. They are a *direction* in life. Assessing the values of clients means helping them becoming aware of directions for their lives that are in line with what is truly important to them. In addition, values can be a starting point for clients to construct goals that promote behaviour in those directions.

Although values are per definition considered to be important (e.g. exercising, spending time with children), the behaviour of clients is often not consistent with their values (e.g., spending more hours in front of the television, working during evening hours, etc.). In order to decrease the discrepancy between values and actual valued living, it is important to create awareness of this discrepancy in the first place. The tool presented in this chapter can be used to increase the client's awareness of his values and the extent to which he or she lives in line with his/her values. It can be a good starting point for making value-based changes in life.

The Bull's-Eye Values Survey

Values & Meaning
Assesment
15-30 min.
Client
Yes

The The Bull's-Eye Values Survey (BEVS; Lundgren et al., 2012) is a tool that can be used for assessing values, values-action discrepancies, and barriers to value-based living. Both the subscales and total score of the BEVS have been found to measure an independent dimension of psychological functioning that is negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress, and is positively related with psychological flexibility. Research findings imply that the BEVS is sensitive to treatment effects and is capable of differentiating between clients who receive values-based interventions and those who do not. Stability and internal consistency are good.

Author

The current tool was developed by Tobias Lundgren (http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tobias_Lundgren). Used with permission of the author.

Goal

The goal of the BEVS is to identify and measure personal values, values attainment, and persistence in the face of barriers.

Advice

The present assessment tool can be used to assess the current discrepancy between values and actual valued living, but can also be used to measure progress in treatment over time. A big advantage of the BEVS over other value assessment tools is the graphical representation of the discrepancy between the values and valued living. This can be very useful when using the tool for tracking progress over time: comparing different Bull's Eye dart boards can give a clear and immediate indication of the client's progess.

Suggested Readings

Lundgren, T., Luoma, J.B., Dahl, J., Strosahl, K., Melin, L. (2012). The Bull's-Eye Values Survey: A Psychometric Evaluation. Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 19, 518-526.

Tool Description

Instruction

The Bull's Eye dart board on [next page] is divided into four areas of living that are important in people's lives: work/education, leisure, relationships and personal growth/health.

1. *Work/Education* refers to your career aims, your values about improving your education and knowledge, and generally feeling of use to those close to you or to your community (i.e., volunteering, overseeing your household, etc.).

2. *Leisure* refers to how you play in your life, how you enjoy yourself, your hobbies or other activities that you spend your free time doing (i.e., gardening, sewing, coaching a children's soccer team, fishing, playing sports).

3. *Relationships* refers to intimacy in your life, relation- ships with your children, your family of origin, your friends and social contacts in the community.

4. *Personal growth/health* refers to your spiritual life, either in organized religion or personal expressions of spirituality, exercise, nutrition, and addressing health risk factors like drinking, drug use, smoking, weight.

In this exercise, you will be asked to look more closely at your personal values in each of these areas and write them out. Then, you will evaluate how close you are to living your life in keeping with your values. You will also take a closer look at the barriers or obstacles in your life that stand between you and the kind of life you want to live. Don't rush through this; just take your time.

Part 1. Identify Your Values

Start by describing your values within each of the four values areas. Think about each area in terms of your dreams, like you had the possibility to get your wishes completely fulfilled. What are the qualities that you would like to get out of each area and what are your expectations from these areas of your life? Your value should not be a specific goal but instead reflect a way you would like to live your life over time. For example, getting married might be a goal you have in life, but it just reflects your value of being an affectionate, honest and loving partner. To accompany your son to a baseball game might be a goal; to be an involved and interested parent might be the value. Note! Write your value for each area on the lines provided on the space below and on the next page. It is your personal values that are important in this exercise.

Work/education:

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.....

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Relationships:

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Leisure:

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Personal growth/health:

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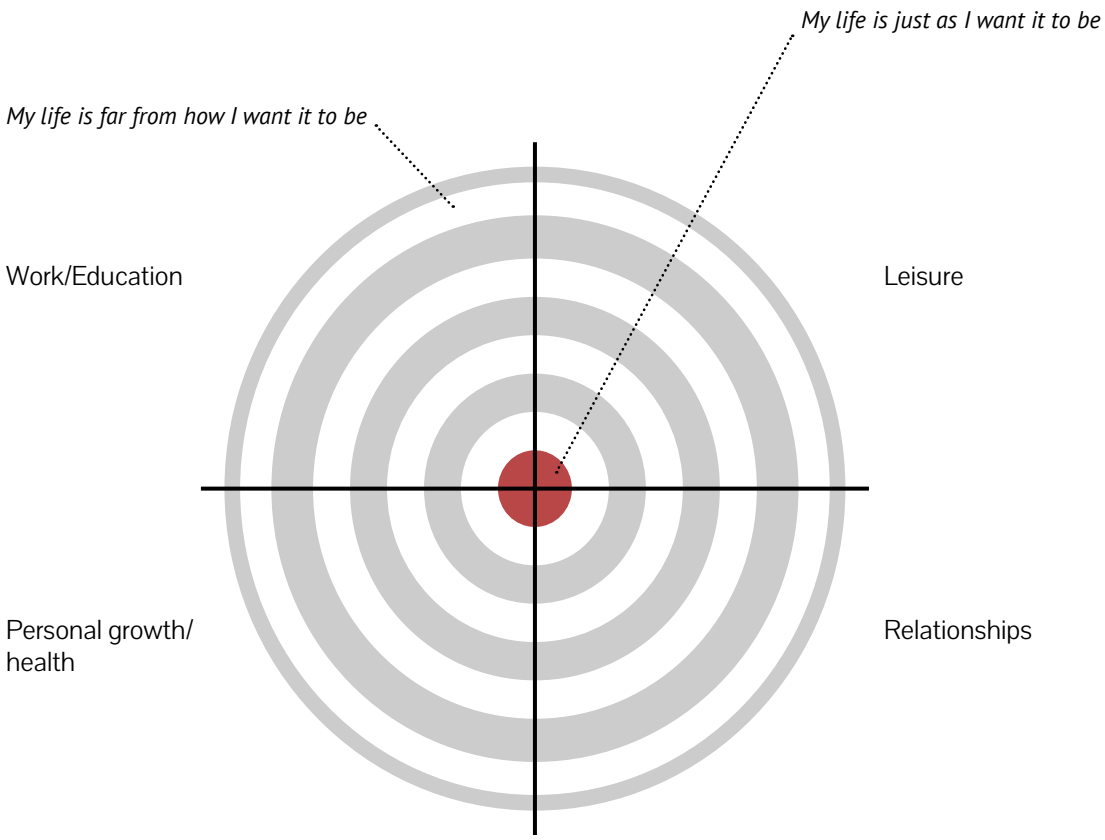
Now, look again at the values you have written above. Think of your value as "bull's eye" (the middle of the dart board). "Bull's eye" is exactly how you want your life to be, a direct hit, where you are living your life in a way that is consistent with your value. Now, make an X on the dart board in each area that best represents where you stand today. An X in the bull's eye means that you are living completely in keeping with your value for that area of living. An X far from bull's eye means that your life is way off the mark in terms of how you are living your life. Since there are four areas of valued living, you should mark four Xs on the dart board. Note! Use the dart board on this page before you go to Part 2 of this exercise.



Part 2. Identify Your Obstacles

Now write down what stands between you and living your current life as you want to, from what you have written in your areas of value. When you think of the life you want to live and the values that you would like to put in play, what gets in the way of you living that kind of life? Describe any obstacle (s) on the lines below.

Obstacle 1: .....

Obstacle 2: .....

Obstacle 3: .....

Obstacle 4: .....

Now estimate to what extent the obstacle (s) you just described can prevent you from living your life in a way that is in keeping with your values. Circle one number below that best describes how powerful this obstacle (s) is in your life.

1 Doesn't prevent me at all	2	3	4	5	6	7 Prevents me completely
Obstacle 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Obstacle 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Obstacle 3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Obstacle 4	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Part 3. My Valued Action Plan

Think about actions you can take in your daily life that would tell you that you are zeroing in on the bull's-eye in each important area of your life. These actions could be small steps toward a particular goal or they could just be actions that reflect what you want to be about as a person. Usually, taking a valued step includes being willing to encounter the obstacle(s) you identified earlier and to take the action anyway. Try to identify at least one value-based action you are willing to take in each of the four areas listed below.

Work/education:

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Relationships:

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Leisure:

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Personal growth/health:

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.....

.....

chapter 3
Self-compassion

There is growing evidence that self-compassion is an important predictor of well-being and resilience (Barnard & Curry, 2011; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Neff (2003a, 2003b) proposes that self-compassion involves treating yourself with care and concern when considering personal inadequacies, mistakes, failures, and painful life situations. It comprises three interacting com- ponents: self-kindness versus self-judgment, a sense of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification.

Self-kindness refers to the tendency to be caring and understanding with oneself rather than being harshly critical. Rather than attacking and berating oneself for personal shortcomings, the self is offered warmth and unconditional acceptance (even though particular behaviors may be identified as unproductive and in need of change). Similarly, when life circumstances are stressful, instead of immediately trying to control or fix the problem, a self-compassionate response might entail pausing first to offer oneself soothing and comfort.

The sense of common humanity in self-compassion involves recognizing that humans are imperfect, that all people fail, make mistakes, and have serious life challenges. Self-compassion connects one's own flawed condition to the shared human condition, so that features of the self are considered from a broad, inclusive perspective.

Mindfulness in the context of self-compassion involves being aware of one's painful experiences in a balanced way that neither ignores and avoids nor amplifies painful thoughts and emotions. It is necessary to be mindfully aware of personal suffering to be able to extend com- passion towards the self. At the same time, it is important to pay attention in an equilibrated way that prevents being carried away by a dramatic storyline, a process that Neff (2003b) has termed "over-identification." This type of thinking narrows one's focus and exaggerates implications for self-worth.

Numerous studies have found that treating oneself compassionately when confronting personal suffering promotes mental health. For instance, greater self-compassion has consistently been associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety (see Barnard & Curry, 2011 for a review). These findings were supported by a recent study (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012) that documented a large effect size ($r = -0.54$) for the relationship between self-compassion and common expressions of psychopathology, such as depression, anxiety, and stress. In addition, a number of studies have found associations between self-compassion and positive psychological qualities, such as happiness, optimism, wisdom, curiosity and exploration, personal initiative, and emotional intelligence (Heffernan, Griffin, McNulty, & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Compassionate Chair Work

Compassion
Exercise
15-25 min.
Client
No

An effective way to deal with a low amount of self-compassion is by finding a way to relate differently to the inner critical voice. The principles of schema therapy are very useful in this regard. Schema Therapy (or more properly, Schema-Focused Cognitive Therapy) was developed by Jeffrey Young to address lifelong, self-defeating patterns called early maladaptive schemas. „Chair Work" is a technique used in Schema Therapy to address maladaptive schemas. Chair work involves the client moving between two chairs as he dialogues between different parts of herself such as a Detached Protector mode and the Healthy Adult mode. The present exercise builds on the principles of chair work in the context of compassion.

Goal

The goal of the exercise is to access disparate facets of the self, in order to understand how they work together, conflict, and how they feel in when experienced in the present.

Advice

The present exercise works best if three empty chairs are used, preferably in a tri-angular arrangement. Because the exercise may sound a bit strange for clients, it can be helpful as a coach to either demonstrate the exercise first. Because clients sometimes have little or no experience expressing the supportive friend or wise councilor, the can first play this role.

Moreover, if clients find it diffult to directly talk to the different aspects of the self, a coach can take a seat in one of the chairs and physically represent the voice that is being talked to. Although there is a fixed sequence and structure in this exercise, sometimes clients feel that they need to switch chairs in between the seperate parts of the exercise. It is good to let the conversation between the different voices be as dynamic as possible and take the proposed strcuture mainly as a rough guideline.

Suggested Readings

Arntz, Arnoud; Jacob, Gitta (2013). *Schema therapy in practice: an introductory guide to the schema mode approach.* Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA

Young, J. E., Klosko, J. S., & Weishaar, M., (2003). *Schema therapy: A practitioner's guide.* New York: Guilford Publications.

Tool Description

Instruction for client:

Think of something that has recently caused you to criticize yourself. Each chair in front of your represents a different perspective to help you understand your self-criticism.

The first chair represents a voice of self-criticism.
The second chair represents the emotionality or sensation of feeling judged.
The last chair takes the perspective of a supportive friend or wise councilor.

Your job is to play the role of each voice represented by the respective chairs. Try to avoid feeling silly and learn from letting you access different perspectives.

Part 1
First, sit in the perspective of the inner critic. Now, vocally express how you think about the issue that you have been dwelling on (out loud). For example "I hate that I am so lazy and can't seem to get anything done." Try to understand the tone you use. Notice the emotions your words evoke. Even notice your posture or general demeanor.

Part 2
Now move to the chair that represents the sensation of being judged (by yourself). Vocally express how it feels to encounter criticism (out loud). For example "I feel hurt" or "I do not feel supported." Notice the same things you did before (your tone, emotions, posture, ect.).

Part 3
Now, engage with yourself in a dialogue between the last two perspectives the (the critical voice and the emotion voice). Try to understand how each perspective feels.

Part 4
Next, move to the chair that represents the friend or wise councilor. Drawing on a sincere sense of compassion, confront the critical voice and the critiqued voice. Address both perspectives vocally. What do you say? What advice do you give? How do you relate to each perspective from a more detached point of view? Notice your tone and demeanor.

Allow yourself enough time to express everything you need to from each perspective. Make sure you leave time to reflect on the experience. Try to understand how you think, and how you could benefit from the perspectives you explored. How does that inform your inner critic and your experience with self-compassion? Ultimately, you are already capable of using a more supportive voice. Next time you find yourself being negative and self-critical, try to locate the compassionate voice.

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Neff, K., Kirkpatrick, K., & Rude, S. (2003). Self-compassion and adaptive psychological functioning. *Journal of Research in Personality, 41,* 139-154.

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Afterword

We hope you find these exercises valuable and see possibilities for applying them in real-life settings with clients, employees or students.

Our promise is to be your one-stop positive psychology resource. Therefore we have decided to create what we call "The Positive Psychology Practitioner's Toolkit", a database containing all the possible documents (e.g. exercises, questionnaires, assessments, etc.) that enable you as an educator or practitioner to implement the findings of the field of positive psychology.

It is with great excitement that we have opened the gates to the toolkit for the price of just $30/month with annual billing. As a toolkit member you will get:

* Access to the complete database filled with interventions, assessments, questionnaires, exercises, and more that can be downloaded and printed in PDF-format
* The possibility to request tools
* The possibility to rate and discuss tools with like-minded professionals
* A bookmark option that allows you to save your favorite tools into your personal account and divide them under categories
* Support from our team
* Continous updates, as new tools will be added on a monthly basis

You can sign up for the toolkit at: https://positivepsychologytoolkit.com/join/

We hope to see you there!