

NEURODIVERSITY
EDUCATION ACADEMY



WHAT'S STRONG WITH YOU?

From Deficits to Strengths



Lana Jelenjev
Saskia Wenniger
Alex Brooks



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About Us



Lana Jelenjev Co-founder, Operations and Training Lead

With more than 20 years experience in the field of educational consultancy, curriculum design and learning experience design, Lana brings her wealth of experience, dedication and passion in creating educational reforms to NEA. Her wish is to see equitable, inclusive and progressive schools that greatly amplify learners' strengths. She loves facilitating spaces for conversations around the themes of giftedness, neurodiversity, strengths-based curriculum design and community building.



Saskia Wenniger Co-founder, Programs and Coaching Lead

Saskia is a learning designer, a media scholar and Strengths based life coach specializing in ADHD and other neurodivergencies. She adores learning, interacting in communities of practice and collaborating with people who have similar interests and values, especially when it comes to co-creating a more (neuro) diversity-friendly future that can uplift the next generations into solving the problems of the future together.



Alex Brooks People, Play and Participatory Practice Designer

Alex is UK based community engagement specialist and landscape architect, with 18 years' experience working alongside Neurodivergent people, their families and friend, in education, residential and community settings in the UK and abroad. Alex is passionate about create imaginative practical inclusive designs that will impact and change people's lives for the better.



NEURODIVERSITY
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Our vision is a society that recognizes the importance of neurodiversity and amplifies the strengths as well as provides accessibility to all neurotypes. We believe that it is crucial for society to create neuroinclusive homes, schools, workplaces and communities that support all neurotypes.

<https://neurodiversityeducationacademy.org>



NEURODIVERSITY
FOUNDATION

NEURODIVERSITY FOUNDATION

The Neurodiversity Foundation works to support a society that embraces all types of minds, including everyone with neurological differences. We are all different and we believe that our diversity is a strength. This also means all of us have something to contribute, in our own way. It organizes the Neurodiversity Pride day every 16th of June.

<https://neurodiversiteit.nl>

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To reference this work, please use the following: "WHAT'S STRONG WITH YOU?": FROM DEFICITS TO STRENGTHS developed by Lana Kristine Jelenjev, Saskia Wenniger and Alex Brooks.

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INTRODUCTION: From "What's Wrong with You?" to "What's Strong With You?"

MORE THAN A MINDSET SHIFT

When I started this project, my intention was to share some of the practices that we have been sharing in our workshops, trainings and spaces that we facilitate. It was a way to synthesize what was already there and truly embody the essence of the strengths based approach - to amplify what has already been working.

Together with my colleagues, Saskia Wenniger and Alex Brooks, we looked at the different ways that we have been using strengths based practices in our lives, our work and our relationships. What started as a desire to share resources and practices turned into something bigger. I began to unravel how much of the strengths based philosophy is deeply ingrained in my own way of being and showing up in the world. With each exercise, I realize how crucial the shift from a pathogenic to a salutogenic framing can influence not only patterns of behavior but also culture. Our family culture is a testament to this (you should hear how much "yet" is being shared in our family conferences!)

What is now evident, is how much the lens of "What's strong with you?" is not just a mindset shift. It doesn't only involve knowing why it is important, or practicing the exercises. It also involves being part of a **movement** of people practicing, advocating, and integrating strengths based approaches in their lives because they know how much it can contribute to their wellbeing, sense of success, and to their relationships. Moving away from our deficits encourage us to celebrate our selves more - all the parts of us, even those that may be challenging. Noticing how we are engaging and leading with our strengths, recognizing our patterns and making visible how we show up with our strengths amplify what we already have and encourage us to deepen our relationship with our strengths.

Welcome to the movement!

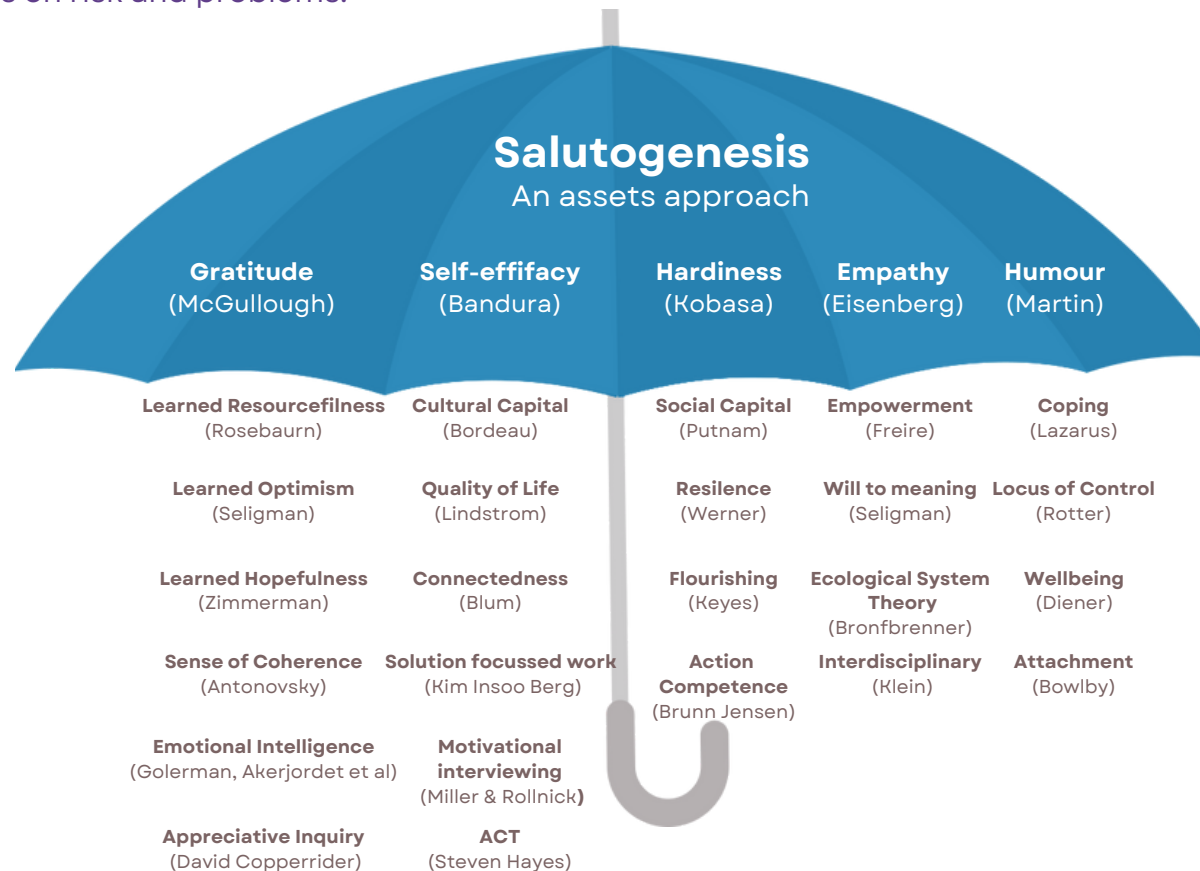
greetings,
Lana Jelenjev
co-founder, Neurodiversity Education Academy
Chairperson, Neurodiversity Foundation



The Importance of Strengths Based Approaches

A SALUTOGENIC FRAMING

Salutogenesis translates to “the origins of health”, from the Latin 'Salus' (Health), and the Greek 'Genesis' (origin or beginning). The term was first coined in 1979 by the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky in his book Health, Stress and Coping. A 'salutogenic' approach is one that focuses on factors that support health and wellbeing, beyond a more traditional, 'pathogenic' focus on risk and problems.





Importance of Strengths Based Approach

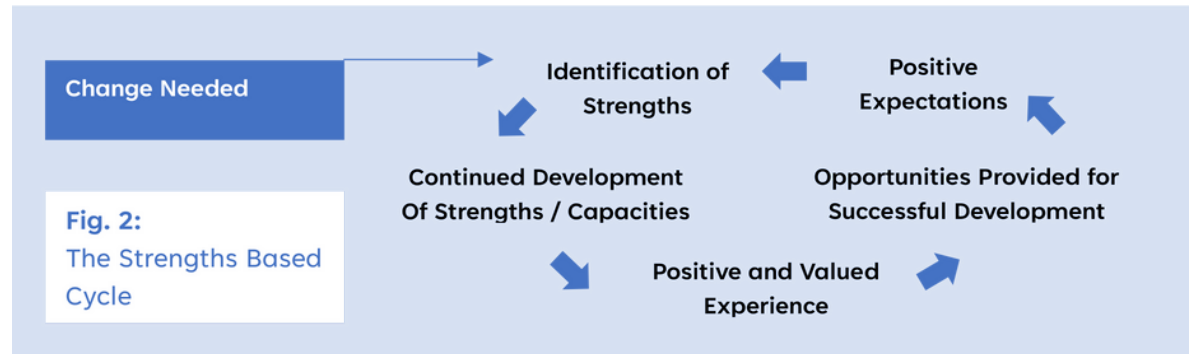
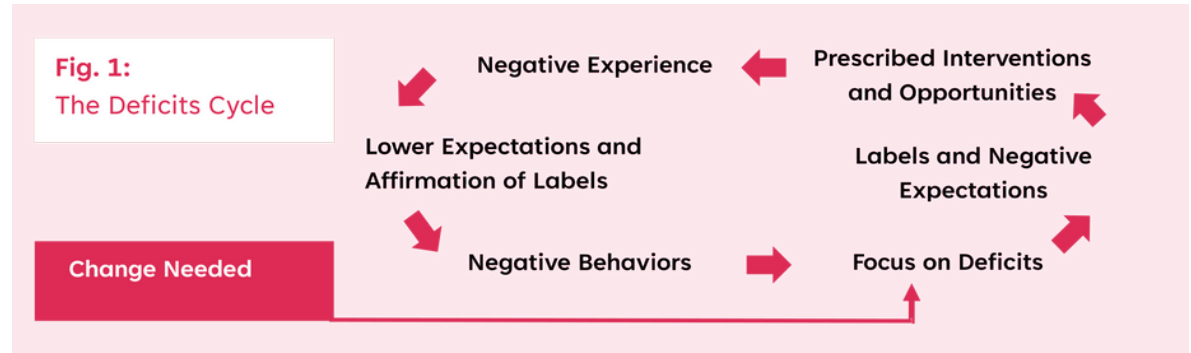
McCaskey (2008) outlines the deficit cycle where the point of view is, once we identify a problem, all we need to do is:

- find an expert to analyze it
- then find a prescription that will fix it.

This starts with a “needs assessment” to determine what is not going well and work out what the needs are to know what can be done.

The strengths based cycle begins with a more holistic focus. It puts emphasis on a person’s strengths and resources (internal and external) in the process of change. It involves:

- acknowledging and validating challenges
- strengths are identified and highlighted.



According to McCaskey, strengths exploration flips the narrative around the problems as it creates positive expectations that things can be different. It also opens the way for the development of competencies.



How this toolkit is divided:

This toolkit is divided into 3 main areas:



NOTICE STRENGTHS

"How might we reflect on, assess and tune in with ourselves and the ways in which we show up with our strengths?"



RECOGNIZE PATTERNS

"How might we deepen our awareness of how we use our strengths, with whom and in which arenas do our strengths surface or are suppressed?"



MAKE STRENGTHS VISIBLE

"How might we engage and lead with our strengths more visibly and effectively in the different arenas of our lives?"

WHAT'S STRONG WITH YOU?



Notice Strengths

PULSE CHECK: Strengths Self-Assessment

REFLECT: Practice the Language of Strengths

EXPLORE: Which Lens Are You Using?

What are Your Brain Strengths?

EXPAND: Observe the Body

EXPERIMENT: Our Strengths as Bucket Fillers

INTEGRATE: Fixed versus Growth Mindset



REFLECT: Practice the Language of Strengths

FROM DEFICITS TO STRENGTHS

To be able to notice strengths, you need to get into the habit of using the language of strengths. Moving away from the traditional problem based or deficit model can be challenging as this is the perspective that we have been brought up in. Our educational system is highly steeped on the "what is wrong with you?" model and this is easily seen within the workforce as well.

By shifting our mindset from a deficit to a strengths-based approach, we are enhancing feelings of self-competence, self-esteem and increasing motivation.

But how do we start focusing on strengths rather than dysfunctions?

One way to do this is to notice your own strengths and the language you use in sharing your strengths with others.

- *When was the last time you talked about your strengths with others?*
- *When was the last time you used the language of strengths in engaging with others?*

Check out the list of brain strengths included in this toolkit You can also use other strengths assessment tools like VIA Character Strengths or the StrengthsFinder.

When we start integrating the language of strengths in our daily lives, we also begin to shift our focus from "what is wrong with you?" to **"what is STRONG with you?"**

What comes to mind when you read the word "Strengths"?



EXPLORE: What are your brain strengths?



Artistic - You have a gift for capturing images and emotions using different channels. You are fascinated with artistic explorations and expressions either through images, movements or sounds.



Candor - You are honest and sincere. You are frank in expressing yourself and your ideas. You value truth telling, transparency and openness. Your ability to speak up encourages others to also express themselves.



Creativity - You can easily find new ways of doing things. You are able to make use of the 3 different networks of your brain: default network- related to brainstorming and daydreaming, executive control network- which activates when you need to focus, and salience network- known for detecting environmental stimuli and determines which sorts of things tend to be noticed.



Curiosity - You are intrinsically motivated to acquire new information (epistemic curiosity), fascinated on how other people think, feel and act (social curiosity) or maximize the sensory information (i.e. sights, sounds, texture) that are around you (perceptual curiosity).



Empathizer - You have the ability to recognize what another person is thinking or feeling, and can easily respond to their state of mind with an appropriate emotion.



Detail oriented - You have the uncanny ability to identify slight differences between similar cues. You like looking at the specifics and pointing out small details.



Global thinker - You have the ability to shift perspective and view an object or event from multiple perspectives, or the ability to see the "gist" or big-picture context surrounding an event or idea.



Humorous - You have a zany sense of humor. You have a natural flair for the comic side of life and seem to have a knack for understanding others and making connections.



Hyper focused - You have the ability to deeply focus and pay attention to the task/s you are doing. You can easily be in flow and immerse yourself in the experiences that interest you the most.



EXPLORE: What are your brain strengths?



Lateral thinkers - You think out of the box and are more apt to take new approaches to an issue or discover connections that others have missed. You can easily bring information and resources from different sources together.



Imaginative - You are able to look beyond what is visible. Combining both feeling and thinking, you can envision possibilities.



Justice sensitivity - You have a high sense of fairness and justice. You are not easily swayed by sentiments and emotions, rather approach the situation rationally.



Narrative reasoning - You tend to remember facts as experiences, examples or stories, rather than abstractions. You also have a profoundly clear and vivid memory of personal experiences.



Organizer - You can plan and organize actions and activities for both short- and long-term goals. It is easy for you to self-monitor, record and self-evaluate.



Novelty - Doing new things and taking part in new experiences make you happy. You are motivated by new sensations, variations in experiences and how things are presented.



Spontaneity - You have the tendency to jump in new ideas and thoughts. Your mind like to wander with spontaneous thoughts. Spontaneous thought is any thought, memory, feeling, daydream or fantasy disconnected from ongoing tasks or sensory experience. Your spontaneity helps you be creative, innovative and action oriented



Tenacity - You have the ability to sustain interest and effort towards your goals. You withstand challenges and setbacks to persevere toward these goals.



Visual-spatial - You are an amazing visualizer. Putting together three- dimensional spatial perspectives is easy for you. You have the ability to understand and analyze shapes of objects another to analyze their spatial features (i.e. size, location, orientation).



EXPLORE: What are your brain strengths?



Systemizer - You have the drive to analyse or build rule-based systems. You systemize based on regularities (structure) and rules. Some examples of systems are : collectible systems (e.g., distinguishing between types of stones or wood), mechanical systems (e.g., a video recorder or a window lock), numerical systems (e.g., a train timetable or a calendar), abstract systems (e.g., the syntax of a language or musical notation), natural systems (e.g., the weather patterns or tidal wave patterns), social systems (e.g., a management hierarchy or a dance routine with a dance partner), motoric systems (e.g., throwing a Frisbee or bouncing on a trampoline).



Vitality - You feel energized both physically and mentally. You feel strong and active.

What other brain strengths would you like to add?

What strengths do you notice with yourself?


What strengths do you notice with others?



EXPLORE: What are your brain strengths?



Artistic




Candor



Creativity



Curiosity



Detail oriented



Empathizer



Global thinker



Humorous




Hyperfocused



Imaginative




Justice sensitivity



Lateral thinkers



Narrative reasoning




Novelty



Organizer




Spontaneity



Systemizer



Tenacity



Visual-spatial



Vitality



EXPLORE: Which Lens Are You Using?

SHIFTING OUR LENS

Our lives are steeped with looking for what is wrong or what is missing rather than acknowledging, celebrating and honoring what is going well and what is already present. This continual focus on problems reinforces a deficit-based perspective that also put our attention on solving problems.

Yet when we use a strengths-based lens we shift our focus on the inherent assets, qualities, untapped resources and capacities in every individual, organization or community.

But how do we start shifting our lens and focus on strengths rather than dysfunctions?

For us to move from deficits to strengths we need to notice the language we are using on a daily basis. Check out the list of words/phrases/questions that you can hear within strengths based conversations and those that you can hear from deficits based ones.

Which ones do you frequently use? and in what context?

A strengths-based approach is not about “superficial look on strengths” . Rather it is an approach that can lead to more self-discovery, self-awareness and self-advocacy.

It can be challenging to move away from what we have always known. Yet, a shift in our lens to strengths focused can amplify capacities individual might need to be able to move towards positive outcomes and flourish and develop as individuals.



EXPLORE: Which Lens Are You Using?

STRENGTHS BASED			
Strengths	What's going well?	Discover and adapt	Celebrate
Potential	Co-constructing	Abundance	Support
Process focused	Unique	How can we build on this?	Flexible
Inclusive	Possibilities	How can strengths propel you?	People are inherently good
Growth Mindset	Long term	Resourceful	Internally focused
Dynamic	Possibilities	Persistent	Strengths driven

DEFICITS BASED			
Deficits	What's going wrong?	Predict and control	Punish
Problem	Problem solving	Shortcomings	Fix
Behavior Focused	Deviant	How can we fix this?	Rigid
Exclusive	Crisis	How can weaknesses hinder you?	People are inherently bad
Fixed Mindset	Short Term	Manipulative	Externally focused
Static	Weaknesses	Resistant	Needs driven

WHAT'S STRONG WITH YOU?



Recognize Patterns

PULSE CHECK: Red and Green Moments

REFLECT: Noticing our Daily Activities

EXPLORE: Signs of Our Strengths

Encouraging and Discouraging

EXPAND: Niche Construction

Mapping Strengths to Arenas

EXPERIMENT: Using WOOP to Engage our Strengths

INTEGRATE: Zones of Development



EXPAND: Niche Construction

WHO SUPPORTS US IN AMPLIFYING OUR STRENGTHS?

In the book *The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain*, Thomas Armstrong shared the importance of "niche construction". It is about modifying the environment to suit our unique needs.

***We see many examples of niche construction in nature: a beaver building a dam, bees creating a hive, a spider spinning a web, a bird building a nest. All of these creatures are changing their immediate environment in order to ensure their survival. Essentially, they're creating their own version of a "least restrictive environment."* - Thomas Armstrong**

One component of niche construction is "envisioning positive role models". In this exercise, think of the people you interact with on a regular basis. Where do you see them within these concentric circles?

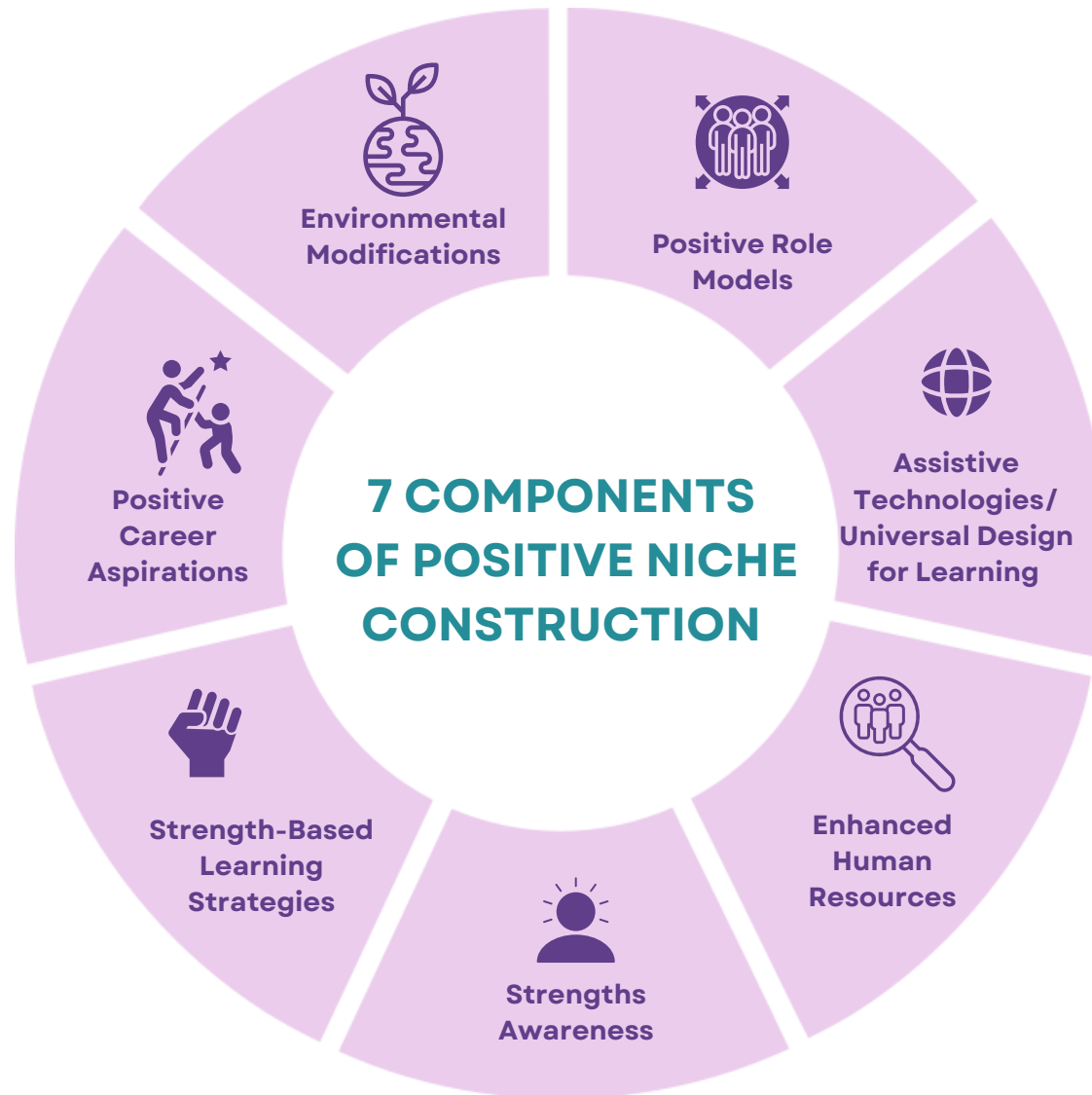
REFLECT ON THE FOLLOWING:

- Who are the people in your life that you engage with on a regular basis? Write below their names.

- How are they related to you in terms of fondness, proximity, or depth of connection (the nearer to you, the deeper the connection)?
- Where do you see these people influencing your niche construction, are they positive role models who are supportive, energizing and strengthening? or are they negative ones who are least supportive, highly critical and energy draining? Plot them in the circles of connection worksheet.



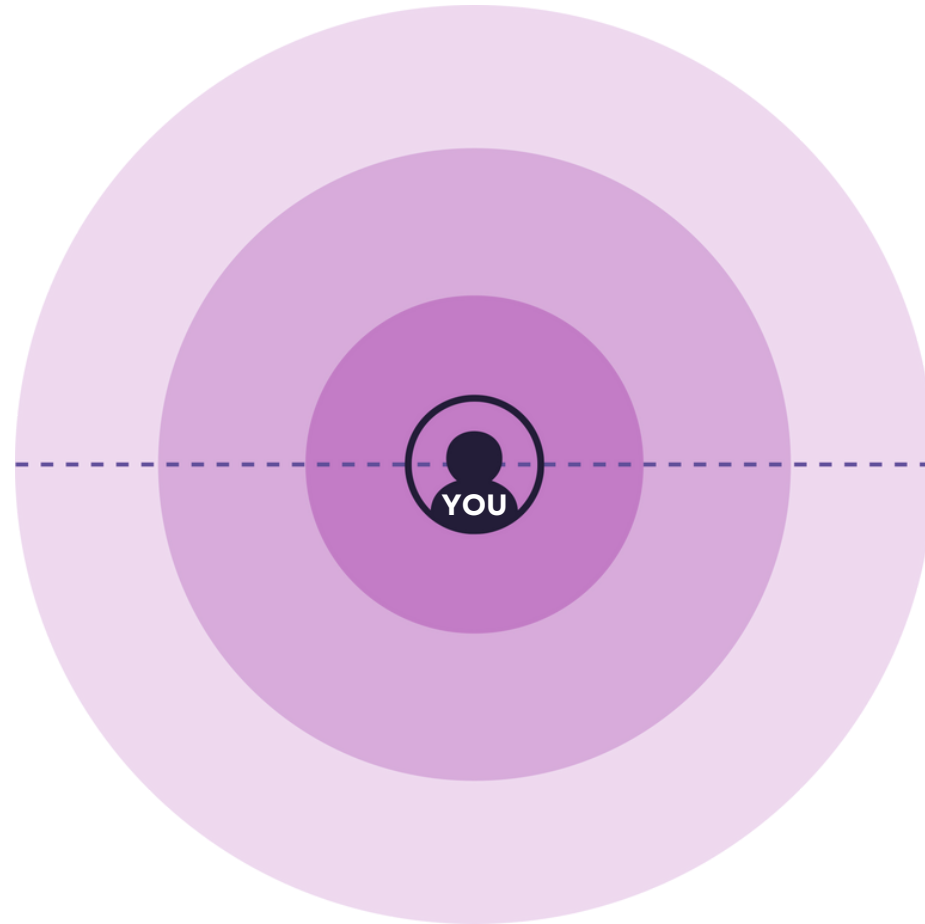
Niche Construction





Circles of Connection

VERY SUPPORTIVE, ENERGIZING AND STRENGTHENING



LEAST SUPPORTIVE, HIGHLY CRITICAL AND ENERGY DRAINING



EXPAND: Niche Construction

Looking at your circles of connection, what strikes you the most about who you engage with?

Are these people role models and do they promote positive niche construction?

How can you nourish these connections? Which strengths can you leverage?

What is one small step that you can do now to reach out to someone you would like to deepen a relationship with?

Leverage the POWER OF YET

These steps might seem really challenging to start executing. Asking people to show up for you in a positive and supportive way can seem really daunting. You may even start to doubt whether you are even worth it.

Leverage the power of yet to increase your motivation and resourcefulness by exploring the untapped potential here. Dream of asking first, before committing yourself to do it. Then plan steps to execute the most promising ask.

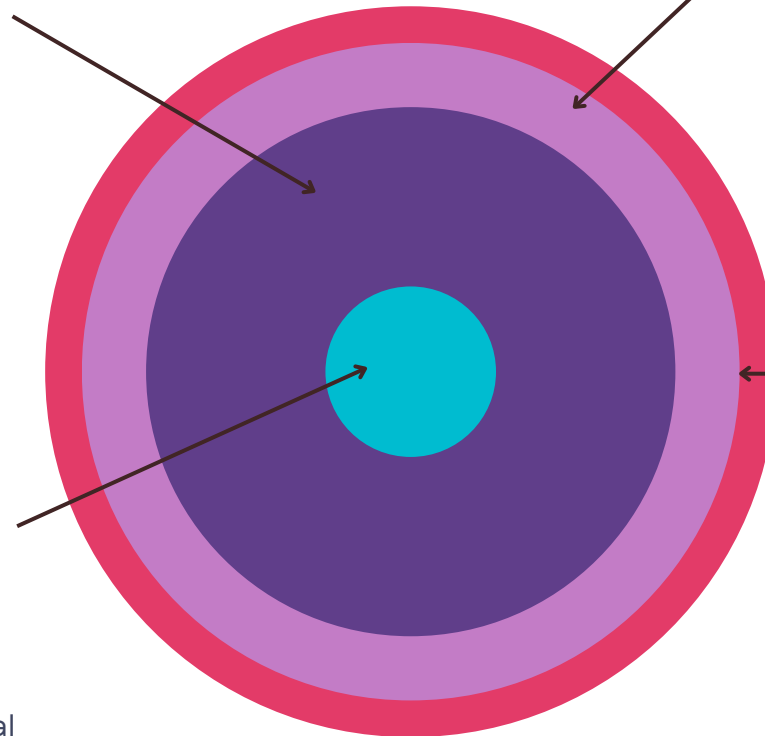
*"I can't ask them YET...
BUT once I do I will ask for.... by....
And deepening this connection in this way will
improve my life by"*



INTEGRATE: Zones of Development

Learning zone - in this zone are the activities we are excited about, and that we would love to learn. It may be an awkward or unfamiliar arena, yet it is rife with exploration, possibilities and expanding what is familiar with new experiences and activities.

Comfort zone - are arenas in our lives where we feel safe, comfortable and are highly familiar territories. These are areas, activities or practices that you are already good at. It is a safe place to reflect on knowledge and experiences. Intentionally pushing the boundaries of our comfort zone is a powerful tool for growth, learning and personal development.



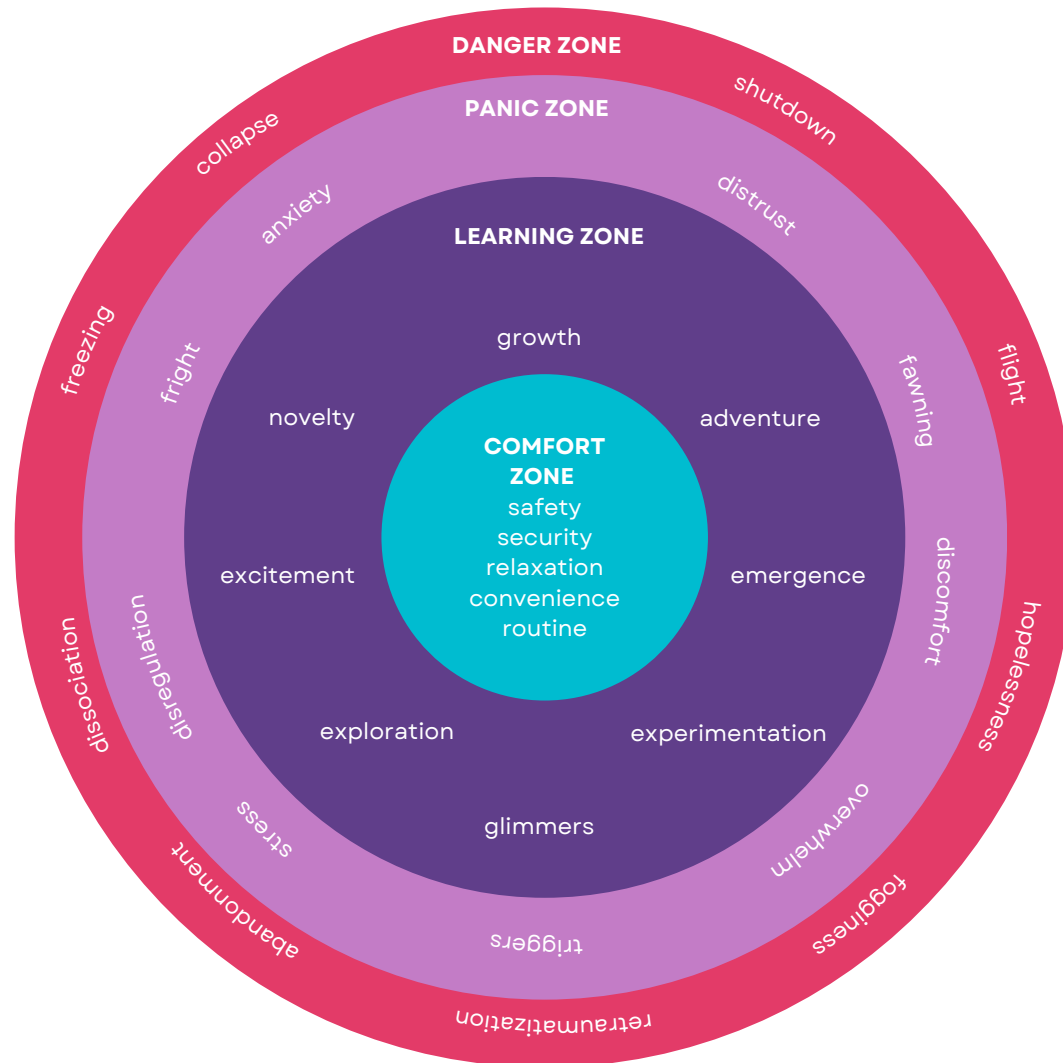
Panic zone - in this zone are the activities we might want to do but fill us with a sense of dread or panic, rather than of joy. In this zone we experience triggers, stress, and fear that makes learning difficult. It is activated when we feel a stirring of unease and energy is spent managing fear and anxiety. From here you can shift to a learning zone if we actively work on regulation

Danger zone - in this zone we cease to explore or learn. This is a point of shutdown, collapse, and dissociation. There are feelings of hopelessness, abandonment, fogginess, and too tired to think or act. Possibility of past traumas resurfacing and can be a zone that is retraumatizing.

*Adapted from Paiget's zone's of proximal development.



INTEGRATE: Zones of Development





INTEGRATE: Zones of Development

Looking at what you wrote in your comfort zone, what are the common activities in your comfort zone? What patterns do you notice with these activities?

What were the body reactions that you noticed and experienced when you were in the comfort zone? learning zone? panic zone? In the danger zone?

How did you move from your comfort zone to your learning zone? Which strengths did you utilise?

How did you move from your panic zone to your learning zone? Which strengths did you utilise?

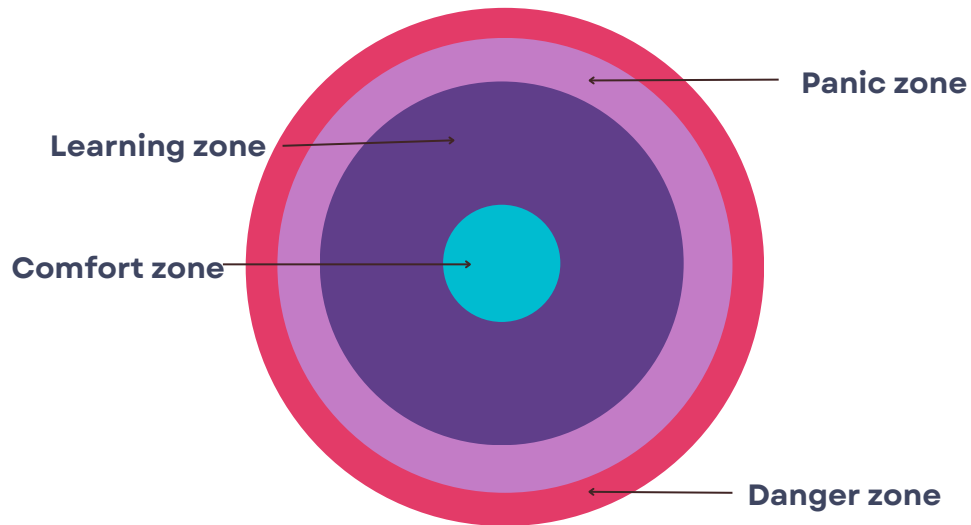
How did you move from your danger zone to retreat back to your comfort zone? Which strengths did you utilise?

In a particular situation where you are challenged or scared, how can you make it safer by applying one of your strengths.



INTEGRATE: Zones of Development

Write down events in your life where you found yourself in your Comfort zone, Learning zone, Panic zone and Danger zone. Which of your strengths helped you navigate these zones? Think of the strengths you used in moving away from comfort zone to learning zone or away from the panic and danger zones.



COMFORT ZONE	LEARNING ZONE
PANIC ZONE	DANGER ZONE

ZONES

WHAT'S STRONG WITH YOU?



Make Strengths Visible

PULSE CHECK: Shine Light on Bright Spots

REFLECT: Celebrate and Share

EXPLORE: Your Strengths Compass

Flip the Narrative

EXPAND: Set Healthy Boundaries

Advocate for Your Strengths

EXPERIMENT: Do a Strengths Interview

Actively Requesting Strengths Based Feedback

INTEGRATE: Use Strengths Based Questions

What has Shifted?



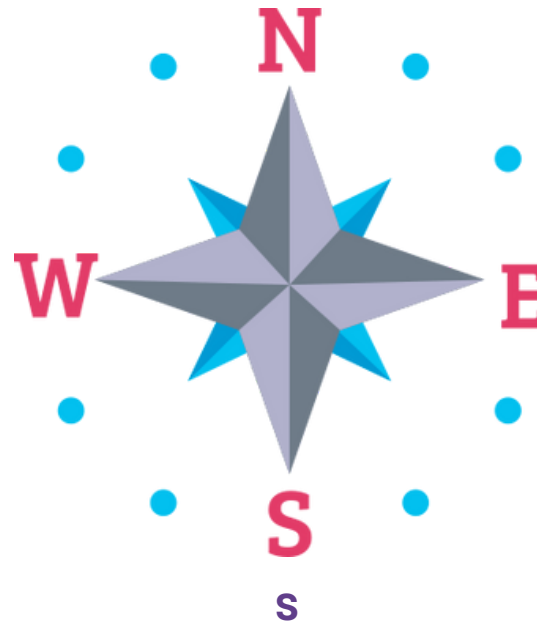
EXPLORE: Your Strengths Compass

N

What are the *NEEDS* driving your strengths?

W

Which areas in your life do you *WISH* to use your strengths more?



E

What *EXCITES* you in using your strengths?

S

Who can *SUPPORT* you in amplifying your strengths?



EXPERIMENT: Do a Strengths Interview

MAKE STRENGTHS VISIBLE

We all have strengths, things that we are more adept at, things that we love to do, things that have our interest naturally, that we gravitate towards and that we find it easy to focus on. Sometimes we have a hard time seeing our own strengths because they are so natural to us. We don't even notice we are doing these things, we don't see them as remarkable. But others in our lives tend to seek us out for help with these things, compliment us on them or admire us because we can do it.

A way to get a very personal picture of our strengths is to do a strengths interview with people we closely connect and engage with.

THINK OF 3 VERY IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE

Ask them the following:

- What are the top 3 strengths that you see in me? (You can use the brain strengths card.)
- What do you see me doing tirelessly and with great enjoyment?
- What would you ask my help or advice on before asking anyone else?



EXPERIMENT: Do a Strengths Interview

Name:

Top 3 Strengths:

What do you see me doing tirelessly and with great enjoyment?

What would you ask my help or advice on before asking anyone else?

Name:

Top 3 Strengths:

What do you see me doing tirelessly and with great enjoyment?

What would you ask my help or advice on before asking anyone else?

Name:

Top 3 Strengths:

What do you see me doing tirelessly and with great enjoyment?

What would you ask my help or advice on before asking anyone else?



List of NEEDS

From the Center for Nonviolent Communication, NYCNVC and Open Communication with a few additions from Peggy Smith

Autonomy	Connection			Meaning		Physical Well-Being
Choice	Acceptance	Communion	Honoring	Accomplishment	Learning &	Air
Dignity	Acknowledgement	Community	Inclusion	Awareness	Growth	Water
Fairness	Affection	Companionship	Intimacy	Celebration	Sensory Stimulation	Physical Movement
Justice	Appreciation	Compassion	Kindness	Challenge	To Matter	Shelter
Freedom	Authenticity	Consideration	Love	Clarity	Participation	Comfort
Independence	Belonging	Consistency	Mutuality	Competence	Perspective	Exercise
Interdependence	Care	Empathy	Nurture	Consciousness	Presence	Pleasure
Space	Closeness	Friendship	Partnership	To Contribute	Purpose	Rest
Spontaneity	Cooperation	Honoring	Power	Creativity	Self-Expression	Sleep
Honesty	Peace			Play		Sexual Expression
Authenticity	Balance	Equality	Harmony	Adventure	Humor	Safety
Integrity	Beauty	Equanimity	Inspiration	Excitement	Joy	Self-Care
Presence	Ease	Faith	Solitude	Fun	Laughter	Touch

WHAT'S STRONG WITH YOU?

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