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**EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CORE POSITIVE SELVES WITH MEN
CONVICTED OF CHILD SEXUAL OFFENSES:
A CHARACTER STRENGTHS INITIATIVE**

BY

TIFFANY ANNETTE MINER

B.S.W., Social Work, New Mexico Highlands University, 2009
M.S.W., Clinical Social Work, New Mexico Highlands University, 2010

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Family and Child Studies

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

July, 2021

DEDICATION

My life's work, and all I have accomplished in this 17-year journey of the soul, is dedicated to my grandmother, my daughter's namesake, Flora Ruth Baca. Though she perhaps did not know the impact of her own strength and power, she was the rock of our family and the glue that held us together. With her depth of insight, intellect, and compassion, she could have taken a number of paths in life, but instead, she gave every piece of herself away in the service of others. I could have never fully grasped the enormity of her sacrifice until becoming a mother myself, nor the profundity of her love. Today, her strongest legacy lives on in the lives of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. It is through her life, her love, and her example of the immense strength of the human spirit that everything in my life has become possible. I can only hope to honor her through my life and the works I leave behind and to be an example to my own daughter of the type of strength that her grandmother possessed and that is, by nature, inherent in her.

This dissertation, the culmination of all of my academic achievements, is dedicated to the late Dr. Jose Alfonso Sisneros. His support and guidance as his undergraduate and graduate student at New Mexico Highlands University allowed me to flourish in ways I would have previously never believed possible. His teachings, and most of all, his belief in me, helped me gain access to a reservoir of internal strengths I never knew I possessed. He taught me the value of “una palabra” (one word) and helped me reclaim my own voice and power as a person and professional. One of the last gems of wisdom he shared with me before his death was to “think of this [dissertation] process as your introduction to academia.” I couldn't have fully understood the depth of those

words at the time, as I had only barely embarked on my doctoral journey, but now I do, and I treasure them still. Six years later, they remain a constant reminder that no matter how much you think you know, with an open mind and an open heart, there is always more to learn. I hope this finished work and all that comes after it does his memory proud. There are no amount of words to adequately express the profound love in my heart for this man, nor what his mentorship has meant in my life.

The infinite love poured into this work, with and for some of our most vulnerable, I give freely with gratitude to my family and those I have loved and lost. My paternal grandfather, Lyle Miner, who loved and believed in me throughout this process, never losing faith in me and in my ability even when I felt uncertain of myself. He inspired me, both in life and in death, to push myself harder to see his vision of me come to fruition. My uncle (nino), Frank, who encouraged me to pursue this doctoral path and who never stopped believing in my ability as a scholar and as a person. My beloved cousins, Jordan and Kyle Parras, who have taught me what is perhaps one of life's greatest lessons of all: how painfully fleeting our time together on this earth is.

Their lives, love, and struggles continue to influence my path daily. It is with them in my heart that I will continue to love out loud, when I can, while I can, and as deeply as I can for as long as I am here. It is love that is our biggest strength of all, and without the love I have given and received in my life, and throughout this doctoral journey, I would be nothing.

Without doubt, my beautiful daughter has taught me the greatest lesson in love and sacrifice, and with that, this bold and assiduous effort to acknowledge and elevate what is most human in us all is dedicated to her. She has taught me more about myself in

her short time on this earth than anyone and is my biggest pride and joy in this life. She is the strength behind everything that I do and am, and that I strive to be. I hope that through this achievement, she will someday be inspired to pursue dreams and goals of her own without fear of failure or judgement. I would do anything to create a safer, kinder, and stronger community for her, and I pray that someday the roots of this work will ensure that. *Te amo por siempre*, my love. Be unafraid.

Finally, this work, the product of what has become a life's passion, is dedicated to all those impacted by the insidious lifelong consequences of child sexual abuse. It is dedicated to all those whose paths I have crossed throughout this journey, whose stories were shared in courage, trust, and hope. Most especially, it is dedicated to the lost boys of my heart whose names and stories I will carry with me forever. In everything I do and strive for, I will remember them. *Todo el tiempo*.

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To my parents, Larry and Lil Miner, who have given me my life and everything that they have to prepare me for this journey, I thank you. I could never adequately express what your support, guidance, and unfailing love have meant to me. This Ph.D. is a credit to the many selfless acts you have granted to me as my parents and biggest supporters of my dreams and goals. I can't imagine what this process would have been like without you. With my heart and soul, I thank you for every opportunity you have given me through your own sacrifices. I would not be where I am today without you and will never be able to express in words what you mean to me. I can only hope that the completion of this Ph.D. brings you as much pride as I have in calling you my parents and the most valuable and important teachers in my life. Having you both there to witness the end of this degree is a moment I will forever hold dear.

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enough for the quiet confidence, support, and love you showed me at a time in my life when I had not yet fully learned to believe in my own strengths and power. I still remember, every time I would see you after some time had passed, and you would ask: “How’s school?” Long after Alzheimer’s had begun robbing you of your memory, auntie, you still remembered to ask that question. I would give anything now for you to know that I am done, but I know in your heart, you are proud of the woman and scholar I have become.

To the men who were brave enough to accept my invitation to participate in this study, I profess my deepest respect and gratitude to you for your courage to dare greatly, live deeply, and share honestly throughout our time together. Without you, this study would not have been possible. May your stories and experiences be reflected in these pages and beyond. May the words within these pages serve as a reminder to us all to always look beyond the surface and challenge the stereotypes we hold of ourselves and others. May the body of this work, to which your contributions have been invaluable, continue to propel us forward as professionals and human beings in our shared goal of accountability, wholeness, and healing.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to help men convicted of child sexual offenses learn to recognize and engage their character strengths over 12 months. Participants were six men convicted of contact and noncontact (internet) child sexual offenses. All participants were members of a community-based reintegration group for registered citizens. In the first weeks of the study, participants received the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* survey. The survey, containing 240 questions—10 items for each of the 24 character strengths outlined—helped participants identify their top character strengths. The study explored (a) how the men could use their character strengths to address their unique needs and barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and (b) how the daily use of their top five strengths informed their attitudes toward themselves and their sexual offending behavior. To accomplish this, several methods of data collection were used, including in-depth, semistructured interviews, art (mask-making), journal writing, observations, and audio recordings. The data underwent thematic analysis to determine participants’

perceptions and experiences. Factors leading to unhealthy lifestyles, barriers to healthy living, ways to overcome barriers, and effects of the strengths approach are discussed. Although further research is needed, results indicate that by identifying and using their character strengths, participants demonstrated improvement in self-awareness and accountability. An emerging model, the Hope-based strengths approach, illustrates how this character strengths approach can help men convicted of child sexual offenses address the needs and barriers related to their offense behavior and facilitate personal accountability for themselves and their crimes.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Currently, the label *sex offender* is arguably one that carries with it the greatest stigma, not only within communities but also among policymakers and treatment providers. As a result, although high-profile sex crimes continue to make headlines, significant questions relating to the appropriateness and effectiveness of current sex offense legislation, as well as largely punitive treatment models, are often overshadowed by the fear-driven sensationalism surrounding this sensitive topic (Velázquez, 2008). Consequently, despite recent literature indicating the benefits of augmenting the existing risk-needs treatment model with an emphasis on developing strengths and the goal of a “good life” (Ward, 2002), there remains a substantial gap in the research. The present study was a means to inform the possibility of maintaining a focus on building strengths while addressing criminogenic needs. Specifically, the goal of the present study was to shed light on the perceived benefit of a character strengths approach, which utilizes the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to facilitate a dialogue about individual strengths of men convicted of child sexual offending, as well as to address the unique needs and barriers they face to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Once more, although recent strengths-based models (e.g., Ward, 2002) suggest that equipping child sexual offenders with both the internal and external resources (strengths) necessary to lead productive lives leads to decreased recidivism, research into such approaches with this population remains in its infancy. Moreover, to date, the use of a positive psychology approach that implements the VIA-IS with men convicted of child sexual offenses has yet to be applied. The objective of such an

approach is contextualized within a much wider aim for a cultural shift away from traditional, castigatory approaches to managing child sexual offending and toward a positive psychology paradigm that values and works to strengthen the “core best self” of each individual, remaining conscious of criminogenic risk factors underlying the offense. In implementing such an approach, my primary research question was: How the daily use of their top character strengths informs the attitudes of men convicted of child sexual offenses, specifically in relation to themselves and their sexual offending behavior? The central issue at the heart of such an inquiry is: How can we best utilize a character strengths approach as a method of helping these individuals to decrease the reliance on the offending behaviors to meet basic human needs, thus addressing the overarching issue at hand, which is recidivism?

Background and Context

According to recent data, the number of registered sex offenders indicates a widespread problem. Based on a report from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC; 2020), there have been more than 917,770 individuals placed on sex offender registries in the United States. That is around 279 registered citizens for every 100,000 people. The Special Analysis Unit of NCMEC compiled these data from a survey of the 50 sex offender registries across the United States, as well as sex offender registries in the District of Columbia and five U.S. territories (American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands). A steady increase in the number of registered citizens is likely due in part to the increased efforts and means of monitoring that are currently available to authorities and the general public and speaks to the heightened collective awareness of this type of offending, which

has been encouraged by a surge of media attention in response to high-profile sex crimes (Velázquez, 2008).

Over the past 2 decades, in particular, there have been many policies and procedures put into place to address the issue of sexual offending. Apart from assuaging public fear and anger, one of the primary objectives integral to the expansion of legislation around child sexual offenses is to reduce recidivism rates among this group of offenders, thus safeguarding children from the nocuous effects of such crimes. The core assumption perpetuating the historically punitive measures of addressing child sexual offense is that compared to other types of offenders, child sexual offenders are at an increased risk of recidivism (Maddan, 2008). Much of the current legislation and treatment have been largely influenced by the public response to media coverage reserved for crimes considered the most sensational. As a result, the public, as well as many professionals, have a limited, often flawed perception of child sexual offending. As such, they often share misperceptions about what motivates these types of offenders (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), as well as the extent to which an offender is likely to reoffend (Maddan, 2008; Sample, 2001).

These misconstructions frequently contribute to many problems linked to an increased risk of recidivism, such as an extreme abhorrence and rejection from the wider community. One direct consequence of such an elevated hatred response from others is a type of cognitive shutdown, which refers to a process that shares many elements with the concept of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972). When this cognitive shutdown occurs, offenders are more prone to minimize or deny their actions or stop responding to

treatment due to a hopeless or catastrophic view of themselves and their situation. As one individual shared during his time in custody,

A lot of times, with us being in here, people tend to think that we're monsters and we're hideous because we committed all these crimes and everything, and in people looking at us like that, we start actually looking at *ourselves* like that. And...one of the things that I met with and dealt with a whole lot was the fact that, when I started getting down into myself, how much I hated myself for everything that had happened and everything that I had done. And all the reflection of people looking at the things that I'd done, and their hatred had just compiled in myself (Kukura et al., 2007).

This example, which is illustrative of a shame-based identity, further highlights the need for a positive psychology approach that aids offenders in identifying and appreciating their strengths and potential goodness and facilitates the development of internal resources (strengths) to address negative affect and motivation for behavioral change. Furthermore, recent literature also indicates that a focus on strengths early on in treatment can help to increase treatment retention. This is partly due to the natural shift away from a shame-based identity, or “innately bad” evaluation of the self, which is related to decreased recidivism rates (Marshall & Marshall, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The primary problem is that the historically punitive approaches to imparting change in sexual offending behaviors have not been effective in deterring these crimes or increasing motivation for change in child sexual offenders (Yates & Prescott, 2010). The issue is that many past and current treatment approaches, while gradually moving away from purely punitive measures, have remained heavily reliant on avoidance strategies that can serve to perpetuate the offense cycle. Many practices that use avoidance strategies as an approach to treatment focus on relieving distressing emotions by teaching distraction skills, self-soothing skills, and skills to improve the moment (e.g., Beck et al., 2004).

However, a growing body of research on internet usage among individuals with addictions suggests that men convicted of child sexual offenses, in particular, increasingly use the internet for sexual gratification and as a form of emotional avoidance. As such, it is reasonable that approaches that rely on avoidance goals to address the offending behaviors of internet child sexual offenders are perhaps not appropriate, particularly in cases where individuals rely on abuse images on the internet as a means for coping with negative emotional states. In contrast with the current focus on approaches that emphasize avoidance techniques, there is a need for counterintuitive approaches toward helping men with histories of child sexual offending accept and cope with negative affect and build motivation for behavioral change through the exploration of core positive selves (Quayle et al., 2006).

Purpose of Study

This study was a means to identify ways to help men convicted of child sexual offenses learn to recognize and engage their character strengths. Emerging research suggests that addressing sexual offending using the positive psychology paradigm could contribute to reducing recidivism rates. In line with the strengths-based approach, helping men who have sexually offended against children build a core positive self is vital if this population is to maintain crime desistance (Quayle et al., 2006). Therefore, the specific aims of the present study were to explore with a sample of men convicted of child sexual offending what they view as their top character strengths and address the following questions:

RQ1: How can men convicted of child sexual offending use their character strengths to address their unique needs and barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle?

RQ2: How can the daily use of their top five “signature strengths” inform the attitudes of men convicted of child sexual offending toward themselves and their sexual offending behavior?

There was also exploration surrounding what types of things men convicted of child sexual offenses strived to achieve through offending behavior (e.g., positive affect/blocking of emotional discomfort, a means of control, closeness and intimacy with others, etc.), and how they could apply the character strengths to achieve those same goals.

Assumptions

Based on my prior knowledge of and work within the field, there were six primary assumptions in this study:

- Men who sexually offend act on the impulse to sexually abuse a child or view child sexual abuse images is as a means of attempting to escape negative emotional states, which are arguably related to their low sense of self-worth and competency (Quayle et al., 2006).
- As evidenced by the current focus of traditional cognitive-behavioral methods to treatment, there is a need for character strengths approaches with child sexual offenders, which utilize approach goals rather than goals rooted in avoidance (Marshall et al., 2011).
- A positive psychology approach that utilizes and builds upon character strengths intuitively increases positive emotion and connection with others by encouraging a climate that values strengths as a way to access basic human goods/needs (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

- A positive psychology approach that utilizes and builds upon character strengths intuitively cultivates a positive sense of self through feedback and successful use of strengths (Pritchard, 2009).
- Individuals who participate in a character strengths-based approach will be more likely to report increased self-efficacy and agency through the development and awareness of one's values and the successful implementation of one's strengths (Elston & Boniwell, 2011).
- A better understanding of one's character strengths and how to use them can facilitate motivation for behavioral change, increase distress tolerance, and aid individuals in overcoming rejection (Bandura, 1994; Govindji & Linley, 2007; Pritchard, 2009).

Each of these assumptions informed my working hypothesis, which was that if men who are convicted of child sexual offenses are taught to implement a character strengths-based approach, they would be better equipped to address motivation for behavioral change. My working hypothesis was based on the knowledge that fostering core positive selves can help address shame-based identity formation, which is directly related to increased recidivism (Tangney et al., 2011). The study's goal was to demonstrate precisely how this type of approach, with a specific focus on the use of character strengths as an internal resource, could be of use to this population in addressing underlying offending mechanisms and behavior.

Researcher Perspective

My perspective and assumptions coming into this study were equally influenced by my roles, both professionally and personally, which served as a guiding compass

throughout this research endeavor. I have worked as an Inmate Specialist, helping clients, primarily adult males, to create person-centered treatment plans leading to their release or transition from community-based treatment. Many of my clients were parents incarcerated on a broad range of charges and who often required assistance in locating basic resources in the community to meet their needs. From a professional perspective, coming from a Family and Child Studies and Clinical Social Work background and practicing from a positive psychology framework, my paradigm of thought is largely steeped in strengths-based approaches and practices. Specifically, I operate from a biopsychosocial-cultural-spiritual model (Engel, 1980). This model asserts that “biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual factors coalesce within an individual to produce a unique diathesis or response to stress” (Stuart & Robertson, 2012, p. 84). Accordingly, my primary focus in all that I do is to help facilitate positive connections and relationships between people that honor the voices of all involved. As such, my lens and approach to working with offending populations are primarily guided by the principal components of restorative justice, which shows crime as a violation of people and relationships rather than the more traditional criminal justice view of crime as a violation of law and the state. Rather than focusing on the perpetrator’s punishment for the crime, as is typically the perspective of criminal justice, the central focus of restorative justice is victim needs and offender responsibility for repairing harm. Finally, I brought with me to the inquiry process a personal and professional background in the area of neurodevelopmental disability, which plays an important role in how I view the world and how I assess and work with individuals in corrections and other settings. Working and existing within the disability community has afforded me the knowledge,

capability, and sensitivity to always place the person before the diagnosis. Also, coming into this process with an in-depth understanding and appreciation of person-centered, strengths-based approaches (many of which emerged in the disability community) and their importance, particularly in the facilitation of transitioning, I brought a diverse perspective that was in some ways beneficial throughout the research process. This is especially true in exercising the ability to view each participant as a valuable human being who is not the sum of their worst act and who inherently possesses strengths and the capacity for growth. That said, I also recognize that this view in and of itself, as well as other aspects of my experience and worldview, has undoubtedly influenced my interactions with and perceptions of those whom I encountered on this research journey. Remaining aware of precisely what I brought to this inquiry as a person and professional and the importance of the co-construction of meaning throughout was a critical part of my experience as a researcher, which I documented in my researcher's journal. Part of remaining mindful as I went forth in this endeavor was to continually reflect on the rationale and significance of the current study related to the broader picture of working toward healthier and safer communities.

Rationale and Significance

As mentioned, the central issue is recidivism and how to utilize a character strengths approach to help men convicted of child sexual offenses to maintain behavioral change and decrease their reliance on offending behaviors to address life problems. As such, if people hope to improve treatment and reduce the instance of sexual offenses against children and other vulnerable populations, they must be open to better understanding the needs and experiences of those who commit such crimes. This includes

a critical examination of the issues present within this population and what is genuinely needed to affect behavioral change. One of the main issues, as suggested, is the association between low self-concept or self-worth and offending behavior. Research has shown that when matched with controls, men who sexually abuse children demonstrate significantly lower self-worth than their counterparts, which can also contribute to high instances of negative affect. This is critical because although low self-worth is not related to reoffending in and of itself, it is believed to moderate changes in other risk factors that are related to recidivism, including the inability to form healthy attachments to others, relationship and intimacy deficits, experiences of loneliness, and the predilection toward deviant sexual behaviors. As such, fostering the knowledge and use of the individual character strengths of men convicted of child sexual offenses is important to enhance their self-worth and formulation of a positive self. In the current study, I argue that this could be a key factor in facilitating and maintaining a healthy and offense-free lifestyle and can be seen as an internal resource instrumental in influencing the offense cycle.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

This study was a means to explore how to best use a character strengths approach as a method of helping men convicted of child sexual offenses decrease their reliance on the offending material and behavior and increase their motivation for change. A thorough understanding of salient points within the current literature was necessary to move forward with this study. The review of the literature presents a critical exploration of the following overarching areas and their significance to the present study:

- Overview of present, empirically supported treatments for child sexual offenders.
- Negative affect as a precursor to the offending cycle.
- Advancement toward a positive approach to treatment of individuals who sexually offend against children.

The lattermost area of focus further expands on the positive psychology paradigm and the currently untapped potential of such a paradigm to help address some of the core issues inherent in the offense cycle, such as low self-worth and high instances of negative affect. The present study provides a more thorough understanding of this paradigm, as well as its principal components as they relate to the present population and study. Such information is a necessary first step to impart change in how the U.S. criminal justice system currently attends to child sexual offense and the individuals responsible.

Overview of Present Empirically Supported Treatments for Child Sexual

Offenders: Historical Background of Sexual Offender Treatment

Due to heightened public and professional awareness of child sexual offending and a shared consciousness of the presence of child sexual offenders within communities,

a broader focus on treatment programs tailored specifically for this offending population began to emerge. The specific focus of such treatment programs, both now and in the past, is preventing recidivism (Gerardin & Thibaut, 2004; Patel et al., 2008). However, although most individuals advocating for treatment soon recognized that incarceration alone was insufficient to curtail sexual offenses, early attempts at child sexual offender treatment often produced poor results (Yates & Prescott, 2010). The ineffectiveness of early child sexual offender treatment was later attributed to the foundations used to build the initial treatment paradigms. These initial treatment paradigms emerged from and were rooted in the efforts of child sexual abuse victims, therapists, and advocates in the 1970s. Those individuals began to give a voice to survivors of child sexual abuse and the often secretive nature of the offense, removing the focus from the many children victimized by people close to them. Their goal was to “dispel the myths perpetrated in society that either minimized societal assessment of the impact of sexual abuse or placed blame on the victim” (Carich & Mussack, 2014, p. 5). The efforts of those who were part of this movement in the 1970s were means to remove the stigma and guilt from child sexual abuse victims by holding perpetrators adequately accountable.

Additionally, the intent was to empower child sexual abuse victims by giving them a voice, providing them with pathways to healing, and decreasing recidivism by implementing child sexual offender treatment programs with the sole purpose of confronting and shaming the perpetrator. Thus, as is apparent in the almost exclusive concentration on victim impact, the intent and focus of early treatment programs were less on the treatment and rehabilitation of those who had perpetrated, and more on validating those who had been victimized. Nonetheless, these intensely punitive treatment

approaches, which were largely modeled on similar substance abuse intervention strategies of the time, were later branded “Gestapo” therapy by those working in the field of sexual offender treatment due to their often brutal and harmful effects. First, these punitive approaches to treatment often exacerbated some of the fundamental issues related to the offense cycle, such as the perpetrator’s denials, minimizations, and cognitive distortions. Moreover, the approaches failed to provide the type of constructive assistance to victims of child sexual abuse as initially intended. Eventually, as a result of the emerging evidence of the approaches’ ineffectiveness, the field as a whole began slowly shifting away from shame-based, confrontational approaches to treatment. Rather than focusing exclusively on victim impact, modern sex offender treatment programs focus predominantly on the perpetrator. Sex offender treatment specialists recognize the perpetrator as the primary client. The impact of his offenses poses immediate consequences for all involved parties, including himself, his victims, and the larger society (Carich & Mussack, 2014). Hence, targeting the offense-related behaviors and cognitions in proactive ways that address the needs of the perpetrator as a whole person and helping him build upon internal and external resources is of central concern and considered necessary to ensure the safety of all impacted by the offense. Therefore, in recent years, the overarching goal of all current models of sexual offender treatment has been to address the multidimensional nature of sexual offending and the core criminogenic needs of perpetrators that contribute to the risk of sexual offending. Some of the foremost therapeutic approaches applied to date and shown to be most advantageous include the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), and the more recent good lives model.

Risk-Need-Responsivity Model

The RNR model (Andrews & Bonta, 2017) was first developed in the 1980s and later formalized in the 1990s to assess and treat sexual offenders. As its name suggests, there are three principles: risk, need, and responsivity. The risk principle stems from the notion that the amount and intensity of treatment offered should adhere to each individual's level of assessed risk potential. In other words, individuals assessed to be at a higher risk to reoffend receive more resources and treatment than those deemed at a lower risk to reoffend. This principle is based on research indicating that recidivism rates will often increase with excessive treatment given to low-risk offenders and decrease with more treatment options presented to high-risk offenders (Carich & Mussack, 2014). The need principle also addresses recidivism, stating that approaches that specifically target individual criminogenic needs are more likely to result in reduced recidivism rates. There are numerous criminogenic needs or psychologically meaningful factors (e.g., antisocial personality pattern, crime-rationalizing attitudes, substance abuse, poor family and community relationships, poor performance and satisfaction at work, and limited involvement in pro-social leisure activities, etc.), which, when deliberately targeted, have shown significant overall impact on recidivism rates and risk reduction (Hanson et al., 2009). The final principle in the RNR model, the responsivity principle, refers to the idea that crime desistance is more likely achieved when therapeutic interventions for sexual offenders are tailored to individual characteristics and strengths, like the present study implementing a character strengths-based training approach. Further articulated as part of the responsivity principle is the notion that treatments that incorporate aspects of both social learning and cognitive-behavioral approaches often produce stronger outcomes

(Carich & Mussack, 2014). This also speaks to the potential of a character strengths-based training approach that adopts a positive psychology framework, as positive psychology interventions comprise cognitive and behavioral strategies designed with the goal of enhancing individual well-being (e.g., Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Currently, cognitive-behavioral approaches to the treatment of child sexual offending remain the most widely used and empirically supported, which is the case regarding the treatment of many other issues in the field of mental health. The rudiments of CBT with sexual offenders include delineating the offense process, identifying potential behavioral triggers, challenging cognitive distortions thought to influence empathetic responses and perpetuate offending behavior, addressing relationship and intimacy deficits, and taking steps to instill responsibility for behavior in the perpetrator. In addition to this, treatment providers work with clients to implement relapse prevention plans that address issues related to offense-behaviors and self-regulatory function. While all of these components are significant, some cognitive-behavioral treatment targets have received less empirical support with regard to their role in actively reducing recidivism rates, and thus, might be less instrumental, victim empathy being one such target (e.g., Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Yates, 2009). Moreover, there has been a recent trend in the literature regarding the excessive focus on challenging cognitive distortions in CBT rather than addressing cognitive schemas. Cognitive schemas can be understood as networks of “learned associations that guide attention, inform perceptions, and save mental energy by providing shortcuts to interpreting incoming stimuli” (Beech et al., 2013, p. 54). In this way, it is cognitive schemas that represent individual attitudes,

beliefs, and assumptions about oneself and the world. In contrast, cognitive distortions are simply a byproduct. According to Beck et al. (2004), schemas emerge as a result of the individual's past experiences, stimulated by physical, environmental, and social cues, specifically in situations that are frightening or confusing (Mann & Shingler, 2006). There are several cognitive schemas shared among individuals who sexually offend against children, including (a) it is a cruel and unsafe world; (b) adults are hostile, rejecting, and will harm me; (c) I am alone in, and have no control over, my life or circumstances; (d) I am entitled to behave in whatever manner I deem appropriate; and (e) children need and desire sexual contact; thus, my actions are not harmful to them (Beech et al., 2013). Focusing principally on distorted cognitions rather than the underlying critical cognitive schemas reduces the opportunity to rehearse, accommodate, and assimilate new schemas, which is vital to long-term behavioral change.

A positive psychology paradigm shift, which I propose in this study, could help to augment some of the shortcomings in current CBT practice. However, this would require a shift in four major areas of thinking, including (a) moving away from an exclusive focus on the details of past offenses and toward the identification of areas of functioning that need enhancement; (b) removing the focus from the clients' deficits, and focusing more purposefully on a strengths-based emphasis; (c) moving away from elaborate detailing of potential future risks, and toward the collaborative generation of future possibilities for a better life; and (d) shifting the extensive focus from thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to avoid to developing approach goals that will help to enhance individual lives and well-being (Marshall & Marshall, 2011). Such a paradigm shift, which pays specific attention to fostering strengths and best possible selves as they relate to

offending behavior, could also help men convicted of child sexual offenses recognize and cope with negative affect.

Negative Affect as a Precursor to the Offense Cycle

Negative affect, another precursor to the sexual offending cycle and overall recidivism rates, refers to a temperamental sensitivity to negative stimuli resulting in feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, guilt, and self-dissatisfaction (Clark et al., 1994). Recent literature suggests that negative affect could play a considerable role in certain types of sexual offending, particularly internet child sexual offenses. Current evidence suggests that individuals use the internet as a means of emotional avoidance or escape displeasing affective states. In addition to the sexual arousal frequently attained from viewing child abuse images on the internet, studies suggest that viewing these images could also help sex offenders alleviate some of the more immediate feelings of distress and dissatisfaction they experience in their daily lives (Quayle et al., 2006). Middleton et al. (2006) profiled 43 subjects convicted of internet offenses against children using Ward and Siegert's (2002) pathways model of childhood sexual abuse. Among participants, 35% fell into the emotional dysregulation pathway to offending, and all reported having high levels of difficulty coping with negative emotions and stress. In addition, 38% of internet offenders fell within the intimacy deficit pathway to offending. Both groups reported using sex as a coping mechanism when feeling lonely, disconnected, or otherwise emotionally distressed.

Political and Personal Shaming and Its Relationship to Negative Affect

The key component of negative affect in the offending cycle has been largely neglected until recent years, in part due to the extreme focus on retribution.

Overwhelmingly, shifts in political agendas and legislative policies resulting from the moral panic surrounding child sexual offending, particularly over the past 2 decades, have created a system in which punishment and retribution dominate over treatment. There is wide reliance on a legal rather than therapeutic model to addressing child sexual offense, even with today's treatments. However, the problem is that few child sexual offenders receive the intervention they need to maintain crime desistence. Although studies support the notion that completing treatment is vital to crime desistence and that sex offenders who receive treatment have overall greater long-term success than those who do not, few treatment programs are available to sex offenders while incarcerated (Wright, 2015). Despite more than 700 sex offender treatment programs in the United States, only 90 are available to sex offenders while actively incarcerated (McAlinden, 2007), and few community-based programs exist.

Furthermore, current legal and community approaches to addressing child sexual offense, including disintegrative shaming practices (e.g., mandated sex offender registration and notification, residency restrictions, GPS monitoring and other tracking mechanisms, self-disclosing signs and license plates, and other parole conditions) only serve to further stigmatize and ostracize individuals who have offended from anything positive in their lives that could serve to safeguard against future offending behavior (Koss et al., 2006; McAlinden, 2007). Virtuous Pedophiles, a web-based community for individuals with pedophilia who have successfully abstained from acting on their sexual attractions to youth, sheds light on the issue of shaming. In a statement addressing the challenges that individuals in such a situation face, the co-founder of Virtuous Pedophiles wrote:

To admit our condition is to invite suspicion, hatred, and social ostracism. This hatred has its consequences; many of us suffer from depression and sometimes even commit suicide. Paradoxically, the hatred actually increases the risk of child sexual abuse by making us afraid to admit our condition to others, thus discouraging us from seeking treatment. More of us could lead productive, happy, law-abiding lives if we could open up to people who would treat us not as monsters but as human beings with an unfortunate burden to bear. (Devin & Edwards, 2012, p. 1)

Disintegrative shaming tactics can prove to be exceptionally onerous and damaging to restorative efforts. Specifically, in the case of child sexual offenders who commonly demonstrate markedly lower self-concept than their offending and nonoffending counterparts (Hayes et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2012), disintegrative shaming is not only ineffective in deterring future offenses, but can lead to further negative affect and sense of self. Negative affect can manifest as enduring feelings of depression, hopelessness, self-loathing, and rage and is a critical antecedent to the offending cycle. These feelings can be further compounded by the offender's perception that regardless of what he does, he will forever be viewed as monstrous and has no power to improve his situation. This type of perception and the corresponding response is similar to Seligman's (1972) theory of learned helplessness, exacerbating negative emotional states and thus the offending cycle. It would stand to reason, then, that to address the underlying issues of negative affect and sense of self, there is a need for counterintuitive approaches that help child sexual offenders appreciate their strengths and potential goodness and learn how to develop these strengths to protect against this type of offending. The following plea, submitted to a website forum by an anonymous 20-year-old male who identified as having an attraction to young prepubescent girls, demonstrates how critical such an approach could be not only for the individual but also for the community. He shared,

I need to speak to a therapist because I don't think I can get through this on my own. But if I talk to a therapist, he could report me, because I have to talk about my attraction to young girls. I don't know whether he would or not and don't even know how to go about getting more information. Even the friendships I have are in danger of falling apart, because I can't just keep saying "I'm fine" and I can't talk to anyone about my problem. I think about suicide a lot. (Devin & Edwards, 2012, p. 1)

Others on this same website, all anonymous individuals who identify as sexually attracted to young children, expressed going through their lives feeling "dirty," "evil," and filled with self-hatred. They shared that they grew up constantly questioning their worth as human beings, at times wishing for and believing they deserved death simply for having this attraction, even though they had never acted upon it. To read these stories is also to recognize the massive ways in which current systems and therapeutic approaches have failed to address this extremely sensitive issue and population of people. However, as briefly addressed in the prior review of literature, there lies a treasure-trove of promise within the field of positive psychology, particularly for populations such as this who have historically been marginalized, oppressed, and ostracized. A strengths-based approach, which acknowledges all parts of the individual rather than solely the "offense identity," could provide such individuals with a much-needed internal resource to address negative affect and sense of self while building motivation for behavioral change. The literature suggests that a better understanding of one's character strengths and how to use them is linked to internal motivation, increased distress tolerance, and overcoming rejection (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Pritchard, 2009).

Advancement Toward a Positive Approach to Addressing Child Sexual Offending

Currently, of the treatment approaches available to child sexual offenders, positive, strengths-based practices are largely absent, outside of a limited number of emerging models (e.g., Marshall et al., 2011; Ward, 2002; Yates & Prescott, 2010).

Additionally, the vast majority of the current treatment approaches focus on avoidance goals and strategies. Avoidance goals and strategies emphasize circumventing or moving away from perceived negative or undesirable outcomes. In contrast, approach goals and strategies work to enhance positive and desirable pathways to aid the individual in moving toward a desired outcome or possibility for the future (Elliot, 1999). Of the two, current literature suggests that sex offenders, in particular, demonstrate increased commitment to and participation in treatment that involves approach-focused interventions as opposed to avoidance-focused ones. Moreover, offenders who participate in approach-focused interventions demonstrate more sincere motivation for behavioral change posttreatment than those who take part in avoidance-focused interventions (Mann et al., 2004; Yates & Prescott, 2010). This is likely the case because individuals working toward something they perceive as positive and promoting personal agency will have a stronger desire to maintain any changes than people attempting goals based on the avoidance of things they might hesitate to let go (Laws, 2000).

This is perhaps even more the case with men convicted of child sexual offenses since this population already adopts avoidance behaviors as a maladaptive means of managing stress. Internet child sexual offenders, in particular, make increasing use of the internet as a form of emotional avoidance (Quayle et al., 2006). Thus, it may be that this population, and particularly those who fall into the avoidant pathways of offense (Seto, 2013), would benefit more from approaches that assist them in using their character strengths to cope with negative affect and sense of self, rather than adopting new ways to avoid these crucial aspects of the offense cycle.

Positive Psychology as a Theoretical Framework

To gain a deeper understanding of this character strengths approach, it is first necessary to understand the field of positive psychology and its application as a theoretical framework. Since its inception, positive psychology has been influenced by and drawn from the contributions of many prominent figures across history, including humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers and early philosophers Gautama Buddha, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Roots of Positive Psychology



Note. From *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell: The Science of Happiness* (3rd ed.), by I. Boniwell, 2006. Copyright 2006 Open University Press.

Spearheading positive psychology was Seligman (1972), perhaps and previously best known for his theory of learned helplessness. During his time as President of the American Psychological Association, Seligman took advantage of his role to endorse “psychology’s forgotten mission,” or what he saw as helping to promote the positive use of individual strengths and personal assets to build healthy lives. He coined positive psychology as “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions, [that] promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Fellow psychology researchers supported his mission, arguing that although conventional approaches support certain useful diagnostic paradigms, they have also inadvertently perpetuated an imbalance of focusing primarily on illness and human weakness (Lopez & Snyder, 2003). By contrast, the newly emerging applications of positive psychology facilitated flexibly employing a variety of skills and resources and learning to foster them to increase problem-solving capacity and emotional well-being. Today, positive psychology exemplifies a commitment to positive emotions, positive experiences, positive environments, human strengths and virtues, and other sources of psychological wellness. Additionally, while still in its infancy compared to many other paradigms of thought in the United States and abroad, positive psychology has had what could arguably be considered the largest and most enduring impact on strengths-based treatments across disciplines since its inception. This holds true across a number of disciplines working directly with children and families, some of which include psychology, social work, education, and, more recently, business and criminal justice (Howell et al., 2007).

Character Strengths and Virtues in Positive Psychology Practice

Following the publication of *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), also called the CSV handbook, positive psychology garnered further recognition as the study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The CSV was the first book to undertake the systematic classification and measurement of widely valued positive traits. Peterson and Seligman (2004) advanced upon the common concept of strengths and virtues by describing them in terms of distinct strengths (e.g., authenticity, persistence, kindness, gratitude, hope, humor, etc.), each of which exists to varying degrees within all human beings. The CSV handbook was rooted in the notion that everyone possesses “signature” character strengths unique to them. With the right conceptual and empirical tools, those strengths can be learned, practiced, and cultivated. As such, from the CSV handbook, the VIA-IS emerged.

The VIA-IS is a psychological assessment measure designed to provide individuals with their unique strengths profile. This tool employs a Likert-type questionnaire to identify survey takers’ 24 individual character strengths, which make up the six broad virtue categories of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Seligman (2002) believed that these virtues grow through nurturing by institutions, organizations, and people, reinforced by the interaction between positive traits, strengths, and abilities that foster positive emotion. With the creation of sophisticated and developed tools such as the VIA-IS, practitioners can produce a shared taxonomy to implement and assess clear strategies for nurturing and developing human assets in their work. These positive aspects and traits inherent within each individual

become invaluable resources to support the growth and development of clients and help counteract the monopolizing focus on “what’s wrong” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For the offending populations—and, in particular, child sexual offenders—the act of humanization that occurs naturally when exploring character strengths and virtues with individuals and groups is vital to begin to bring back a measure of care, compassion, and insight to the situation that has been long lost.

Using a Character Strengths Approach With Individuals

Convicted of Child Sexual Offenses

Research has long supported the notion that helping individuals and communities to build strengths enhances growth and is one way to alleviate suffering. Major strides in the area of prevention have emerged, largely due to the focus on building strengths. These strengths (e.g., hope, courage, optimism, spirituality, honesty and openness, perseverance, wisdom and perspective, and the capacity for flow) act as safeguards against mental illness (Lyubomirsky, 2001) and contribute to individuals living safe, productive, and meaningful lives despite whether their afflictions (e.g., pedophilic attractions) can be “cured.”

More precisely, positive strengths-based treatments and interventions are becoming progressively more recognized and relevant to addressing child sexual offending (Yates & Prescott, 2010). For example, research has shown that the implementation of values in treatment—which are at the heart of all character strengths interventions—is critical to success when working with child sexual offenders (Quayle et al., 2006). The positive psychology paradigm is a good fit in this regard, grounded in the belief that people desire to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best

within them, and to enhance their overall experience of the self and others. Similarly, the good lives model assumes that all people have basic needs and values and desire a good life. Offending behavior is more likely to occur when individuals believe they cannot meet their needs and values, except through offending behaviors. Thus, employing a character strengths intervention not only seems relevant, but its inherent focus on approach rather than avoidance goals, as discussed earlier, naturally shifts the emphasis toward a positive framework. This provides support for clients toward a more positive utilization of individual strengths and personal assets and is associated with both individual values and meaning-making (e.g., Pritchard, 2009), as well as a step toward “lives worth living” (e.g., Ward, 2002). Both of these are vital if the individual is to achieve crime desistance.

Finally, research indicates that positive psychology interventions focused on building character strengths lessen symptoms of depression (Seligman et al., 2005), reverse negative emotions, and build psychological resilience (Fredrickson, 2001; Masten, 2001). This is a tremendously significant piece, particularly when considering individuals who fall within the avoidance pathways of child sexual offending. Such individuals are generally characterized by their wish or intent not to offend. They frequently experience negative affect and cognitive dissonance as a result of their perceived failure to successfully refrain from offending behaviors.

PERMA Model: How Universal Character Strengths Can Address

Offending and Strengthen Communities

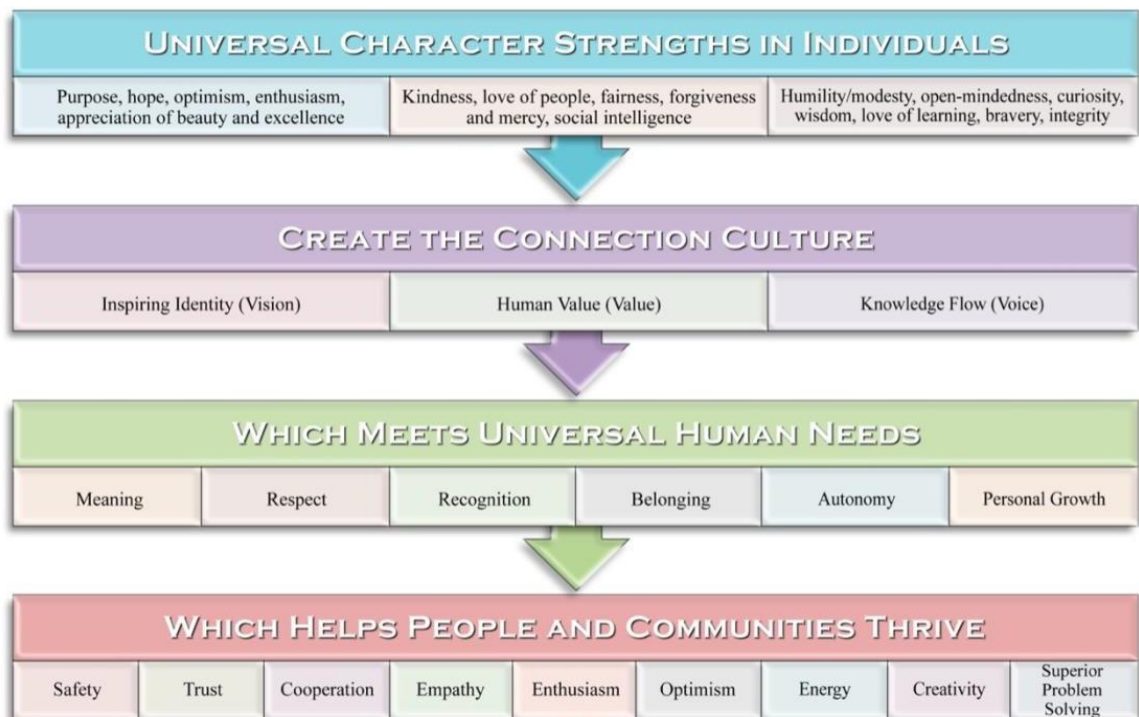
All these things considered, however, the question remains: “How do we [as practitioners] transmit to our clients a belief in the usefulness of change and convey a

sense of ownership of that change to them?” (Yates & Prescott, 2010, p. 140). One possible way to accomplish this is by exploring core positive or “ideal” selves, which is crucial to any character strengths approach. Not only has the exploration and fostering of core positive selves been linked to self-regulation, but it is also a cornerstone of intrinsic motivation (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). Individuals who are engaging in and using their character strengths to explore their core positive selves are also likely to be engaging in what Martin Seligman coined PERMA, or the PERMA model of well-being. With PERMA, individuals experience positive emotions, engage in the present moment, build and foster meaningful relationships, engage in meaning-making by investing in something larger than themselves, and achieve their goals and needs in positive, proactive ways. By fostering universal character strengths in individuals with histories of child sexual offending, practitioners can create cultures of connectedness that embody PERMA by inspiring fresh visions and honoring the value and voice of all affected parties through shared knowledge. These types of environments meet the universal human needs of meaning, respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, and personal growth, which child sexual offenders require to maintain healthy and law-abiding lives (Ward, 2002). Moreover, environments that acknowledge and address these universal human needs, even in the case of those who have offended against people within the community, can cultivate safety, trust, and cooperation among members by allowing all stakeholders the opportunity to be seen, heard, and validated as a whole person. Using a character strengths-based approach to address these universal human needs or “goods” can arguably renew the enthusiasm, hope, and energy required of individuals with histories of offending to learn to engage in proactive and creative problem-solving. All of these

related processes and outcomes illustrate what is called the Character > Connection > Thrive Chain (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Character > Connection > Thrive Chain



Note. From *Fired Up or Burned Out: How to Reignite Your Team's Passion, Creativity, and Productivity*, by M. L. Stallard, 2007, Thomas Nelson Publishing.

As the literature review indicates, there is a clear need for counterintuitive approaches for helping child sexual offenders accept and cope with negative affect and build a positive perception of the self to foster accountability and facilitate behavior for change (Quayle et al., 2006). Critical to this is the exploration of core positive/ideal selves, which align with self-regulation and intrinsic motivation (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). However, as shown by further examination of the PERMA model and its relationship to the Character > Connection > Thrive chain, a focus on character strengths-

based approaches not only holds the potential to address the needs of men with histories of child sexual offending but can potentially reap long-term benefits for the impacted community, as well.

Hope Theory

The central construct in positive psychology that served as an anchor for the present study is hope theory, spearheaded by the late C. R. Snyder. Oxford Dictionaries (2019) defines hope as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen.” Hope, as defined in the positive psychology literature (Snyder, 2000; Snyder et al., 1991), is a positive motivational state based on an interactively derived sense of successful agency (goal-directed energy) and pathways (planning to meet goals). It is different from optimism in that hope is made up of three basic mental components: goals, willpower, and waypower. To this degree, as defined in positive psychology, hope is the sum of mental willpower plus perceived waypower to reach individuals’ goals. Goals refer to things people want to obtain (such as an object) and things they want to attain (such as an accomplishment). Snyder (2000) defined willpower as “a reservoir of determination and commitment that we can call upon to help us move in the direction of the goal” (p. #6). Waypower refers to people’s mental capacity to find one or more ways of reaching their goals (planning). This type of plan-oriented thought is often enhanced in people who, when helped to define their goals clearly, found one or more ways of reaching them.

Hope theory was particularly salient in the present study due to its empirical link with fostering self-esteem and self-concept. Hewitt (1998) defined self-esteem as the emotions that directly result from people’s appraisal of their overall effectiveness in the

conduct of their lives. In other words, according to Coopersmith (1990), “Self-esteem is the personal judgment of worthiness” (p. 7). The roots of self-esteem, as with so much else, emerge in infancy. Like hope theory, self-esteem models postulate that self-esteem and self-concept are developed and built on goal-directed thoughts and activities valued by the individual (Hewitt, 1998). Unlike self-esteem models, however, hope theory focuses on the evaluation of the goal-pursuit process itself. In hope theory, it is goal-pursuit thoughts that impact self-esteem and self-concept, and not vice versa. These goal-pursuit thoughts are directly linked to several positive health outcomes that expand beyond self-esteem (Curry et al., 1997; Snyder et al., 1991). For this reason, the value of integrating theories and practices related to hope theory in the treatment of those with histories of child sexual offenses merits further consideration.

Summary

Individuals convicted of child sexual offenses, as well as those who have not offended but who are sexually attracted to young children, provoke strong emotional reactions from within society and from the systems and professions supposedly put in place to manage and support them. This is arguably not only due to our moral objections to child sexual abuse but also a response to the many ways in which society has libeled sexual offenders over several decades. Despite personal responses, however, it is difficult to dispute that the foremost incentive for investing time and resources in treating child sexual offenders is a moral one. Patty Wetterling, the mother of Jacob Wetterling, a boy abducted at gunpoint in 1989 whose body was recovered 27 years later, had important insight to offer in 2008 as she continued to search for answers as to what happened to her son. She said,

We've been overwhelmed with just amazing, amazing support. But at the same time, nobody wants to find the man who took Jacob...in their family. They don't want to find him in their church, in their school community, in their neighborhood. These people are not monsters. They're living and functioning among us, and we've got to figure out a way for them to live among us and not harm another. I think the one thing that is so sorely missing in all of this—with all of our anger and all of our tough laws, [is that] there is no safe place for these guys. There are a lot of people who succeed. They do these terrible offenses and they go to jail and do their time. Then they get out and never reoffend. There is no place to share their stories, because you can't say, "Well, yeah, I was a sex offender once and then I got some help..." As a culture, we don't tolerate that. We have not built into the system any means for success, and I think that's really sad. (Wright, 2015, p. 79)

Continuing to build walls separating members of society from individuals who sexually offend against children and denying positive avenues that could lead to growth and change inherently denies a substantial piece of what contributes to the offending cycle, thus increasing the likelihood of further offenses. The first step to elicit positive change is for people to use their voice and presence to remove as many of the obstacles that prevent such individuals from seeking or gaining access to treatment. Humanization is essential to removing obstacles to treatment, as we cannot effect change for ourselves or anyone else without first acknowledging one another as fellow people who are deserving of care. In the present study, I sought humanization through the use of a character strengths approach by challenging the perception that individuals who offend in this way are purely monsters, and allowing them the opportunity to challenge this perception, as well.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore with six men convicted of child sexual offenses (a) what they view as their top character strengths, (b) how they can use these strengths to address their unique needs and barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and (c) how the daily use of their top five signature strengths informs their attitudes toward themselves and their sexual offending behavior.

Data interpretation occurred using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2004), a design influenced by the works of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Implementing the constructivist grounded theory methodology was of particular importance to this study because there is so little known about the phenomenon in question. Before this study, no one had used a character strengths approach with men convicted of child sexual offenses. An exploratory approach was, therefore, required to derive an understanding of the role of character strengths in informing participants' attitudes toward themselves and their offending behavior and helping them maintain a healthy lifestyle. This information emerged from the voices and experiences of the study's participants and will be essential for future studies on the topic (Patton, 2002). A scholar should allow the data to precede the theory in any study to uncover new knowledge and potential approaches to treatment. This has not historically been the case with sex offender treatment methods, as other studies suggest. Rather, sex offender treatment methods are typically built from preexisting theoretically based approaches within other domains (e.g., addictions frameworks) and then applied to the treatment of sexual offenders (Bond, 2006). Consequently, in the haste to make theory fit data (Bond,

2006), practitioners are likely missing a wealth of insight that could only emerge from an exploratory, interpretivist approach such as constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2004).

Grounded Theory Tradition and its Philosophy

Qualitative researchers are interested in explanations and theories that arise directly from the emerging data. Grounded theory refers to a constant comparative method of data analysis initially created by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Since its inception, grounded theory has undergone several additions and modifications and has been a source of some debate, even among its creators. However, in addition to the underlying influences of symbolic interactionism on this theory, grounded theory also reconciles and adopts several distinct philosophical underpinnings that make it different from other approaches. First, grounded theorists attempt to describe, explain, and understand subjective experiences of specific individuals through interpretive analysis. In other words, researchers utilizing grounded theory are sensitive to the thoughts, intentions, beliefs, meanings, interpretations, feelings, sensations, and actions of participants from their perspectives. They seek continuously to uncover subjective experiences directly from the participants. Second, grounded theory adopts some elements of positivism, by which researchers attempt to use the information that emerges from the data to identify objective concepts and patterns, which generate broad laws used to describe the world. Third, Blumer (1969), one of the forefathers of symbolic interactionism, suggested that individuals pursue acts that afford a meaningful existence and that such meanings come from interpretations of social interactions. As such, grounded theorists commonly study how social interactions shape meaning, as well as

ways in which individuals conceptualize or define themselves. This is particularly relevant to the present study, as I was interested in exploring how individuals conceptualize or define themselves and their circumstances, specifically following a character strengths approach based on a deductive, concept-building orientation.

Research Site: Circle of Concern (COC)

The sample for this study came from within a community-based group known as the circle of concern (COC) in a southwest U.S. state. The COC is a community-based support group for men convicted of child sexual offenses and their families. The COC is the project of a nonprofit organization whose mission involves providing faith-based support, mentoring, and advocacy for individuals convicted of sexual offenses to help them transition back into society. The husband-and-wife co-founders identify as Christian. Although they speak of the nonprofit as inclusive, it is rooted in the belief that all people are sinners before God and unworthy of God's presence until they repent, confess their sins, and accept Jesus Christ's sacrifice. The COC typically meets once a month for 2 hours and has between 10 and 20 participants. It is primarily social, with potlucks and informal conversation between members, and occasionally includes a speaker on a topic relevant to registered citizens and their families.

Research Sample

Participants for this study included six adult males convicted of child sexual offenses. Participant selection was via purposive sampling. All participants (a) had been convicted of at least one Level 2 or Level 3 (e.g., high risk to reoffend) contact or noncontact (internet) sexual offense perpetrated against a minor, for which they had already served time in prison; (b) had been categorized as high-risk for reoffense; (c) had

completed their sentence prior to the initial contact date; and (d) were willingly engaged in a community-based reintegration program and/or COC prior to initial study contact.

There was initial contact made with the COC coordinators to assess their availability and willingness for current COC members (offenders) to participate in the study. I sent an email to the coordinators, indicating the purpose of the study and its components and requesting their response. Once permission was granted, I sent a formal letter outlining the full details of the study and its purpose to those who expressed interest. Snowball sampling was a means to extend the sample, with interested parties asked to share my contact information with other COC members. I arranged to meet personally with each COC member who expressed interest in the study to discuss potential risks and benefits and review the necessary forms (e.g., informed consent).

Participant Introductions

The six participants in the study came from diverse backgrounds and ranged from 51 to 74 years of age. In the interest of confidentiality, throughout this study, they have received the pseudonyms DJ, MW, MH, SN, JD, and PA. All participants lived in suburban areas in the city, with most residing in areas impacted by high poverty. The majority of participants identified as Christian, with one belonging to the Persian-originated Bahá'í faith. Participants' religious backgrounds were central to their identity, interpretations of their lived experiences, and their experience of the strengths approach, which became apparent in their responses to the process.

At the time of recruitment, all of the men were involved members of the COC. The COC provided them with a safe space to meet monthly with other registrants, their families, and concerned community members. As such, the group served as a vital

support system and became equally salient to their process throughout the study. The group itself, where the coordinators conducted frequent observations, was co-led by one of the men who joined the study. This man, known as DJ, later had to withdraw due to conflicting religious and philosophical differences expressed by his wife toward the researcher and research.

Participant DJ

DJ was a 62-year-old White male living with his wife, 30 years his senior, at the time of the study. He met his wife in prison while she was volunteering, and the two became friends. DJ was interested in helping to support men and women as they reintegrated back into society from prison. Eventually, the two began working together to accomplish this goal, growing closer in their work and relationship and were soon married. Following DJ's release from prison, the couple established a 501(c)(3) nonprofit where "we help other people to reintegrate back into society and also mentor them while they're in prison" (DJ, Interview 1). He and his wife co-created the COC, a part of their nonprofit, as a way to build community for registered citizens who were looking for guidance and support upon release from prison.

I met and recruited those who participated in the present study through DJ's nonprofit and the COC. DJ was a passionate supporter of the study to help those in the program become stronger and find their voice as men living with the burden of the sex offender label. Convicted of a first-degree felony against minors under Section 30-9-11, *Criminal Sexual Penetration*, and a third-degree felony under Section 30-9-13, *Criminal Sexual Contact of a Minor*, DJ knew the stigma of the sex offender label and the related costs. He maintained that he was innocent and falsely accused of sexual crimes against

his sons. He explained that after filing custodial interference against his ex-wife, “She accused me of sexually abusing my sons, and my sons collaborated with her. They convicted me to 105 years, and suspended 80 of it. So, I had to do 25 years, and with good time, 14 years” (DJ, Interview 1).

DJ, who struggled with drugs and alcohol and was prone to angry outbursts, strove to find healthier avenues of expressing himself and his story in service of others, leading our paths to cross as I began my work on this study. He explained,

I have taken anger management classes, other techniques to help me control [my anger], and stuff like that. I’m always looking to open a door to learn more, you know? And I just have a feeling that people need to know what’s good about them, about us. (DJ, Interview 1)

Participant MW

MW was a 74-year-old White male who, at the time of the study, lived with his wife of 43 years, a Malaysian woman whom he had met during his time as a missionary and student of the Bahá’í faith in Singapore. The couple married upon their return to the United States and had one daughter together, who remained decidedly involved in her father’s life following his offense. MW held a master’s degree and worked multiple jobs, traveling the Word before his placement on the sex offender registry. He and his wife remained devoted Bahá’ís, and MW spent a considerable time fighting for reinstatement after being excommunicated following his offense. Throughout the time we spent together, both MW and his wife were heavily involved in the local Bahá’í chapter. MW spent much of his time reading, writing, and creating videos devoted to the expression of his faith, which brought him comfort and a sense of meaning and purpose not only in the wake of his offense but throughout his life. He was a prolific writer, penning many original poems that appear in this study, which he said he would like to include in his

memoirs. His life was, by his own accounts, thrown into turmoil when he was convicted of a fourth-degree felony against minors under Section 30-6A-3, *Sexual Exploitation of children*, and subsequently placed on the sex offender registry. His offense involved unlawful possession of child sexual abuse images depicting minors engaged in obscene sexual acts. It occurred when he was in the throes of self-described pornography addiction. After the offense, MW was filled with shame and humiliation and considered suicide. The usual supports, including those in his cherished Bahá'í community, were limited or absent. He found himself attending Recovering Couples Anonymous and Sex Addicts Anonymous for support in his recovery and in an attempt to salvage his marriage. MW had remained active in these groups when we met. He was attracted to the character strengths approach at first as an opportunity to grow stronger in his recovery and as a person, "Striving to capture meaning which would bring excitement to my life, never giving up" (MW, Feedback). However, through the process, he discovered that "really...for my entire life, I have been giving back, trying to be of service, which is a major goal [mythologist, writer, and lecturer] Joseph Campbell talked about" (MW, Final Feedback).

Participant MH

MH was a 57-year-old Hispanic and Native male who was single and residing with his elderly mother. He seemed to take pride in being on disability and not having to work. He also received weekly compensations from his mother, which he frequently used to indulge in unhealthy habits. Despite this, throughout the study, his embarrassment and shame over his current living situation became a regular topic of discussion. He repeatedly referred to himself as a failure and quitter. He vacillated between imagining

himself in better circumstances and resigning himself that the life he was living was the easiest and most fortunate set of circumstances a person of his criminal background could imagine.

MH was convicted of a second-degree felony against a minor in 1994, under Section 30-28-1, *Attempt to Commit Criminal Sexual Penetration*. His conviction came after attempting to molest his then 5-year-old cousin. Although his offense had occurred during the 1990s, he arguably struggled the most with dynamic risk factors for sexual offense, including prolonged alcohol and drug use, which continued to plague him throughout the study. He also struggled with chronic depression. This caused him to spend most of his time in bed, often sleeping during the day and waking at night to distract himself with television, alcohol, and marijuana.

At the start of the study, the only outside activities he noted consisted of attending the COC, a weekly “Daily Bread” Bible study and devotional over the phone, and playing ping-pong, which he prided himself on and seemed to authentically enjoy. He often received his meals at home, a product of his mother’s membership of the local senior citizen center. He was innately nervous around people, relying heavily on religion to avoid any in-depth personal connections with others. He said his own abuse as a child “shattered my perception of the world” (MH, Mask 1) and felt that “if it weren’t for Jesus, I would absolutely be suicidal” (MH, Journal 5). He repeatedly referred to the analogy, “Jesus is not a crutch; He’s the whole hospital” (MW, Interview 6), and often used his religion to deflect and avoid dialogue directly related to his past and offense behavior.

MH was first attracted to the strength approach because, in his words,

I don't remember being taught that there's all this good stuff in life. It was never drilled in me that I have strengths and unlimited potential. This effort, of my own, made me realize that the greatest thing you can do in life is to help other people. (MH, Interview 1)

He was also adamant that despite his own obvious need for help, he was not interested in seeing another therapist, saying, "I've seen dozens of therapists in my day; no, thanks" (MH, Journal 4). He viewed the strengths approach as something different and was curiously drawn to it and the fact that an outsider wanted to learn something about him not related to his perceived failures as a person.

Participant SN

SN was a 65-year-old White male who was unmarried and living alone at the time of the study. He had managed to secure a job at a local car wash, played small musician gigs for the COC, and often spoke of his love of music and fond memories of his days as a lead guitarist. SN also participated in the weekly "Daily Bread" Bible study and was a self-professed Christian. Although he described a relatively privileged, middle-class upbringing, as an adult, he struggled to recall positive familial interactions growing up and was estranged from the surviving members of his family. As such, he invested much of his energies into the local nonprofit from which the COC developed, forming friendships and alliances that propelled his interest and investment in helping registered citizens.

His conviction of a fourth-degree felony against minors, under Section 30-6A-3, *Sexual Exploitation of Children*, also drove him to find ways to lessen the burden of others stigmatized by the sex offender label. SN was indicted on 17 counts of possession of child sexual abuse images. At the time of his arrest, he gave law enforcement officers consent to search his computer, which contained images of children ranging in age from

8 to 13 years in various sexually explicit poses. He described feeling like a “creep” and recognized that the “black cloud” his offense caused would be with him forever (SN, Interview 1). He hoped that by learning about and engaging in the character strengths approach, he could not only improve himself, but help others to see that individuals convicted of sexual crimes are not all bad.

Participant JD

JD was a 51-year-old Hispanic male who had never been married. He spent his formative years in Peru until his adoption by an Anglo missionary couple and the move to the United States. He was born a conjoined twin in the limelight since birth and had thus grown up with an immense legacy about himself and his identity. He had heard many stories of himself as an infant, toddler, and child from the newspapers and his adoptive parents. The stories painted the picture of a tragic, physically disabled child who, by way of a miracle, survived and received a second chance at life from his adoptive family in the United States.

JD was filled with shame and humiliation about his physical deformities resulting from being born a conjoined twin and was especially fixated on his small penis. He felt that his inability to form lasting relationships with female counterparts was largely due to his physical deformities. By his recollection, JD spent his early years entrenched in trauma and poverty, which had a lasting impact on his self-perception. Following his conviction of a fourth-degree felony against a minor, under Section 21.11 of the Texas Penal Code, *Indecency With a Child*, JD slipped further into hopelessness. He could no longer engage in activities such as singing at church, one of the only things that had previously brought him joy, and felt even further scrutinized.

Once released from prison, he kept to himself, “gave up” on dating, and at the time of the study, was living with a roommate whom he described as having significant physical limitations of his own. Despite his disability, however, JD prided himself on caring for his roommate and tending to his needs, which gave him a sense of purpose. In addition, he and his roommate shared a service dog, whom JD described as being like his child. He poured much of his affections into the dog until her unexpected death shortly before the study. JD was devastated by this loss, which propelled him deeper into depression.

As a self-described loner, JD struggled to find happiness in life, taking up hobbies such as sewing and immersing himself in his work to overcome the feelings of loneliness he experienced. He first expressed interest in the strengths approach because “I just want to know, who am I really? Who am I really? Is this all there is to my life?” (JD, Interview 1). When asked what he hoped to achieve most from the study, JD said simply,

See, I have a heart inside, and I love giving that heart. It’s just the outside has pushed me away from society to be able to talk to them comfortably. They’re already judging [me] before they get a chance to know who the real me is. So, I don’t want this to be a study; I just want people to want to know who I really am. (JD, Interview 1)

Participant PA

PA was a 53-year-old Hispanic male who had spent most of his life in and out of institutions. He possessed promising academic prowess, demonstrating first-year college-level reading comprehension skills in middle school, but suffered from behavioral and psychological troubles that led to him abandoning early academics. At the age of 13, he was briefly sent to a psychiatric center after being caught drinking in the park with his uncle. He was arrested again at age 14 and sent to a juvenile detention facility for a series

of commercial burglaries and carjacking. Following his release at the age of 15, he got arrested again for trying to burn down a school library.

PA attributed these disturbances in behavior to the multitude of early traumatic losses. He explained,

My grandmother died of cancer in June of '77. And then my uncle...was shot in the back of the head with his own .357 in July of that year. Then my dad was shot in his forehead with his own .22 in November that year. (PA, Interview 3)

PA described withdrawing into despair and criminal activity, “numbing the pain” (PA, Interview 1), until he was finally sent to a boy’s school at 17 for committing assault against a neighborhood girl who was selling magazines door-to-door.

He received his first felony charge shortly after his release from the boys’ school for shooting a man. Following this incident, PA raped his niece, receiving another second-degree felony conviction under Section 30-9-11(e), *Criminal Sexual Penetration*. When released from prison, shortly before our initial meeting, he had one goal of learning about the strengths approach. “I’m tired,” he said. “I really don’t want to go back to prison. You seem like you want to help, and I like that” (PA, Interview 1).

Methods for Data Collection

Research Instruments

To thoroughly assess (a) what participants viewed as their top character strengths, (b) how they could use them to address their unique needs and barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and (c) how the daily use of their top five signature strengths informed their attitudes toward themselves and their sexual offending behavior, the present study entailed the use of the following instruments.

VIA-IS

VIA-IS is a robust psychological measure that allows individuals to explore 24 character strengths that are innate to varying degrees. This instrument was the tool used to assist participants in identifying the core signature strengths unique to them. VIA-IS was also useful to help facilitate an ongoing dialogue with participants about their character strengths.

Semistructured Interviews

A series of seven semistructured interviews took place in conjunction with the VIA-IS, allowing participants to construct meaning of the character strengths inherent to the VIA-IS and the relevance to their lives and current situations with regard to the offending behavior. Interviews were essential to this study, as they provided a personal approach to obtaining descriptive, rich information about the topic. Further, interviews aided in the adequate depiction of the story behind participants' experiences (see McNamara, 1999) before and after the character strengths approach.

Art

Art augmented the interviews to encourage those who struggled to vocalize ideas. Art is particularly important in contemporary cultures, as individuals use it to express their identities and come to an understanding of their social worlds. Symbols can be visual metaphors that communicate lived experiences reflected in a multitude of artifacts, such as photographs, video recordings, paintings, and graffiti (Konecki, 2011). For this study, participants used art throughout the interviewing process to reflect on how they saw themselves and others. I subsequently analyzed the art for emerging themes related to how they visualized and put the character strengths into action. Specific art forms

included mask-making, a visual person-centered planning process called Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH; Pearpoint et al., 1993), and a visual depiction of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey as interpreted by participants (Campbell, 1949).

Mask-making became the primary art for two participants. I facilitated bimonthly mask-making workshops in various physical settings. Following restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, mask-making workshops also occurred using a virtual platform. The strengths-related topics presented to each participant at the beginning of the workshop were directly related to the interviews and other strengths tasks pertinent to the study.

Beginning each mask-making workshop with specific topics gave participants a focal point for their creations. In response to topic-driven questions, participants reflected on their masks and the meaning behind them, providing verbal feedback as they desired. For up to 4 hours, each participant received the materials and space needed to create their masks on the given topic, however they chose to interpret it. If they reflected verbally on their masks, those responses underwent later interpretation for common themes related to or different from those in the interviews.

Writing

I encouraged writing between interviews to help participants conceptualize their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the process as it occurred. The writing enabled each participant and me to reflect on where he was in the character strengths training process and identify any progress or barriers. A semistructured and free association style to the writing allowed the emergence of issues otherwise missed in the face-to-face interviews. The art and writing helped determine when or if any alterations to make made to the

character strengths training approach or interview questions, based on the information that emerged for each participant.

Observations

Observations were a way to gather information about the participants' experiences in the COC meetings and the broader community (e.g., at COC events). Particularly, observations allowed me to assess when participants utilized the character strengths-based approach and at what points they reported or appeared to experience stress or negative affect (e.g., vocalizations and micro- and macroexpressions) and whether and how they used the character strengths-based approach to address it. Observations helped me to determine how much time participants were spending on various prosocial activities related to the character strengths-based practice. I could also determine with whom they interacted during these activities to identify meaningful potential supports within the environment.

Audio Recordings

Audio recordings allowed me to capture participants' voices. I could play back the words to check for accuracy and observe any changes in pitch or intonation that were relevant to the process.

Researcher's Journal

Finally, a researcher's journal was appropriate to document any thoughts, feelings, and ideas throughout the research process. I used a journal to process notations and themes that emerged throughout. Maintaining a journal allowed me to be reflexive and continuously clarify research aims, approaches, and position.

Interview Procedure

As indicated, the primary source of data for this study was seven in-depth, face-to-face interviews with each participant, which I audio recorded and transcribed line by line. The interview process took place over 12 months, which allowed sufficient time to complete the interviews and action steps. All interviews occurred during separate meetings with each participant and were approximately 90 minutes in length. Frequent member checking throughout all interviews was a means to ensure the accuracy of the participants' voices and experiences.

Interview 1

The first interview addressed what participants identified as their top character strengths and what they thought would happen (or what they would like to happen) when they used their character strengths. Interviews entailed engaging in open dialogue with the participants about their perception of their character strengths, with Interview 1 taking place before administering the VIA-SI. This was, in some cases, the most challenging of the interviews, as many from this group did not immediately recognize or acknowledge strengths due to extended histories of "hopelessness." As such, I used probing techniques to elicit as much descriptively rich information as possible. Art and other symbolic expressions implemented at multiple stages of this study were particularly useful during this first interview when establishing a rapport. Particularly among offending populations, art has proven to:

- Curtail aggression and acts of violence
- Allow the individual to be safely vulnerable, expressing his thoughts, feelings, and ideas through the use of nonverbal communication

- Promote honesty by addressing defenses
- Provide a means of emotional expression and coping
- Permit different means of expression that may be more tangible or acceptable to someone who is just transitioning to the outside community
- Transcend other barriers, including language, education level, literacy, and verbal and cognitive ability (Gussak & Cohen-Liebman, 2001; Gussak & Virshup, 1997).

Values in Action Inventory of Strengths

Participants took the VIA-IS between the first and second interviews. This free, online psychological assessment tool typically takes approximately 30 minutes to complete. Taking it after the first interview was essential to allow participants adequate time to reflect on the questions and the results of the survey. Each participant reviewed his VIA-IS results independently or within the COC group before the second interview.

Interview 2

During the second interview, participants engaged in an in-depth dialogue about their VIA-SI (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) results, including what they thought of the results and when they recalled using their signature (top five) strengths. This process was a means to help them expand their reflections from the first interview. Art was again a tool used to allow participants to express in symbols and color how they had relied on or used their strengths to confront problems in the past. At the end of Interview 2, participants could reflect on what emerged and begin thinking about how to use these character strengths to address their offending behavior.

Interview 3

In the third interview, after having the opportunity to reflect on what emerged from the previous exercise, participants responded to a series of unstructured, open-interview questions to address needs and barriers related to the character strengths process. This occurred by (a) exploring past experiences and messages that have minimized strengths use, both past and present (e.g., barriers to best possible self/life) and (b) exploring past use of strengths they believed had helped them in times of struggle.

Interview 4

The fourth interview focused on putting strengths into practice by helping participants explore how they could use their character strengths to address their unique criminogenic needs and offense cycle. The interview focused on (a) exploring areas in each participants' lives where they could apply or foster strengths and (b) determining what strengths participants believed were the most important in helping them to address individual challenges related to crime desistence in the present.

Interview 5

Following the dialogue around putting strengths into practice in their daily lives, the fifth interview involved charting strengths action with participants. This entailed (a) exploring shifts in their perceptions of self since implementing strengths actions and (b) exploring how participants thought the strengths approach fostered something new or unexplored related to their attitudes toward their offending behavior.

Interview 6

As participants neared the end of the character strengths process, the sixth interview was a chance to assess strengths outcomes from the lens of each participant. The emphasis was exploring how the daily use of participants' top signature strengths impacted their attitudes toward their sexual offending behavior. Achieving this objective entailed (a) reviewing how participants felt when going through the character strengths action steps and (b) assessing how strong participants believed in their ability to utilize their strengths in the future to address their unique criminogenic needs.

Interview 7

Lastly, the seventh and final interview expanded on assessing strengths outcomes by providing space for participants to reflect on what the process looked like and meant to them. Specifically, this discussion expanded participants' experience of the character strengths approach by (a) exploring how the daily use of participants' top signature strengths impacted their views of themselves and (b) assessing whether and how participants believed the character strengths approach was meaningful to them.

Check-ins

I maintained contact with each participant in between interviews and other study-related tasks via 15-minute check-ins once or twice a week. This contact was essential to the other methods of data collection, allowing me to gather data on how participants were doing in implementing the strengths approach in their day-to-day lives (e.g., when they were conscious of implementing their strengths during the week and what challenges, if any, had come up). During this time, the participants also shared any art or writing they had done between the interviews. The check-ins allowed me to better determine if the

strengths approach was proceeding accordingly and whether any revisions were needed. This contact ensured that the participants remained focused on using their strengths throughout the process. This proved crucial to gathering rich, robust data, allowing me to explain in detail how the strengths approach worked or did not work and increase the credibility of the overall findings.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

In analyzing and synthesizing the data, I looked for emerging patterns and themes related to the participants' application of the character strengths-based training approach, specifically related to building a positive core sense of self and addressing unique needs and barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. I could also determine how they were using the top five signature strengths to their attitudes toward themselves and their sexual offending behavior. The analysis process occurred from the first bit of data collection to the study's conclusion. A preliminary coding analysis occurred initially to begin building an indexing system for the data.

In keeping with the constructivist grounded theory approach, I reviewed all data line by line and assigned initial codes through the process of open coding. I then reexamined initial codes to provide further focus to the data. Finally, after applying all of the codes to the data through the axial coding process, I began combining codes into categories and establishing distinct relationships. According to Charmaz (2004), when working on generating categories, researchers should ask themselves the following five questions:

1. What are the processes or mechanisms that underlie this piece of information? For example, in response to the utterance "I am 10 times more effective than anyone

else,” the researcher might feel the executive meets “Attempts to amplify their pride.”

2. When does this process or mechanism tend to arise—that is, what are the antecedents or determinants of this process?
3. What are the consequences or implications of this process or mechanism?
4. What are the factors that initiate a change in this process or mechanism?
5. What are the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and urges that participants experience when this process is operating?

The goal of using this theory is to saturate categories and themes with the potential of creating a theory that illustrates the relationship between overarching themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As such, all coding and themes were dependent on the emergent data. Using qualitative data analysis software NVivo’s open coding scheme “free nodes” allowed me to organize and analyze data throughout. NVivo’s free nodes involve identifying unique ideas present throughout the text and assigning labels or codes to them routinely throughout the research process (Pritchard, 2009; Saldaña, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

Each participant received an informed consent document. I described fully the purpose and process of collecting and using the information. All participants were aware of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time. There was no financial compensation for participation in this study. Information about how to contact the appropriate professional parties allowed participants to address any concerns about their well-being in a timely and appropriate manner, if needed.

I coded all identifying information from transcripts and other generated records of the participants. All identifying information derived from the study was strictly confidential. I erased all interview audio files and locked all transcripts in a secure area and an encrypted file in accordance with IRB standards. Because the participants in the present study were convicted of crimes against children, additional consideration was necessary for participants' awareness of risk, including states' legal obligations for reporting child abuse or the intent thereof. To address this issue, I used strong language in the informed consent that identified to participants any risk of legal action and established rigorous guidelines on how to record the data.

Additional ethical concerns were building and maintaining trust within the population. Because this population typically struggles to form trusting connections with others (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005), it was of paramount concern to be open about how I would use the study and who would have access in its completed form. This issue of trust is another reason I chose to gather data from within the COC group. This type of group not only offered a level of support and knowledge to myself as the researcher but also intuitively reduced the risk of mental harm to the participants via "shame or embarrassment, or social harm in terms of how an individual is viewed or treated by others in the community" (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 48). This protection was due to the increased social and community support available to the COC group members, which fosters a sense of trust and openness.

My active involvement within the COC community during the study was also vital to establishing a strong rapport with the participants and giving back to the community. From a qualitative perspective, this concept of giving back is critical to the

research process and a considerable ethical consideration, particularly when bearing in mind the “intentional ethics of reciprocity” (Swartz, 2011, p. 47). While it was critical to establish clear boundaries concerning my role as the researcher and the COC group member, involvement in the COC community throughout data collection helped reduce power dynamics between myself and the participants. Support groups such as COC are naturally community-based, integrative approaches in which members (in this case, offenders) are in constant collaboration with those around them. As such, the COC group stems from a foundation of mutuality and respect. To appropriately honor and foster trust and honesty as the study came to a close, I considered means of appropriate termination. One month in advance, I let participants know that our last meetings were approaching and contacted any external parties needed (e.g., COC coordinators) to help the transition go smoothly.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

I collected data in the field for 12 months. Spending a sufficient amount of time engaging in fieldwork was vital to the credibility of this study to provide a deep enough understanding of the culture and social setting. A year allowed me to draw conclusions about how the participants used and benefited from the character strengths-based approach. Specifically, prolonged engagement in the field enhanced my credibility as a researcher by (a) allowing me to become better oriented to the situation to appreciate and understand the context fully; (b) better equipping me to detect and account for distortions in the data; (c) allowing me to notice, address, and move beyond preconceptions; and (d)

enabling me to build trust and rapport with the participants and wider community (see Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Moreover, I engaged in persistent observation throughout the duration of the study to provide further depth to my understanding of the characteristics and elements in situations most relevant to the topic of interest. Observations occurred during monthly COC meetings and within community-based settings in which the participants interacted regularly. Data triangulation through the use of multiple sampling strategies and data collection methods further ensured credibility. By triangulating the data, the process of data gathering occurred at different times, across different social situations and settings, and from a range of people, including the participants and those with whom he regularly interacts within COC and the broader community. Denzin (1978), who was a great proponent of the use of triangulation within the interpretivist paradigm, noted the importance of triangulation of the data.

Choosing dissimilar settings to study the same phenomenon allows the researcher to identify which explanations, or aspects of them, hold true across the board and which are context-specific...the data can be collected about different people doing the same activity; it can be collected at different times of the day or night, and it can be collected in different places. [There are three levels at which data can be analyzed, which include] the aggregate, where data were collected from separate, unrelated individuals, the interactive, where interaction between people or groups is the focus of analysis and the collectivity, where the unit to be observed is a group, community or society. (p. 209)

Additionally, throughout data collection, member checking occurred regularly, with the analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions confirmed through direct correspondence with the participants. This technique established the validity of various accounts by (a) providing an opportunity for reflection and assessment of the intent of participants' vocalizations or actions, (b) allowing participants a fair opportunity to challenge or correct what information they felt was inaccurate or untrue, (c) creating an

opportunity for the participants to expand on or offer additional information that sometimes came to mind while engaging in the member-checking process, (d) getting participants' actual words on record by clarifying their reports, (e) providing an opportunity to summarize preliminary findings, and (f) allowing participants the opportunity to assess and confirm the adequacy of the preliminary findings and corresponding data.

Finally, it was necessary to participate in peer debriefing at several points throughout the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described peer debriefing as "the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). This process, while good for many things, is particularly important for keeping an open mind to potential blind spots and receiving support, which could help address challenges throughout.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are some limitations to the present study that merited consideration from the outset. First, the measure used to classify positive traits and strengths is only one such measure available, which is not likely to reflect all human strengths or definitions therein. Moreover, this particular tool reflects a great deal of Westernized ideologies in the questions. As such, it does not encompass all participants' strengths, particularly those coming from other philosophical views. Thus, when engaging with participants using the character strengths approach, it was extremely important to consider the growing body of research that scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds have contributed, particularly over the past decade (e.g., Benedikovicova & Ardel, 2008; Ho, 2008; Knoop & Fave,

2013; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2014). Second, because this study focused on a particular sector of the sexually offending population—specifically, those having more access to supports within the community than others with similar offense backgrounds—it cannot encapsulate the full breadth of voices, views, and experiences of individuals with histories of child sexual offending.

In addition to these limitations, there are also several delimitations to consider. To preserve its ethicality and veracity, the scope of this study did not include juvenile sexual offenders, female child sexual offenders, individuals convicted of sexual offenses against adults, and individuals with comorbid psychotic disorder or severe cognitive impairment that interferes with their understanding of research procedures. These restrictions were due to the differences in offending etiology, maintenance, and presentation among these diverse groups, which would require separate consideration.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis, Thematic Framework, and Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how the daily use of top character strengths informed the attitudes of men convicted of child sexual offenses, specifically related to themselves and their sexual offending behavior. This chapter provides a detailed synopsis of the data analysis, themes, and findings reported by the participants. The main themes from the interviews and masks included factors leading to unhealthy behavior, barriers to healthy living and improvement, ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement, and effects of the strengths approach.

Interview and Mask Themes

The interview/follow-up check-in and the mask reflections data underwent separate analysis to highlight the contributions of the mask workshops to the findings, explore similarities and differences among the emergent themes, and increase the validity of the findings by triangulating the data. As a result of the analysis, two thematic frameworks (see Appendices R and S) emerged for the interview and the mask reflections data. The following sections present each theme and subtheme in the order in which they appear in the tables in the appendices. Data from both data sets (interviews and mask reflections) appear interchangeably to demonstrate the validity of the findings, with differences highlighted when necessary.

The factors leading to unhealthy behavior receive discussion in Section 1, followed by the barriers to healthy living and improvement in Section 2. Section 3 then presents different ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement. Subsequently, the effects of the strengths approach are in Section 4, with the contribution

of the approach to the previously discussed ways to overcome barriers highlighted. Also outlined are the participants' perceptions of their top character strengths.

Factors Leading to Unhealthy Behavior

This section presents factors leading to unhealthy behavior, providing a background for the subsequent discussion, a better understanding of the factors contributing to the participants committing the offense, and the barriers to healthy life and improvement they later faced. Difficult childhood and early exposure to crime and violence were among the most discussed factors leading to unhealthy behavior. DJ, for example, stated that he “can’t really think of any” strengths acquired from his parents and felt that what he mostly “learned from them was anger.” PA, in turn, described in detail his early exposure to crime and violence, noting his referral to a psychiatric center at the age of 13 when “I got caught drinking in the park with my uncle.” He reported exposure to “a lot of deaths” in the family, which included both his father and his uncle getting shot. He recalled the traumatic experience of his father’s death when he was 9 or 10, saying,

I just remember that my dad and my uncle was...drinking, and after my father got off to work, I think my uncle left and my mom and dad got in an argument...and I don’t know why, but I felt that one of them— ...I think I felt like my father was going to get his gun from their bedroom. So, I ran to the only bedroom in the house that had a lock besides the one that they were in. It was a five-bedroom house, and I waited there because I knew my mom would show up. And eventually, she showed up and she made my brother get in the closet and me get under the bed. And then she told me to go to the neighbor...to jump out the window and go to the neighbors’ [and]...have them call the police and that she would be there in a minute. And then a little while later, she showed up, then the police came and said that my dad was dead. (PA, Interview 3)

Following these events, he became withdrawn and “stopped studying and...stopped attending school altogether,” becoming increasingly involved in crime and violence that eventually led to him assaulting “a girl that was selling magazines door to

door” at the age of 17. SN noted that he “didn’t really have a father figure,” explaining that he experienced a sense of “isolation,” that his father was “pretty private,” and that “we never really got a sense of community with him or anything.” MW also described a difficult childhood in a “dysfunctional family” where he had “no guidance” regarding what was right and what was wrong. His mother took him to parties where she “would start making out with men,” and his stepbrother took him to a prostitute. Having been exposed to pornography, he would “go and get magazines” and “found my father’s stash of pornography” one day while his parents were both absent. He portrayed his homelife as being one of constant chaos and uncertainty, journaling about “the worst experience” growing up in a reflection he entitled “My Mother, Father and a Doorbell”:

I believe that the worst experience for me growing up came when my mother passed out on the hall floor right in front of the front entrance. My sisters were out. At 8 years old I had to deal with the problem myself. She just laid there groaning, moving her head back and forth. I did not know what to do. She would not respond to my pleas to get up and go to her bedroom. Then the doorbell rang. I panicked, thinking when I answered it, whoever it was, would see my mother’s condition. I became hysterical, crying when the doorbell rang the second time. I tried to drag her to her bedroom, but she was dead weight. I could not move her. The third ring sent me into a desperate state, yelling at my mother to “get up...get up.”

Then I heard the pounding on the door and my father’s voice. He had forgotten his keys. Relief spread through me as I opened the door. “Why the hell didn’t you let me in?” “Mom is sick,” I exclaimed through my tears. My father dragged her to her room, muttering to himself “Once a drunk, always a drunk.” I went to the living room, sat down shaking with fear. “Once a drunk always a drunk,” sounded again from the bedroom.

I’m not sure why I started chanting it, but I mimicked my father saying, “Once a drunk always a drunk!” Not once but several times, sing-songing [the words] out loud. I was emotionally distraught, totally divorced from reality. I didn’t know what I was saying or the significance of those words. Those damning words came out of me mechanically. Words that I could never have said about a person I loved. My father, hearing the words, rushed into the living room and smacked me upside my head, shouted at me to shut up. I ran into the bedroom and locked the door. (MW, “An Introduction to My Memoirs,” Journal)

This experience imprinted on MW and seemed to follow him well into adulthood, even in interviews on the topic of barriers during our time together. Speaking of the memory, he said,

It caused me shame and guilt. I also felt like there was something wrong with me. For a very long time, a cloud of deep-seated anxiety and feelings of inferiority would invade my mind, becoming a part of my personality. (MW, Interview 3)

Another participant, JD, described experiencing abandonment, as well as a series of medical traumas and losses that plagued his early childhood:

I was born in Lima Peru, [in] 1970, as a conjoined twin, [attached] at the hip and buttock and penis. Once born, my biological mother noticed us together [and] she quickly abandoned my brother and I, because we were conjoined and that was a superstitious thing for her. Especially, her living in a small village, it was a sign of bad luck to the village or family. (JD, Journal 1)

Eventually, he and his brother were successfully separated in 1971, but the trauma they had endured and continued to experience postsurgery. was pervasive:

My real parents were not fit to take care of us. They were poor and [had] no education... We bounced back and forth with [the couple who adopted us] for five years. On the fifth year, my brother died due to starvation. My biological parents wanted the best for us, so [...] they decided to let my brother die from hunger [knowing that they could not afford two sons]. After my brother passed away, I was given the option to be adopted by the missionary couple [who my brother and I had been staying with in the U.S., during our time in the hospital]. Now, aged 9, [I moved] to the United States with my new family. My [adoptive] parents always presented me as their Peruvian child souvenir. (JD, Journal 3)

In a subsequent interview, JD described the loss of his brother as a significant turning point and a loss that cast a long shadow on his life and still impacts him to this day:

After my brother died, I went downhill. In fact, when my brother died it led to a big impact. I stayed mute for two years. I didn't talk to anybody. I mean I didn't talk to anybody. ...I was still like in my own little world. I didn't speak, I didn't talk, I didn't do anything for two years except just, "Mm, mm." That was my language. Just that. "Are you hungry?" Mm. "Are you tired?" Mm. You know, that was it. I did not talk, I was so traumatized with my brother dying. (JD, Interview 3)

Participant SN, shared, “I was raised in a kind of protective middle-class family and had all the things that all my other friends had” (Interview 1). He recalled being alone frequently, saying, “I was a kid, and my parents left the house and that, I was free to do whatever I wanted to, as long as I covered it up, and no one knew anything” (Interview 3). He further indicated that although his father was authoritarian in his parenting,

I didn’t really— I just still don’t— I still don’t understand a lot about him. So I didn’t feel like, I mean, when he lowered the boom, that’s when we understood him. That’s when we knew he was in the room and everything. (SN, Interview 3)

Asked how he felt his relationship with his father, or lack thereof, impacted him, he replied,

[My father’s father] was like, 50 years old when, when [my father] was born. And his wife [my grandmother] was like...36 or 37. They were both set in their ways and didn’t have a lot of time or...energy to expend on a little kid. So, he didn’t know how to be a father; [he was never taught] from his father. So my father didn’t know how to be a father to me, and, and he tried and, there’s one particular time that um, he comes home and wants to give me a hug, and I run from him. I don’t know what was going on or anything like that. But I do remember that time and everything. (SN, Interview 3)

In some cases, the difficult childhood the participants described also involved molestation and abuse. Such was the case with PA, who was molested by his cousin, DJ, who was beaten by his mother and stepfather over a period of years, and MH, who was molested and sodomized by his father at the age of 5. Reflecting on his experiences in an early journal entry, MH wrote,

I have been accused of pedophilia [but] it turns out, I was the victim [...] I never thought about it until 30 years later, in prison. I plead guilty to exposing genitalia, but *not* sodomy, which I still have never experienced, except as the recipient (MH, Journal 2)

He later expanded on this in an interview, explaining,

When I was five years old...I was molested by my natural father. I think it was only twice, though, so. But I...I quit...after that, I quit sleeping with my parents in their bed. Up to that time, I would sleep with them, but after that I would sleep in my own bed in my bedroom. But then, see, other than that, I don't remember, you know, I never talked about it to anybody. I never dealt with it, the ramifications of...that experience. (MH, Interview 3)

It was not until he was an adult that MH further realized his avoidance of the memories of his sexual abuse as a child. Until this point, he had always adhered to the belief that his past sexual abuse was beneficial to his upbringing. Diving deeper into his feelings about the impact of his sexual abuse and the blame he carried with him, he said,

I had never known that I...that I had felt that about it. I had always thought that it was acceptable or even desirable. But it took the [eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy] to...to convince to me that it was actually a detrimental event in my life. I experienced an amount...an amount...a certain amount of guilt and shame about having done it, and then I...I wanted to...I wanted to be healthy, have a peace in myself about it and not let it...not let it be such a bad thing that it affected my life really badly. (MH, Interview 4)

The participants' self-reports supported the existing literature on the subject of adverse childhood experiences, which indicates that the prevalence of childhood trauma among men and women who go on to sexually abuse minors is greater than that experienced by the general population. Men with histories of child sexual offending, in particular, are three times more likely to report child sexual abuse, twice as likely to report physical abuse, 13 times more likely to have been verbally abused, and four times more likely to experience emotional neglect or have unmarried parents (Levenson et al., 2015; Levenson & Socia, 2016).

As some of the men in the present study reflected, these experiences of crime, violence, abuse, and neglect within the home eventually resulted in problems with understanding social norms and sexuality. Social norms, otherwise defined as the informal rules that define appropriate behaviors in a group or family, play a significant

role in how people understand childhood and interact with young people (Pichon et al., 2020). Participant JD explained that coming from an impoverished family in a small village, it was not unusual for him to be nude in the presence of adults. This practice continued well into his childhood, once he had moved to the United States to be with his adoptive parents:

When I was living with my biological family, they did not have enough money to clothe me with proper clothing, so they [would] wrap my private area only. They [were] extremely poor. My adopted parents fought with me to try to keep my clothes on. I did not like wearing clothes. In fact, I was their little striptease. They allowed me to go as far down to my underwear. Finally, my parents gave up on me, [so they would] allow me to wear shorts around the house with no shirt. It took a long time before I started using clothes the right way. (JD, Interview 3)

He also discussed extensively how his physical differences, especially his “missing hip” and penis malformation resulting from being a conjoined twin, led him to seek nonconforming social situations with peers to see and experience “what I never had.” The first time, he recalled, was at the age of 11:

I was invited at a sleepover. My friend was curious about my missing hip. He wanted to see it. I thought he was nuts at the time. He [kept on] begging me. I finally gave in only on one condition: if I could see his penis. The curiosity hit me as well. Now he said I was nuts. I reminded him, “Well, you want to see my missing butt cheek.” So we both agreed. I was shocked and heartbroken. He asked me what happened to my penis; I told him. He felt sad and tried to comfort me by saying, “Do you want to touch mine?” I was startled but trying to hold back; but, I really wanted to see how it felt, [knowing] that I might not be able to get that chance of that feeling again. I’m not going to lie: while feeling him, it felt like I was feeling myself. I felt a tingling sensation and arousal. (JD, Interview 3)

In subsequent interviews, JD repeatedly described himself as “unthreatening” due to the small size of his penis. He felt that because those he had engaged in sexual promiscuity with leading up to his offense had “allowed” the behavior, it could be perceived as socially normal. He had what he described as “simple confrontations” with friends as a young boy and adolescent, following his experience at the sleepover, but “I

didn't make any moves. I let them decide. ...I just wanted to see it, to see, to compare how much of a difference [their penis] was to mine."

JD's perceptions around social norms, particularly related to body image and the size of a man's penis, were striking and appeared to preoccupy him a great deal throughout the interviews. Even as he delved into the strengths process, he would frequently return to body image, with an intensity and fixation that sometimes made it difficult for him to focus. He said he had all but "given up" on relationships with women his age because of this and wondered

What is the percentage of females liking, loving a guy with a pacifier penis like mine. Why can't they give that pacifier of a penis the same love as a regular penis? Why do women make penises an issue in having an average size penis or relationship? (JD, Interview #5)

He did not seem able to separate himself from the idea that it was women who judged and held negative views of his penis, although his stories so often revolved around his own negative connotations related to its form and function. Describing his offense against the 7-year-old daughter of a woman he had been seeing "casually" at the time, JD again referred to the size and form of his penis and his belief that it was nonthreatening to his victim:

[The girl's mother] said, "So what should I do about my daughter [being bullied and sexually harassed by a boy at school]? What kind of suggestions can you think of?" And the first thing I was thinking in my mind [was], "Well, I know my penis is not threatening because it's too small. Maybe she can use mine as a diagram, since it looks very youthful, no more than the age she's in." That was what was going through my mind. (JD, Interview 4)

MH also expressed skewed concepts related to his sexuality, which took root in childhood. In one of his mask workshops, as shown later in Section 4, MH explained how his sexual abuse as a child had influenced his behavior and later sexual offense. This realization was significant progress for him, considering his reluctance to take ownership

and responsibility for his actions that was evident during the interviews. Here, however, he explained that “my own experience at 5 years old contributed to my thinking that that was the age it was...it was a good age to do it, to experience sexual experiences.” He also noted that “after the age of 5 years old, nobody else ever talked about it, discussed it, or educated me about it until I ended up doing it to someone else.” These insights further emphasized the importance of social and community-driven measures to address the interrelated toxic belief systems, attitudes, and social norms that underlie and perpetuate child sexual abuse.

Relatedly, PA, MW, and SN each discussed problems with understanding social norms and sexuality, specifically about male entitlement and the perceived lack of clear social sanctions in the family and community regarding issues of child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. For example, PA, having been molested by his cousin, explained that “seeing that nothing was done to [his cousin]” might have given him the impression that “it was like some type of a norm that people just didn’t do anything about” and “something...that I could get away with.” Speaking of his own offense, he said, “I forced [the victim] to perform oral sex, and I raped her. I’ve never done anything like that before or since.” Later, he alluded to an attitude of male entitlement when he described sexual encounters with women, including his wife of the time, saying.

Whenever I find myself looking at even women of legal age, I try to take my mind off of them anymore because I’m afraid of being set up. Recently, with my second wife, in my mind there’s...I don’t know if I’m paranoid or not, but there’s a fear in me that she set me up to go to prison, you know, by provoking me into violence and stuff. There were times when I wanted to have sex and she didn’t and I came like that close. I told her, “Well, fine, then, I’ll just take it from you.” And then I stopped. And I said, “No, I’m not going to do that.” But, you know... (PA, Interview 4)

Similarly, MW, who had been taken to a prostitute by his stepbrother and was exposed to pornography at an early age, felt that “all these things were leading up to a sort of dysfunctional approach to sexuality and women,” which later culminated in his addiction to pornography that led to his offense. He now recognizes that “it was an addiction developing over time” but explained on more than one occasion that “in my mind, though, I never considered this behavior an addiction.” Rather, he had been conditioned to believe that it was normal, and even as I interviewed him, posited, “A part of growing up?” He offered the following insight in a journal entry:

About 10 years ago, I was stopped by a policeman because my headlights were not on. He asked me where I was going. I told him to a [Sex Addicts Anonymous] meeting. He asked what that was. I explained the goals of the 12-Step program. He couldn’t get it. He thought that sex was a natural urge and that is what people do. We spent about 15 minutes talking about addiction and its negative consequences. Finally, he did accept that there could be negative result of sex addiction, but didn’t understand that sex could develop into an addiction.

I mention this because growing up...without any direction from my parents. ...I didn’t know any better and thought that what I was doing sexually was normal, natural for a young man. I had girlfriends but still participated in those other sexual activities. Because there were not any negative consequences, I just followed that path. Little did I realize that I was developing a habit, an addiction that I later realized was hurting me and my family. ...That is when it started becoming an addiction as I described to the policeman. (MW, Journal 7)

SN discussed his days as a lead guitarist in a rock and roll band and playing in clubs with “what I think...I perceived them as underage girls” at the time of his offense. He described how, for him, that led to a skewed view of his own masculinity and the belief that objectifying women and girls was normal:

I mean, it was a habit, there’s no doubt, there’s no denying that. It was an addiction. And I don’t know what led me into it, but I do know that I had kind of like a feeling of free reign over the territory. When I was playing in bands and stuff, I would get seduced all the time [by underage girls]. The managers at clubs and stuff, the club owners would allow them in there, the doormen would allow them in, without checking IDs and stuff like this, and there was some of it, not a lot, but there was some of it. But, the life of a musician is exactly what you think

it is, I mean, you're an object, or they objectify you. So I tie objectivity back [to the addiction], and so that kind of seared, I guess a – an image in my mind, whatever part of the brain that reacts to addictions and stuff, well, that image is in there. (SN, Interview 4)

These men's shared experiences draw attention to the deep-seated societal narrative that "promiscuity, sexual conquest, and sexual prowess" are valued and important qualities at the core of masculinity (Pichon et al., 2020). Moreover, they support the need for trauma-informed preventative approaches that recognize the multiple interrelated social facets sustaining perpetration. Specifically, engaging men such as these is essential, as men are the most common perpetrators of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Interventions such as the present strengths approach enable and engage men to understand how they experience social norms linked to child sexual abuse and exploitation and promote protective factors that support healthy sexual and nonsexual relationships, both vital for lasting behavioral change.

Finally, MH described substance abuse as a factor leading to unhealthy behavior, explaining that he "self-medicated with alcohol" and "was a crackhead" at the time. He had "done quite a bit of drinking alcohol and other drugs, of course," and at the time of committing the offense, he was under the influence of alcohol. Because of his problem with alcohol addiction, he explained that the offense ultimately "wasn't my fault," something discussed in the following section as possible evidence of failing to take responsibility for his actions.

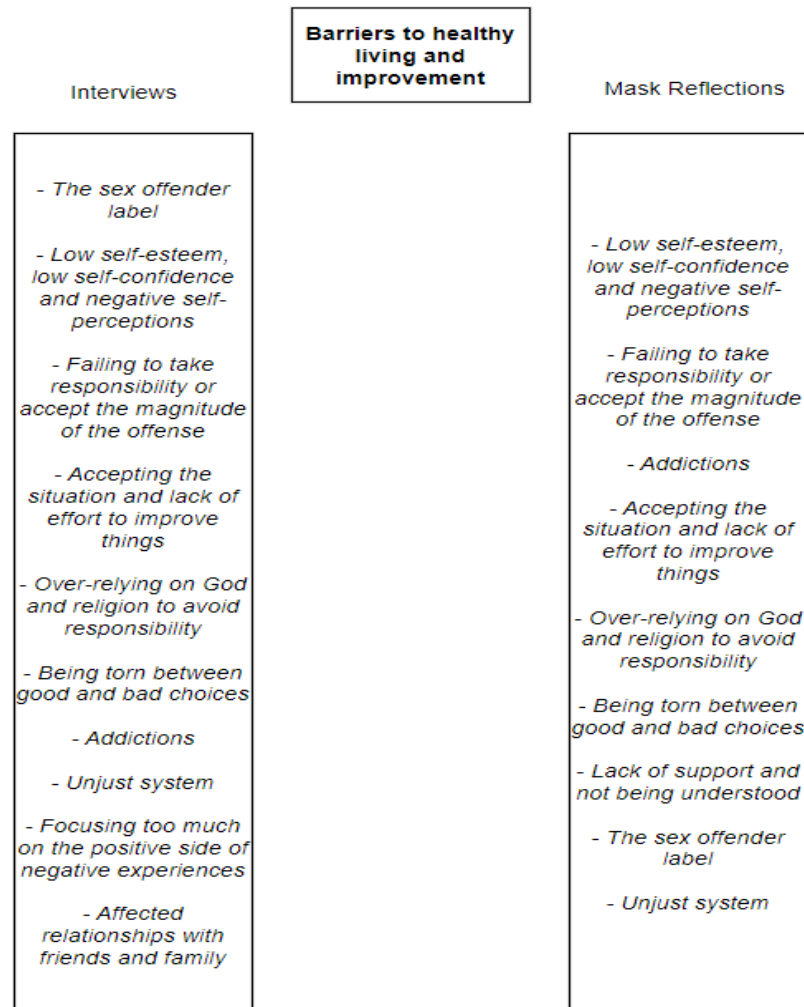
Barriers to Healthy Living and Improvement

In addition to factors leading to unhealthy behavior, barriers to healthy living and improvement following participants' offenses also underwent exploration. Figure 3

presents the themes that emerged organically from the interviews and mask reflections, respectively.

Figure 3

Barriers to Healthy Living and Improvement



The sex offender label emerged as the main barrier in the interviews (see Figure 3), and it was also evident in two of the mask reflections. The participants frequently raised concerns about “the black mark that [they] have following [them] around” (SN, Interview 1), and SN explained that he would like “people to understand that we’re not all bad.” He noted that he “hated Hitler” and “anybody that would take power over

someone else” and that he “would never hurt anybody.” MH also referred to Hitler and Stalin to explain that they are the real monsters because they have “done a lot of killing” and “they are obsessed with controlling another person to the extent that they torture them” (Interview 3). He believed that “monster” is how people tend to perceive sex offenders, even though many, including himself, are not “real pedophiles” or those who are “attracted to 5-year-olds” (Interview 5). He explained, “I consider myself the least sexually offending person that I know of” (Interview 7) and believed that people tend to forgive those who commit other, more serious crimes, including murder, more easily than they forgive sex offenders (“If it’d been like murder, they would say, ‘Hey, that’s awesome. Cool, everybody slips’”; Interview 5). MW made similar comments and raised concerns that “those other crimes don’t require that person to be on a registry.” As he noted,

For an example, one of the highest rate offenses is burglary, I think. Armed robbery, right? That person doesn’t...whether it’s armed robbery or they threatened someone or even maybe he has killed him during breaking and entering, if they get out, they ain’t going to be on the registry. (MW, Interview 1)

Participant DJ described using his experience on the sex offender registry to try to bring about much-needed change that would better the situation for himself and others:

In some ways [being on the registry] has hindered me because, like, I used to perform [magic shows] for a lot of schools and stuff like that, you know, and nowadays I get cut. It’s hindered me in that way, although I don’t let too much of that negativity that most people feel on the registry affect me...this is just something that I have to do every month or every three months in a row, register. So, as far as people know, I share with people sometimes what happened to me, and I’m not scared really to do that. I think it’s important, you know, so now, I like standing up and speaking to state legislators and other government officials and explaining the problems that [sex offenders] are having with jobs and housing, so I do that. (DJ, Interview 3)

Hearing and being open to the experiences and perspectives of men and women currently on the registry, such as DJ, are critical to ultimately understanding and

rectifying the barriers to successful integration and rehabilitation. The men repeatedly described the registry as a significant barrier to seeking and accessing therapeutic and other supports vital to their well-being. MW voiced this in Interview 3, saying that sex offenders “can’t come up and talk about it” when they need help. “It’s not like the alcoholic who can come out so well.” He explained,

There’s stories in...AA books, in [Sex Addicts Anonymous], which I just—...They describe a person who is alcoholic and he gets help from his family and friends. You know. I asked, I said out loud [in a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting], “This doesn’t apply to us [sex offenders]!” We can’t do that. We can’t, you know, say, “Oh, I’m a sex addict” and expect help from people. (MW, Interview 3)

When asked about the long-term effects of this ostracization and inability to seek help, he responded with a raw simplicity, saying, “A lot of people...die, mentally, and spiritually, when they’re on the registry. And that’s why they lead lives of quiet desperation at home and just not doing much because they’re too afraid.”

He believed that he was “too afraid” and wished he had “the strength to overcome that dread of the registry” (Interview 4), although “the stigma is always going to be there” (PATH discussion). When describing his second mask, MW reflected on the impact of stigma and the sex offender label on his life and his emotional well-being:

The worst lighting and tornado in my life represent the moment when I realized that I would be on the sex registry for the rest of my life. No other tragic event in my life compares to the consequences of a probationary officer searching my home, the degrading visits to the registration office, taking of mug shots, the condemnation from people I respected and love, the threats on my life, the attempts to extort money from me, the disappointment I felt from my family, the inability to secure a job with the financial insecurity that followed, the constant fear of exposure, even, after time, the ring of my doorbell, causing me every time my heart to race with trepidation, the lack of hope, the loss of self-worth, the constant turmoil of thoughts rushing through my mind of what might happen next, all of which destroyed my life, any self-esteem I had, and, in my mind, realizing society’s label of a leper. (MW, Mask Workshop 2)

Participant SN wrote,

[The Sex Offender registry] gives [the general public] a certain amount of superiority. Everybody's always looking for that, and if there's a reason to hate somebody, they're going to hate them. So, I just want to say, I hope [the strengths program] removes some of these reasons and allows people to look at the community for what it is. Sure, not that all souls are good, but [the public and lawmakers] have to have a certain understanding that there is something missing [to our current approaches]. Yes, a few [people who commit these crimes], there's something missing. There are a few of them that they don't care about society. They don't care about protecting children. They don't care about it. They were born with something missing, or through some traumatic process, they don't consider the lives of people around them, and I get that, but I just hope [the strengths program] will show people that this isn't who we all are. We are not all that way, the way they see us. We are more than just what they think. (SN, Journal 2)

These excerpts partly relate to the lack of support and not being understood, as raised by MW during his mask discussions. As he noted, although the impact of these experiences resembles the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, they are not recognized as such. He would like people to understand what sex offenders go through and that the trauma resulting from the whole experience "is a form of punishment" (Mask 4 reflection) in itself. While describing his Mask 2, he pointed to "a burning smile inviting people to connect with me" and show "a simple act of kindness," which indicated the feeling of isolation and lack of understanding and support that he experienced.

Participant JD described the perceived loss of a significant part of his identity following his incarceration and placement on the sex offender registry:

Let's put it this way. I had a very strong testimony. I was a miracle child. One of my ministry was singing. I have enjoyed singing [since I was a child]. Now, since I have this big scar [of being on the registry], this letter A on my back, that's the way to say it... You remember that story, scarred with an A? I have all these scars; well, for songs, I can't share them with anybody now, because, what? You share with people, and they say, "That's a good song. I like that song. Can you come share your ministry with us?" "No, I can't." "Why not?" "Because I'm a sex offender." You see what I'm saying? I can witness to one person, but they say, "Oh, that's a beautiful song. I want you to share with our group of people over here," and I'm like, "I would love to, but I can't," And they say, "How come?" I

can't tell them right out of the closet that I'm a sex offender! They're like, "Whoa! See you. Bye!" (JD, Interview 4)

The innate stigma of the sex offender registry ties into another significant barrier to healthy living expressed by participants, which was low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and negative self-perceptions that often seem to be the result of the label. As MW explained in his Mask 4 reflection, for example, "If I were out of the registry, I would just speak up more and express myself more." He also "wouldn't feel intimidated by what [people] think of me" and would be more "open and authentic in their faces." Finally, he "would be more of an expressive person, a spontaneous person instead of hesitating" (MW, Interview 4).

The stigma affects the participants' self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-perceptions. SN also felt that "now that I'm a creep" who "joined the world of creeps," he has no confidence to voice his opinions. MH also discussed several negative self-perceptions (e.g., "a loner"; Interview 3; "a quitter"; Interview 4). While these words were not related to the sex offender label, it seemed they could have been barriers to a better life in general, including his struggles to overcome addiction. MH described experiencing shame and embarrassment from his status label of a sex offender and facing judgment from family and friends, who treated him differently once they discovered the crime he committed. He viewed the sex offender label as being detrimental to his life. As a result of the associated stigma, he often found himself reluctant to meet new people and open up to strangers about his past for fear of being judged. He gave the following story as an example in an interview:

I remember when my aunt had a baby, they judged me. She considered me a predator. She had a baby in the crib, and...and [my uncle] whispered to me not to touch his...you know. And I reacted as though I hadn't heard, but I had heard.

And so, yeah, I acted like...like I didn't hear what he said, but I knew. (MH, Interview 5)

As a result of his registration status, MH felt physically uneasy and uncomfortable around people and often went out of his way to avoid meeting new people. He described having a feeling of dread, panic, and anxiety "like the wall is starting to close in on you," and frequently said he believed his life would be easier "if I can only get away from all these people!" The traumas he has experienced in life have caused him to distrust people naturally, and he did not like being vulnerable in front of others. One of the earliest memories he attributed to his feelings of low self-worth was when his parents divorced when he was 6-years-old: "But...and then, I don't think that, maybe I did, I might have like, blamed myself for them getting divorced. I don't know, that's possible, certainly" (Interview 5). This led to negative self-talk, and he frequently described himself throughout the process as stupid and lacking intelligence. In a memo following a mask-making session with MH, the interviewer stated:

He noted that most of the words that he made on his mask have been negative or challenging thoughts. He noted that he could go back very far to think about when these messages took root. One of the ones that came up was how his stupidity and lack of intelligence have led him down the path that he is currently. That [negative inner dialogue] has been a barrier in his life, and the mask-making exercise brought much of it to light.

Similarly, participant PA struggled immensely with negative self-concept. It was he, in particular, who seemed haunted by what he had done and repeatedly referenced the crippling guilt and remorse he felt over his actions and the shame he carried daily in both himself and his actions:

Interviewer: You looked a little sad just then. Tell me what's coming up for you right now.

PA: It's just what I've done. What I've done to people.

Interviewer: And, I can see that hurts you a lot, that you carry that really deeply.

PA: And there's a song that expresses it. It says, "Boy, you're going to carry that weight a long time." I think it may have been The Beatles: "Boy, you're going to carry that weight a long time." I know that the things that I've done, don't only hurt the people that are the victims, but also the families and my own family. I hurt a lot of people.

Interviewer: And you feel—

PA: Very remorseful. [...] Like with anything else, there's no human words that are ever sufficient to express the fullness of it. I'm terrible. (PA, Interview 3)

Participant JD's low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and negative self-perceptions were only further exacerbated by his mandatory sex offender registration status. Like other participants, these feelings of inadequacy took root when he was only a child. The profound trauma and survivor's guilt he experienced following the death of his conjoined twin brother in childhood had left a deep scar and a lasting impact on his self-perception. "This is what ticks me off," he said in an interview. "That's why I'm upset with myself!" He went on to explain that:

Even though [my brother and I] were conjoined, together, he got all the main organs and all the parts. Because he was the weaker one. Me, I didn't get most of the organs and I got the lesser ones, but I was stronger and a bigger child, a bigger healthier baby. So that's what got me really mad. When he passed away, I didn't have anything to live for, I had all the leftovers!... That's why I've always been hard on myself, because of walking with a limp, missing my hip, the penis area you know, and being short you know.... After I realized that he was gone, I always put down my self-image, and I cried. Why couldn't it be me instead of him? Because he had all the parts. The only thing that he did not have was [the ability] to be able to control his body fluids, that was the only issue. But other than that, he had everything that I didn't have. Me, I'm missing everything and... I'm missing everything and I don't feel complete, you know? (JD, Interview 3)

After his offense and subsequent placement on the sex offender registry, his self-worth plummeted further, and he described feeling "like dirt":

I felt queasy, I felt like the absolute scum of the earth. In fact, I felt so bad, my dad would call me [before my arrest], "Hey, why don't you come over and eat

over here with us?” “No, it’s okay. I’ve got other things to do.” I didn’t have anything else to do, I just didn’t...I just didn’t want to be around, especially when it happened, that same day. On that weekend, my dad called me. “Hey, we’re having this tonight, your favorite food, come over.” “No, I’ve got something else going on, I can’t.” I made excuse, “I’m going to work,” – which I wasn’t. I just wanted to be alone. I was in my own little world now. It’s like, [I was thinking] you created...you created a monster, now how are you going to live with it? (JD, Interview 3)

As evident from these excerpts, another possible factor that may also contribute to negative self-perceptions, low self-confidence, and low self-esteem are affected relationships with friends and family. All participants mentioned strained relationships with family and friends following their offense on at least one occasion. “I was the favorite uncle at my sister’s house with my nieces [before the offense],” SN explained in one interview, but noted how everything changed following his offense:

If there was an adult out there that would engage with them, playing, that type of stuff and everything, it was me. They wouldn’t ask for anybody else. Because they knew I would say yes, I would be up for it, for playing and joking around and everything else. ...[After the offense happened], she was like, how could I? How could I have these charges and everything? How could I? I say the same thing to myself. How could I? How could I cross those boundaries? (SN, Interview 3)

He later acknowledged the strain on their relationship was preexisting due to an incident that had happened 3 years prior. His offense and resulting arrest only intensified those wounds and caused the rift in their relationship to deepen.

She wasn’t talking to me anyway [at the time]. There’s been an incident, [but it] had nothing to do with my charges or anything...and she hung up the phone on me and stuff like that, [so I] called her back. And I said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to create this real, this darkness in our relationship,” you know. And, “When you’re ready, give me a call [and] we can talk,” but she never did. She was just—I don’t know. ...It was a lot deeper than just. ...It’s deep and everything. (SN, Interview 4)

It was interesting that, despite his almost crippling desire to share his story, SN appeared hesitant, almost embarrassed, to disclose the full nature of the family incident

that had driven such a strong wedge between him and his sister; he would only say, “I’d like for it to be better.” Notwithstanding, the strain his offense and its aftermath had on his relationship with those most significant in his life had clearly had a significant impact on his self-esteem and self-concept and posed barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Similarly, JD described the permeating effects his offense had on his relationship with his family and friends, even following his release from prison, saying,

My dad was letting me know, like 2 months ago, that one of my cousins was moving to...where I’m at. And he says, “Well, I’m gonna see if I can hook him up with you to talk about old times.” Unfortunately, my cousin...at the time, he was 11 years old, before I got incarcerated. So, after my dad talked to his family about it, he says, no, they don’t want anything to do with me at all. So, that won’t happen. We won’t talk or anything like that now. ...My dad, being a minister, he says, “Son, you have to realize. After having this type of felony, you’ll never be the same. You always will have a stain...on your back. And no one... They’ll look at you totally different, especially family-wise.” So he says, “But for now, you’re doing strong. I’m not trying to discourage you. But you have to realize this is family, and that’s the way the family feels about you.” (JD, Interview 4)

Failing to take responsibility or accept the magnitude of the offense was another barrier that emerged from the data. As MW reflected, “It’s part of people anyways, and they just try to avoid [responsibility] instead of dealing with it” (MW, Mask 4 reflection). As for MW avoiding responsibility for his actions, this did not seem to be the case, and he generally seemed to be fully conscious of what he did and why. Arguably, the only possible evidence of him avoiding responsibility was when he explained that “I did not have any conscious offense behavior when I was in the ‘beast’ state of mind, downloading pictures which I thought were of adults.”

More extracts that demonstrate this theme emerged, however, in MH’s data. His statements were full of contradictions on whether he felt attracted to minors or not. Although he often insisted that he never had any attraction to children, at one point, he stated, “I’ve grown out of the idea that children are capable of...of sexual activities”

(MH, Mask 4 reflection). These words and his statement that “the nature of the crime seems to...to indicate that I’m guilty” (Mask 1 reflection) seem to be a significant improvement compared to the interviews, during which he mainly maintained that alcohol addiction was the only problem. When asked to talk about ways to improve himself or the wrong decisions he had made, MH usually ignored the offending behavior and focused on alcohol addiction. He explained that when he consumed alcohol, he went into a blackout and “my body will continue to perform things I haven’t always done” (Interview 3), and that “when I’m blacked out and I do those things, it’s not me” (Interview 7). In his Mask 4 reflection, he also explained that alcohol “dulls the senses” and “erases my memory of anything that’s happened, and to be perfectly clear about it...evil spirits take control of my body while I’m unconscious.” As he further noted, “When I get to the blackout stage, I’m possessed by demons.”

This observation led to another barrier primarily evident in MH’s data: overreliance on God and religion to avoid responsibility. He repeatedly stated that his demons “are just as real as God is” (Interview 3), that he had no control over his actions, and that these actions do not matter because “life is just a speck of dust compared to going home to...eternal life” after death. He repeated, “I don’t need to worry about anything” (“Addressing barriers” check-in) because he is as good as Christ and “perfect enough to enter heaven” (“Barriers to strengths practice (religion scrupulosity)” check-in). In all these extracts, it was clear that MH used religion to avoid responsibility for his actions. He stated that his alcohol addiction, rather than himself, was to blame for his offense. He also believed that “having the disease of alcoholism in the first place wasn’t...my choice” (Mask 1 reflection), suggesting that everything in this life was

preordained. At a check-in for which he showed up heavily inebriated, he became enraged when challenged to confront his past. The following check-in excerpt underscores MH's reliance on religion, especially when confronted with his past or encouraged to engage in self-reflection.

MH: That's the reason there's people that are serial killers because they hold resentment in them because of what people have done to them. They hold that resentment, bitterness! They become serial killers, active shooters.

Interviewer: Oh, man, you are speaking with such passion right now. I even detect a hint of anger. Maybe a hint of resentment?

MH: Who likes an active shooter? I am angry at evil like that. Of course, I'm angry at that.

Interviewer: What about evil that you perpetuated? Are you angry about the evil that you—

MH: Yeah, until I forgave myself. God forgave me. I don't know if the person that I offended forgave me; that's on him. That's his problem.

Interviewer: Is it?

MH: I'm clear. I'm clean. I'm perfect. I'm perfect! I have no worries. I have nothing to worry about. Nothing whatsoever. Especially since...I have not reoffended [in all the time since being released]. Do you think I've learned my lesson?

Interviewer: Well, that does not mean that the harm that was done is not there.

MH: But I don't have to worry about that. ...The harm is still there? It's not there if it's forgiven. It's no longer there if it has been forgiven. It's erased.

Interviewer: So you don't think that anything that happened—

MH: That's the power of forgiveness!

Interviewer: But you don't think anything that has happened to you has shaped your life right now? And shaped your struggles and who you are as a person? Your anger, your hurt—none of that shaped you? None of that shapes who you are, for example?

MH: Sure it has, of course. That's how every person's shaped, hello?

Interviewer: That's a contradiction, isn't it? Because it's still there for you, it still mattered?

MH: [shouting, trembling, raging] Big deal! I don't consider that a big deal. My past, it's water under the bridge. I've forgiven it. Other people, like active shooters, they keep remembering, rehashing it. Makes their brain...evil! Evil! I feel... I feel... I feel—

Interviewer: Okay. I hear you. You know what, let's... Let's stop and just sit with this for a minute. (MH, "Barriers to Strengths Practice (Religion Scrupulosity)" Check-in)

Furthermore, relying on God and religion to avoid responsibility was also evident in the responses of some of the family members closest to participants. This reliance created tension for participant DJ, ultimately resulting in his premature withdrawal from the study, despite his personal desire to continue and continued support of those who remained active participants following his exit.

Wife of DJ: [He] has progressed so much in the 8 years I've been married to him that I can't see you need an awful lot of one-on-one with him.

Interviewer: ...That's not a decision that you make for someone, is it?

Wife of DJ: So, you think he's sort of a basket case, do you?

Interviewer: No, I don't... I think [he] has a very important, valuable story. I think that he's been an excellent participant so far. ...I want to support his desire to continue with this work, which is why we are meeting right now. I hope we can work together too, to—

Wife of DJ: I'm probably a little bit jealous. ...So, I'm hurting the poor guy, is that right? I'm holding him back?

Interviewer: Actually, I'm kind of confused as to why whenever I've suggested a way to help through your feelings [of jealousy] or to address your feelings, that you keep referring back to [your husband's issues]. I'm a little bit confused by that.

Wife of DJ: Well, after meeting with the pastor today, it was of great help. And we met with him for an hour and he heard both of our viewpoints. And then he prayed with us, gave some suggestions. And I'm not going to tell you what those suggestions were, but I strongly feel that God answers prayer. I really do. So I'm going to pray about it, and I'm going to pray for you because you indicate to me that, oh, well, you go to church once in a while, but it's not a big deal.

Interviewer: So, that's interesting, because I haven't discussed my religious beliefs with you, have I? You don't know my—

Wife of DJ: That's the impression I have. ...That's the impression I have. So I am going to pray for you. That's all. (Wife of DJ, Resolution Meeting)

Although DJ insisted he didn't "give her any reasons" to be jealous, he attributed her feelings of jealousy to his decision, but qualified it with, "I don't know...the Christian thing..." His departure from the study and the circumstances surrounding it are particularly relevant because they draw attention to the importance of trust, support, and positive relationships with the family (as discussed earlier) as a factor in overcoming barriers to healthy living and improvement. DJ's reliance on his wife was evident, despite the unhealthy mechanisms underlying their relationship. His wife's relying on God and religion to deflect and avoid addressing her issues of jealousy and discomfort surrounding DJ's participation in the study, as evident by her statements, ultimately undermined the trust and support he needed to continue his journey in recovery and participation in the study.

As is perhaps apparent by the nature of these excerpts, more opportunities for researchers and child and family practitioners to evaluate the link between religiosity, cognitive distortions, and irrational thinking in the general and offending populations are needed. Although religious affiliations could also act as a buffer to offense behavior in some cases (discussed in Section 3), it is equally important to understand the extent to which an individual's religious beliefs could act as a barrier to psychological well-being. If this relationship is further substantiated, then child and family professionals could benefit significantly from a thorough assessment of the individual's religious beliefs before their work together.

Relying on God and religion to avoid responsibility, especially the attitude of preordination, also partly relates to another barrier to healthy living, namely accepting the situation and lack of effort to improve things. As MH noted in the Mask 1 reflection, “We all have to live somewhere on this planet. Why not in a jail cell?” He also reported that he does not like to set goals because if he fails to achieve them, “I’m a failure” (Mask 2 reflection). Therefore, he explained, “It’s better not to set any goals, and I wouldn’t be a failure.”

Participant JD shared similar feelings that his “life was a failure.” The death of his conjoined twin brother and, years later, his adoptive sister and mother to cancer “disheartened” him, as they were the only people in his life whom he believed understood and accepted him for who he was. Feeling alienated, rejected, and ashamed of his physical deformity, he described a sense of futility in attempting to improve his situation:

JD: I think one of the reasons why I have so much negat—...how do you say? Negativism is because I was thrown negativism all my life. And since then, I’ve just accepted it, accepted it, and just let it drown me down more and more and more. And now that I’ve had this offense, it’s worse. Now I can’t fly, let my wings fly out anymore. I have boundaries to fly. I can’t fly like I used to fly.

Interviewer: What would’ve needed to be different for that not to happen?

JD: To not be born. (JD, Interview 4)

Being torn between good and bad choices is another barrier, and people “are going to be distracted by all kinds of crazy things life” (MW, PATH Discussion). In his Mask 3, MW demonstrated the dual nature of people with “one evil and the other good with back and forth arrows along the strip indicated a back-and-forth fight between the two sides.” MH also included similar elements in his Mask 4, indicating “a battle between good and evil” as the constant element of life that “every individual on this planet experiences.” He further explained that “in one person, there’s the two opposites

that are fighting each other” and that “these two opposites are at war constantly.” MW also believed that “since we’re only human, we go back and forth from being the Buddha and being someone who’s naughty.” In a Mask reflection, he emphasized that practicing self-compassion (later noted in Section 3, Ways to Overcome Barriers to Healthy Living and Improvement) during the inevitable ebb and flow of the human experience was vital to his recovery, writing,

Our true authentic self, our inner Spirit, I believe people should strive for this goal at the end of our journey. But our journey never ends, our Spirit comes in and out of our consciousness...if we truly could become the essence of Spirit, we would be Saints...and no one is. I’m happy to occasionally goof up, spill my milk, say something stupid, be impatient. ...I could go on and on... you see...these shortcomings make us human. I’d rather be human [than] some perfect Buddha...who is really an idea... (MW, Mask Reflection 3)

Addictions also received discussion as one barrier to a healthy life, as “what happens is addictive behavior is a block to the positive aspects of life” (MW, Interview 5). MW recalled some of his earliest memories of being plagued by addiction, saying, “My mother and sister were alcoholics along with a father who was incapable of showing me any affection [as a result of his addictions]. Both my mother and sister died violently of [their alcohol] addiction.” For MW, the problem was his addiction to pornography and sex (often achieved with prostitutes) when committing the offense, and for MH and DJ, their addiction to drugs and alcohol. DJ recalled how most of his life, his addictions often got in the way of the things that were most important to him and hindered his ability to live his best life. When asked if he could remember a time when he was at his best, he could not do so without reflecting on his addictions, saying,

[At the time], I owned a plumbing business. I was very involved in my hobby, which is magic illusions. And I felt like things were going well for me...but there was always sometimes that I was clean with drugs, and other times I wasn’t. So, during the times that I wasn’t playing with drugs and [was] going to church. That was probably the best time in my life, you know.

MH, who struggled with his addiction both in the past and at the time of this study, frequently described substances as a way of self-medicating and distancing himself from his present reality:

I was 17 years old [when I took my first drink], and since then, 38 years ago (I'm now 55), I've done quite a bit of drinking alcohol and other drugs, of course, like the marijuana and crack cocaine. I mentioned the crack cocaine, too. That's what got me in prison. (MH, Interview #3)

MH spoke of alcohol as the catalyst that led him to engage in destructive behavior of which he regularly claimed to have no memory, including committing domestic violence against his mother on one occasion during a drunken blackout. To his detriment, he continuously used his addictions to avoid taking responsibility for his past actions and distance himself from opportunities to make changes in his present situation. Even while engaging in the character strengths practice, the lack of responsibility was a barrier that caused arguably the most difficulty in committing to growth and change throughout. When confronted about his addictions and their ramifications, he said that while he recognized his addictions as a barrier to healthy living, he could not bring himself to take full ownership of what he did or did not do under their influence:

I accept that I'm responsible for taking the first drink that led to the next and the next and to the blackout. So I am responsible for the blackout...but I don't see how I can be responsible...for things I do in a blackout that I have no...no...no, you know, I have no cognition of doing it. (MH, Interview 7)

All of the men in this study who shared their experiences with addictive behaviors spoke of what they perceived as an overwhelming loss of self-control. MW mused in his journals about his experience with addiction,

What is the lack of self-control? It's hard to describe. However, you might get a glimpse of the intensity of an addict when he gets into that mode of the thought of wanting sex, the plan of having sex, going out and searching for it, finding and having it and the negative downer an addict experiences. (MW, Journal 7)

In a raw and emotional piece of poetry, he described the stages of “The Beast” (addiction) that plagued him in his offense cycle and the depth of his hopelessness and fear during this time, as he pondered a way out:

Blood-thirsty beast of the night,
Stalking, craving are his delight,
Prowling, cruising shadowy lanes,
Tearing at his spirit, agonizing pains.

Chaos, folly, fantasies on patrol,
Plummeting down a darken hole,
Careening, the monster must be fed,
Powerless of the devastation ahead.

Nothing else matters, loved ones too,
Breaking hearts, he doesn't have a clue,
Forsaking family, friends, his morality,
Living with shame, without his integrity.

The tension brewing deep within,
The heat, the storm, an insidious sin,
Demoralizing release, tears in his eyes,
No tenderness, intimacy, only lies.

What is he doing, the two lives he leads,
His spirit, his demon, both he must feed,
Devout Christian kneeling in a pew,
Perverted visions consuming him anew.

Alone in his despair, his self-annihilation,
Hopelessly engulfed in a final desperation,
A hundred excuses mull in his head,
Continuing to obsess, he'll surely be dead...

At the brink, pleading for his salvation,
Beseeching an answer to his temptation,
Looming within, a dreaded decision,
Truth, honesty must be his new mission.

Terrified, he humbles himself before his creator,
Inching forward, stumbling, a single millimeter,
Confronting the fiend, facing his life anew,
Unafraid to share his soul with friends like you.

JD described his intense self-consciousness around his peers, and his inability to form relationships with girls due to his fear of judgment and rejection over the shape and size of his penis:

I heard rumors that girls like boys with average penises or more. They did not know what I was carrying. I decided...I tried to be bold with a girl and let her wonder inside of me. Not knowing then, when she saw and felt my penis... What scarred me for the rest of my life is what she said, "Your penis is like a little baby and it looks like a pacifier." I didn't know what else to say, but from that day on, I kept to myself. (JD, Interview 4)

Still, he longed to be "normal" and accepted. Being introduced to pornography during his senior year of high school was like "all my fantasy opened up so clearly!" JD continued,

Knowing from that day on, I would not be judged and [be able to] enjoy what I have been missing for a long time. I don't know if there is such a thing [as having a] fetish of seeing penises only and comparing them with mine... And not considering it being gay or me being gay. I say this in respect, because of my penis issues and [the] disformality [*sic*], not being normal like other males. Seeing all sorts of penises—shape, form, length, hardness, and thickness—allows me to release the tension of [focusing on] what I am lacking. Yes, it does release that other tension... (JD, Interview 4)

The unjust system was another barrier that participants discussed various aspects of, including "different rules" established by probation departments "that make life difficult" (MW, Interview 1) or the fact that registry is available to the public (MW, Mask 4 Reflections). This makes it difficult for registered citizens to lead their lives, secure jobs, or find something meaningful to do, which (discussed in Section 3) is one of the key ways to overcome barriers to healthy living. MW spoke of the inconsistencies often inherent to the registry, the legislative misnomers, and the resulting sense of futility and desolation he felt at the prospects of ever getting off the registry, despite his attempts to remain positive:

I go to the Alliance for Fair Sex Offender laws website to view the news, litigations and other sex offender topics. One article showed a list of states and described whether the state had a mechanism about getting off the registry. I

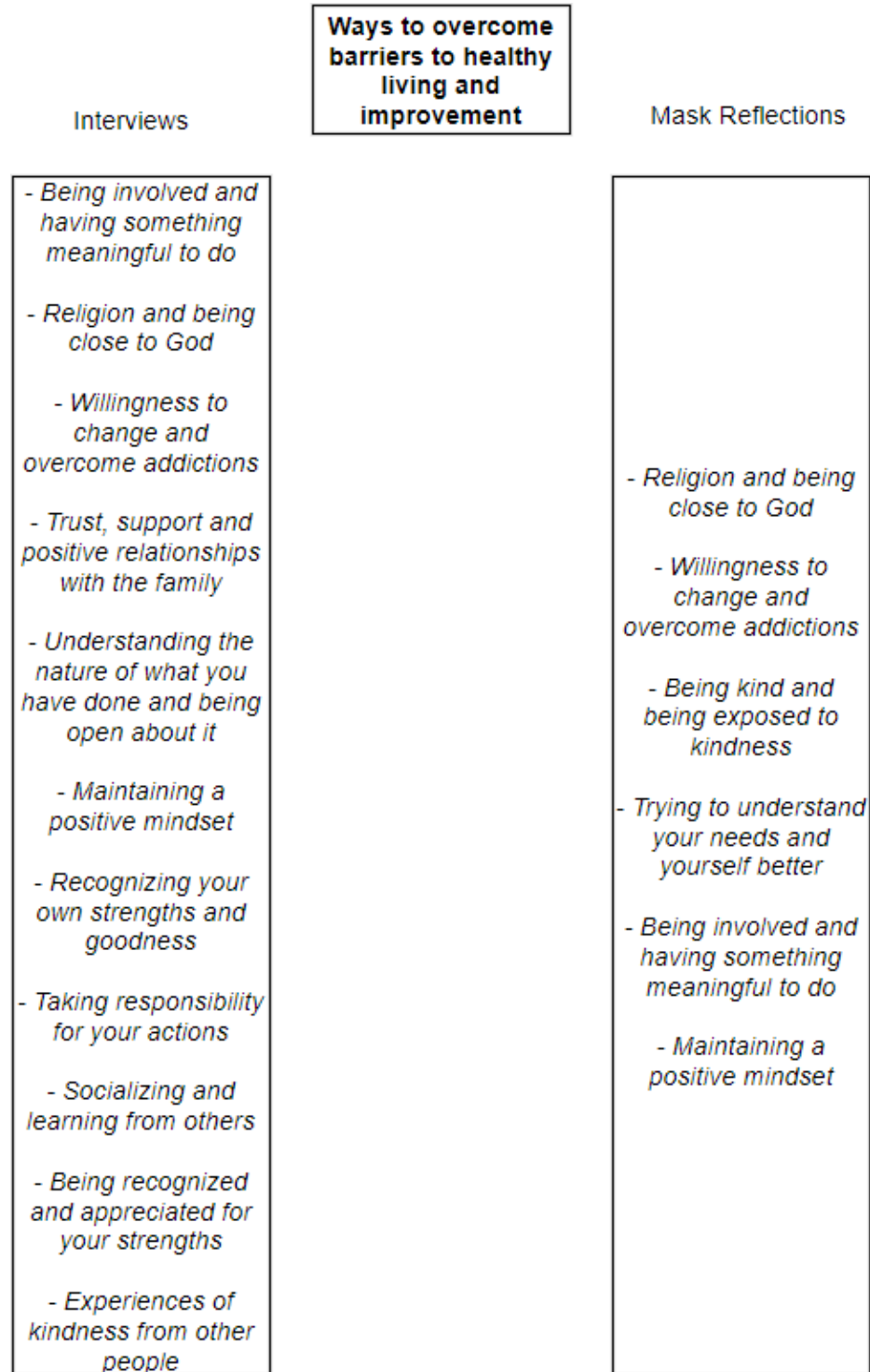
counted [around] 35 states which have laws which offers relief from the registry based on tier level, nonviolent criteria, length of time on the registry and other factors. [My state] doesn't have laws to get off the registry. When I go to the website, I guess I am hoping that some major litigation will say that the sex registry is unconstitutional.... And it has but nothing seems to come of the conclusions. For every positive case, there are four negative consequences of the registry... Guess it is wishful thinking that I can get off the registry in my lifetime. Talk about hopeless!!! (MW, Journal 12/5)

Focusing too much on the positive side of negative experiences was a barrier in MH's data. Although maintaining a positive mindset was an effective way to overcome barriers (see Section 3), the impression was that focusing too much on the positives could hinder understanding of the magnitude of the offense, as well as later affect the desire to improve as a person. As MH pointed out in Interview 1, for example, he initially interpreted his molestation as a child as "some kind of good...experience" that "helped my...development," which eventually led to him failing to see what harm he later did to his victim. As he noted, "My thoughts about it weren't that I was causing any harm, but that similar to my experience that it might be beneficial to his...development as a person." This "positive" mindset also seemed to hinder MH's willingness to work on improving his life, as he stated, "I should consider myself the...luckiest person on the planet" because "I'm retired already" and "I don't have to work." Considering that these statements immediately followed a question about the emotions he experienced when thinking about his offense, it seemed a rosy outlook could be another factor hindering the desire to take responsibility for one's actions and try to change and improve.

Ways to Overcome Barriers to Healthy Living and Improvement

Figure 4

Ways to Overcome Barriers to Healthy Living and Improvement



Mentioned 61 times across 17 discussions, being involved and having something meaningful to do emerged as the most-discussed theme in the interview data and referred to in the mask reflections. At least once or more during the study, all participants discussed being involved and having something meaningful to do as a way to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement. DJ, who had met his wife in prison, became involved in “helping those who are on the red street” and joined his wife “in the effort to be able [to] help other people that are in prison and leaving prison” (Interview 1). He also described his involvement in local church and charities, describing that he “wore about 10 different hats” and has been involved in many activities as “my biggest personal strength.”

When asked about the time he was “at his best,” PA identified “when I was running a [junior college] course” and “was taking [junior college courses] and taking criminal justice courses.” Throughout his time in the study, he strived to embrace the opportunities to create new meaning in his life following his release from prison by engaging in a series of job training opportunities and joining a ministry for men with histories of sexual offending, where he engaged in daily devotionals.

Moreover, both MW and MH extensively discussed ways to keep themselves busy. Apart from being involved in “consultation and developing different activities within a community” (MW, Process check-in), MW was also “creating this booklet or book with 10 plus Bahá’í poems” and planned to “perform [a shadow play] for a fundraiser for the Bahá’ís” (PATH Discussion), as well as an organized “Zoom gathering, where I asked the Bahá’ís to share their talents, share their writing, poetry and short stories” (PATH check-in). He was involved in a whole range of activities and explained

that he wants to “focus on my goals for my final part of my journey” (Interview 5), namely on “being an empathetic, compassionate person with a goal of service to people and the community” (Interview 5).

MW discussed his current activities:

In terms of things I’m doing now, writing, the tennis, and I’m involved in RCA and I’m the coordinator for the InMail and making sure there’s a host available and still going as groups. And what else? Yeah. For the Bahá’í’s. I do that newsletter; I think I mentioned that we’re having a fundraiser [on the] 28th. (MW, Interview 3)

MW explained that the goal is “to fill yourself up with positive things...and those positive things override your addiction.” He believes that “my writing, my tennis, with Bahá’í faith, and all of those things were substitutes for my addiction” and that the key is to “find your flow.”

Although he is not involved in as many activities as MW, MH also believed that “to work hard toward a certain goal” (Interview 4) was helpful. He taught his friend with chronic pain about God and religion, was building a brick wall in his backyard, planned to read a book, and played ping pong. He believed that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop” and that falling into not doing anything “gets me in trouble” (MH, Addressing Barriers). As he noted, “I need entertainment in my life” and “drugs and alcohol filled that void [in a way that’s not good for me]” (Mask 1 reflection).

While overreliance on religion can lead to the failure to take responsibility for one’s actions, religion and being close to God was the second-most-discussed way of overcoming barriers in the interviews and the most-discussed one in the mask reflections. For DJ, for example, his relationship with God helped him learn “forgiveness and knowing that people make mistakes. I make mistakes but so do other people, and I need to forgive.” PA also found comfort in religion, and specifically in losing his “desire to be

right” and understanding that people make mistakes but can be forgiven. All participants discussed their relationship with God and how being a religious person helps them overcome barriers and weaknesses.

MW noted, for example, that his goal is to lead “spiritual life” that helps him make sure “there is [*sic*] no more lustful thoughts, no sexual distractions, no more getting caught up in that swirling confusion of the Beast’s goals” (Interview 5). MH, on the other hand, found comfort in believing that God “only sees good” (Mask 4 reflection) in him, which seemed to help him deal with his low self-esteem in general. MH discussed his religion and relationship with God at great length throughout most interviews and reflections and believed that “that’s at the core of my existence” (Mask 4 reflection).

Finally, for SN, his relationship with God, much like MH, seemed to assuage his anxiety and need for a loving, compassionate connection, especially during the times of isolation, hardship, and trauma following his offense:

Knowing that I made by a creator and let this creator is my God, Father in Heaven. And that’s Him who I need to be responsible for. It’s Him who gives me that string. He pours out all kinds of wisdom, pours out all kinds of courage, pours all kinds of counseling. And His presence is felt all the time. And that’s probably what allowed me to get through it all. (SN, Interview 4)

Not surprisingly, willingness to change and overcome addictions emerged as another way to overcome barriers to healthy living. DJ, for example, would like “to be a more positive person” and attended anger management classes, and MH “made a solemn promise to God that...I would never drink for any reason as long as I live” (Mask 2 discussion). Although it was evident during the study that he had not fully overcome his addictions, he was aware of this problem and willing to change. His Mask 3 includes a tear that “is an improvement over all other tears, the flood of tears from all the miserable things in life...like too much drinking and drugging. Alcohol and marijuana are a

problem” (Interview 4) and “to eliminate it and lead into positive actions” (Interview 6) is his goal. As MH reflected during the Mask 4 workshop, “I’ve come to consider [alcohol and drugs] my only means of escape from reality. It’s really easy to do that with drugs and alcohol.” As previously noted, he mostly blamed his addictions on the offense he committed, so his motivation to overcome these addictions was a clear attempt to overcome what he believed to be the main barriers to his healthy life. When asked to journal about the perceived effects of his alcohol and drug use on his life and past offense behavior as motivation for change, he wrote,

Whenever I drink, my brain remembers nothing of the time [but]...everyone who knows me would say the exact same thing: “He’s a great guy, when he’s not drinking!” [Marijuana] has three main drawbacks [for me; I become]: 1. Too hungry; 2) Too lazy; [and], 3) Too angry.

About anger, he wrote: “ALL anger stems from deception and lies; in the absence of truth, it will escalate [into] rage,” and posed the question, “Is anger an emotion or just a reaction?” Depression, he felt, was at the root of his anger; as such, he professed the need for escape, which seemed to lead to and be influenced by his inability to connect with this life (MH, Strengths Journal #6). These insights, for him, were significant and spoke to his awareness of and desire to make changes in his life, despite his ongoing struggles with addiction and commitment throughout the study. “I can [use drugs and] drink all the alcohol I want,” he said, “but I don’t want to [use] ANY of it.”

MW also talked about the importance of the willingness to change, noting that the “decision to walk into their first [Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting]...takes a lot of guts” (Interview 4) and is the first step toward self-improvement. He mentioned the importance of breaking free from “that invisible hand that’s pulling you back” and asking the question, “What can I do next in terms of being a whole person?” (Interview 4). He also

described how he understood “I hurt my wife the most” (Interview 6) and how this realization motivated him to attend Recovery Couples Anonymous to save his relationship because “I did not want to hurt her anymore” (Interview 6). These words demonstrate the importance of willingness to change for overcoming barriers to healthy living and improvement.

MW, in particular, penned many reflections relative to what he often referred to as “sparks of hope” in his life or situations that propelled him forward, even in the face of his addictions. In some situations, although the experiences were in and of themselves painful, they gave him pause to reflect on his life, make changes, and push himself into “a quest for something better,” as he described. “Question for you,” he said, in one of his many journal reflections:

Do you remember when you made a momentous decision, the situation that you were in? I mention this because the decision to pursue an undertaking that scary, causing anxiety and fear, is significant and should be remembered; because if one looks back on that epiphany, they will see how the decision lead them into their adventure... (MW, Strengths Journal 7)

He wrote about one such significant episode in a short story that he said “altered my life.” The piece, which he called “Woodlawn Tap,” described the profound self-disdain, unhappiness, fear, and lonely desperation he felt in the throes of his addictions. Specifically, he related one experience in a local bar that forced him to look in the mirror and call himself to account, sparking a willingness and desire for change:

Spilling my beer all over my pants, I shouted out “shit,” thinking, “what a fuck up!” feeling cold liquid seeping into my underwear, I shook my head from side to side, stirring the thousands of befuddling thoughts racing through my Monkey Mind.

Looking down the bar, I see my buddies sipping beer spouting empty, meaningless bullshit. I’m fed up hearing their crap of exaggerated sexual conquests, confident certainties of the next failed Chicago politician or those pathetic certitudes about the Cubs playing better next year.

I have to admit... I have joined in over the years expressing the same tired thoughts though without an ounce of conviction. The guys knew it too, having no respect for me, "the loser of the Woodlawn Tap."

What was that song with the first line "Once Upon a Time there was a tavern," I laughed out loud. I couldn't get it out of my head. I became depressed thinking I would wind up the same way as the sad characters in that song.

Staring at myself in the mirror above the bottles of whisky, I wondered if I really was a loser. I felt full of disdain for myself and those guys warming the bar stools. Staring at them again, shaking my head, I concluded that their barroom rantings were a mask that hid the same meaningless life that I was leading.

I looked in the mirror again freaking out. I did a double take as the image spoke. "What the... Was I that drunk?" He was dressed in a dirty-looking coat of armor with piercing dark eyes, staring at me through the slits on the metal helmet that covered his face.

"Make your decision," he demanded. My heart raced. I began to panic. My beer glass trembled. I looked over at my buddies who I heard but were in some sort of a hazy fog.

The demon-like threatening eyes waited for an answer. "Make your decision," he asserted again with such terrifying clarity that I began to tremble. I blurted out, "what the fuck are you talking about?"

Tears welled [*sic*] up in my eyes. I knew what he meant, but I was too afraid to act on his ultimatum. Too afraid to admit how unhappy I was. Too disgusted with my life.

My head fell onto the bar counter. My thoughts whirled in a lonely desperation. I started pounding my head on the counter so hard that my glass of beer jumped up, fell and shattered on the floor.

The lights, the noise, the stares, the confusion suddenly flooded back. My so-called pals stopped their conversation, looked over at me thinking that I had lost my mind. My head still on the counter, moved to look over at them. "Fuck you, fuck all of you." I screamed. "I'm not a loser." I started sobbing uncontrollably. The guys started laughing at me.

I stop sobbing, still staring at my friends, but with a clarity this time...an overwhelming sense of compassion and sadness for them...that's when I lifted my head, paid for my beer and left the bar never to return. (MW, Strengths Journal 7)

Trust, support, and positive relationships with the family was another topic of discussion. For SN, his family's support was the main factor that motivated him to

change and make sure not to commit crime again, as “I don’t need them dying and knowing that happened again.” He explained that his family was “forgiving well enough,” “sympathetic well enough, and empathetic, and knowing that their child had done something like that or had charges like that...broke my heart.” Although both of his parents were abusive when he was a child, DJ found comfort in managing to “build a little relationship with both of them” after he left prison and before they died. The participants also discussed the support and trust of other people, including the community, or “people with the same values” (MH, PATH Dialogue), and they generally believed that “it’s what helps you moving in a positive direction” (MH, Interview 6).

Understanding the nature of what one has done and being open about it is also vital for various reasons. Still, most importantly, it helps to understand the victim’s point of view and fully realize the magnitude of the offense, consequently seeing the need to change and seek help. Several participants reported the moment of this realization as an essential step on their journey toward self-improvement. SN, for example, reported how having his personal space invaded by a homosexual hairdresser “allowed me to understand a victim’s point of view.” PA also gradually arrived at this realization, although initially he “just buried everything and ignored it...put it away and never thought twice about it.” Eventually, however, as he shared in his third interview, he “began to see the harm that I did to not just people who are hurt but all the people around them and all the people around me” and desired to use the strengths process to better himself as a person:

There’s a verse in Bible. It says, “A broken and a contrite heart, the Lord will not deny.” Basically, it means that if you come to Him and you are very broken and forthright, you are contrite, then He will forgive you. I forget what verse it is...just that I am broken. I’ve lost my sense of—. I used to have a sense of pride

and now I've lost the desire to be right, to always have to be right and strong. And you know how men are not supposed to cry? I really don't care anymore about any people seeing my weakness. (PA, Interview 6)

As MH noted during Interview 6, although "some people keep it bottled up," it is important "to bring out what's inside" to overcome weaknesses and work on improving oneself. This also involves taking responsibility for one's actions, or the "clearing of the conscience" (MH, Interview 6). For MH, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy allowed him to realize the extent of the trauma caused by being abused as a child. As a result, he said, "I realized that it wasn't any better for [the victim] than it was for me. You have to accept [what you have done]" (MW, Interview 3), "and being aware of [this], and just that issue of being aware of the problem, allows you to have a choice of whether you want to do that or not" (MW Interview 4).

Maintaining a positive mindset is another way to overcome the barriers, although, as noted in Section 2, focusing too much on the positive side of negative experiences could also hinder self-development. As MH pointed out in Interview 5, "I see a good thing about...everything that's happening in my life...and my gratitude improved my life, my living, my happiness and contentment." Although, as previously noted, it could be detrimental to be able to see positives in the committed offense, a positive mindset can help overcome barriers and weaknesses, including addiction. MH reminds himself, for example, that

Regardless of what...comes in, your whole family could perish, and you could lose everything you have and be on the streets. Maybe even your health could be affected like Job. The bottom line is...you still won't have to take a drink. (MH, Process Check-in)

This, as he noted, also helps him increase his self-esteem. MW also remarked that, although he understands the magnitude of what he had done, "I'm going to start

focusing on something else.” He intended to make a shift from too much “negative focus on what happened in the past to focusing on the positive things that I can do with my life now” (MW, Interview 4). He also explained that “self-care and realizing that I’m not perfect” and “the realization of good and bad things are part of my life” (MW, PATH discussion) help him move on and focus on his current goals. He concluded,

If you’re an optimist, you’re positive about life. You have to say that there are more good people, spiritual people in life than bad ones. And if that’s the case, then there are millions of these split experiences that have given going on throughout the world. Period. (MW, Process Check-in)

Maintaining a positive mindset also involves recognizing one’s strengths and goodness. It is important to “take it easy...on yourself” (MH, Interview 3) and to focus on “positive actions” (MH, Interview 6). For MH, this involves building the wall in his backyard, taking “pride in my work,” and having “a sense of accomplishment” (Interview 7). MW, in turn, frequently referred to his “mode of altruism” (Interview 4) and his conscious efforts to leave the past behind and focus on the good things he is doing and plans to do.

The participants also spoke about socializing and learning from others. MH mainly discussed the benefits of attending AA meetings and talking to people who share similar experiences, explaining that “by telling my story, I remind myself that I don’t want to go back there anymore” (MH, PATH Dialogue). Thus, these meetings essentially helped him work on regulation and self-control. For MW, in turn, socializing and learning from others was about socializing with Malaysian people and experiences in the Sexual Addicts Anonymous program. He believed, for example, that realizing that other program participants “are human beings and that they’re flawed” (MW, PATH discussion) brought out the goodness in him, as he felt “compassion” and “empathy” for

them. Socialization also partly related to the importance of being kind and being exposed to kindness, which MW discussed on several occasions in the mask reflections. He noted, for example, that he likes to “take a chance to reach out to people, which makes them happy or better, while my benefit is a sense of a minor ecstasy for sharing the truth or experiencing a simple act of kindness” (MW, All Masks Reflection). Furthermore, MW discussed exposure to kindness that helped him both in the early years and after committing the offense. As he explained when describing his Mask 2, the word healing, written “in very big letters,” represents “a host of people, events, Bahá’í thoughts, a lady called [name], a wife called [name], all of which and many more help me to heal.” During the interviews, participants also discussed experiences of kindness from other people. This was a particular topic for MW, who described “positive experiences” that “[add] up to getting a perspective on life” (MW, PATH Discussion).

The various accounts of finding recognition and appreciation for one’s strengths mainly referred to childhood events, with the participants discussing the positive impact on their self-perceptions. SN described the time when he returned a wallet that he found, and the owner “let me know I was a good person”; PA explained that he was perceived as being an “intelligent” and “well-behaved kid.” It is not surprising that being appreciated for one’s strengths could have a positive influence on the person’s self-perception, self-confidence, and overall well-being. However, this study showed the importance of fostering these experiences, not just in the present, but in early childhood, particularly for those most at risk of sexually offending, according to the dynamic risk factors they face. As MH pointed out, his life would have taken a different turn, and “it would be different

by...my being able to walk into a room and be at peace with everybody instead of stigmatized” (Interview 5).

Of the strengths approach, SN found it reaffirmed that

The further away you get from the last [offending] incident, the stronger you get. And it is the thing to celebrate every day. I mean, it is a thing to give yourself kudos, give yourself a blue ribbon, and all that you’ve achieved, the goals, you can cross the finish line, even if there is another day with another finish line. The farther and farther away you get from the last incident, the better, the stronger you become. And the more comfortable with yourself, you become without it. (SN, Interview 7)

MH also described a defining moment of being recognized and appreciated for his strengths. It happened when, after months of going over the importance of “showing up” for himself, he was able to overcome his usual self-saboteur and show up for a scheduled meeting despite the temptation to stay home and drink. He repeatedly referred to this moment as a positive experience and believed that the support he received from our interaction—and the acknowledgment he received afterward—was paramount to his strengths work.

SN explained how being recognized and appreciated for his strengths made him realize even further that he did not want to go back to that place and space in his life that he was in when he offended. He said,

Calling up my character strengths, you know, I think they’re in everybody...but to understand that everybody is a person, [and if that’s true], then they have a spirit. And they have a sense of moving forward, a sense of progress, a sense of having goals and completing them and being proud of themselves. [They have] pride and all these things that are illuminated in anybody, in everybody. Understanding that and understanding that you’re going to blot out one of those, one of those senses, the sense of pride, [if you offend]. The sense of accomplishment, the sense of beauty, the sense of being proud of yourself, you’re going to blot out all that if you do any of those things that are against [children’s] nature...without their understanding, for one, because, like, children, they don’t understand that. So, I don’t want to blot out my strengths, you know. I don’t want to go back to that. (SN, Interview 6)

This relates to the last theme related to overcoming barriers, trying to understand one's needs and oneself better. MH referred to this theme in describing his approach to self-improvement as the ability to change something undesirable "to the opposite." When, as he explained, he did not brush his teeth before bed and "I actually hear myself telling myself that I don't feel like brushing my teeth right now," he started saying, "I do feel like brushing my teeth" (Mask 2 reflection). Similarly, after his girlfriend broke up with him "because I told her about my past," he redefined the situation, saying, "Well, I didn't want to get married to her anyway" (Mask 3 reflection). In short, by recognizing his needs and how his mind works, MH managed to develop strategies that contributed, in one way or another, to his physical and mental well-being.

To summarize, the participants were aware of various ways to overcome barriers to healthy living. As the following section presents, in considering these ways to overcome barriers, it becomes evident that the strengths approach implemented in this study contributed to the participants' ability to put these strategies into practice. The effects of the strengths approach receive more detailed discussion in the following section.

Effects of the Strengths Approach

The extracts coded as the various effects of the strengths approach are mainly what I interpreted as these effects, rather than what the participants openly discussed. Despite directly asking the participants about the influence of the project, I believe many more effects than those discussed were evident in how they talked about their experiences and emotions.

One example was talking about emotions more openly, which I noticed during the mask reflections. The participants, especially the otherwise reserved MH, opened up about their emotions throughout the project, particularly when working on their masks. MH, for example, placed a tear in both Mask 3 and Mask 4 and explained how it symbolized his struggle to achieve goals and the resulting “feeling of being a failure” (Mask 3 reflection). Although making many attempts to avoid the topic of the offense he committed and the responsibility for it, he understands he disappointed other people (Mask 3).

During the Mask 2 discussion, MH reflected on the nature of his anger and explained that he hated himself for it and feels “worthless” (Mask 2), with his alcohol addiction hindering his progress in life. Although MW also discussed his emotions during the mask-making workshops, he was more open than MH from the start of the project. It is MH’s case that clearly demonstrated the influence of the project and the mask-making component on the ability to understand and talk about emotions more openly.

These discussions led the men to understand their strengths and themselves better, which is another effect of the strengths approach. As MW noted, the strengths, or “the positive attributes...reinforced for me in the Strength program I went through with you” (Mask 3 reflection). As shown, MH talked about his emotions, strengths, and weaknesses more openly than before, which arguably required first understanding them better. He believed that the project “has been an adventure” and “a real eye-opener” (Mask 3), something evident in the way he discussed not only his strengths but also his weaknesses. He seemed more aware of how his addiction worked and how he is sometimes not honest with himself. He was more keen to describe these processes, as he “observed it in myself

and realized what was happening” (MH, Interview 3). For example, when asked about the reasons he had taken a drink, he responded,

I’ve always been asked that question, and my answer in the past was always: I don’t know. But now, I’m starting to...want to have the answer as to why. My answer this time is: I was overconfident being sober for six months, so I chose to visit an old buddy and sat there too long. I started getting jitters, and I got this...the answer came to me, “Yeah, when I’m drinking, the jitters are gone. I’ll be relaxed and feeling a part of the scenery, as opposed to being an outcast.” And sure enough, it worked. (MH, Interview 6)

The extract indicates how MH’s understanding of himself and aspects of his offense cycle developed over the year-long study, as he increasingly tried to deconstruct the thought processes behind his actions. This marked a significant shift for MH. Unlike at the beginning of the study, over the course of the strengths work, he gradually and carefully became more willing to engage in meaningful self-reflection. When asked how he felt about the strengths process and how it applied to his own life and circumstances, he responded, “It’s like you’re using my own medicine. I wasn’t taking my own medicine, so you’re feeding it to me.” He followed by saying,

I also had this thought that [going through the strengths process with you] opened my eyes more than that of any sponsor I have ever had in [Alcoholics Anonymous]. And even more than all the rehab I’ve gone through [...] I was at [one rehab facility] for over 30 days. And then, of course, I did the drug program when I was in jail. In my nearly 40-year drinking career, this has probably been more than I’ve ever... It’s more eye-opening. It feels like it’s finally hitting home. (MH, Addressing Barriers – Reaffirming Commitment)

For MW, the project also helped him understand himself, including his strengths and weaknesses. He reflected, for example, that the strengths of which he was increasingly becoming aware “were [always] part of me” (Interview 3), but he had failed to recognize them. Now, however, “I’m becoming aware of them through this effort, [through this] strength research. ...I’m learning things about myself” (Interview 3). As previously noted, the sex offender label and the various consequences of being on the

registry were among the main barriers to healthy life and improvement. MW believed that “the integration of the character strengths snuff out any pain I have about being on the registry” (Interview 6). He said there was “nothing more powerful” than the constant flow of “encouragement from another person” he experienced throughout the process. In his closing remarks on the strengths approach and our time together, he wrote,

[All of this] touched my heart, gave me more courage to act, the confidence in myself, a belief that there are people out there who are kind, compassionate and willing to help others. This depth of our relationship with the discussions we had on life, peoples’ weaknesses and strengths, an awareness that being of service, having compassion for others IS, AND HAS BEEN, A LIFE GOAL FOR ME. We established trust, an understanding, a mutual rapport, an eagerness to talk about sensitive topics, a “flow” of ideas that caused [this work] to fly by with each share that we made. Simply put, I wish I had this type of relationship in my life [before now]. I thank you for it. (MW, “Final Words to a Friend”)

Reflecting on how the strengths approach helped him to overcome some of the previously discussed barriers to a healthy lifestyle, he stated:

All of the shares that we have made over this past year have become a part of me, [and] I am a better person for it, [now] that I have the strength not to be afraid [...] a new willingness to be vulnerable to show compassion, to joke, to speak the truth, to follow through on my projects, to love, to love, to love without any concerns that I will be rejected. All of the cracks in my personality has [been] filled in with the Strength program. I feel enthusiastic about life about doing new things at my age. ...I have hope for the future. ...Thank you. ...Thank you three times. (MW, “Final Words to a Friend”)

As this excerpt demonstrates, belonging, connection with others, community, love, and self-love seemed to be powerful underlying motivators for the men who participated in the strengths process. As such, these values acted as catalysts for coming to understand oneself and others better and ultimately embracing the small, everyday changes needed to lead a healthy life.

Participant SN, in his first interview, described a thought, which he perceived as an early memory, of a time when he felt indescribably loved:

There's something that I remember my birth. I keep saying that. And I'm not sure if it was my birth or not. That might have been a dream, but it's got nothing else around it to associate it with. So I'm thinking that's my birth. At any rate, I'm bathed in pure white, and nothing but satisfaction, just satisfaction, just love. Not in need of anything. Just knowing that I felt love all around me. So, I'm thinking that might have been the angels welcoming me into my mother's womb? Do you think? Or, it could have been my mom holding me right after being born? It could have been the floodlight from the operating room or something. I don't know. I don't know what it was. All I know is that it's there. It's part of my memory, as long as, as far back as being an infant. Love inhabited me in that moment. I never understood it or anything. I never saw any, any faces or any of that, just pure love and light, and I just want to get back to that, you know. I want to feel like that again, that love. (SN, Interview 1)

Listening to this story for the first time felt like important imagery or a coping mechanism for a man who had perhaps lacked love for most of his life. Or perhaps, I thought, just as humans are capable of holding on to trauma, perhaps they can, in some rudimentary way, also hold on to the earliest memories of human connection. Maybe as bodies hold on to the instances of trauma, they are also capable of holding on to love, even in its most basic form. Nonetheless, telling the story, it was clear that SN held very powerful connotations driving him throughout the strengths process to seek more from the connections than he had with others, which ultimately is one way to overcome barriers to healthy living. Allowing him space for these types of innermost reflections resulted in the creation of a sacred space where he felt able to explore who he was, is, and could be. Ultimately, as he described, he gained a deeper understanding of himself and was able to better address his needs and barriers more openly. "I think you need to focus on the beauty of humanity that everybody has," he said in a final reflection:

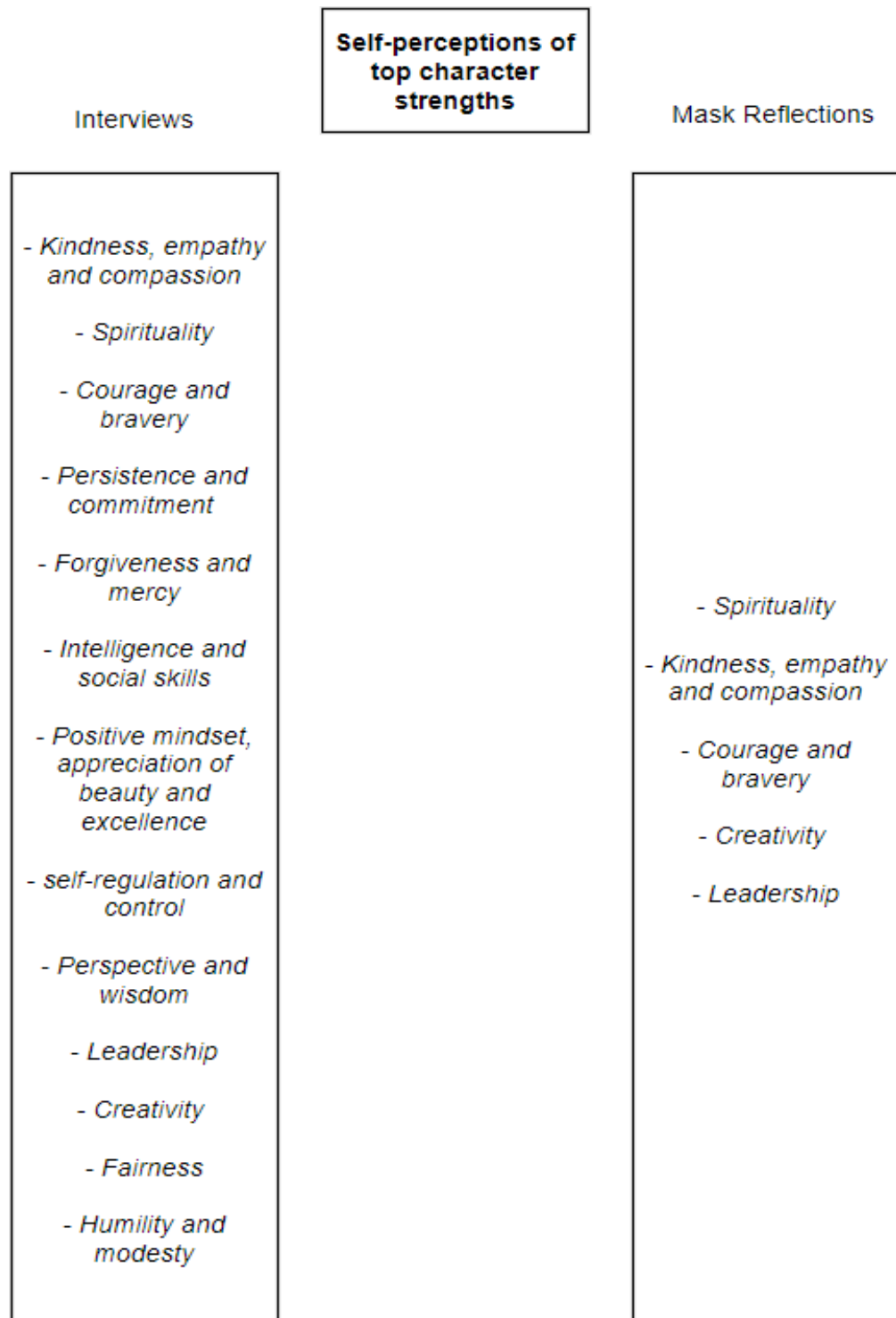
Everybody—adults, children, everybody. Everybody has that, and I had never experienced that, really, you know? That even though they're crammed together in a big old city with a bunch of concrete, and everything else, even though they're...they have all their prejudgment, prejudicial attitudes, even though all that is piled on...Even with everything they're bearing, you know, all the beauty [in people]...all of that beauty's still there. And if you focus on that alone and make it your priority, it's a good bet that you'll go back to how you were...how

you thought, you know, as a child, because that's where your head for the world is pretty empty. What do I mean? It doesn't have nothing but magic in it, you know. I think the strengths...looking at the strengths, I think it brings back some of that magic. (SN, Interview 7)

This excerpt brought to life the notable shift in SN when talking about the strengths approach. He went from someone who spoke of angels and “welcomed him to his mother’s womb” being his most profound memory of love, to reaching the realization that, despite all that had happened in his life, he still had the power to find beauty all around him. It is clear in this example that the self-perception of his character strengths had a significant impact on his ability to open himself up to the possibility of this change and embrace a growth mindset. Figure 5 presents the participants’ self-perceptions of top character strengths.

Figure 5

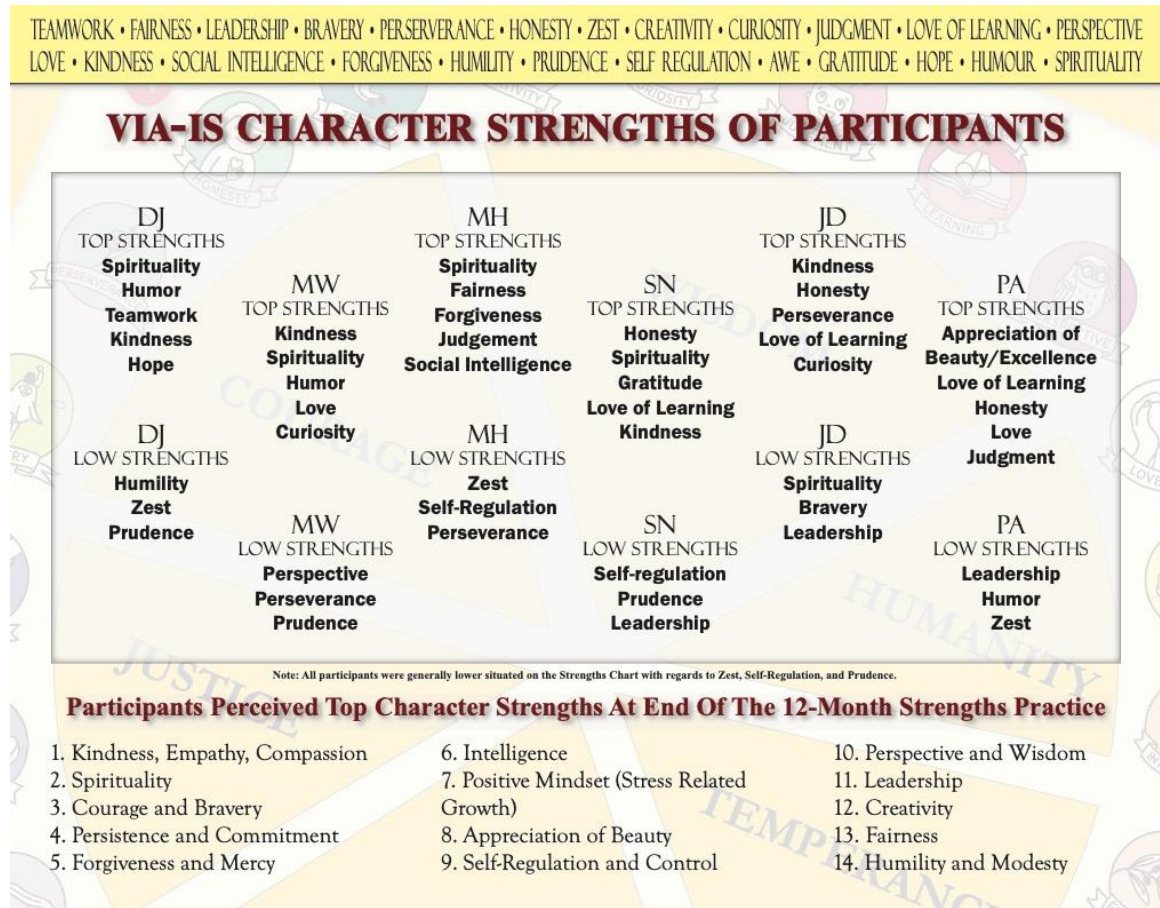
Self-Perceptions of Top Character Strengths



In this study, the definition of character strengths was as “personality traits that are part of our identity and when expressed lead to positive outcomes for ourselves and others and contribute to the collective good” (Niemiec, 2018). I referred specifically to the strengths and virtues outlined in the VIA-IS (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As depicted in Figure 6, the 24 character strengths served as a tool to engage participants in the character strengths process throughout the study. Figure 6 shows the 24 VIA-IS strengths at the top, followed by the top 5 “signature” strengths and the bottom (lowest-ranked) three strengths of each participant at the beginning of the study. The bottom-most part of the graphic shows the participants’ perceived top character strengths collectively expressed with the most frequency at the end of the 12-month character strengths practice.

Figure 6

VIA-IS Character Strengths of Participants



The subsequent text will go further in depth about how the character strengths approach influenced positive outcomes for the participants in this study and could ostensibly lead to the collective good.

Self-Perceptions of Top Character Strengths Use

One of the most significant observations of the strengths approach was participants' increased ability to understand themselves and their struggles with greater clarity. This ability could also lead to raised awareness of the need to change, which was another observed effect of the strengths program. This relates both to acknowledging one's weakness and addictions and understanding how important it is to overcome them,

ultimately becoming aware of character traits in need of change or development. MH, for example, admitted that his problems with “drinking and drugging...are real” (Mask 3). The participant also seemed to develop more awareness of the strengths he needs to focus on (“I need to work on my self-regulation and my temperance and transcendence, I think. But I said my perseverance and procrastination also”; Mask 1). He understood that “I need to come to terms with...with nature, the nature of my choices” and eventually decided that “I can’t accept being drunk or high” and “I’m gonna change that” (MH, Interview 6). MW also believed that through understanding his strengths and the increased awareness of which character traits to work on, he was able “to be my better self” (Mask 3).

This increased awareness of the need to change also seemed to contribute to forming ideas for improving oneself and one’s life. As noted, MH reflected on how to overcome his addictions and which strengths to focus on improving. MW believed that his strengths “all become clear” and “I must use them to be a productive, compassionate person” (Mask 3). Awareness also leads to actively working toward goals and self-improvement. The interviews were full of examples of the participants’ various initiatives to have something meaningful to do (which, as discussed in the previous section, is one of the key ways to overcome barriers). Both the increased understanding of oneself and the guidance and support received throughout the project seemed to contribute to participants’ desire to do something they perceived as meaningful and good. As SN noted in one of his final interviews,

I never really paid attention to [my strengths] until you wanted to do this study. ...I never recognized [my strengths], didn’t know what they were, really. ...Hopefully, your study will grow to be a tool that the world will recognize as something that makes a difference and brings the world a certain amount

of...trust. Brings us out of the darkness as a group of deplorables, you know what I'm saying? I believe that [coming to know one's] character strengths is the one thing missing. [It's the one thing] that will cause people to want to change. And give people [like me] a handle on...a tool to allow them to change. (SN, Interview 6)

Another possible effect of the project was acknowledging what you did and taking responsibility. As previously noted, MH, in particular, was reluctant to talk about the offense he committed. He frequently changed the topic when asked about it. When he did comment on it, he mainly focused on finding ways to avoid responsibility for his actions, either by blaming his alcohol addiction or by over-relying on religion (as discussed in Section 2). He did, however, eventually start to not only talk about his emotions more but also make more references to his offending behavior. He mentioned having "regrets that are born [*sic*] of my own decisions" (Mask 4) and openly admitted to being "in a kind of denial about [the offense]" (Mask 1). He also shared that he "thinks" he was at some point attracted to children (Mask 1). He felt he "can't be trusted" and that "I've disappointed myself" and "other people have felt disappointment in me." However, "in spite of all past damages from unhealthy behaviors" to which he also admitted in Mask 1 reflection, MH would like people to give him a chance and understand that he is "making progress." MW was also talking openly about his "being aware of a problem" and taking responsibility for his "addictive behavior" (Interview 4) to improve his life as a whole.

Developing positive self-perceptions and mindset, as well as increased self-confidence, were both effects of the project. MW, for example, believed that "what I gained the most from this program" is "the ability to speak the truth, to act on a need in my life space, to perform a simple act of kindness" (All Masks Reflection). He is "thankful for the Strength program because in my own way, I'm stronger to better my life, to speak up, to care about others, to love and to never curse the darkness." This is a

great improvement because, as noted in Section 2, low self-esteem and self-confidence are among the main barriers to healthy living. MW reported that his affected self-confidence hindered his ability to express his opinions freely. In Interview 4, he noted that “what I’m developing is more confidence, more lack of fear” and “I’m capable of expressing myself more than I did before.” He also openly admitted that working on the character strengths resulted in “the return” of “joy, happiness, satisfaction, ecstasy.” Perhaps one of the most striking impacts of the strengths approach for MW, however, was the increased awareness of the lack of strengths integration in other programs he had been through and his desire to bring the strengths approach forth into these other communities and environments by which he had before felt stifled. In one of his final journal entries, he shared,

I met with my therapist today. ...I described your research. I told him I was especially attracted to the project because of its theme about “strength” I also said that in [Sex Addicts Anonymous meetings], that men do not discuss strength even though it is of one of the pillars of the program: “experience, strength and hope.” My belief is that men in the [Sex Addicts Anonymous] should work to develop strength as their goal. I told [my therapist] that I did a word search in what is called the “White Book,” the Bible for 12-step programs. I could only find 15 hits for “strength”! Several of them were in prayers and came up when “experience, strength and hope” were described, usually in one sentence, without any guidelines or an explanation about the importance of strength in recovery. In other words, the 12-step books do not have any chapters about how to develop strength. If there were ever a need for “strength” development, it should be in a 12-Step program. However, how could this be implemented in a program? The views, opinions and philosophies are so ingrained in members, that to think of bringing in change of this sort [seems] impossible...I told [my therapist] that I tried to bring up this topic without success. Members are stuck on being powerless and if they can connect to a higher power, they expect God to cleanse them of their problems and addictions. (MW, Journal 12/10)

Relatedly, in the interviews, MH and MW mentioned interpreting and understanding others better as another influence of the strengths approach. As MH reflected, understanding the various strengths not only contributes to recognizing these

strengths in oneself, but also helps “to see those strengths in other people, and to understand them better” (Interview 2). This observation was a marked improvement for him, considering that at the beginning of our process, he was reluctant to connect with anyone. MW, in turn, did not give up on his endeavors to bring the strengths approach to the others in his immediate circle whom he perceived needed it. He demonstrated great courage in developing and sharing a multitude of presentations related to the importance of strengths implementation, especially in recovery. Figure 7 shows one of the many examples of the presentations he gave in groups, including Recovering Couples Anonymous.

Figure 7

MW Strengths Presentation Outline

RCA PREAMBLE

Ours is a fellowship of recovering couples. We suffer from many addictions and dysfunctions, and we share our experience, strength, and hope with each other that we may solve our common problems and help other recovering couples restore their relationships. The only requirement for membership is the desire to remain committed to each other and to develop new intimacy. (<https://recovering-couples.org/preamble/>)

Tonight we're going to talk about how we have used strength in one of the S-Programs and RCA program to work toward recovery and to mend our relationships. We usually have a reading which acts as a stepping-stone to our shares. Instead, I am offering attributes, related to strength, that you have used during your journey to sobriety and a better understanding of your spouse. They will be your inspiration for discussion. For example, how did you use "empathy" in the program to understand your partner and other couples in the program.

Read over the "Strength" attributes and choose a couple to discuss on how you used them.

"Strength" attributes:

Perspective	Patience
Humility	Understanding
Courage	Resilient
Love	Vulnerable
Open-mindedness	Decisive
Persistence	Considerate
Kindness	Conscious/Mindful
Self-Control	Attentive
Humor	Compassion
Honesty	Flexible
Social Skills	Insightful
Forgiveness	Analytical
Spirituality	Service
Sincerity	Determination
Gratitude	Creative
Hope	Supportive
Empathetic	Humor
Independent	Teamwork (R.M. Niemiec: Character Strength Inventory)

I always thought that personal solutions come from within with the assistance of our Spirits, our Higher Power or that mystery that is within us... along with the heartfelt shares from the 12-Step members. Looking back on my experiences, that Mystery has helped me, and you, to make courageous decisions towards sobriety. I also have realized that Power was with me even during the darkest times.

This example shows how MW was able to take what he learned from the strengths approach and share it with others to foster meaning and connectedness in his life. This was an important step in his process when he demonstrated his ability not only to internalize the information he was learning, but to live it out loud without the same hesitation that he once experienced as a person deflated by the shame of his past actions. His openness, astuteness, and enthusiasm to embrace the tools given to him throughout our time together, as well as his trust in my presence, allowed him to blossom into this leadership role with ease. Following his presentations to these groups, MW would often engage in deep reflections about the material presented and the group's responses. He took joy in imagining how a strengths approach might shape the future of recovery programs for men with sex addictions and would frequently challenge himself on the subject, as is evident in this journal entry:

While showering, a question came to me. "What are the criteria for developing strength? Then I thought about the relationship I have had with my therapist, that of Parent to Child, which is a psychologically unhealthy state of mind to that of a child. Then I thought about men in the [Sex Addicts Anonymous] 12 step program. Are they children, subordinate to the 12-Step program? When they say they are (1) powerless, that would be a condition a child experiences. The relationship to a (2) power greater than oneself is a subordinate state of mind. Two of the steps deal with (3) "Character defects" that are drilled into 12 step members. Many of them feel helpless about their flaws. Of course, the worst degrading, powerless feeling is the (4) sex addiction itself which condemns many of the men to guilt and shame. Then there are the heart-breaking thoughts about men's (5) dysfunctional families which come up frequently during meeting. From the negative experiences of the past, men develop a host of negative feeling: fear, low self-esteem, insecurity, pain to mention a few, all of the above contributes to a person inability to be strong. Getting back to the first question, "What are the criteria for developing strength? Is the answer the opposite of the negative influences and feeling 12 step men have? Must think about this for my next presentation. (MW, Journal 12/14)

This excerpt, in particular, highlights how MW was striving, throughout his integration of the strengths practice, to understand himself and others on a deeper level,

constantly forming connections and making meaning of the process in his mind. His clear desire to connect with and facilitate hope for himself and others remained a powerful incentive for him throughout our time together:

All the older 12-Step programs are rigid, set in their beliefs [about persons in recovery]. As I mentioned to you...I expressed myself by saying that men have to empower themselves instead of having “powerlessness” pounded into them...I wish I had known about [a strengths-based recovery program] before. ...THIS IS THE KIND OF PROGRAM THAT SOs COULD BENEFIT. I wonder how your components of your program could fit into [a strengths-based recovery program for men with sexual addictions]. I think that they could! (MW, “A Collection of Strengths Topics” Journal)

Similarly, although he exited the study prematurely, DJ also expressed gaining insight into people important in his life. He spoke particularly of his mother and how she must have felt when he was growing up. Focusing on her humanism rather than her past deeds enabled him to let go of some of his anger:

DJ: Other people make mistakes. When my mom... She was human. She was trying to do the best she can. As a single mom, having four boys running around was hardcore. Trying to make a living, she put us in an orphanage when we were young, because she had to work and nobody was around to take care of us. My grandmother was sick, she couldn't take care of us, so we went into an orphanage and just to be able to forgive my mom for some of the things that I thought were kind of bad [that] happened to me growing up.

Interviewer: That takes a great amount of strength that you have. You were able to dig deep and find that forgiveness in your heart, and that's such a vulnerable part of you, a wonderful part of you that I appreciate. It's not easy. How do you think sharing this story has helped you today?

DJ: It helps to just...see people as human. As just human... My mom. Me. We are just human, you know? That's all. (DJ, Interview 3)

In a subsequent interview, DJ described his desire to use the strengths approach to help others who had faced similar challenges feel better equipped to manage their anger and approach their trials with more confidence:

DJ: I did get in a number of fights when I was in prison. My anger would get the best of me, so I was able to display anger to other inmates and COs, sometimes, correctional officers.

Interviewer: How do you think that using your character strengths has helped to make your situation better, helped to make you a better version of you?

DJ: Just even looking at them and then knowing what they are and trying to build on that, you know? ...I had always strived...wanted to be a more positive person, and I'm pretty positive as it is, but you know, I think looking at [my strengths] makes it easier to...be able to share that with others, to help others out, free of my anger.

Interviewer: So, you want to keep looking for personal ways to address your challenges, like the anger, but you also want to keep using them as a tool to help other people with the same problem. Is that what I'm understanding?

DJ: Yeah. (DJ, Interview 4)

Other participants, such as SN, found renewed hope in the strengths process and believed that some people still wanted to see positive change take place. This belief was a significant motivator for him throughout the process:

I think you're an angel. I do. I think, to your risk in a certain amount of reputation. You have these, these people...and they're all saying things like, "What are you doing?" and all this stuff. "That's all creepy." And yet you still do it? Because you believe in something. And I think that's it. It's...got a sense of predestination in it. And, sort of, ordained by God? I mean, it's hard to look at it that way because you're in the beginning stages of it. So you don't know what potential it has and everything, and how do you get past...everybody's prejudices and everything? (SN, Interview #2)

Toward the end of our time together, when asked how he felt that the strengths approach could enable him to be more proactive and productive in the things most important to him, SN said,

I just have a heart for coming out of the darkness with this now. I mean, before, before I was [convicted of a sex offense], I was, I was just as much of a hater. I was just as much of a hater. So I was part of the darkness. And so, I'm hoping that I'm somebody that can do a lot of good for bringing the community and this group of untouchables together more. I hope you're a key part of it; I hope...that your ideas for character strength will explode into a nationwide thing. This is the dream I have... I have dreamt these things. As a daydream... [The strengths

approach will] work, and people will look toward it. And it'll cover a multitude of evil thoughts about us and prejudices and everything else and make, make people more accepting of the truths about who we are. And, and make people more accepting of it more, more in tune with the idea that the recidivism rate really is a lot lower than people who are listening or hearing or believing the people are saying, at you know. And that I could, I could feel positive in myself. (SN, Interview 7)

While continuing to struggle with significant depression and feelings of low self-worth due to his physical deformities and marked history of trauma, JD still seemed to benefit from our time together and from the regular opportunities to talk about his strengths. He admitted,

I still don't know why I'm here in this world. Why has God given me so many chances? I still don't know why. There have been a lot of times when I was growing up, like, "God, just take me out of my misery and let me go Home." And I still pray those prayers once in a while. But I guess, you know, through this process, I'm reminded that I'm not finished, because He has me taking care of other people. [Caring for others is] like my part to care about my brother! (JD, Interview 6)

Strengths as the Will Toward a Healthy Lifestyle, and Recognizing the Way to Get There

While the strengths approach had a valuable impact on participants, as illustrated in the above example from JD, it was also painfully challenging for some. Many had never before considered their innate goodness and strengths; thus, having to engage their strengths was the most difficult part of this journey. Many felt compelled to speak only of their trials and weaknesses but appeared perplexed at the concept of character strengths. Through continuous, supported opportunities for self-introspection rooted in character strengths instead of deficits, the strengths approach gradually facilitated an environment that permitted participants to reimagine themselves, their choices, and their life circumstances.

The measure of grace and hope inherent to the strengths approach gave participants a tool to safely navigate the waters of past and present traumas and challenges with the belief that, often for the first time, they possessed the means to come out the other side. This, in and of itself, influenced and created opportunities for positive experiences, self-perceptions, and behavioral change. These effects of the strengths approach are of particular significance to this study. Namely, they support existing literature suggesting that character strengths, when applied across time, play an integral role in helping people flourish, thrive, and be resilient, even during adversity (Brown et al., 2017). The following section, detailing the six functions of character strengths (Niemiec, 2018), demonstrates how participants could use a character strengths approach to move toward their goals.

The Six Functions of Character Strengths and Their Role in the Strengths Approach

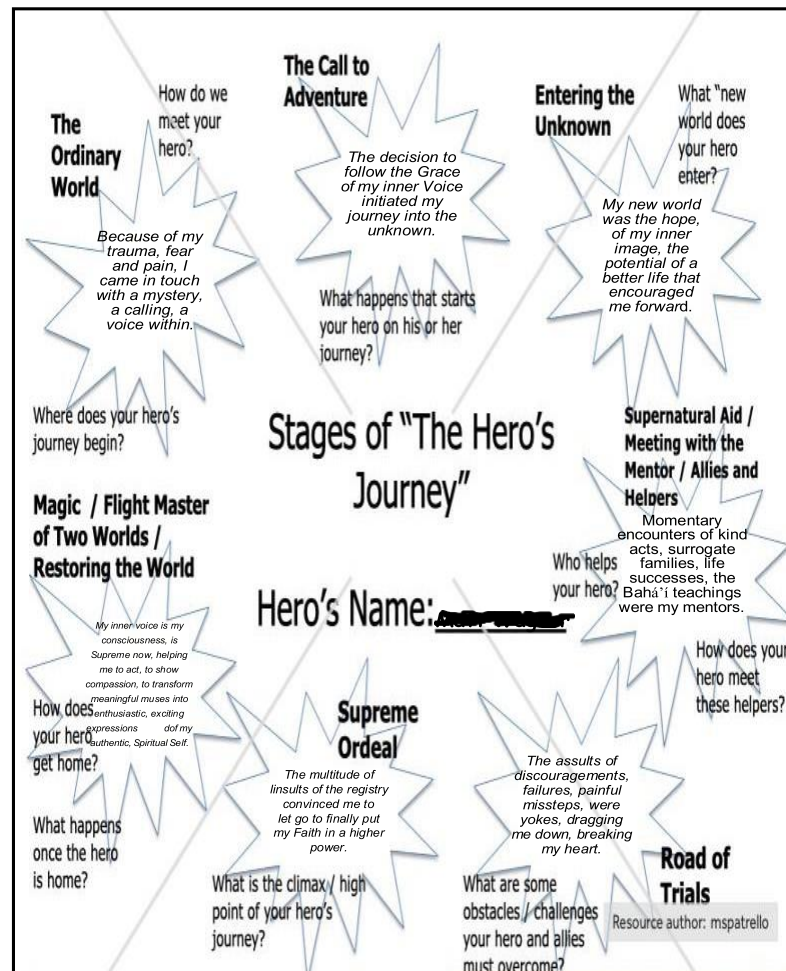
There are six significant functions of character strengths, as defined by Niemiec (2018), which this study used within the context of the strengths practice over the 12 months. These six functions were priming, mindfulness, appreciation, buffering, reappraisal, and resilience. For this study, these functions were means to encourage participants to make meaning of their strengths experience and put their strengths into tangible practice. The following section is a breakdown of the six functions, outlining some of the ways participants identified utilizing the strengths process while engaging the functions during the strengths practice.

Function 1: Priming: Utilizing of Character Strengths in Preparation for Strengths Awareness and Use

For the purposes of this study, all participants engaged in the “priming” function when they first took the VIA-IS survey in preparation for the strengths practice. Some further employed the priming function at various stages of the process by bringing the priming function to life across contexts. Some of the ways this occurred included written and art-based strengths exercises, such as “strengths spotting” (e.g., identifying strengths in oneself and others through the use of stories); strengths cards; strengths-based mask-making, poetry and writings; and the creation of a person-centered plan of action to further engage their strengths (PATH). One participant, MW, created a Hero’s Journey map (Campbell, 1990) in these activities. This occurred spontaneously, as the participant took our discussions of psychologist and mythologist Joseph Campbell to heart, artfully documenting his struggles, strengths, call to adventure, and other key components to enhance his understanding of his strengths and put them to use (see Figure 9).

Figure 8

Hero's Journey Map by Participant MW



Function 2: Mindfulness: Character Strengths Acting in Collaboration With Mindful Awareness of the Present Moment and Experience

Participants' journal reflections were deliberately designed to engage the mindfulness function by asking them to reflect on what strengths they worked on during that week, as well as to describe in as much detail as they could: what they did, what they thought, what was the biggest challenge for them, what happened afterward, and what they gained. This process was particularly challenging for men who, for the most part,

had never engaged in purposeful journaling. However, when combined with free association writings, the exercise was particularly powerful for some, especially MW, as one of his goals was to write. Some considerations were participants' ability to understand and process the prompts, especially as some were operating at different intellectual levels due to cognitive functioning and drug and alcohol use. The journaling and prompts were less structured for these participants, but still worked to actively engage them in mindful associations related to the character strengths practice. One technique used in such a case was asking the participant to choose a character strength, place it somewhere he could visually see it every day and then jot down thoughts, feelings, and ideas if and when they arose.

Mask-making was another technique used to engage the mindfulness function when journaling became difficult. Although mask-making was not a required part of the practice, it led to some of the most important introspections for the two individuals who elected to engage in it, which they could not glean during the interview process. One such instance came when, during a mask-making session, MH acknowledged and accepted responsibility for what he had done, an issue he had previously avoided during the interviews. Reflecting on the impact of the strengths approach on his ability to accept himself wholly and make positive changes in his life, he said,

I think by...by focusing on...on the progress, making progress in these...good areas, as opposed to...feeding my weaknesses, it will...definitely be...something that...helps my...desire to be a part of the solution and not the problem. And it will definitely be real. ... It'll be a real benefit to my... position...in society, and not only benefit me personally but also those around me. (MH, Interview #5)

The marked strain in his speech patterns, as reflected by the frequent stutters and pauses, was particularly evident as MH struggled to discuss, dissect, and integrate ideas

about strengths. Still, the fact that he could engage the mindfulness function throughout was a considerable step in his process.

Similarly, participant MW frequently engaged in mindful reflection about his past and present circumstances. One example was his journal entry about acceptance:

At the Thursday lunch hour [Sex Addicts Anonymous] meeting, the topic was about acceptance and consciousness. My share described my consciousness about the negative aspects when I first entered the [Sex Addicts Anonymous] program, such episodes of the challenges of discovery, the first awareness and acceptance that I was a sex addict, that I was powerless, the awareness of my past dysfunctional family, my character defects, the events leading up to a “slip.” I compared how these negative experiences CONTROLLED my life and had negative consequences. (MW, Journal Entry 8)

Later, MW discussed concepts around mindful awareness and the ability to practice a certain degree of consciousness related to the strengths approach, writing,

Yesterday I was thinking about the character strengths of which I try to apply in my life at an appropriate moment and if I am “present,” aware, conscious and strong enough to apply them. Strength is the obvious key, the foundation for applying each one of the character strengths. You can’t be curious if you are in fear (lack of strength). You can’t show gratitude for the same reason, you can’t be any of them: loving, open-minded, kind etc. without being in the state of strength, courage. (MW, Journal Entry 8)

By reflecting on and being mindful of their own experience, the “mindful” strengths function also allowed participants to relate to others in more meaningful ways and express empathy. MH began the process of viewing empathy as a weakness but later identified it as a strength. He used ping pong as an example, telling stories about his anger and doubt in his abilities when he first began playing, which led him to quit something that he loved and not return until years later. At the end of the study, he described empathy as being “supportive of other people’s feelings,” observing that he would occasionally purposefully lose games to new players to help them feel more at ease during the game. This statement is one example of how MH enacted the mindfulness

function to take on other people's perspectives, challenge himself in social situations, and form meaningful connections about his process and how it relates to others.

Similarly, MW described how his experiences led him to experience a deep empathy for others in painful situations. He said,

Within that instant of clarity, I felt empathy for the woman's pain, a need in my heart to reach out to her, a feeling of compassion, a certitude, a culmination of my life experiences that gave me the strength to act. (MW, Interview #5)

He frequently relied on the mindful function of his strengths practice to engage in ideas and writings about how to bring the strengths approach out into the community and spread "simple acts of kindness."

Function 3: Appreciation: Strengths Used in the Expression of Value for What Has Occurred

Appreciation emerged in the present study when participants wrote a gratitude letter thanking those who had played valuable roles in their lives, either past or present. MW wrote a moving letter to the Bahá'í congregation, and specifically spoke of a mentor "with his angelic smile, a smile that greeted me every time we met at his home, at firesides, deepenings and at the delicious meals we had at Bahá'í events...thank you, for your loving intellectual embrace!" He recalled with affection "how the Bahá'is shared their love with a...boy who came from a broken family, was terribly insecure and full of fear, suspicious of people and incapable of giving or receiving love."

JD, who was arguably the most resistant to the idea of learning about character strengths, eventually engaged in profound values work as he spoke about his adoptive mother and the impact her strength had on his life:

She wanted to change her field of teaching, prior to teaching me, and seeing how many kids need that same type of help. She saw, she witnessed how it changed me and wanted to share it with others' kids. I can still remember her coming home

and crying and giving up. She would say, ‘I have this one little boy that reminds me a lot of you when you were growing up, and all the challenges you were facing in learning.’ She would say, ‘Why can’t I get through [to] him?’ And I told her, ‘Mom, each child is different it takes time and patience. Don’t give up on him; keep at it. Look at me, look how I turned out? You spent long hours and patience with me. You never gave up on me! I was your challenging kid, and now look what you have accomplished. I made it through. Right there and then I realized...a spark just lit up. I gave her a hug and kiss and told ‘Thank You, Mom. I Love You.’ (JD, Journal Entry 6)

MH frequently expressed his gratitude for God and everything He meant to him. He described several examples where he felt gratitude to God for rescuing him. On one occasion, MH had fallen off a three-story building and “didn’t break any bones or receive any major injuries...but the biggest thing was my reaction to it. It was one of extreme gratitude to God for...for keeping me alive through that” (MH, Interview 2).

Function 4: Buffering: Character Strengths Used in the Prevention of Problems

Participants in the present study frequently engaged the buffering function by participating in several study activities that promoted strengths awareness and exercise. MW engaged in poetry writing as a form of creativity and catharsis, which led to insight related to his strengths and how he could use them to address some of the challenges in daily life. Following are some examples showing how he used strengths-based activities to engage in goal-directed thoughts related to his future and address some of the barriers to a healthy lifestyle.

Participants used exercises in strengths spotting to learn to recognize strengths to overcome challenges and prevent future barriers, including extending the strengths approach into the community. JD discussed strengths spotting regularly, which arguably helped him most in the areas of social intelligence, connection, and relation to others. He provided the following story as an example of strengths spotting in a situation that

allowed him to not only prevent problems for himself through engaging in positive, prosocial friendships, but also to help others, something that was important to him:

A kid...in church, he was really bad in stuttering. So the mom said, "What do you suggest?" I said, "Does your son like to sing?" She goes, "Yes." I said, "Encourage him to sing with the radio. Just encourage him, that's the way I started [when I had a stuttering problem]." I started singing along with the radio, because our wavelengths is [*sic*] what causes us to stutter. We don't catch that wavelength, then we stutter. But once we start catching that wavelength, our stuttering starts to...how do you say? It starts to let go of that stutter [in the brain]. ...So, finally, his mom did that, and sure enough, within time, she started seeing results! And she came up to me and hugged me, and hugged me, and hugged me: "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" It felt nice. (JD, Interview #1)

Function 5: Reappraisal: Character Strengths Serving to Explain and/or

Reinterpret the Complex Dynamics of Problems

Putting strengths spotting through storytelling also allowed JD to engage the fifth function of reappraisal. Most importantly for him, he could make connections between his feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, shame, and embarrassment to his later offense behavior. Even though it remained a constant struggle throughout for JD to stay in this growth mindset, his reflections held a great deal of emotion and insight. In coming to recognize the complex nature of his and others' problems, he was able to practice forgiveness. He described this in a story about reconnecting with his adoptive father:

Before my [adoptive mother's] death, I overheard Mom telling Dad, "When I'm gone from this world, please be patient with [our son]. Yes, he's hard to understand and [can be slow in] getting to the point of a conversation. Don't let him be afraid of you. He needs you now. He looks up to you." [After hearing that], for the first time after 35 years, I found the words to tell my dad how I felt. Even though he gave me a wonderful life...there was always a distance between us. What was keeping us apart from each other? Why couldn't I have that level of communication with him, you know. I was scared and nervous, not knowing how he would react. I told him, "Dad, I'm sorry"...sorry for being scared of him. Sorry for being slow. "I'll try to do better in talking with you." For the first time, we cried, laughed and hugged each other and told each other, "I'm sorry, and I love you." (JD, Interview 5)

Similarly, MW came to understand that everyone has flaws and practices extending grace to those who have hurt him:

As I said, I realized that I had shortcomings, addicts have them, and people outside the program with the same behavior...allowed me to come to this conclusion... I must have compassion for my parents instead of the resentment I had and many of the addicts have in the program. (MW, Journal 6)

MH further related to the character strengths function of reappraisal by speaking to his increased ability over the years to practice forgiveness and try to let go of his anger:

It's like a daily process of...like whenever a memory comes back to you that makes you feel resentful and not forgiving, then the practice is to try to relax and not let it bother you. You know, that is water under the bridge, and just forget about it. Or you could get angry about it all over again and let it affect you in a negative way. (MH, Journal 6)

Function 6: Resilience: Character Strengths Used in Bouncing Back From Life

Setbacks or Problems

Many of the participants exhibited courage in bouncing back at multiple points of the study. Due to their intense trauma histories, they struggled to believe that character strengths could be applied to their lives but continued to show up boldly and lean into the process when there were setbacks and problems. Participant SN displayed resilience by verbally confessing that the struggle he experiences daily “doesn’t matter”:

I am who I am. And I know who I am. I’m proud of myself and everything. And that’s probably where I’m at my best. I don’t know. I’m not going to let [the struggles and setbacks] destroy me, I guess. (SN, Interview 4)

MW also viewed resiliency in the same way as carrying on in the face of adversity and making a quick recovery. MW said,

Knowing that I have character defects, yet I still forge on when bad thing[s] happen to me or have the image in my mind that they do. For a person who is striving in extraordinarily challenging situations, this is normal...always

something that comes up to block me, yet I try to overcome these tests. (MW Journal 8)

MH exhibited bravery when operating in the resilience function, continuing to live his life even after being molested in his youth and sharing his story with others as an adult. When engaging in the strengths approach, he recognized this as a form of resiliency:

I was brave, right, to...never once seriously consider committing suicide, like a lot of people have. They have made attempts, but I've never attempted. So that's a plus. Even though I had depression, not that kind of depression [to attempt taking my life]. (MH, Interview 2)

MH also demonstrated resilient strengths work by showing up to important meetings (accountability), even when he did not feel like attending, was late, or struggled with his addiction. He described the act of showing up as “the boldest, most courageous thing that a person could do,” which motivated him to do better. The following excerpt from the researcher’s journal presents a breakthrough moment wherein the trusting relationship between the researcher and MH motivated the participant to stay the course and inspired resilience over his continued struggle with addiction and accountability:

I had an interview today with [MH]. He contacted me this morning to inform me he couldn’t make it to our meeting. I had already arranged for [my daughter’s] care and was soon on my way to the appointment. I informed [MH] of this and asked the reason he would be unable to make it.

MH: “Hungover.”

Show up.

MH: “I reek.”

Show up.

MH: “You’ll need a gas mask.”

Interviewer: “No problem. I can accept your smell, just not your lack of accountability to yourself.”

MH: “I can only take the bus to get there.”

Interviewer: “That must be difficult. I know how frustrating it can be to have to rely only on public transportation.”

Show up.

MH: “I have another appointment on the same side of town, but it’s at 1:00 p.m.”

Interviewer: “Wonderful! Since we’ll only be a couple hours, you’ll be early.”

Show up.

...

MH: “I could make it at 10 a.m.”

Interviewer: “Great. See you at 9:30 a.m.”

MH: “Wow, I guess I could do that.”

Interviewer: “I’m here.”

MH: “Me too. Thank you.”

Sometimes, the most important step forward is just to come as you are.

Show up.

The examples in this section provide a glimpse into the various study tasks and strengths practices participants undertook and which respective functions of strengths they served, based on participants’ stories, writings, and other contributions. The examples also indicate how the conscious incorporation of Niemiec’s six functions of character strengths into the strengths approach can ostensibly help these men activate character strengths for goal-oriented growth and change. The following section presents in detail a final component of the strengths practice, the mask-making workshop series,

which two participants, MW and MH, completed. The workshops provided another outlet to express and enact the character strengths practice.

Mask-Making as an Augmentation to the Strength Approach:

An Evolving Portrait of the Self Through the Use of Integrative Art

Sorrell (1973) described the “mask” as an important “visual realization of our two-fold existence” (p. 11, as cited by Janzing, 1998, p. 152). Bari Rolfe (1977), author of *Behind the Mask*, posited that “a mask is a role; a mask effaces who we are, to show who we want to be; a mask hides, and reveals that which it hides; a mask is oneself, the realization of the inner spirit and a mask is the other” (as cited in Johnson, 1992, p. 1). When individuals construct masks, and when all of these elements are encompassed by and through their creations, they are therefore better able to traverse their lives through various contexts (Johnson, 1992). As observed by Dunn-Snow and Joy-Smellie (2000), masks, when utilized effectively, can act as protective symbols and aid in profound transformative experiences for individuals engaging in the mask-making process. Mask-making can increase self-awareness and self-concept, help manage difficult emotions, and facilitate greater self-efficacy, which, as research supports, is vital for crime desistance.

The Mask-Making Process in the Context of the Strengths Approach

In the context of this study, the process of mask-making was a means to augment the strengths approach by providing space for participants to create an evolving portrait of the “self” through the use of integrative art as they moved through the character strengths tasks. Mask-making was a rigorous integrative strategy to help participants better understand complex, multifaceted subjects related to the character strengths

process. Although the mask-making workshops were not a requirement of the study, mask-making became an integral part of the strengths process for the two participants who completed the workshop series.

With this exercise in strengths identification and integration through art, participants engaged in ever-evolving personal identity narratives supported by each individual's unique mask-making process. The creation of the masks facilitated participants' social and emotional learning by creating space for them to process and make meaning of their experiences utilizing the strengths approach. Mask-making expanded on participants' understanding of self and others over time by engaging them in a reflective process that challenged them to see, experience, shape, and reshape their personal identity multiple times during a year, then to share it with others.

The ability to experience their identity as something fluid and constantly evolving positively impacted participants' performance and confidence. This result is notable considering these are two areas considered barriers to healthy living. The imaginative nature of the art also made it easier for participants to share experiences that they struggled to address in the interviews and enhanced their ability to express their emotions.

In particular, the art-rich, iterative process allowed participants to challenge, change, expand, or expunge parts of their identity at different points of the strengths work. At each juncture of the mask-making journey, they were constantly posing the question "Who am I?" across various domains and contexts. Mask-making enabled each man to examine himself in new and emerging ways that became a powerful way to further develop the self and strengths inherent to his process.

The mask-making process was unique to the other components of the strengths approach in some ways because it repeatedly created a space where participants could transcend both time and space. They could go wherever they needed to go, mentally or emotionally, to envision themselves in new, strengths-equipped ways. The process supported multiple narratives of the self, and its tactile nature served as a buffer for the stress sometimes present within the interviews and other settings. One of the main themes to emerge from mask-making was the importance of personal identity development related to how participants see themselves and how they believe or would like others to see them. Exploring this topic and honoring where they come from and what has influenced their journey allowed these two men to share in ways that they previously had not.

The Mask-Making Process for Participants MW and MH

For the two participants who chose to partake, the mask-making workshop series occurred bimonthly. A series of strengths-based questions guided the process, allowing participants to reflect verbally and in written form with the researcher. Depending on the workshop, these questions addressed a plethora of issues related to identity formation, finding strength in the struggle, imagining the best possible self, discovering the golden Buddha/essence, and, finally, coming full circle and looking toward the future. The imagery and words on the mask remained at the interpretation of the artists (participants) themselves. Following is a discussion of the participants' mask-making experiences and how the workshops related to the men's strengths processes.

Workshop 1: Old Me, True Me

The goal of the first mask-making workshop series, “Old Me, True Me,” was to allow both participants space to reimagine themselves from the lens of their character strengths. The process centered around the question, “If no one knew about your former self, had heard about your past actions, or had an idea about you or your character, who would you be?” Participants received support in identifying and clarifying core values by creating a visual representation of who and what they attributed the most meaning to in their lives.

In making the mask, the men had the space to imagine how these values had or might come to life in the absence of labels. In describing their masks, both men spoke about the importance of a higher power in their lives, which they felt pushed them forward and gave them a sense of meaning and security. MH said that if he could choose to be someone else, he would “be Jesus”:

MH: I always hear preachers say that He was sent to us to be our prime example...of a person who lived a perfect life and [who] we’re supposed to emulate. But I think... His actions that are recorded in the Gospel, everything He did, you know, speaks for itself. Just like walking on the water, healing leprosy and paralysis and everything, blindness, you name it. Yeah, that would be good.

Interviewer: You can relate to that, walking on water, healing leprosy and blindness. That’s something that feels powerful to you in your life now?

MH: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, let’s just extrapolate Jesus for a little bit. Let’s explore this a little bit more. Is that okay? So, what is it about Jesus that you admire so much?

MH.: Trust. His trust in the Creator.

Interviewer: Okay. So trust, that’s a value that you have. (MH, Mask 1)

Similarly, MW talked about the importance of trust in a higher power, an “inner voice” that pushed him to strive for better even amid pain. His experience of connectedness with this power that was greater than himself was apparent in the depth of his words and speech. He called his mask “Dream Hunter” as a nod to this journey of the spirit:

[The description] connects to my life’s journey. The words “strive” and “search” are the mainstays of my life to seek out meaning through a Spiritual calling inside myself. The mystery of “Grace” or gift was the factor that gave me guidance, strength to overcome my fears through the challenges and the heartbreaks of my life. The word “incite” also is significant, because with this Grace I could incite myself to act on the choices that led to an extraordinary life! Even with my deep-seated insecurity, along with the pain that seemed [in the past] to be hovering over me, I made decisions anyway. It was this inner Spiritual power that tipped the scales [for me] to choose to move on to a new adventure.

Describing how the mask reflected his strengths journey, MW said:

As a “Dream Hunter” all my life I would describe myself as a person today who strives, with the voice inside, toward meaning. It has been the engine that has guided me. That teenager [self] would not be any different than who I am today. The difference is for that young man...fear hovered over me with each decision I made. Now, my decisions are based on strength, confidence, certitude, a foundation of Spiritual awareness along with a Spiritual spark that allows me to act to do the right thing. I feel certitude, a certainty, that my foundation of values are with me in showing love and compassion to others. This is the awareness I received because of the Strength Program. I don’t kid myself though because life is very complicated with the consequences of my decisions. I’m also not perfect. Nevertheless, I accept my vulnerability to take a chance to reach out to people, which makes them happy or better while my benefit is a sense of a minor ecstasy for sharing the truth or experiencing a simple act of kindness. (MW, Mask #1)

MH struggled to imagine how he might be without labels and was fearful of being vulnerable in front of others. Through the creation of the mask, he came to realize and acknowledge how much he kept to himself about who he was. He realized that the messages he had inherited from others about who he was (as seen on the front of his mask) limited his perception of his ability:

MH: What I'm mostly about is trying to hide everything about myself, you know, because it feels like...like I'm, you've heard them say it: *you're as sick as your darkest secrets*, or something like that.

Interviewer: Mm. Do you think you have a lot of dark secrets?

MH: Mm, yeah. Not...a whole lot, but you know, I have my share. definitely. And...I tend to be more embarrassed about them than is healthy, I think, because they say you're supposed to use [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings to get stuff off your chest.

Interviewer: You don't think you do that?

MH: Not...not quite like, especially...

Interviewer: What do you think would happen if you divulged these things?

MH: I'd probably...I'd probably have a sense of relief. (MH, Mask 1)

Both participants, in the making of their mask, identified *trust* as the core value that they believed vital in helping them progress. Trust became a cornerstone of our work together, especially as we began to delve deeper into identifying barriers to healthy living and improvement. This was the primary focus of the second mask-making workshop series.

Workshop 2: Finding Strength in the Struggle

In the second mask-making workshop series, "Finding Strength in the Struggle," participants were to "create a mask that personifies your biggest struggles." They also reflected on what strengths have gotten them through these struggles in the past. MH spoke in depth about his struggle with substance abuse and addiction since his adolescence, labeling the mask with a large, bold-lettered "WHY" across the forehead. He reflected on this in an excerpt from the mask-making workshop:

MH: The biggest thing I was getting [from abusing alcohol and drugs] was escape. You know, I was...enjoying that feeling of escape from...this dire reality,

this wickedness that's all around us. And...I could also escape responsibilities. Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: I see. So, it sounds like what I'm hearing you say is that you were escaping from that old message about the world that you've had for such a long time.

MH: Yeah.

Interviewer: Some of those things were on your last mask, as I recall. That it's tragic, that it's painful, that it's detrimental, that there's really no goodness in the world. All those old messages. It sounds like what you're telling me is that you were trying to escape that reality...

MH: That's right.

Interviewer: What responsibilities might you be escaping through your drug and alcohol use?

MH: Myself, maybe, the responsibility of...you know, myself. (MH, Mask 2)

Related to his avoidance of responsibility to himself, MH also spoke to his fear of failure and the limits that he put on himself because of this fear. This became a barrier to him setting goals, especially when he felt he might be setting himself up for another disappointment. His mask depicted a tear to show his feelings around failure.

Interviewer: It says: *"You cannot do this, so don't even try. Don't set goals because you never meet them."*

MH: Yeah, that's right. I've always... That's something I've always been real good at, is not...*not* trying to set any goals. Been real good at not trying to set a goal.

Interviewer: Why do you think that there is some hesitation for you to set a goal?

MH: Well, because...because I feel more, like more of a failure...when I don't make the goal. It's past the deadline and I didn't do it, so I'm a failure. So it's better not to set any goals, and I wouldn't be a failure. That's why it's better not to set goals. (MH, Mask 2)

MW, by contrast, spoke about overcoming his fear and sense of inadequacy by leaning further into the "spiritual power," which he saw as his way out of the darkness.

He mentioned in his reflections the strength, will, and necessity to survive and believed that the “inner power” afforded to him through his faith helped him see himself as valuable, worthy, and possessing the strengths to overcome his shame and despair in his life:

I feel that I have practice in pain with the dysfunctional family I had that caused me to develop into an insecure, fearful, suspicious, guilt-ridden human being. As I overcome much of the pain of the past, so do I confront each challenge with total fear at first. Yet, with growing acceptance that I have *had* to survive, I had to persevere, I had to deal with my karma...one day at a time. I won't list the strength that I have used to overcome these affronts to my life, but simply declare that it was an *inner power* that got me through the painful experiences. I think that it's the Spiritual power that triggers my strength to get through such traumatic experiences. Without it, I could not have utilized [the strengths] to gain sanity, to step up to them, to believe that this scarlet letter does not define who I am as a child of God, a human being who should receive understanding and forgiveness from my fellow-man. (MW, Mask 2)

In describing his mask, MW spoke to his desire and need to make meaning from his most painful experiences and to use them as opportunities to connect with others, which drew him further into the strengths practices:

The name of the mask [“Dancing to the Music”] came from the Chinese characters on the mask. Later, my wife translated the words, which means “Dancing with enthusiasm and beauty through life,” a metaphor for finding meaning and living life to the fullest without inhibitions. I tried to do this. On the mask, there are words “hidden,” “vision,” with an “eye,” along with “lightening” [*sic*] and a “tornado.” [These symbols] represent the turmoil in my life with those heartbreaks, challenges... [They] brought on fear, anxiety each time I came to a crossroads and had to make a decision. Other words about “find truth through our difficulties and suffering” was the MO for my life, always realizing that through my “pain” came “healing” and “Quietus,” a calm which led to a great freedom. The smiling sun is where I am today, with the certitude that I can find my way through compassion toward others and being of service. (MW, Mask 2)

Workshop 3: Imagining My Best Possible Self

The third workshop series took place at a point in the strengths process when participants were guided toward implementing their character strengths in their daily

lives. The focus of the workshop was to allow participants to imagine what their lives would look like if “you experienced some relief from your struggles, if your situation were resolved, or if there was a shift for the better.” Their mask was to reflect who or what would be present in their lives to make it a life worth living. This topic, like the previous one, focused on overcoming barriers to healthy living and improvement. However, it did so by fostering goal-oriented thinking.

For MH, goal-oriented thinking was the most difficult. His mask reflected an internal struggle to take power over his life and be responsible for himself and his actions. In creating his mask, he repeatedly went back to material things, such as a car, money, and girlfriends, to describe what would make his life worth living, but then contradicted those claims by saying he felt happy with a life of lesser responsibility. The front of his mask, which he called “Dichotomy,” showed a chaotic visual which resembled Jesus Christ. On the back, he wrote, “Peace of Mind; I know and believe the Truth.”

Significantly, it was only during mask making that MH found the courage or desire to address his past offense. During the interviews, he would almost always speak of his alcohol or drug use; in making a mask, he found it easier to speak of the offense in a less threatening way. It was within these workshops, and particularly during this session, that MH made the most progress toward taking responsibility and ownership of his past behaviors, as noted in this exchange:

Interviewer: Can you tell me about this red, these red cheeks here?

MH: Sure, yeah, it’s too embarrassing. I guess it’s embarrassment.

Interviewer: It’s embarrassing? So it sounds like you carried a lot of shame about both [the abuse that happened to you and the abuse you perpetrated], then.

MH: Sure, yeah. Especially with...my offense... That was made clear when...to me, when they picked me up for questioning, and they drove me to their offices and were investigating the incident, I was in denial completely about it. I didn't want to own up to it. I realized that if I had maintained my denial, that I would, you know...I could have easily gotten off with just my word against theirs, and they could have dropped the charges and nothing would've come of it. But I realized, I realize...that I did...I *did* do something that was...out of the normal. So, I did do that. I did do that. (MH, Mask 3)

While MH struggled to reconcile two parts of himself and his identity, MW also described the constant struggle of balancing two identities, two opposing worlds, two parts of the self. He referred to his mask as “Waking Up to Your Better Half,” an homage to his desire to embrace the more authentic parts of himself:

There are two sides to the mask: one displaying positive attributes and the other side negative ones. The mask is separated by a strip of Buddha faces, dual in nature...one evil and the other good, with back and forth arrows along the strip indicating a struggle between the two natures. There is a monkey representing a “monkey mind” on the strip... In agony, representing the confusion, turmoil, and constant stimuli of ideas going on in my mind. I believe that if I had more direction from my family, concrete attributes taught to me, keeping me grounded on the straight and narrow as they say... I wouldn't have made as many bad decisions. Without any standards given to me, my only guidance was the Grace that I had mentioned, something inside, telling me the right things to do. The name of the mask says to *wake up to your better half*. I think I have. As an adult, now, as I sit here, I am a more authentic, spiritual person. (MW, Mask 3)

When reflecting on challenges, MW's mind went to the registry. He imaged that being released from the burden of the registry would be something that made his life fuller and less painful. However, through his art, he was also able to express how living through the challenges of his life made him stronger and better equipped to act on his best possible self:

When an event happens because of the registry, the strike enters my soul, reminding me of my burden. Therefore, freedom from the registry would mean peace of mind without any more abrupt insults to my life. I still write, sing, create videos, play tennis and strive to be better. I have always done this under traumatic experiences. The challenges have made me a better person, and I understand and

appreciate love now when I did not have it, contentment vs. the painful times in my life, happiness vs. the times I was miserable. So I am doing well with or without the registry. Yet freedom without it would be a gift. (MW, Mask 3)

Regarding what “freedom” from his struggles would feel like, MH described it as being like a literal Heaven:

MH: It’s supposed to be a glory, like the rays of glory emanating from you. Because nothing could be better than this feeling. This is kind of like when you get to heaven. Everything’s perfect. And just totally, like the best thing that you’ve ever felt. And it doesn’t go away. It’s constant. And then, of course, this is the bad side, the dark. I colored it black because it’s all dark and mysterious. It has fear and loathing. And part of it is trying to, up here, it’s trying to eat my soul. This is like my soul.

Interviewer: Tell me more about the part that’s trying to eat your soul.

MH: Yeah. It’s like evil. This is pretty much a description of the way I see life. This life, anyway. It’s a battle between good and evil...one side and the other. And I got a tear, a tear of joy. But I wanted my mouth to be exaggerated, really happy, super happy. But it turned out that it’s only like a little bit of a smile there, because I haven’t gotten there. (MH, Mask 3)

Workshop 4: Discovering the Golden Essence

The fourth mask-making workshop encouraged participants to reflect on their outer “shell of hardness” and their inner “golden essence.” The shell of hardness was made up of things in their lives that had caused them the most pain, created the most barriers, and hid or diminished their virtues. The golden essence, in contrast, comprised things the men felt were the most authentic and good about themselves. Perhaps importantly, throughout the mask-making process and in his reflection, MW described the “shell of hardness” as being a motivator for some of the positive things that later came about in his life:

The shell of hardness created out of fear developed by...seeing my drunken mother being beaten, dragging her to her bedroom, watching detectives taking her away, my parents’ separation, sending me away, a slap across the face, my father saying, “You can’t do anything right,” him leaving me in a neighborhood jail cell

for a weekend for a minor infringement, a step mother who avoided me and hardly ever spoke to me, a tremble in my hand from birth, a stutter that developed over time, the trauma that forced me out my house at 15, the experience of “quiet desperation” with no one to turn to, the dropping out of college twice, the doubt, the insecurity, the fear, the lack of any self-esteem, the absence of love...set the stage for events to follow, good and bad.

Asked why he thought that his shell of hardness, made up of the negative or challenging events that had occurred in his life, had served him well in some capacities, MW referred to stress-related growth. For most of his life, fear kept him separate from others, which meant, from his perspective, that he was forced to survive and make it on his own. He felt it was these experiences that, much later in his life, allowed him to practice more compassion and authenticity and, eventually, reach out. He said,

There is something powerful about fear. [Fear] puts you on guard, heightens your awareness, causes introspection, forces you to survive any way you can, causes an awareness of an inner voice, the only thread of hope that kept me going. Most important, I was too afraid to conform, afraid of rejection, never becoming part of any peer group. It was me in my mind, with the voice, with the decisions I made with trepidation not knowing if I was right or wrong, only the hope to carry on with them.

These fractured life experiences were the norm for me with tragic as well as joyous consequences for me. It was my “web of life” with its gems, good and evil, that punched me in the face, kicked me unconscious, told me at every step that I was worthless, that...no one loved me. Out of this came a man who is capable of showing compassion, sharing hope, reaching out to others, loving, loving others...who am I now...an authentic, Spiritual being...ready for the next challenge. (MW, Mask 4)

MH addressed using the “shell of hardness” as a form of protection when he wanted to escape, but ultimately conceded that other forms of pleasure might be possible if he were able to live more authentically:

Interviewer: So, what you did in the past, the abuses that have happened to you in the past and those that you’ve perpetrated against others, those are all part of that shell of hardness, that dark layer, like you’ve talked about. And so it sounds like you know that, yet there are times that you kind of still hide behind that shell of hardness or shield yourself. What do you say to that?

MH: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: So what, if any, advantage is there to holding on to those things that you mentioned? The shell of hardness, everything that it entails.

MH: Well, I've come to consider it my only means of escape from reality. It's really easy to do that with drugs and alcohol. But I've heard there's other ways to escape reality, like going into a movie and just getting into it. That's another form. Maybe forming a relationship with the opposite sex and that can be a form of escape because it turns into something that's surreal and extremely pleasurable. I think, you know, if I allowed myself to try, it would be good. (MW, Mask 5)

Workshop 5: Coming Full Circle

The fifth workshop was about coming full circle with the strengths approach and honoring the things that had gone well throughout the process. For MW, the visceral act of “creating” inspired him. Using words from his mask, he expressed a newfound excitement and joy at the prospect of connecting with the divine and sharing his spirit through the strengths practice:

There's something “magical” about “creating,” when the “gut feeling” engulfs you! When, in a moment, lightening [*sic*] strikes, a burst, thinking “there's something to do here!” One can't hesitate! Otherwise, the inspiration is lost. One must do a “deep dive” with enthusiasm, with the worthy, novel idea. Go with it! Focus! Listen to the inner voice, all the while saying: “I believe! I believe!” This is “courage,” to believe in yourself, in your Grace, your gift to forge ahead, whether it's writing a short story, a poem, or acting on an opportunity to be kind. With this personal revelation, I am “overflowing the world with happiness”! Don't you see, my art, my kindness, is “celebrating the Sacred,” celebrating a “heaven in the moment” with my creation, with you, my God. (MW, Mask 5)

On the front of his mask, he referred to the strengths approach as “REHAB FOR THE SOUL,” explaining,

The appreciation about the Strength Program runs parallel to responding to a creative thought in that we must have the *consciousness and strength* to respond to stimuli that enters our life. ...I can do this better because of the strength program. This is what I gained the most from this program, the ability to speak the truth, to act on a need in my life, space, to perform a simple act of kindness. Do people generally do this? I don't think so. ...I have brought up the need to talk

about “strength” and “hope” during [Sex Addicts Anonymous] meetings. Generally, members don’t want to change the “gospel” within the books of the program. The members don’t want to face the weaknesses of the program or new ideas. They don’t have the strength to “rock the boat.” ...Life is complicated with many contributing factors to hinder one to act out for the right reasons. “Many are called few are chosen”...rings out as a truth about people. However, those few can change the world, do simple acts of kindness, do the right thing. This has been the reality in history. I am thankful for the Strength program because in my own way, I’m stronger to better my life, to speak up, to care about others, to love and to never curse the darkness. (MW, Mask 5)

MH, who arguably struggled the most with personal accountability, had seemingly the most significant response to the mask-making process. When creating his masks, he was able to open up and verbalize far more than he did during the interviews. During this mask-making workshop, he spoke again about his struggle with addictions, including the image of the “chronic slipper” that he had held about himself for so long. He admitted to using his drinking to avoid taking responsibility, but eventually acknowledged that it is he alone who bears responsibility:

Interviewer: Before, you spoke about the people in [Alcoholics Anonymous], that they know you as the “chronic slipper.”

MH: Right, you know, because in the past, I have never stayed sober, right? And add to that population, add to that, friends and family that know me as the “chronic slipper,” too. ...But, because of the nature of His forgiveness, He’s forgiven all my sins, past, present and even future ones. It’s like, He doesn’t see my bad side. He only sees good.

Interviewer: Hm. And how does that make you feel?

MH: Like...like, love.

Interviewer: So He sees you as an embodiment of love? Because the Creator is Love and the Creator has made all of us in His image, is that correct?

Participant: Yep. Hey, thank you. Yeah, emotions and labels. I think it’s made of all kinds of bad stuff, sometimes, and it makes you feel bad. Then I want to say, it’s not me. It’s like... If I say [my actions are because of] the enemy of God, Lucifer, and his minions of the fallen angels, but that’s kind of like passing blame. It’s like not taking responsibility to say, “The devil made me do it.”

Interviewer: Yeah. Wow, that's great. That's a wonderful step forward, I think, to recognize that.

Participant: Thank you.

In this case, the making of the mask allowed MH the space to reflect on an aspect of himself that he previously felt uncomfortable or unwilling to address: his denial and deflection of responsibility. In coming full circle, he divulged, in his own way, his responsibility and took ownership of it. This marked a monumental moment in his process, as he had often used religion to sidestep accountability for his actions during the interviews. In this case, masks became an outlet that made it safe for him to let down that barrier, even for a moment, to allow for self-reflection. It should be noted that this happened when discussing the feeling of love and unconditional positive regard that he believes God provides in his life.

Workshop 6: Looking Toward the Future

In "Looking to the Future," the sixth and final workshop, the men were to reflect on which character strengths resonated with them the most moving forward and how these strengths would be important to their continued journey in health and improvement. MW further reflected on the importance of love and connection in his life and throughout the strengths process. He wrote,

The final mask describes, at the top, the mysterious qualities that are necessary to be brave to initiate strengths in our daily lives. Because of the experience of the Strength Program, I have concluded that to apply love, patience, or the courage to perform an act of kindness or do the right thing, I must be in-tune to my "inner voice," my "spirit" that "force within," that "gut feeling" to follow my own heart and not blindly follow the "conventional wisdom" of the day. I am convinced that without the spark from within, we'll hesitate, doubt, be indecisive about our actions...and usually be disappointed when we don't act on an opportunity to be kind.

At the bottom of the mask is the symbolic "Holy Grail" the goal of a person's life's journey. For me, it's giving back, showing compassion and being of service.

The underlying quality that one must connect to and apply is love...as the song expresses, that is placed around the edges of the mask, “love, love changes everything, days are longer, words mean more, love, love changes everything, pain is deeper than before... nothing in the world will ever be the same...” If we could integrate and apply love in our lives, like in the song, it would change a person’s life for the better. (MW, Mask 6)

MH reflected on his offense once more, acknowledging that recognizing and finding ways to express and “let go” of aspects of the past is important to recovering:

MH: He...my uncle...told me that he was able to visit [the boy I victimized], or he was one time. He said [the boy, who is now grown] was just a basket case. Like, out of his mind, he didn’t make any sense. I hope it wasn’t the result of my offense. I don’t think... I can’t imagine...

Interviewer: Tell me about this tear on your mask, here.

MH: I was trying to say it’s an improvement over all of the misery of my past.

Interviewer: So, it’s a happy tear? Describe to me what you were thinking when you put the teardrop there.

MH: An improvement of, you know, being able to show it. That’s heavy. Because a man should never cry. An old wives tale says. But the truth is a real man can cry all they want. It’s about... It’s about letting go. (MW, Mask 6)

This conversation was the only time he acknowledged any emotion over his past offense behavior, which he previously expressed only through anger and denial. When asked about his summation of the strengths approach and his experience of the mask-making workshop, he expressed appreciation. While MH felt uncertain about the humanistic elements, the “Glory” of God, he said, was always present on his strengths journey. He identified his belief in the Almighty and his ability to achieve balance and discipline in his life as paramount to his continued well-being:

MH: I found, I think... It’s actually all...always available through God, but when I least expect it, it’s unpredictable. But it’s always there. It’s like this forcefield that’s this impenetrable protection around me that unless I turn it off and decide to go to the dark side, it’s gonna be there protecting... And I think it’s a refining

process; it's correctional, it's disciplinary. And it's progressive. And doesn't happen overnight.

Interviewer: Okay.

MH: And there's all kinds of stuff like sexual deviance or the deviant sexual practices that are out there. Excessive anything is a bad thing. There should be a balance in life among various practices. I would definitely say the good side has a lot more of an influence on my living now than the dark side.

Mask-Making Conclusions

As expressed in the words of the two men who participated, the mask-making process was a strong component of the character strengths approach. It challenged them to see and experience themselves and their world differently and added depth to the strengths approach that otherwise would not have been present. MH, in particular, was able to use the mask-making process as a tool to talk about past actions that he had, in the interviews, been unwilling to discuss. Through the use of art, he seemed more capable of opening up about his crime, expressing regret, and taking responsibility. In this way, mask-making was more effective at helping him to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement than just the interviews and journaling alone.

Additionally, the process of creating art seemed to motivate both men to express their faith in a new way, which was critical to helping them find meaning in their experiences. As a naturally inclined creator, MW took the visuals of the masks to a new level by creating videos of his experience. These videos helped him to integrate aspects of himself and his journey in a way that gave him a deeper insight into himself. He expressed this through his PATH process (as seen at the bottom of Figure 10) and in his increased confidence to share and act on his strengths as he moved further into the mask-making workshop series and strengths practice. It is hoped that this process will also have

an impact on others who view the works of these men and further support the need for more strengths-based approaches to working with men convicted of child sexual offenses.

Figure 10 depicts MW's and MH's masks in the order of completion. Bearing in mind the wishes of MH, not all masks appear in their entirety. Participant MW chose to share his PATH process as an elaboration of his final mask, which was based on his gleanings from the strengths practice and how he perceived them to relate to his pathway forward. The masks showcased are modeled by his wife, who supported him throughout.

Mask-Making Workshop Series



MASK WORKSHOP



MW

TWO

Mask-Making Workshop 2

Finding Strength in the Struggle - Create a mask which reflects your biggest struggles. These are often the parts of yourself or your life that have caused you the most difficulty and/or pain. It may include struggles related to your offense behavior, as well as other struggles that you feel have contributed to recurrent disorder in your life. As you make your mask, consider what strengths have gotten you through these challenging times in the past. Incorporate them into your mask in a way that is meaningful to you.

MH



MASK WORKSHOP



MW

THREE

Mask-Making Workshop 3

Imagining My Best Possible Self – Create a mask envisioning what it would look like if you experienced some relief from your current struggles, if your situation were resolved, or if there was a shift for the better. In what ways would you be different? How would the script of your life be transformed? Who or what would be present in your life that would make it “worth it?” Use your mask to reflect both your outer and inner experiences.

MH



MASK WORKSHOP



MW

FOUR

Mask-Making Workshop 4

Discovering the Golden Essence– Create a mask that honors the story of the Golden Essence in you. Let a piece of your mask reflect your outer “Shell of Hardness,” which consists of the things that hide or diminish your virtues or “Golden Essence.” Let the other piece of your mask reflect your inner “Golden Essence,” which is all your hidden virtues, treasures, and the things most authentic and good about you that others may not initially see.

Consider the following phrase as inspiration: Most people see me as _____, but if they knew the real me, they would know _____.

MH



MASK WORKSHOP



MW

FIVE

Mask-Making Workshop 5

Coming Full Circle - Create a mask that honors the things that have gone well throughout this process, recognizing what it was about you and the situation that made you able to appreciate it. Let a piece of your mask reflect yourself at the beginning of this process, and a piece of your mask reflect yourself now.

MH



MASK WORKSHOP

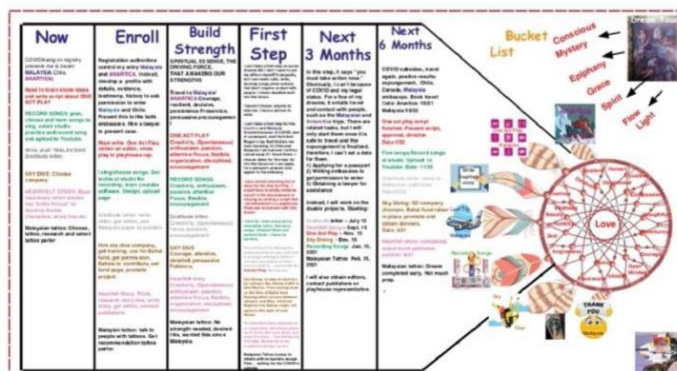


MW

SIX

Mask-Making Workshop 6

Looking Toward the Future – Create a mask that is a visual representation of the character strength(s) that you most identify with. As usual, you may choose to include strengths from the “‘At My Best’ Strengths Cards” or the VIA. You may also choose to include strengths that you have come to identify yourself. Illustrate how you have used these strengths throughout the process, and how you can continue using these strengths in the future to address (your struggles/offense behavior).



Chapter 5

Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Inspiring the present study was the constructivist grounded theory approach, which is a means to investigate and better understand a social process where there is no sufficient theory developed. The purpose of this study was to research and identify (a) how men convicted of child sexual offending could use their strengths to address their unique needs and barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and (b) how the daily use of their top five signature strengths informs their attitudes toward themselves and their sexually offending behavior. Chapter 5 presents a summary and discussion of the results of data analysis included in Chapter 4.

The chapter consists of several sections to thoroughly interpret and discuss the findings. First, there is a breakdown and discussion of factors leading to unhealthy behavior and barriers to healthy living and improvement following one's offense. Secondly, discoveries rooted in the strengths practice, namely ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement, receive elaboration. Finally, the chapter will present a conceptual framework for the developing theory that emerged from the data gathered, which I refer to as the hope-based strengths model. Limitations and implications for the future are also included.

Factors Leading to Unhealthy Behavior

The influential factors in the etiology and maintenance of sexual offending, which the present study indicated as factors leading to unhealthy behavior, have been of keen interest to those in the field of sex offender intervention. Perhaps the most dominating area of study has been the link between sexual offending and early life trauma. This area

boasts a large body of empirical studies, particularly concerning childhood sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, and disruption of the family system due to breakups, death, divorce, imprisonment, or forced removal from the childhood home. A difficult childhood and early exposure to crime and violence were the main factors leading to the unhealthy behavior of participants in the present study. Participants' responses ranged from:

- consistent bullying or ostracization in childhood and adolescence;
- parental discord and interpersonal violence in the home;
- parental abandonment or absence either physically or emotionally;
- loss of family members, friends, and siblings, either through death, violence, or separation;
- familial history of substance abuse and addictions;
- oversexualization in early childhood, including exposure to pornography;
- personal and familial history of mental illness such as depression;
- familial history of crimes, and
- generally poor role modeling leading to difficulty understanding social and sexual norms.

The participants' self-reports further support the existing literature on the subject of adverse childhood experiences, which indicates that the prevalence of childhood trauma among both men and women who go on to sexually abuse minors is greater than that experienced by the general population.

Their own molestation and abuse, particularly in the case of MH and PA, was prevalent in the development of participants' unhealthy and offending behaviors.

Interestingly, two participants who did not report direct experiences of sexual abuse, SN and JD, claimed they did not remember whether they had been sexually abused. To date, of all types of victimization, child sexual abuse has been the highest reported form and has also shown to be of the greatest significance regarding later sexual offending (Van Wijk et al., 2006). With such thorough empirical study, sexual abuse as a child is now considered the most well-documented risk factor for sexually abusing children as an adult (Maniglio, 2011; Seto & Lalumière, 2010).

Two separate meta-analyses showed that compared to nonsexual offenders and nonoffenders, adolescent sexual offenders were significantly more likely to have a history of childhood victimization and, in particular, child sexual abuse (Seto & Lalumière, 2010; Whitaker et al., 2008). In addition to these findings, studies have also indicated that certain types of sexual offenders are more likely to have had histories of child sexual abuse. For example, a recent study on sexual murderers suggested that rates of child sexual abuse among sexual offenders who offend against children are almost three times as high as those of sexual offenders who offend against adults (Beauregard et al., 2008).

Moreover, participants in the present study reported instances of child sexual abuse involving close family members as young as 5 years. This report supports research indicating that for minor-attracted individuals, or individuals who offend against minors, early histories of deviant sexual development might play a prominent role in later offending behavior (Maniglio, 2011). One study in line with this notion showed that child sexual offenders reported a greater frequency of childhood sexual abuse. In contrast, adult sexual offenders reported a greater frequency of physical abuse, parental violence, and emotional abuse. Conversely, however, not all sexual offenders report having been

perpetrated against as children (Van Wijk et al., 2006), and the majority of individuals who have experienced child sexual abuse do not go on to perpetrate later in life. Rather, as shown in the cases of the men in the present study, wide ranges of psychological and behavioral outcomes are related to child sexual abuse, one of which is an increased risk of sexual offending.

Beyond child sexual abuse, the literature also suggests that child sexual offenders frequently report histories of all types of childhood victimization, including physical abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse. Studies indicate that such individuals are “twice as likely to report physical abuse, thirteen times more likely to have been verbally abused, and four times more likely to experience emotional neglect or having unmarried parents” (Levenson et al., 2015, p. #), respectively. It is common for adult sexual offenders to report a childhood and adolescence plagued with intrafamilial problems, such as domestic violence, abuse, substance abuse, and interpersonal discord (Maniglio, 2011), much like those of the present study participants.

PA and DJ, specifically, reported high levels of interpersonal violence in the home, as well as significant family discord and disruption of the family unit by extreme violence or force. This led them, by their own admission, to engage in criminal behavior—including, for PA, sexual violence—early on. In particular, PA’s cycle of offending began in adolescence. This knowledge supports current research on juvenile sexual offending, namely, a recent study showing that juvenile sexual offenders, in particular, reported an increased rate of domestic violence in the home. Sixty-three percent of 1,616 youth in a nationwide sample reported witnessing extreme violence in the home (Seto & Lalumière, 2010). Furthermore, compared with their nonsexual

counterparts, juvenile sexual offenders had significantly higher rates of exposure to sexual violence in the home, typically involving family members.

Research on the link between severe disruption of the family system and later sexual offending has also proven substantial. In Seto and Lalumière's (2010) study, 57% of the 1,616 juvenile sexual offenders had experienced the loss of a parent, and slightly over 34% had experienced separation from their parents and foster care or other out-of-home placements. Concerning individuals with pedophilia, the meta-analysis showed that approximately 44% came from single-parent households. Also, about 43% had been in the foster care system at some point, indicating increased rates of family disruption among juvenile sex offender populations. This was a topic discussed at some length in the present study by DJ, who recalled being sent to an orphanage by his mother, and JD, who spent much of his early years going between his biological and adoptive parents. Severe disruption of the family unit is likely a risk factor in all forms of offending rather than specifically related to sexual offenders but was a key factor noted in some form by all the participants in the present study.

Barriers to Healthy Living and Improvement

Participants in the present study also discussed a number of barriers to healthy living and improvement, many of which also appear in the current literature. The most salient barrier mentioned by participants was, by far, the sex offender label or stigma the participants associated with it. Participants spoke in detail about the significant encumbrance of the sex offender registry on their lives and the destruction it caused.

Indeed, unintended adverse effects of the registry, and their implications as described by the participants in this study, are vast and should be carefully considered if

society is to move forward in a way that truly works to protect its most vulnerable.

Although sex offender notification laws were originally enacted to prevent offending and draw unwavering support from the public, mandatory reporting laws have been historically unsuccessful in reducing reoffending and providing protection for the community (Wright, 2015). As such, given the complexity of sexual offending and its causes, scholars and practitioners have supported potential multidisciplinary commissions to further investigate the adverse impact of current law and policy on the successful integration of former offenders into the community, as well as the impact it has on their behavior and likelihood to reoffend.

Individuals put on the registry report experiencing a plethora of unintended consequences of sex offender notification directly related to dynamic risk factors for reoffending, as they create barriers to a healthy lifestyle. Some of those mentioned by the participants in the present study included social isolation, stigmatization, feelings of vulnerability and shame, and loss of or strain on social relationships. Others have reported experiencing homelessness, job loss, and instability as a direct result of their registration status, harassment, and property damage. These factors culminate to have negative effects on registrants and their behavior and create a high risk for reoffending. Furthermore, as noted by Dr. Richard Wright, a specialist in the area of violence, victimization, and sex offender laws,

Sex offenders are not the only ones experiencing unintended consequences of notification laws. A study of probation and parole officers...revealed that these laws were accompanied by increased responsibilities for and greater expectations for criminal justice agents. These authors concluded that any gains in public awareness and community protection resulting from community notification laws comes at a high price for corrections in terms of personnel, time, and budgetary resources. (Wright, 2015, p. #)

Likewise, despite billing the sex offender registry as a means to protect and inform the public, the policies and procedures built around it have come at a high price, as well. Specifically, they appear to increase public anxiety and fear around sexual offending rather than feelings of safety and protection from sexual abuse and violence. One of the reasons for this is that the registry can spread misinformation. The community derives a false sense of safety from “unknown strangers” and predators whom they believe might sexually victimize their children while simultaneously diverting their attention from the perpetrators closest and most likely to offend against them (e.g., family, friends, and neighbors). To this end, hearing and being open to the lived experiences and perspectives of men and women currently on the registry will be critical to understanding and rectifying the barriers it so often creates for successful integration and rehabilitation. The stories shared by the participants in the present study helped to illuminate a number of the shortcomings of the current system.

Participants discussed central factors related to stigmatization, such as feeling trapped, overwhelmed, or hopeless due to what they described as an unjust system. They felt that the lack of support and not being understood contributed to and further exacerbated their low self-esteem, low self-concept, and negative self-perceptions. The sense of shame described by participants—not only at being labeled a sex offender but at feeling as though they were powerless to affect change in their own lives or make amends for their past—is a known risk for recidivism.

Perhaps correlated to their histories of abuse (Maniglio, 2011) as well as the challenges arising from their offense and the consequences therein, participants also struggled with other dynamic risk factors, such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse,

and suicidal ideation. Current literature supports this finding, positing that as many as 95% of sexual offenders have mood disorders, and nearly 39% have a diagnosable anxiety disorder. Moreover, a recent literature review indicated that approximately 60% of sexual offenders report abusing substances as a form of coping with negative affect and shame and have a diagnosable substance use disorder (Marshall, 2007).

Depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are strongly linked to an increased risk of sexual offending (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Quayle et al., 2006; Quayle & Taylor, 2002), as have deficits in coping and self-regulation (i.e., suicidality and self-harm; Gifford, 2002; Ward & Beech, 2011). Additionally, as participants also shared, the consequences of living with depression, anxiety, low self-worth, and substance abuse disorder can often cause a rift in relationships with family and friends, which might otherwise serve as supports to them in their lives and their transition back into the community. As noted in many of the participants' responses, sexual offenders demonstrate high levels of paranoia and mistrust from the outset, perhaps due to their own early life trauma, attachment disruptions, and abuse (Rich, 2005). This paranoia and distrust, together with their inabilities or difficulties in forming healthy, stable relationships with others due to stigma, shame, depression, and addiction, further heightens the risk for future offense behavior. Thus, the present study aimed to help participants address these issues by implementing a strengths-based, goal-oriented approach to treating those most at risk of child sexual offending. These findings could be vital to preventing further offense behavior.

When not adequately addressed, these barriers to a healthy lifestyle and improvement present further barriers to accountability and change. Some of these

impediments for participants included failing to take responsibility or accept the magnitude of one's offense, overreliance on God and religion to avoid responsibility (such as arguing that all things are predestined), and accepting the situation and lack of effort to improve things. A lack of accountability suspended participants between good and bad choices, leaving them focused too much on the positive side of negative experiences as a way to distance themselves from responsibility.

All of these barriers to accountability appear from the perspective of hope theory as the manifestation of goal blockages. In other words, if individuals do not believe they possess the will and the way to reach their goals, they will engage in avoidance behavior to prevent facing possible failure, rejection, disappointment, or pain. Researchers describe this process as going from hope to rage, rage to despair, and, ultimately, despair to apathy.

Many of the individuals in the present study described reaching the point of apathy, the death of hope when personal accountability becomes most unlikely. These barriers to accountability were, for them, prime examples of how they had lived and functioned without hope (the will and the way to reach their goals for a "good life") for so long. That said, their participation in the study and engagement with the character strengths approach allowed them to engage hope-based, agency-thinking in their lives, sometimes for the first time. In doing so, ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement naturally emerged. The following two sections detail the various pathways to overcome the barriers participants identified while engaged in the strengths approach.

Ways to Overcome Barriers to Healthy Living and Improvement

As discussed in Chapter 2, hope theory and the practices rooted therein facilitate addressing barriers to healthy living by helping individuals implement goal-oriented thoughts. Such thinking has a naturally positive impact on their self-esteem and self-worth and is therefore linked to other lasting health outcomes (Curry et al., 1997; Snyder et al., 1991). The present study offered participants a previously unemployed outlet—the character strengths—to challenge their self-deprecating dialogue and self-views and encourage goal-pursuit thinking. Through this strengths practice, participants identified areas they considered helpful in overcoming barriers to healthy living and improvement.

Being Involved and Having Something Meaningful to Do

The most frequently mentioned way to overcome barriers was being involved and finding something meaningful to do. Participants described this task as difficult to achieve due to the previously discussed challenges, including their status as registered sex offenders. In general, members of society do not think to meaningfully engage sexual offenders. Rather, they are typically the population most readily outcast. Despite this kneejerk reaction, however, restorative justice literature supports that the more invested individuals with histories of child sexual offending feel in their lives and communities, the less likely they are to reoffend.

Many of the men in the present study were able to find meaning by reaching out to, and becoming involved in, various religious organizations or recovery groups where they felt they were making a meaningful contribution. Some found meaning in mentoring or helping those in similar situations to theirs, such as DJ, through his co-owning and operating the nonprofit organization for registered citizens and their families. Participants

also formed and attended support groups for formerly incarcerated individuals and self-described sex addicts. They wrote about their experiences passionately as part of the strengths process to help others and make meaning of their own trauma, loss, and struggle. Some of the writings resulted in forming newsletters, legal or group outlines, and poetry included in various religious publications.

Together with church or faith-based organizations, Alcoholics Anonymous, Recovering Couples Anonymous, and Sex Addicts Anonymous were also significant contributors to finding meaning for the individuals who participated in the present study. This makes intuitive sense, with Alcoholics Anonymous and its sister programs built on the notion of mutual reciprocity and problem-solving. They are, by nature, peer-support programs that empower members to engage in reciprocal emotional exchanges and the sharing of experiences to overcome great personal struggles (Mead et al., 2001). Benefits include enhanced community cohesion, reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness, and increased perception of social and emotional support (Bean et al., 2013; Field & Schuldberg, 2011; Walker & Bryant, 2013), which all work to address previously discussed dynamic risk factors to offending. Further, this type of community-based support is vital to reducing sexual offending, not only for the benefits noted but because of the sense-making process involved in giving support and the self-reflection and experiential learning that occur in doing so (Solomon, 2004), fostering a sense of meaning.

In support of the goal of belongingness, meaning, and involvement, participants in the present study were encouraged through the strengths approach to utilize their utmost strengths to act on their desires and to give back to the communities in which they were

involved. One participant in particular, MW, became increasingly interested in how interweaving the strengths approach into existing community-based programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Sex Addicts Anonymous would enhance the lived experiences of himself and others in recovery. As a result, he involved himself in leading a number of meetings on this subject. Meaning-making through peer leadership and mentorship, especially for those who are or have been incarcerated, has proven particularly valuable to breaking the offense cycle. Studies show increased self-confidence and personal growth in individuals who can find meaning through community involvement and peer mentoring, as well as improved self-regulatory capacities, which again directly addresses criminogenic needs and risk factors.

Researchers suggest that, specifically, these outcomes can assist individuals in crime desistance by contributing to a desire to give something back (Blagden et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2007). This desire to give back, frequently met by finding meaning in the struggle, is also known as a redemption script, “a comeback story of renewal, gaining strength, and realizing [our] true selves” or “a wish to make good and give something back to society as a display of gratitude and possibly cosmic restitution” (Sundt, 2010, p. 6). For the participants in the present study, meaning-making, connection, and having something to do that they considered meaningful greatly enhanced the redemption script and made them more apt to want to succeed at a given task rather than intentionally failing to avoid feelings of inadequacy.

Religion and Being Close to God

The second most salient way to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement was religion and being close to God. This theme is, in many ways, related

to meaning-making and having something meaningful to do, especially among the participants in this study. Participants tended to lean into religion and religious or spiritual practices to help them cope with events in their lives that were not amenable to repair by problem-solving. For example, they dealt with the repercussions of their abuse, imprisonment, and trauma by believing in a God who was all-knowing and able to see the best qualities about them despite their professed sin and shortcomings. They spoke about finding comfort in the idea that this life was not all there is and that by accepting Christ, they are finally free.

These reflections support the literature that in the most traumatic or seemingly unresolvable situations, religion can help to restore beliefs in a safe, just, predictable, and controllable world that is ruled not by man but by a compassionate Creator (Dull & Skokan, 1995; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). This belief makes particular sense among individuals with histories of child sexual offending, who frequently hold a firm belief in a dangerous, capricious world that affords them minimal safety or control. Research indicates that the belief in a benevolent, loving God is associated with greater well-being. Religion, in this case, often involves coming to see traumatic or stressful events as a spiritual opportunity for growth, or as the naturally occurring punishment from God for human sinfulness (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). For the individuals in this study, belief in God often helped them make sense of their lives and situations when they otherwise could not.

Zinnbauer et al. (1997) described the power of religion to transform the meaning of events as the ability to make “what first seems random, nonsensical and tragic...something else—an opportunity to appreciate life more fully, a chance to be with God, a challenge to help others grow, or a loving act meant to prevent something worse

from taking place” (p. 223). Although an overreliance on God and religion to avoid responsibility for their actions emerged as a barrier to healthy living and improvement, research suggests that religion often facilitates the perception of positive aspects of stressful situations useful to overcome personal challenges (Frazier et al., 2004). Some participants in the present study were able to embrace religion as an opportunity for spiritual growth and connection to a higher power. These men reported more stress-related growth (e.g., positive changes in coping skills, relationships, and life perspectives; Schaefer & Moos, 1992), which became a cornerstone of the strengths practice by implementing art, gratitude letters, poetry, and music highlighting their faith.

Trust, Support, and Positive Relationships With Family and Community

Related to feeling useful and connected to a greater purpose, participants identified trust, support, and positive relationships with family and community as strongly related to their success in overcoming barriers to healthy living and improvement. Social support is well-established in the literature as fundamental to sustained recovery for individuals with substance use disorders (Day et al., 2013; Havassy et al., 1991; McCrady, 2004) and other addictions. For those with histories of child sexual offending, the intense feeling and experience of ostracization and the frequently severed family ties leave them particularly vulnerable to relapses, which can increase recidivism rates. In contrast, providing individuals with stronger support networks creates an environment more prone to long-term recovery from substance abuse and addiction (Dobkin et al., 2002; Ellis et al., 2004; Havassy et al., 1991; Wasserman et al., 2001), which decreases the likelihood of future offending.

Participants in the present study felt that having friends, family, and community members who were aware of their past and supportive of their recovery was instrumental to their successful integration and crime desistance. Social networks became particularly vital when they felt rejected or alone in their experiences and compelled to give up. Participants reported that positive interactions with others who believed in and supported their recovery process pushed them to do better. They reported increased opportunities to socialize and learn from others and embrace hope and more courage to express kindness toward others. Feeling recognized and appreciated for their strengths by those whom they valued, as well as being kind and experiencing kindness from people with whom they might not otherwise interact, had a notable impact on their attitude toward themselves and the strengths approach.

Summary of Ways to Overcome Barriers

As the participants' responses indicate, belonging, connection, community, love, and self-love (compassion) are at the core of all the ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement. Participants met these needs through being involved and having something meaningful to do, religion and being close to God, and building trust, support, and positive relationships with family and community. These three ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement, previously discussed at length, were the strongest influencers of what I refer to as the hope-based strengths model and practice, discussed further in the following section. All of these three ways for overcoming barriers address the central inquiry of this study, as noted in the introduction:

How can we best utilize a character strengths approach as a method of helping individuals with histories of child sexual offending to decrease the reliance on the offending behaviors to meet basic human needs, thus addressing the issue of recidivism?

When participants were able to use the character strengths approach to meet the basic human needs of belonging, connection, community, love, and self-love (compassion), they could better understand and express themselves and their needs and keep a positive mindset about their future and goals. A notable result of this was that participants seemed naturally more inclined to take responsibility for themselves and their actions. Understanding the nature of what they had done and being open about it resulted in an increased willingness to change and overcome addictions. Each of these things emerged from the data as being relevant to participants' ability to overcome barriers to change. To this end, readiness and willingness to acknowledge past transgressions and make substantial changes to one's life and behaviors were directly related to participants' perceived opportunities for meaning, connection, and support in their lives.

As such, better understanding the relationship between the basic human needs of belonging, connection, community, love, and self-love (compassion) and the readiness and willingness to address offense behavior could potentially maximize treatment outcomes for this population. Over this 12-month study, it became apparent that through the ability afforded to them in the strengths work, participants were able, in their own ways, to build new, goal-oriented narratives about the self, which would later contribute to their insights of the strengths process. Specifically, the present study indicated that when encouraged to reflect on and share their self-perceptions of their top character strengths with intent, participants

- Gained insight into their strengths and the strengths of others
- Had more understanding and compassion for themselves and others

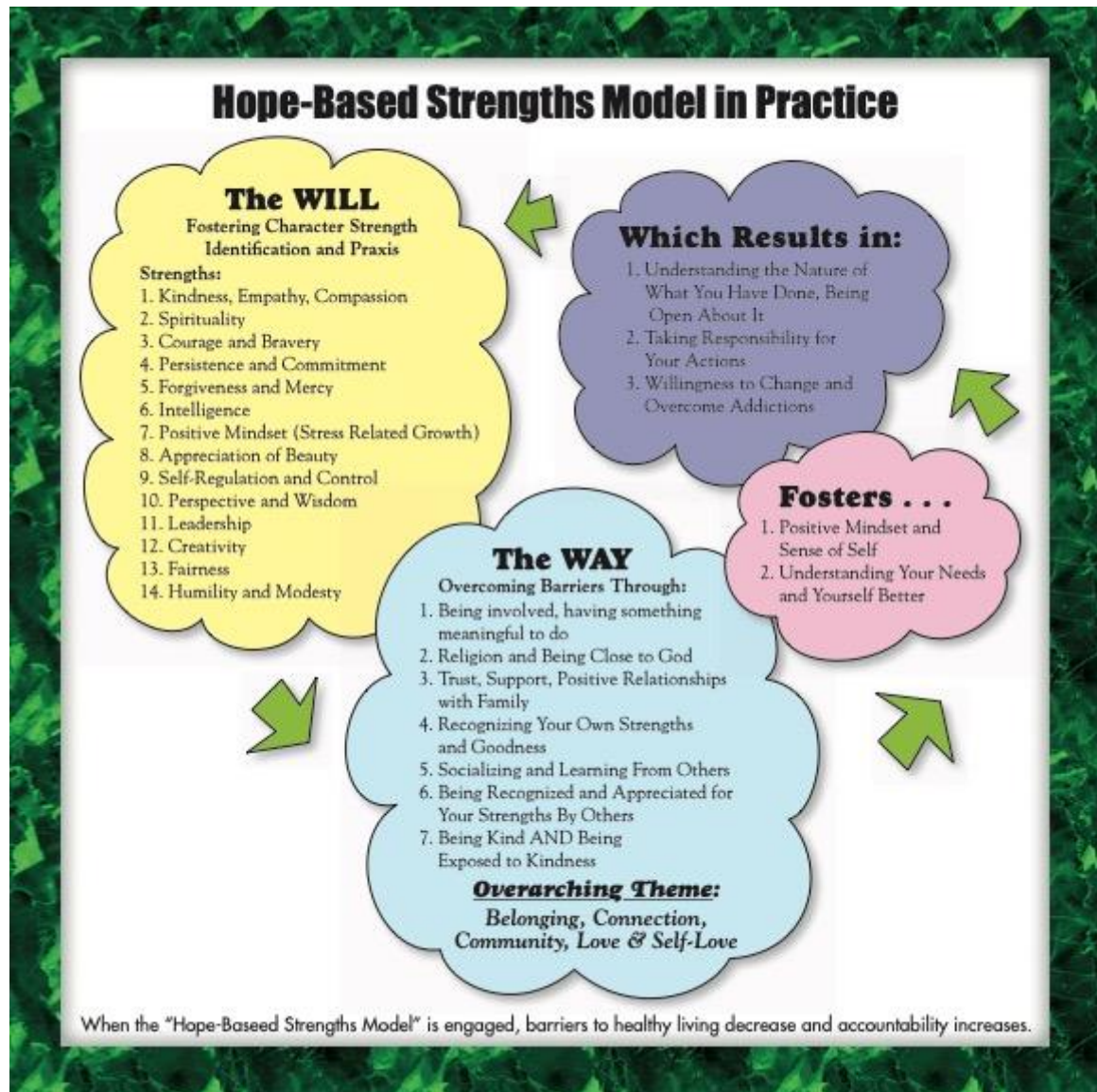
- Talked about their emotions more openly
- Raised awareness of the need for change
- Formed ideas (pathways) for how to improve themselves and their lives
- Actively worked toward reaching their goals (agency)

Hope-Based Strengths Model in Practice

Based on the various themes that emerged related to how participants were experiencing and making meaning of the strengths approach, I constructed a theory developed from the participants' data. In grounded theory, a theory consists of "an explanatory scheme that systematically integrates various concepts through statements of relationship" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 25). Figure 9 shows how I did this by integrating concepts of hope theory and character strengths, particularly regarding supporting and developing what in hope theory is the will and the way for men to achieve goals for healthy living and improvement. In the model, the willpower refers to strengths identification and practice, while the waypower is the means identified by participants to overcome barriers.

Figure 9

Strengths Approach Model in Practice



The theory of the hope-based strengths model itself is an interpretation I arrived at as the researcher. I did so by integrating the concepts inherent to hope theory and character strengths and exploring their relationship throughout the strengths practice. The figure depicts the process that the participants in the present study underwent, which ultimately facilitated the engagement of the willpower (agency) and the waypower

(pathways). This, in turn, fostered a positive growth mindset and sense of self and led to what participants described as understanding themselves and their needs better.

In this case, the willpower (agency) emerged as the character strengths that participants collectively identified as their top strengths throughout the study. Although the participants took the VIA-IS (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) at the beginning of the year-long study process to help them engage a dialogue about their perceived strengths, only 14 strengths/attributes in the VIA appear in the model. These 14 strengths emerged organically from the data as the most significant to the hope-based strengths model process for this group of participants. The willpower (agency) in this model refers not necessarily to any particular set of strengths but to the process of identifying and putting one's perceived strengths into practice (identification and praxis). Therefore, the process of engagement depicted in the hope-based strengths model would remain intact regardless of which strengths/attributes emerged.

Praxis, in this case, is the actual act of engaging, applying, exercising, and realizing one's strengths in the real-world context. This act in relation to one's strengths likely motivates men with histories of child sexual offending to develop and establish pathways and agency-thinking to reach goals. The waypower, described in the model as pathways to overcoming barriers to healthy living, lists the seven areas the participants identified as being the strongest perceived pathways to overcoming dynamic risk factors to offense.

As mentioned, the overarching theme of all seven areas seems to relate to the basic human needs of (a) belonging; (b) connection (to oneself, to others, to a higher power); and (c) community, love, and self-love (compassion). Although everyone

benefits from the basic human needs of belonging, connection, community, love, and self-love (compassion), all of these needs are dependent on establishing a goal and then acting to connect with another and oneself. The literature in this area demonstrates that high-hope individuals possess an increased likelihood to seek out and sustain positive connections with others (Snyder, Hoza, et al., 1997), whereas low-hope individuals do not. One measure directly related to individuals' desire to connect with others is the degree to which they believe other people perceive them favorably.

For the men in the present study, issues related to how they believed people perceived them created many barriers to a healthy lifestyle. Among these challenges were severed relationships, low self-esteem and self-confidence, negative self-perceptions, minimization of offending behavior, addictions, and avoidance of responsibility. Full engagement of the hope-based strengths model is of particular importance and value for men with histories of child sexual offending, because it can potentially improve men's self-perceptions of how they are viewed by others. As the hope-based strengths model shows, fully engaging the willpower and the waypower inherent in this process over time can foster a positive mindset and sense of self (which can also be seen, to a degree, as stress-related growth) as well as a better understanding of one's needs.

Participants demonstrated and described the hope-based strengths model results, which included understanding the nature of what they have done and being open to it, taking responsibility for their actions, and expressing a willingness to change and overcome addictions. This, in turn, led to a decrease in barriers to healthy living, which occurred naturally as a result of the implementation of approach goals in the strengths process. As barriers decreased and pathways to change became clearer, increased

personal accountability related to the participants' attitudes toward themselves and their offense behaviors became apparent.

Figure 9 depicts the hope-based strengths model as interminable, with a continual flow in a circular motion. This does not deny the growth that occurs but suggests that the process itself does not have a defined ending point—in other words, it should consistently feed into itself over time. To this point, the model fuels lasting change as each of the components eventually integrate into the individual's conceptual schemas of the self across contexts. In other words, the model adopts the belief that psychosocial constructs of the self and the human mind, body, and spirit are constantly in a state of evolution, change, and reconstruction.

Coming to know the strengths inherent in those so often viewed as the most abhorred members of society is not something that comes naturally for many people, nor did it come naturally for the men who participated in this study. However, character strengths anchored this study from its inception, becoming the sails that, in so many instances, demonstrated power to propel each participant forward in his own way (see Biswas-Diener, 2010). I hope that these theoretical “sails” might also propel people and professionals forward in how they think about individuals who sexually offend against children and how to engage them in holistic hope- and strengths-based treatment that engages the will and the way to positive change.

Limitations

The empirical results reported herein are subject to several limitations. The first and arguably most salient limitation was restricted access to the research population. This limitation was mainly due to the general lack of openness from the community and other

professionals about this topic, most often driven by the fear, misinformation, and politics surrounding it. Restrictions placed on the sexually offending population by various outside stakeholders made it challenging to procure the supports needed to make the present research possible. These included supports from the necessary parties, such as therapists, organizational and program leaders, and probation and parole officers. These stakeholders' disinterest, skepticism, or verbalized disdain for the topic made it difficult, at best, to recruit participants, who often first had to go through these various entities to participate without direct consequence. As such, this limitation presented as markedly problematic throughout the study. I believe this limitation further highlights the importance of public and professional educational opportunities around the topic of treatment and integration of sexually offending individuals, as well as the need to reexamine the power dynamics that exist around such individuals gaining access to treatment and supports.

The second limitation of this study was conflicts arising from philosophical differences between me (the researcher) and the other invested parties. In particular, the sample for the study came from a religious-based nonprofit that professed powerful antihumanistic beliefs and whose work was firmly rooted in Old Testament theological beliefs and practices. Guiding the nonprofit was the conviction that "everyone is a sinner before God, unworthy of coming into God's presence until we repent, confess our sins, and accept the payment of Jesus on the Cross." The coordinators openly voiced to group members that humanistic values were heathenous and professing or taking ownership of one's strengths was, in a sense, ungodly because of its perceived humanistic foundations. Rooting the study in the principles of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi,

2000), humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1951), and hope theory (Snyder, 2000) posed further challenges in relating and connecting to program coordinators, who held a strong influence on potential participants for the study, as noted. In some cases, the study's principles also led to difficulties supporting and communicating aspects of the strengths practice to participants themselves. Using religion as a shield, or what participants in this study referred to as reliance on God and religion, to excuse or minimize personal responsibility was the main issue arising as a result of this conflict. This is a dynamic risk factor for sexually offending individuals only minimally explored in the literature (Hanson & Harris, 1998).

Relatedly, the third limitation was, perhaps unsurprisingly, difficulties retaining participants for the study, largely due to the abovementioned philosophical differences, especially for men resistant to the idea of completing study tasks considered humanistic in nature. As the researcher and practitioner, I found this an opportunity for growth; however, it limited how I could present and facilitate the strengths practice with participants. Ultimately, it also affected overall access to the community and participant retention, as with DJ.

The fourth limitation, limited diversity in the research sample, can arguably be directly tied back to the first three limitations. This limited diversity refers not only to cultural diversity but to philosophical beliefs, as well. The strong theological beliefs of the participants have clearly influenced and informed this research. Further, they have limited the perspective in ways that perhaps did not allow me to explore the full scope of views and experiences of this population related to the topic of study.

The issue of diversity partially speaks to the fifth limitation, nonhomogeneous offending histories among participants. Sex offenses and individuals placed on the sex offender registry are characteristically broad. One of the only requirements to participate in this study was to have been convicted of a child sexual offense that classified the individual at “high risk” to reoffend. As such, this could, and did, include contact and noncontact (internet) sexual offenses. All but two participants had a contact offense; however, it is unknown how the participants with noncontact offenses could have influenced the data. Therefore, future researchers might seek to sample from a more homogenous group of individuals with child sexual offenses.

The sixth limitation of this study was unresolved trauma in participants. While this factor contributed to the knowledge attained during this study, I am noting this as a limitation because the trauma histories of the men sometimes prevented them from fully engaging in the process. Examples included showing up to interviews or other related study tasks intoxicated; becoming anxious or distrustful of the strengths process out of fear that they would fail, be judged harshly, or look or feel poorly; and being unable to focus on strengths work over processing their trauma in the presence of a person who would listen. This limitation posed barriers for me, too. As a professional, I am obligated to first address and create safe spaces to process issues of trauma; as a researcher, I fill a wholly different role. Navigating this complex dyad was difficult and posed challenges when conducting research, which unavoidably influenced how I presented and carried out the research. Living and experiencing this limitation was one of the most difficult things I have ever faced as a professional and a researcher. From my perspective, it presents the clear need for trauma-informed care for this population, both in research and practice.

The seventh and final limitation was switching to virtual data collection midprocess. Because the study was underway when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I had to make the difficult choice of continuing the study virtually to protect all parties involved. This meant conducting the remaining interviews, mask-making sessions, and other study activities online. While this was an approved method of data collection in accordance with the IRB, it was a significant limitation to the research because the population's fear and distrust and the complex issues related to their offense do not always lend well to working online. It was necessary to reestablish boundaries and adjust some of the study materials to be workable in an online format. The participants and I collectively experienced a major societal shift and shared trauma simply by living through a pandemic, which clearly influenced the researcher-participant dyad.

Implications for Research and Practice

Despite the study's limitations, there are several possible implications of this research. It is the first of its kind to have employed the VIA-IS as a tool to help men convicted of child sexual offenses start a dialogue about their value and potential goodness. Utilizing the VIA-IS encouraged participants to (a) identify their character strengths and virtues and (b) consider how to utilize them to enhance their quality of life and decrease offense-related coping. By engaging participants in this thought process and implementing specific action steps, the study tasks worked to challenge hopelessness and enhance participants' self-efficacy by fostering a positive sense of self. Furthermore, with its focus on character strength development, this study presented ways to influence a paradigm shift toward strength-based, person-centered treatment options for individuals who have sexually offended against children or are minor-attracted.

The findings from this study represent an overall paradigm shift toward strengths-based, person-centered treatment options for this population. Such a shift starts with understanding how to use individual character strengths purposefully as internal resources to address criminogenic and noncriminogenic needs. The overall results support the benefit of implementing a character strengths approach with men with histories of child sexual offending in a multitude of ways. Moreover, the findings add to the existing literature by proposing a model of practice that produced positive outcomes for the men who participated in this study, which are replicable with similar groups in the future. The implications of this study follow in more detail in the remaining sections.

Implications for Future Research

I deliberately did not identify the small sample of the present study as a limitation because the constructivist grounded theory methodological approach relied on theoretical saturation to determine sample size rather than demographic representativeness. That said, one of the possible implications for future researchers is to replicate the present study utilizing mixed methods research to introduce triangulation methods to improve the transferability of the findings. This measure would also likely increase opportunities for funding of future pilot studies related to this topic. Furthermore, exploratory studies based on the proposed hope-based strengths model could enhance the findings in the present study, as well as lead to new insights about whether and how the model could work with diverse groups, including individuals who sexually offend. In addition, while the mask-making component of this research was only one part of the strengths process, it arguably produced some of the most significant findings and the most noteworthy participant insights. As such, there is a need for future research to determine how the

mask-making process, as an iterative process of its own nature, could further help this population and others, especially related to hope-based strengths practices.

Specific to some of the themes identified in the present study, the sex offender label emerged from the interview data as the most salient barrier to a healthy lifestyle. Therefore, further studies on the sex offender label and registry are needed to better understand how they affect individual behavior, long-term recovery, and recidivism. In particular, it would be beneficial, based on the current literature and the findings of this study, for future researchers to examine how the sex offender label contributes to perpetuating the shame-based personal narratives of the sexually offending populations that contribute to the offense cycle. Relatedly, another thought-provoking theme was the co-occurring roles religion and religiosity played in the lives of the men in the present study. While emerging as one way for participants to overcome barriers to healthy living, religion also posed a barrier to healthy living, especially when reliance on God and religion took the form of avoiding responsibility for one's actions.

Another area for future research emerging from the present study would be to focus on the topic of religious scrupulosity. Specifically, scholars can investigate the overreliance on religion to avoid personal responsibility, and the potential impacts on the sexual abuse cycles, treatment, and prevention. Last, as this topic is still in its infancy, more research on how strengths-based models function when used with the sexually offending population could greatly impact the knowledge and resources to prevent and reduce sexual crimes. This could also include research on when and how character strengths in this population could be overused or underused to one's detriment. Emerging research on "the dark side" of positive psychology appears in more recent literature,

including Ivtzan et al.'s (2015) "Second Wave Positive Psychology: Embracing the Dark Side of Life."

Implications for Policy

The overwhelmingly salient issue emerging from this study concerning policy implications is the barriers to healthy living discussed due to the sex offender registry and community notification laws. Among other factors, these barriers directly link to recidivism (Wright, 2015), presenting in the form of shame, social isolation, stigmatization, loss of relationships, job loss and unemployment, and harassment.

Government officials have historically perpetuated laws and policies that

do not reflect the scientific research on sexual victimization, offending, and risk; (2) do not focus on victims' recovery and healing processes; (3) are driven by singularly horrific 'perfect storm' cases, which are awful but rare outliers when compared to the most common types of sexual assault and molestation cases; (4) are politically popular, overly broad and simplistic; and (5) provide a superficial reassurance to the public on a profoundly complex, deeply vulnerable and personal fear (that of sexual assault and victimization). (Wright, 2015, p. 2)

Unfortunately, law- and policymakers have repeatedly demonstrated a willful ignorance on the topic of sexual offending. They choose to inform and shape our current law and policies around the rarest and most heinous sexual offenses, as opposed to creating laws and policies to protect constituents from the most likely sources of sexual victimization and exploitation (Wright, 2015). As shown by the participants in the present study and in the broader literature on the area of sexual offending, most individuals who offend sexually against children are not the boogeyman on the sex offender registry but are family, friends, neighbors, and associates. Furthermore, men (and women) convicted of sexual offenses have a statistically low reoffense rate, ranging from 5% after 3 years to 24% after 15 years (Przybylski, 2017). This rate is in stark contrast with the misconstrued

notions perpetuated by law- and policymakers that sex offenders are at the highest risk to reoffend.

That said, the implications of being on the sex offender registry create significant barriers to successful community reintegration, ultimately placing everyone at an increased risk. As such, policy implications should include evidence for a thorough reexamination of the sex offender registry and its repercussions and rectifying U.S. laws and policies to more closely reflect the realities of sexual offending, treatment, and prevention. Lawmakers and policymakers possess the power that their constituents often do not, which is to make an informed decision about how best to allocate funds in service of protecting the most vulnerable citizens from these crimes. The narratives from the participants in the present study support the notion that the United States is missing a profound piece in its current approaches to law and policy and implore a more critically considered, empirically supported path forward. Hopefully, in the near future, empirical research will serve as a guide for law and policy over public pacification.

A small step forward, and one suggestion based on the present research, is for law- and policymakers to reconsider public notification in favor of registries intended for law enforcement personnel only. In addition, laws and policies in support of public education around sexual offending would arguably go a long way toward the reform needed to effect lasting change, as would community-based programs that listen to survivors and support offenders' integration by addressing their basic human needs. Finally, supporting laws, legislation, and practices that empower the community to be actively involved in preventing sexual crimes could act as a strong safeguard to future

sexual crimes. This suggestion aligns with the principles of restorative justice measures in other areas of crime prevention, which have seen considerable success.

Implications for Practice

Therapists and mental health practitioners working with men with histories of child sexual offending have historically favored punitive treatment models that garnered little success in the way of preventing sexual offenses or reducing recidivism rates. This study sheds light on more humane approaches, which, while still acknowledging the very real risk factors of men who sexually offend, also lend optimism to the possibility that hope-based strengths practices can provide a necessary augmentation to current treatment modalities. Family and child specialists, social workers, therapists, and clinicians working with at-risk populations all learn ethical standards and principles that guide them in their work with vulnerable populations. Service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, n.d.) as well as the steadfast rule to “do no harm” are at the core of all helping professions. Work with individuals who sexually offend can understandably result in strong feelings, which may trigger some helping professionals. However, such feelings do not excuse conduct that goes against ethical principles and guidelines.

Based on my work on this study and in the field, I realize even more how frequently unethical responses occur among helping professionals who have no experience or expectations in working with people who sexually offend or are minor-attracted. These ethical lapses are invariable, as all helping professionals (or, at the very least, within the fields mentioned) will encounter and work with these men and women in their practice. Fear, disdain, and discontentment in working with this population will not

make these offenders go away. To prevent sexual crimes, it is imperative to stop responding collectively, as practitioners and people, as if dealing with those who sexually offend is “another person’s role.” To this point, this study highlights several ways in which helping professionals can adopt hope-based strengths approaches to address some of the dynamic risk factors individuals who sexually offend face. Most notably, based on the themes that emerged from the data related to participants’ need for belonging, connection, community, and love and self-love, there are ways to address low self-concept, lack of meaning, feelings of isolation, and fear of seeking help due to the stigma of being labeled a sex offender. Finally, in addressing barriers to a healthy lifestyle, the present study supports the need for trauma-informed care in a profoundly trauma-steeped population. Professionals and students from a wide variety of sectors would benefit from receiving these training opportunities in the area of sexual violence prevention.

Implications for Community

Apart from the contributions of researchers, policymakers, and therapists, it is important to remember the pivotal role community can and should play in sexual violence prevention. Irrespective of personal views, most individuals convicted of sexual offenses will, at some point, return to the community. As such, preventing sexual assault should start at the community level, and this study has several implications for community-based care and sexual violence prevention. Perhaps most prevalent in the data was participants’ sense of isolation, as they sometimes referred to themselves as lepers, societal outcasts, and without a sense of meaning or belonging.

Further, sex offenses understandably provoke fear and alarm in communities. The registry provides community members with a false sense of safety and security but does

little to safeguard against sexual offenses (Wright, 2015). The present study highlights the stark lack of community-based education and community-based care for those who are transitioning back into society. Therefore, empowering community members to take an active rather than a passive role in preventing sexual crimes, which is in line with principles of restorative justice, is one step community leaders can take to prevent sexual violence. An example of this type of approach, Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is a community-led effort in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other regions. COSA presents the catchphrase “no more victims” and strives to meet that goal by taking active measures to safely, responsibly, and healthily recreate community for former offenders in invigorative ways. Empirical studies yielded an 83% reduction in sexual recidivism, a 73% reduction in all types of violent recidivism, and an overall reduction of 71% in all types of recidivism (Wilson et al., 2009) among high-risk offenders belonging to a COSA. Regrettably, attitudes toward sexual offending and the politics typically involved in sustaining these efforts have resulted in insufficient funds for the widespread implementation of these types of preventative methods.

Theoretical Implications

In this study, I sought to better understand whether and how a character strengths-based approach could work with men with histories of child sexual offending. I wanted to help men identify what they perceived as their top character strengths, and in particular, to explore (a) how these men could use their character strengths to better understand and address their unique needs to maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and (b) how the daily use of their perceived top strengths informed their attitudes toward themselves and their sexually offending behavior. Throughout the research process, a theory of practice related

to these questions emerged, which I call the hope-based strengths approach. I created a model based on participants' experiences to explain how the process and variables function in real time. In doing so, I merged a theory and a practice—hope theory (Snyder, 2000) and the character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), respectively—to create a new and emerging idea. The model shows a comprehensive view of how to combine these two well-known theoretical concepts in a cohesive practice to help men with histories of sexual offending. Based on the present study's findings, this model offers promising insights and implications for theoretical practice. Improving the model would entail thoroughly extrapolating its individual components related to the treatment of men with histories of sexual offending and other populations. This could also include exploring the process with younger sexually delinquent populations. It is hoped that further analysis of this model and its functions could contribute to the theoretical knowledge base, now and in the future.

Conclusion

I would like to return to the root of this work, as depicted in the hope-based strengths model and as expressed throughout in the stories of participants. The overarching theme and the pathway forward are best understood as the basic human need for belonging, connection, community, love, and self-love. With that, the strengths of the participants and the collective strengths of the community allow people to look at things in a new light, even at the risk of the untold stories causing pain or fear. People need stories to understand themselves. I contend that it is only through giving voice to these stories—especially those that force people collectively to look at and challenge the

darkest, most vulnerable parts of themselves in the process—that communities will begin to see lasting change.

As I wrote the last words of this dissertation, I received a letter from one of my participants, MW, who contacted me overflowing with contagious elation. I was expecting a letter from him related to the study: one last journal, one last bit of his story, his strength that he wanted to share with someone he knew would listen. I was thankful for his enthusiasm, thankful for all I had learned from this process of being radically present with men whose voices no one wants to hear. I knew I needed to honor this one last note, but I was not expecting the excitement and depth of that closing moment between us.

In his note, MW informed me that, after a long, painful journey—much of which he had shared in our time together—his record had been expunged. “Expungement Granted!!!” he wrote. “[My wife] informed me as I was emailing you.”

The words were piquant, placed in a speech bubble and pasted on a photograph of him smiling. It was the same smile I had seen from him on numerous occasions before, but this time, it was different. I could feel that hope had made a lasting home inside of him. My heart stopped, reading those words, and knowing what a powerful story this man had in him that finally, after so long, he just might get to share in a way he had always longed to. “How are you feeling?” I asked. “Happy, relieved, hopeful...”

The journey is only beginning, I said. “Inshallah” [God willing], he replied, a frequent mantra of his that he picked up on his journey as a Bahá’í: Inshallah, Inshallah, Inshallah. The contents of that last email contained this poem, “Brothers and Sisters in Pain”:

What did I do to deserve a life of pain and fear? My motive rejected, judged my behavior a crime.

Stunned at the devastating repercussions of my action. The act complete, my destiny sealed, my life shattered.

The impact crushed my identity, an annihilation of my worth.

The alarming, unreal raid, a SWAT team brandishing assault rifles. Or a subtle summon to appear before a biased, hardened judge.

My life ending, my family, friends, church condemning.

My reality, years of painful imprisonment, penetrating shame. Alone, I mulled over and over again the “what ifs,” “if onlys” I despise their labeling me as leper, sinner ... condemned.

I even visualize the tattooed “Scarlet Letter” across my foreheads.

After punishment ends, endless traumatic troubles begin. With no job, homeless, no future, my despair overwhelms me.

Insults from probationary officers, loved ones, neighbors down the block. The threats, the taunting, the finger pointing breaks me down further.

I begin to hole away, to lead a life of “quiet desperation.”

I dare not question my truth, attacks, damning, denouncing retorts. Then my heart breaks even more ... my sentence, shunned for life. My fate is sealed with reminders of chiding TV news broadcasts.

My agony, anguish causes me to give up, to raise a white flag.

I accept my lot, too afraid to speak up, to write a letter to question, “why!”

Inside, I say “I just want to be heard, I am not a boogymen [sic]... please hear me!”

Nevermind the laws, I want to plead from my soul that I am a human being.

These inner yearning for justice demands to set the record straight.

Though I have no outlet, to explain, to show that I paid dearly for my mistake.

Is there anyone out there with compassion for a “St. Jude” to understand? I realize that this voice inside me is my only solace ... heard only by God.

Quiet longings for human connections dominate, receiving eyes full of contempt.

My prayers reach out for a “do unto others,” but instead reap a slap in the face.

My Spirit tells me to have strength to cope with the dreaded registry, but I can't! I seek answers that frustrate me ... though I still strive ... for what?

I read an article that says the registry is unconstitutional, punishment, illegal.

Another explains men are appealing to get off the registry ... is this true?

Then other litigations create further punishing laws to twist the blade deeper.

Am confused, but sense an inner need to be part of this movement ...

Sisters and brother in pain, my desperation and hope are for you. My heart-felt thoughts are to tell you that you are not alone.
Courageous heroes are speaking out against the tyranny, injustice.
My plea is not to give up, but to give voice to your inner trauma, your truth.

I was struck by the last line of MW's poem: "Give voice to your inner trauma, your truth." I know this is an academic endeavor, and having spent half of my life in pursuit of it, it is my sincere hope that the contents herein will go on to contribute to the works that I have dedicated my energies to up until this point in my journey. I hope someone, somewhere takes the story here and keeps it moving, brings its contents to a bigger sample, a larger project, with extended visions for how it will shape the fields and practices to which people belong, because that is how "hope" happens. That is how the will and the way are born, how knowledge evolves, and how people evolve, too.

I also know that if the only thing this dissertation accomplishes is to have created a space that has honored another human being's story, given voice to their trauma and their truth—especially a human being who, in present society, no one wants to hear from—I have accomplished what I set out to do. I believe, in completing this dissertation, I have done that, and I believe it is best reflected in the voices of the participants upon whom this study has been founded.

Interviewer: What do you think you have taken away from this process, this journey we've been on together? What would you most want people to know? How have you grown?

MW: I take a chance by being vulnerable. I look for opportunities to joke with people. Just today, we dropped off provisions for making sandwiches for the homeless at an Iranian friend's home...who we are very friendly with. Leaving, I shouted up to her, saying, ... "I love you!!!!" She responded by throwing me a kiss. We both laughed at the gestures...as I drove away.

MH: Well, I wanted, I want [love]...to be like the most visible part of my...existence. Being able to show...it's not easy to show people that you possess love and you...you have love for...for humanity.

PA: The only thing I can do [about my past crimes] is...you know, is try to apologize. And I know nobody... I don't think anybody wants to hear my apology... But I have seen programs where they do...where they supposedly have healing. It's supposed to be healing, [to] go and speak with a person who's committed a crime against you. If that was helpful, I would. I would do that to say, you know...I'm just. I am sorry. I'm so sorry. But I know...I can never make it all right. I can never undo all the things I've done...I know I can't blame anybody else for what I've done. It's always been my own choice. Just, you know, all I want...all I'm trying to do now is love, to know what it's like to love.

The most powerful insights, expressions, and paths forward often come from confronting taboos. All taboos, including child sexual abuse, relate to many people who have no outlet. If people can find ways to face the darkest elements in themselves and others, if they can confront the secrets in front of them that keep them powerless and afraid, if they can give a voice to those things instead of separating themselves from them, they can reclaim their power. In the words of mother and child safety advocate Patty Wetterling,

I refuse to let the man who took Jacob take anything else. You can't take my marriage. You can't take my other children. You can't take my sense of goodness with the world. You can't take away the world that Jacob believed in. You can't have it. I've fought very hard to rebuild the world that I know it could be. The way the world could be when people care about each other and they reach out. When somebody does something wrong, you get them the help that they need so that they can turn their lives around. I just couldn't go to the very punitive way and stay there. It wasn't me. (Wright, 2015, p. 78)

This dissertation is a call to courage for professionals and people to reclaim their power and embrace new hope for the prevention of sexual crimes against the most vulnerable. It is necessary to look at all information available to impact change. Change is not possible unless people are committed to listening to stories, hearing perspectives that may be foreign to them, and being active agents of change. The hope-based strengths model depicts a process that is ongoing. Trauma and pain are not things resolved in a year-long pilot study. Further, as this study has shown, trauma and pain are not addressed

or resolved in isolation, but through belonging, connection, community, love, and self-love. These basic human needs are important healing agents in the lives of all parties impacted by sexual violence and abuse. The path forward, the hope, is to find and create spaces for this change to happen. To quote Mariame Kaba, a leading activist in violence prevention, about dismantling the prison industrial complex, transformative justice, and youth leadership development: “Hope is a discipline. We have to practice it every day.”

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Appendix A: Letter of Support

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is
organization,

I am the

of

the program include:

My duties and oversight of

WORKING w/DOC, Parole + Probation to Identify members
Identifying + Training Volunteers
Begin circles Support
Report to COCOSA
Attend Trainings + meetings

I am writing this letter in support of Tiffany A. Miner, who is a current doctoral candidate at the University of New Mexico in Family Studies and Human Development. I give my consent for Tiffany to complete her doctoral study with

and to sample from within my organization.

If I can assist in answering any further questions with regard to
and my role, please contact me at:

Thank you.

Name:

Organizational Role:

Executive Dir.

Date:

4/4/17

Appendix B: Primary Participant Recruitment Email for Coordinators

Dear Coordinator,

I hope this message finds you well.

My name is Tiffany Miner, and I am a student at the University of New Mexico. I am conducting a research study to fulfil the requirements of my doctoral degree in Family and Child Studies in the Department of Individual, Family, and Community Education. This study is rooted in the tenets of Positive Psychology, the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The specific aims of the study are to explore with a sample of males with a history of one or more child sexual offenses: (1) what they view as their unique character strengths; (2) how they can apply their top character strengths to address their key areas of struggle; and, (3) how the daily use of their character strengths impacts their outlook on themselves and their offending behavior. The study will occur over a 12-month period and involves interviewing participants about the use of their character strengths (the best of who they are) in the past and present, as well as helping them to identify and apply their character strengths in meaningful ways. This will be accomplished not only through the interviews but several other practices, such as participant journaling, bimonthly mask-making workshops that highlight different aspects of each participant's character strengths journey, and other strength-building activities.

I am looking for 10 or more male participants who:

- have at least one Level 2 (Tier II or Tier III) contact *or* noncontact (internet) sexual offense perpetrated against a minor, for which they have already served time in prison;
- are categorized as “high risk” for reoffense;
- have completed their sentence and are actively transitioned out of prison by the time they are initially contacted;
- currently belong to, or plan to participate in a **voluntary** reintegration group or Circles of Support and Accountability in the community.

This study **will not** include females with histories of sexual offending, males under the age of 18, males convicted only of sexual offenses against adults, males with severe cognitive impairment that interferes with their understanding of the research project and procedures, or non-English speaking populations.

If you know of individuals within your organization or group who fit the above criteria, may be interested in participating in this study, and who you would support participating in this study, I would be very grateful for your response. Should you choose to respond to this email, you will have the chance to find out more about the study before any further action is taken. Replying to this email alone *does not* require that you engage in any further communication related to this study. It also in no way obligates any individual currently in your organization or group to participate in the study.

If you have read and understand the above to your satisfaction, please respond to this email. I thank you for your interest and look forward to hearing from you.

If you have any questions before proceeding, you may contact me directly at this email address. In addition, you may contact my faculty advisor and chairperson, Dr. Ziarat Hossain, who is overseeing my work on this study. He can be reached at zhossain@unm.edu.

The use of email to recruit participants for this study has been approved by the Office of the Institutional Review Board (OIRB) at UNM. If you would like to speak with someone other than the research team to obtain information or offer input or if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the IRB. The IRB is a group of people from UNM and the community who provide independent oversight of safety and ethical issues related to research involving people:

UNM Office of the IRB, (505) 277-2644, irbmaincampus@unm.edu. Website: <http://irb.unm.edu/>

Thank you,

Tiffany Miner
Student Researcher
University of New Mexico

Appendix C: Primary Participant Recruitment Form

Information About Participation in a Study

Hello! My name is Tiffany Miner, and I am a student enrolled in the Family and Child Studies program in the Department of Individual, Community, and Family Education at the University of New Mexico. You have received this letter because the coordinator of your community reintegration group and/or Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) was informed about my research study and thought you might be a suitable candidate for participation, should you be interested. My study is rooted in the tenets of Positive Psychology, the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The purpose of this study is to explore with males with a history of one or more child sexual offenses: (1) what they view as their unique character strengths (the best of who they are); (2) how they can apply their top character strengths to address their key areas of struggle; and, (3) how the daily use of their character strengths impacts their outlook on themselves and their offending behaviour. To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be a male over the age of 18 who:

- has at least one Level 2 (Tier II or Tier III) contact *or* noncontact (internet) sexual offense perpetrated against a minor, for which they have already served time in custody;
- is categorized as “high risk” for reoffense;
- has completed your sentence and are actively transitioned out of prison/into the community;
- currently belongs to, or plans to participate in, a **voluntary** community-based reintegration group or Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) in your community.

The study will not include females with histories of sexual offending, males under the age of 18, males convicted only of sexual offenses against adults, individuals with severe cognitive impairment that interferes with their understanding of the research project and procedures, or non-English speaking populations.

The study will occur over a 12-month period and involves helping participants identify their unique character strengths and how they have used them in the past and present, and working with them to apply their character strengths in new and meaningful ways. There are several potential benefits to you should you choose to participate in this study, including the opportunity to learn of the unique character strengths you possess, a safe space throughout the study to explore positive attributes about yourself and how to put them into practice, concrete ways that you can apply a character-strengths approach to address your unique needs and struggles, the opportunity to build stronger interpersonal connections with others, and the opportunity to experience increased feelings of self- and life satisfaction through exposure to new ways of reflecting on yourself, your abilities, and your situation.

Should you decide to participate in this study, your name and other identifying information would be kept strictly confidential. You are in no way obligated to

participate in this research study solely because you received this letter. Please indicate whether you would or would not be interested in learning more about this study by checking one of the boxes below.

[] **Yes**, I am interested in potentially participating in this study should I meet the inclusion criteria and would like to know more about it.

[] **No**, I am not interested in participating in this study, regardless of whether I meet the inclusion criteria, and do not wish to be contacted about it again.

I thank you for taking the time to read and respond to this letter. If you expressed interest, a face-to-face meeting between you and I will be arranged so that I can go over the study in more detail with you and speak to any questions or concerns you may have at that time. There will be no penalty if you are not interested in receiving further information in this study. Please return this letter to me personally to indicate your interest in participating in the study.

Best,

Tiffany Miner

Appendix D: Primary Participant Inclusion Questionnaire

Below is a brief questionnaire to determine your eligibility to participate in this study. This information will be kept strictly confidential. Please answer the following questions truthfully and to the best of your ability. If you have any questions regarding your participation status, please do not hesitate to contact me at tminer@unm.edu.

1. Are you currently residing in the state _____ with the intent to remain in the state of _____ for 12 months or longer?

Yes

No

Other_____

2. Are you between the ages of 18 and 80 years of age?

Yes

No

3. Does your offense history include at least one contact *or* noncontact (internet) sexual offense with a child under the age of 18 that classifies you as moderate or high risk to reoffend?

Yes

No

Other_____

4. Are you currently on parole in the community?

Yes

No

Other_____

5. Are you currently involved in, or in the process of requesting to participate in, a community-based reintegration group such as Circle of Concern (COC) or a weekly community support group(s)?

Yes

No

Other_____

Please initial and date below to indicate your consent to share the above information with the researcher to determine your eligibility to participate in the research study.

Initials _____ **Researcher's Signature** _____

Date _____ **Date** _____

Appendix E: Secondary Participant Inclusion Questionnaire

Below is a brief questionnaire to determine your eligibility to participate in this study. This information will be kept strictly confidential. Please answer the following questions truthfully and to the best of your ability. If you have any questions regarding your participation status, please do not hesitate to contact me at tminer@unm.edu.

1. Are you currently residing in the state of _____ with the intent to remain in the state of _____ for 12 months or longer?

Yes

No

Other_____
2. Are you between the ages of 18 and 80 years of age?

Yes

No
3. Have you successfully completed a background check, as required by _____, the community-based organization for which you are volunteering?

Yes

No

Other_____
4. Have you completed the on-site training provided by _____, the community-based organization for which you are volunteering?

Yes

No

Other_____
5. Are you committed to volunteering within _____ for a period of at least one year?

Yes

No

Other_____

Please initial and date below to indicate your consent to share the above information with the researcher to determine your eligibility to participate in the research study.

Initials _____ **Researcher's Signature**_____

Date _____ **Date** _____

Appendix F: Denial Letter

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study, “Exploring the Role of Core Positive Selves With Men Convicted of Child Sexual Offenses: A Character Strengths Initiative.” This letter is to inform you that your participation in this study has been denied because you do not meet the research eligibility criteria. Specifically, you have been denied participation in this study for the following reasons:

While you do not meet the eligibility criteria for this particular research study, I greatly appreciate your expressed interest in this topic and hope to work with you in some capacity in the future. If you have any questions regarding why you were denied participation in this study, you may contact me directly at tminer@unm.edu.

Best,

Tiffany Miner
Student Researcher
University of New Mexico

Appendix G: Primary Participant Consent to Participate in Research

Purpose of the study: You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being done by Dr. Ziarat Hossain, the Principal Investigator, and Tiffany A. Miner, from the Department of Individual, Family, and Community Education, at the University of New Mexico. This study uses Positive Psychology, the scientific study of the strengths that empower individuals and communities to thrive, to help you learn and use your character strengths in your daily life. The purpose of this study is to explore with you: (1) what you view as your unique character strengths; (2) how you can apply your top character strengths to address your key areas of struggle; and (3) how the daily use of your character strengths impacts your outlook on yourself and your offending behaviour. You are being asked to take part in this study because you meet the inclusion criteria, which is as follows:

Males over the age of 18 who:

- have at least one Level 2 (Tier II or Tier III) contact *or* noncontact (internet) sexual offense perpetrated against a minor, for which they have already served time in custody;
- are categorized as “high risk” for reoffense;
- have completed their sentence and are actively transitioned out of prison by the time they are initially contacted;
- currently belong to, or plan to participate in, a **voluntary** community-based reintegration group in their community.

This form will explain what to expect when joining the research, as well as the possible risks and benefits of participation. If you have any questions, please ask me.

What you will do in the study: This 12-month study involves helping you identify your unique character strengths (the best of who you are) and how you have used them in the past and present, and working with you to apply your character strengths in new and meaningful ways. To do this, interviews, as well as several other activities such as journaling, mask-making workshops which highlight different parts of your character strengths journey, and other strength-building activities, will be used. Throughout the process, you will learn about and use the “At My Best” Strengths Card Deck and the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), both unique and flexible tools that help uncover your strengths and what is most valuable to you. If you would like to participate in this study, details of each of these activities and what you will be doing is listed below:

Interviews. There will be a total of 7 interviews, which will take place once every other month, for up to 90 minutes. You *are not* required to utilize the entire 90 minutes, but can if you choose to. You may stop the interview at any time or choose to skip any question that makes you uncomfortable. The interviews will be audiotaped, not video-recorded, and will take place in a private room/location at the research site.

Values In Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). You will be asked to take the VIA-IS **one time**, between the first and second interview. This is a free and easy online survey that takes approximately 20-30 minutes to finish. You will answer a series of 120 questions on a scale of 1 to 5 (*very much like me, like me, neutral, unlike me, very much unlike me*) related to your personal strengths. After completing the questions, you will be given results that include an in-depth report of your top character strengths. You will be asked to review your VIA-IS results independently or within your group/CoSA Circle once you have completed it. I will also collect and review the results of your VIA-IS before the second interview takes place. Results of the VIA-IS will be used to help you recognize and talk about the core “signature strengths” that are unique to you throughout the 12-month character strengths training.

“At My Best” and Character Strengths Card Deck. These cards will be introduced to you at the beginning of the research process. Each card contains a different character strength and photo. They will be used throughout the entire 12-month process, individually throughout the week, during group meetings, and during check-ins with you (1 to 3x/week, for 15 minutes). You will use this card deck similarly to the VIA-IS to help you to identify and develop your core “signature strengths.” The cards will be used as tools to encourage strengths-related conversation during the other research activities, including journaling, mask-making, and interviews.

Journaling. You will be given a notepad/journal, which you will have throughout the week, before your group or one-on-one meetings with me take place. Questions and writing prompts related to strengths practice will be given each week to help you with your writing exercises (e.g., “One thing I noticed today/this week was...”). You will be asked to commit to journaling a minimum of 10 minutes a day, at least once per week, but may take as long as needed. The purpose of the journal writing is to allow you to think about where you feel you are at in the character strengths training process, and identify progress, barriers, or goals, as well as reflect on thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Mask-Making. As a part of this study, you will be given the opportunity to participate in a 6-session mask-making workshop, “Exploring Your Core Positive Self Through the Art of Mask-Making.” Participating in the mask-making workshops is a way for you to express through the use of art (1) how your character strengths show up in your life, (2) how you feel that they shape who you are as a person, and (3) how they relate to your view of yourself and your life circumstances. Workshops will take place every other month, for up to 4 hours, for the length of the full study. You *are not* required to use the full 4 hours to complete your mask, although it will be available to you. At the beginning of the mask-making process, you will be given a schedule of the mask-making workshops. A private space will be given to you for the creation of the masks, and materials will be provided to you. At the end of each mask-making workshop, you will be asked to complete a brief writing exercise on your mask and the monthly theme, which will require a minimum of 15 minutes. I will then ask to take pictures of the masks for the purposes of this study. You can either give your consent or opt out. I will never ask to take pictures of you personally. An additional form discusses the mask-making workshops in greater detail.

Observations. Field notes/observations will be used to gather information about when and how the character strengths approach is being utilized in daily activities and interactions, in what situations you might be experiencing challenges, and whether and how the character strengths approach is used to address them. Observations will also help to determine how much time you are spending on various activities related to the character strengths practice and who you see as your community supports throughout this process. This will allow me to identify potential meaningful interactions and environments available to you and address possible barriers to these things with you.

Researchers Journal. Lastly, a researcher's journal will be used by myself to write down any thoughts, feelings, and ideas that I may have throughout the research process. I will complete entries in my researcher's journal daily throughout the process, which will help me to constantly clarify my position and commitment to you as a researcher and for the rest of our time together.

Risks:

The risks of participating in this study are unlikely since you will have regular support and guidance from your community support group/CoSA, which will remain in place for you for this entire study. However, there are still some risks of stress, emotional distress, inconvenience, and loss of privacy and confidentiality that are possible when participating in any research study. Any risks to you will be managed in the following ways:

1. You will have access to your current therapist, either by phone or in-person, who can help you to appropriately address any anxiety or distress experienced as a result of the study. If you do not have a therapist at any point during the study, a referral will be provided to you as needed.
2. You will have continued contact with your parole officer during the study, who will remain responsible for matters related to your offense.
3. You will have regular contact with knowledgeable and supportive community volunteers through your ongoing participation in the community-based reintegration group/CoSA. These individuals will be available for discussion and feedback related to your participation in the study.
4. Your reintegration/CoSA group will also be aware of situations that need reporting or attention from appropriate professionals, which you will have discussed with them before beginning the study.

Benefits: If you choose to participate in the study, there are several potential benefits to you. For example:

- You will have the opportunity to **learn your unique character strengths** through the use of strengths tools such as the "At My Best" Strengths Cards Deck and the Values In Action Inventory of Strengths, as well as open dialogue.
- You will be given a safe space throughout the study to explore positive qualities about yourself, as well as **how to put them into practice in your daily life.**

- You will learn concrete ways that you can use a character-strengths approach to **gain awareness and understanding of your unique needs and struggles** and how to address them in new and empowering ways.
- You will have an opportunity to **build stronger positive connections with others** through the creative expression of your experiences with the character strengths approach.
- You will potentially experience more **feelings of self- and life satisfaction** through learning new ways of reflecting on yourself, your abilities, and your situation.

Please also note that there may be **no direct benefit** to you from participating in the study.

As a long-term goal of this study, it is hoped that this type of work will shed light on new techniques that could help individuals who have sexually offended to remain healthy and address challenges related to their offense behavior.

Confidentiality of your information: I, the researcher, will take steps to protect the security of all your personal information but cannot guarantee confidentiality of all study data. The University of New Mexico Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees human subject research and/or Dr. Ziarat Hossain, who is overseeing this research as my advisor, may be allowed to access your data. However, your name and any other identifying information **WILL NOT** be used in any published reports about this study, and I will take the following additional steps to ensure your confidentiality:

- All identifying information from transcripts and other generated records about you will be de-identified, meaning that your identity will not be connected to the information in any way
- All identifying information from the study will be strictly confidential
- All research materials, interviews, and transcripts will be locked and stored in a secure area, and/or in an encrypted (protected) file, and;
- All original audio files obtained throughout the interview process will be deleted immediately upon study closure.

You should know that there are some occasions that I will be legally and ethically required to report information that you share with me. Specifically, this includes:

- Information indicating your intent to harm yourself;
- Information indicating your intent to harm another person, and/or
- Information indicating your active involvement in offense-related behaviors that could result in injury to yourself or others.

These limitations to confidentiality are in place for the safety of yourself and others.

Payment: *You will not be paid for participating in this study.*

Right to withdraw from the study: Your participation in this study is completely by choice. You have the right to choose not to participate or to end your participation at any point in this study without a consequence. If you wish to end your participation in the study, you will be asked to verbally inform me, the researcher, that you have chosen to stop all study activities. You may choose to state your reasons for leaving the study at the time but **will not** be required to. You will also be given a form to complete, explaining in writing your desire to end your participation in the study. At that time, you will be given options on how you wish for your data to be handled once you leave the study. You can give your consent for me to continue to use any of the data collected before your departure from the study. You can also choose to refuse the use of any data pertaining to you entirely.

I, as the researcher, may also choose to end your participation in the study. This would occur only if (1) you are sent back to prison following another offense, (2) you relocate outside of the state during the course of the study, (3) you are considered at any time by the appropriate professional party to be mentally or physically unable to complete the study, or (4) you are not engaging in the study tasks. Any data collected prior to **any participant** exiting the study under such circumstances will be destroyed.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study, please reach out to me:

Tiffany A. Miner, Individual, Family, and Community Education, **Address**, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, tminer@unm.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor and chairperson, Dr. Ziarat Hossain, at zhossain@unm.edu.

If you would like to speak with someone other than the research team to get information or offer feedback or if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people from UNM and the community who look over and manage safety and ethical issues related to research involving people:

UNM Office of the IRB, (505) 277-2644, irbmaincampus@unm.edu. Website: <http://irb.unm.edu/>

CONSENT

You are making a decision whether to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read this form (or the form was read to you) and that all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights as a research participant. A copy of this consent form will be given to you.

I agree to participate in this study.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Initials _____ **Researcher's Signature** _____

Date _____ **Date** _____

Appendix H: Informed Consent for Coordinators and Volunteer Community Members to Participate in Research

Dr. Ziarat Hossain, the Principal Investigator, and I, Tiffany A. Miner, from the Department of Individual, Family, and Community Education are doing a research study to explore with males with a history of one or more child sexual offenses (primary research participants): (1) what they view as their unique character strengths; (2) how they can apply their top character strengths to address their key areas of struggle; and, (3) how the daily use of their character strengths impacts their outlook on themselves and their offending behavior. You are being asked to participate in this study because you

- are a group coordinator OR volunteer community member, aged 18 to 80, who is working/volunteering within the community-based reintegration groups that the primary participants (offending parties) belong to;
- have received a prior background check and completed the onsite training as required and provided by the organization for which you work/volunteer; and,
- you have committed to working/volunteering within the organization/reintegration groups for a period of at least one year.

Your participation will involve you giving your feedback to participants about the use of their character strengths. To do so, you will be asked to complete monthly “360° Feedback—Participant Strength Reflections Questionnaires.” You will be asked to complete one of these monthly questionnaires for each participant that you work with for 12 months. Each questionnaire should take about 20 to 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaire includes questions such as ‘How often did the participant demonstrate SELF-REGULATION? For example, how often was he able to be disciplined and show self-control, even when feeling frustrated or poorly?’, ‘[Using the below chart], please circle 5 to 7 strengths that you feel the participant most clearly demonstrated in the past month,’ and ‘Please provide a brief rationale or story of how the participant has demonstrated each of the 5 to 7 strengths that you circled in the past month’.

Your involvement in the study is completely up to you. You may choose not to participate or to end your participation at any time. You can also refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no names or identifying information connected to your responses. The completion of this questionnaire involves no known risks to you or the primary participants, although some people may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when answering questions. All questionnaires (data) collected will be locked and stored in a secure area and/or in an encrypted file.

Potential benefits to you should you choose to participate in the study include:

- the opportunity to **learn a new strengths vocabulary** that you can apply to yourself and your work with others;

- the opportunity to **build stronger positive connections with others**, particularly those you are working with, through helping them to recognize and identify their unique character strengths in action; and,
- a **possible increase in feelings of self- and life-satisfaction** through your engagement with others in the strengths practice and learning to identify the best in those you are working with.

Please also note that there may be **no direct benefit** to you from participating in the study.

The findings from this questionnaire will offer information on how often and in what ways you believe each primary study participant you are working with has used the strengths I am asking you about. If published, your responses will be presented in summary form only.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research study, please contact me: Tiffany A. Miner, at tminer@unm.edu. In addition, you may contact my faculty advisor and chairperson, Dr. Ziarat Hossain, at zhossain@unm.edu. Individual, Family, and Community Education, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131.

If you would like to speak with someone other than the research team to get information or offer feedback, or if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people from UNM and the community who look over and manage safety and ethical issues related to research involving people:

UNM Office of the IRB, (505) 277-2644, irbmaincampus@unm.edu. Website: <http://irb.unm.edu/>

By signing below, you will be agreeing to participate in the above described research study.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Initials _____ **Researcher's Signature** _____

Date _____ **Date** _____

Appendix I: Participant Demographics Questionnaire

Thank you for completing this brief demographic questionnaire. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

1) Age

- ☐ 18-24 years old
- ☐ 25-34 years old
- ☐ 35-44 years old
- ☐ 45-54 years old
- ☐ 55-64 years old
- ☐ 65-74 years old
- ☐ 75 years old or older
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

2) Ethnicity or Race

- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ Native American/American Indian
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other (please specify)_____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

3) Marital Status

- ☐ Single, never married
- ☐ Married or domestic partnership
- ☐ Divorced

☐ Widowed

☐ Separated

☐ Prefer not to answer

4) Sexual Orientation *Do you consider yourself to be (Mark one answer)*

☐ Heterosexual or straight

☐ Gay

☐ Bisexual

☐ Other (please specify)_____

☐ Prefer not to answer

5) Education. *What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed? If currently enrolled, mark the previous grade or highest degree received.*

☐ No schooling completed

☐ Elementary to 8th grade

☐ 9th, 10th or 11th grade

☐ 12th grade, no diploma

☐ High school graduate - high school diploma or the equivalent (for example, GED)

☐ Some Technical/Vocational degree

☐ Associate's degree (for example, AA, AS)

☐ Bachelor's degree (for example, BA, AB, BS)

☐ Master's degree (for example, MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA)

☐ Professional degree (for example, MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)

☐ Doctoral degree (for example, PhD, EdD)

☐ Other (please specify)_____

☐ Prefer not to answer

6) Employment Status. *Are you currently—*

☐ Employed for wages

☐ Self-employed

☐ Out of work and looking for work

☐ Out of work but not currently looking for work

☐ Student

☐ Retired

☐ Unable to work

☐ Other (please specify)_____

☐ Prefer not to answer

7) Income. *What was your total household income before taxes during the past 12 months?*

☐ Less than \$25,000

☐ \$25,000 to \$34,999

☐ \$35,000 to \$49,999

☐ \$50,000 to \$74,999

☐ \$75,000 to \$99,999

☐ \$100,000 to \$149,999

☐ \$150,000 or more

☐ Other (please specify)_____

☐ Prefer not to answer

8) Living Arrangement. *Which of the following are applicable to your living situation? (Check all that apply)*

- ☐ I live alone
- ☐ I live with roommates
- ☐ I live with parents(s) or relative(s)
- ☐ I live with a wife/domestic partner/significant other
- ☐ I live with my adult child/children
- ☐ I live with my minor children
- ☐ Other (please specify)_____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

To be filled out by the researcher after determination of study eligibility status.

Participant Initials/I.D. #

Date

Appendix J: Primary Participant Semistructured Interview Protocol

Interview 1 “At My Best” Character Strengths Exploration	
Length	90 minutes
Emphasis	Determine what participants view as their top character strengths.
Objective	(a) Help participants identify their character strengths. (b) Determine what participants think happens (or what they would like to happen) when they use their character strengths.

Interview Questions.

1. Tell me more about what it was that first attracted you to learning about your character strengths.
2. Tell me a story about a time in your life when you felt like you were at your best.
3. Describe the first memory that you have of someone recognizing something good about you.
4. If someone was asked to describe who you are today, what would you most want them to say about you?
5. How do you hope that using your character strengths will make you/your situation better?

Interview 2 “VIA” Character Strengths Exploration	
Length	90 minutes
Emphasis	Determine what participants view as their top character strengths.
Objective	(a) Determine what the participants think of their VIA results. (b) Help participants identify times in the past when they recall using their signature (top) strengths from the VIA.

Interview Questions.

1. What is your gut reaction to your VIA results?
2. What surprised you most about these results?
3. How do you feel that your top five VIA strengths reflect who you really are?
4. Tell me about the character strength that you feel is the most important in your life right now.
5. What would make it “worth it” to explore these character strengths more?

Addressing Needs and Barriers	
Interview 3	
Length	90 minutes
Emphasis	Help participants explore how they can use their character strengths to address their unique criminogenic needs and offense cycle.
Objective	(a) Explore past experiences and messages that have minimized strengths-use, both in the past and currently (e.g., barriers to best possible self/life). (b) Explore past use of strengths that participants believe have helped them in times of struggle.

Interview Questions.

1. Tell me about a key moment in your early life that gave you the strongest message about who you are.
2. How do you think that message continues to present itself in your life right now, particularly related to your struggles/offense behavior?
3. What hurt in your life has made it the most difficult for you to be your best possible self?
4. What strengths do you think you learned from your early experiences that have helped you during times of struggle in your present life?
5. Imagine you are sitting in front of yourself as a young child. What message does he most need to hear from you that he never got from anyone else?

Interview 4 Putting Strengths Into Practice

Length	90 minutes
Emphasis	Help participants explore how they can use their character strengths to address their unique criminogenic needs and offense cycle.
Objective	(a) Explore areas of each participants' present life where strengths can be applied or fostered. (b) Determine what strengths participants feel are the most important in helping them to address individual challenges related to crime desistence in the present.

Interview Questions.

1. Looking back on your struggles/offense behavior, what role do you think it has played in your life up until now?
2. How would you like the role that your struggles/offense behavior plays in your life to change?
3. How would your current relationship with your struggles/offense behavior need to change in order for the role it plays in your life to be different?
4. Describe what your life would look if the changes that we have just discussed were made.
5. In what ways can you use your strengths to create a better future for yourself moving forward?

Interview 5 Charting Strengths Actions	
Length	90 minutes
Emphasis	Help participants explore how they can use their character strengths to address their unique criminogenic needs and offense cycle.
Objective	(a) Explore shifts in participants' perception of the self since implementing strengths actions. (b) Explore how participants think this strengths approach fosters something new or unexplored related to their attitude toward their offending behavior.

Interview Questions.

1. Tell me about a time recently when you were feeling anxious, depressed, or stressed and used your strengths to move forward.
2. How do you think that you focusing on what's most authentic and good about you helps you to reframe and reexamine your struggles/offense behavior?
3. How do you think that others focusing on what's most authentic and good about you helps you to reframe and reexamine your struggles/offense behavior?
4. What is something that you have realized about yourself since beginning your strengths practice that was hidden before?
5. How might this new realization about yourself help you moving forward?

Interview 6 Assessing Strengths Outcomes	
Length	90 minutes
Emphasis	Explore how the daily use of participants' top signature strengths impacts their attitudes toward their sexual offending behavior.
Objective	(a) Review how participants felt when going through the action steps. (b) Assess how strong participants feel in their ability to utilize their strengths in the future to address their unique criminogenic needs.

Interview Questions.

1. Describe how you feel when you are able to put your character strengths into action.
2. In what ways, if any, do you believe that recognizing your character strengths has reframed your outlook of yourself and/or your offense behavior?
3. How do you think your past story (struggles) will influence your story moving forward?
4. What is the biggest difference that you have observed in yourself/your behavior throughout this process that you think will be important in dealing with the challenges ahead of you?
5. Over the past year, you have learned a lot about your character strengths and how to use them to express yourself. If given the opportunity, how would you use them to express to the person(s) you have hurt most through your past behavior how you feel about what you did then?

Interview 7 Assessing Strengths Outcomes	
Length	90 minutes
Emphasis	Explore participants' experience of the character strengths approach and how they feel about it.
Objective	(a) Explore how the daily use of participants' top signature strengths impacts their view of themselves. (b) Assess if and how participants feel that the character strengths approach is meaningful to them.

Interview Questions.

1. What was a memorable “rose” about this process – something beneficial or beautiful?
2. What was a memorable “thorn” about this process – something difficult or challenging?
3. What was a memorable “bud” about this process – something that helped you grow?
4. What surprised you the most about yourself during this process?
5. What do you think has been the most meaningful thing to come out of learning and using your character strengths daily?

Appendix K: The Strengths Use Scale

The following questions ask you about your strengths—that is, the things you are able to do well or do best. Please respond to each statement using the scale below.

1 strongly disagree	2 disagree	3 slightly disagree	4 neither agree nor disagree	5 slightly agree	6 agree
1. I am regularly able to do what I do best.					
1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
2. I always play to my strengths.					
1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
3. I always try to use my strengths.					
1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
4. I achieve what I want by using my strengths.					
1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
5. I use my strengths every day.					
1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
6. I am able to use my strengths in lots of different situations.					
1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree

7. I use my strengths to get what I want out of life.

1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
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8. My work gives me lots of opportunities to use my strengths.

1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
--------------------------	--------------	--------------------------	--------------------------------------	-----------------------	-----------

9. My life presents me with lots of different ways to use my strengths.

1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
--------------------------	--------------	--------------------------	--------------------------------------	-----------------------	-----------

10. Using my strengths comes naturally to me.

1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
--------------------------	--------------	--------------------------	--------------------------------------	-----------------------	-----------

11. I find it easy to use my strengths in the things I do.

1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
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12. Most of my time is spent doing things that I am good at doing.

1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
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13. Using my strengths is something I am familiar with.

1 – strongly disagree	2 – disagree	3 – slightly disagree	4 – neither agree nor disagree	5 – slightly agree	6 – agree
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14. I am able to use my strengths in lots of different ways.

1 – strongly	2 – disagree	3 – slightly	4 – neither agree	5 – slightly	6 – agree
--------------	--------------	--------------	-------------------	--------------	-----------

disagree

disagree

nor disagree

agree

How to score: Add up your responses to the 14 items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of strength use. Strength use is associated with better goal attainment, higher levels of happiness and well-being, and lower stress.

Source. “Strength Use, Self-Concordance, and Well-Being: Implications for Strengths Coaching and Coaching Psychologists,” by R. Govindji and P. A. Linley, 2007, *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 2(2), 143-153.

Appendix L: Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) Survey

Please choose one option in response to each statement. All of the questions reflect statements that many people would find desirable, but we want you to answer only in terms of whether the statement describes what you are like. Please be honest and accurate. We cannot rank your strengths until you answer all of the 120 questions.

1. Being able to come up with new and different ideas is one of my strong points.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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2. I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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3. I never quit a task before it is done.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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4. I always keep my promises.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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5. I have no trouble eating healthy foods.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
-------------------	---------	---------	-----------	---------------------

6. I always look on the bright side.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
-------------------	---------	---------	-----------	---------------------

7. I am a spiritual person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
-------------------	---------	---------	-----------	---------------------

8. I know how to handle myself in different social situations.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

9. I always finish what I start.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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10. I really enjoy doing small favors for friends.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

11. There are people in my life who care as much about my feelings and well-being as they do about their own.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

12. As a leader, I treat everyone equally well regardless of his or her experience.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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13. Even when candy or cookies are under my nose, I never overeat.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

14. I practice my religion.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

15. I rarely hold a grudge.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

16. I am always busy with something interesting.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

17. I am thrilled when I learn something new.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

18. I like to think of new ways to do things.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

19. No matter what the situation, I am able to fit in.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

20. I never hesitate to publicly express an unpopular opinion.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

21. I believe honesty is the basis for trust.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

22. I go out of my way to cheer up people who appear down.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

23. I treat all people equally regardless of who they might be.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

24. One of my strengths is helping a group of people work well together even when they have their differences.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

25. I am a highly disciplined person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

26. I always think before I speak.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

27. I experience deep emotions when I see beautiful things.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

28. At least once a day, I stop and count my blessings.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

29. Despite challenges, I always remain hopeful about the future.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

30. My faith never deserts me during hard times.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

31. I do not act as if I am a special person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

32. I welcome the opportunity to brighten someone else's day with laughter.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

33. I never seek vengeance.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

34. I value my ability to think critically.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

35. I have the ability to make other people feel interesting.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

36. I must stand up for what I believe even if there are negative results.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

37. I finish things despite obstacles in the way.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

38. I love to make other people happy.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

39. I am the most important person in someone else's life.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

40. I work at my very best when I am a group member.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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41. Everyone's rights are equally important to me.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

42. I see beauty that other people pass by without noticing.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

43. I have a clear picture in my mind about what I want to happen in the future.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

44. I never brag about my accomplishments.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

45. I try to have fun in all kinds of situations.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

46. I love what I do.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

47. I am excited by many different activities.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

48. I am a true life-long learner.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

49. I am always coming up with new ways to do things.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

50. People describe me as “wise beyond my years.”

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

51. My promises can be trusted.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

52. I give everyone a chance.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

53. To be an effective leader, I treat everyone the same.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

54. I never want things that are bad for me in the long run, even if they make me feel good in the short run.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

55. I have often been left speechless by the beauty depicted in a movie.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

56. I am an extremely grateful person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

57. I try to add some humor to whatever I do.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

58. I look forward to each new day.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

59. I believe it is best to forgive and forget.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

60. I have many interests.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

61. When the topic calls for it, I can be a highly rational thinker.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

62. My friends say that I have lots of new and different ideas.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

63. I am always able to look at things and see the big picture.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

64. I always stand up for my beliefs.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

65. I do not give up.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

66. I am true to my own values.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

67. I always feel the presence of love in my life.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

68. I can always stay on a diet.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

69. I think through the consequences every time before I act.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

70. I am always aware of the natural beauty in the environment.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

71. My faith makes me who I am.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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72. I have lots of energy.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

73. I can find something of interest in any situation.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

74. I read all of the time.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

75. Thinking things through is part of who I am.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

76. I am an original thinker.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

77. I am good at sensing what other people are feeling.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

78. I have a mature view on life.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

79. I am as excited about the good fortune of others as I am about my own.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

80. I can express love to someone else.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

81. Without exception, I support my teammates or fellow group members.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

82. My friends always tell me I am a strong but fair leader.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

83. I always keep straight right from wrong.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

84. I feel thankful for what I have received in life.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

85. I know that I will succeed with the goals I set for myself.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

86. I rarely call attention to myself.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

87. I have a great sense of humor.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

88. I rarely try to get even.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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89. I always weigh the pros and cons.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

90. I stick with whatever I decide to do.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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91. I enjoy being kind to others.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

92. I can accept love from others.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

93. Even if I disagree with them, I always respect the leaders of my group.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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94. Even if I do not like someone, I treat him or her fairly.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

95. As a leader, I try to make all group members happy.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

96. I am a very careful person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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97. I am in awe of simple things in life that others might take for granted.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

98. When I look at my life, I find many things to be grateful for.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

99. I have been told that modesty is one of my most notable characteristics.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

100. I am usually willing to give someone another chance.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

101. I think my life is extremely interesting.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

102. I read a huge variety of books.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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103. I try to have good reasons for my important decisions.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

104. I always know what to say to make people feel good.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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105. I may not say it to others, but I consider myself to be a wise person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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106. It is important to me to respect decisions made by my group.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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107. I always make careful choices.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

108. I feel a profound sense of appreciation every day.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

109. If I feel down, I always think about what is good in my life.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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110. My beliefs make my life important.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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111. I awaken with a sense of excitement about the day's possibilities.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

112. I love to read nonfiction books for fun.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

113. Others consider me to be a wise person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

114. I am a brave person.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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115. Others trust me to keep their secrets.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

116. I gladly sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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117. I believe that it is worth listening to everyone's opinions.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
----------------------	---------	---------	-----------	------------------------

118. People are drawn to me because I am humble.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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119. I am known for my good sense of humor.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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120. People describe me as full of zest.

very much like me	like me	neutral	unlike me	very much unlike me
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VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

The Character Strengths of a Flourishing Life

WISDOM	COURAGE	HUMANITY	JUSTICE	TEMPERANCE	TRANSCENDENCE
 Creativity Originality; adaptive; ingenuity	 Bravery Valor; not shrinking from fear; speaking up for what's right	 Love Both loving and being loved; valuing close relations with others	 Teamwork Citizenship; social responsibility; loyalty	 Forgiveness Mercy; accepting others' shortcomings; giving people a second chance	 Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence Awe; wonder; elevation
 Curiosity Interest; novelty-seeking; exploration; openness to experience	 Perseverance Persistence; industry; finishing what one starts	 Kindness Generosity; nurturance; care; compassion; altruism; "niceness"	 Fairness Just; not letting feelings bias decisions about others	 Humility Modesty; letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves	 Gratitude Thankful for the good; expressing thanks; feeling blessed
 Judgment Critical thinking; thinking things through; open-minded	 Honesty Authenticity; integrity	 Social Intelligence Emotional intelligence; aware of the motives/feelings of self/others; knowing what makes other people tick	 Leadership Organizing group activities; encouraging a group to get things done	 Prudence Careful; cautious; not taking undue risks	 Hope Optimism; future-mindedness; future orientation
 Love of Learning Mastering new skills & topics; systematically adding to knowledge	 Zest Vitality; enthusiasm; vigor; energy; feeling alive and activated			 Self-Regulation Self-control; disciplined; managing impulses & emotions	 Humor Playfulness; bringing smiles to others; lighthearted
 Perspective Wisdom; providing wise counsel; taking the big picture view					 Spirituality Religiousness; faith; purpose; meaning



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Appendix M: Primary Participant “Expressions of the Self”

Workshop Series Packet

“Expressions of the Self” Workshop Series: Exploring Your Core Positive Self Through the Art of Mask-Making

Description: Throughout the course of this study, there will be a total of 6 ‘Expressions of the Self’ workshops, during which you will be asked to create a mask that reflects yourself at each of the different stages of the 12-month “Character Strengths-Based Training.” Participating in the mask-making workshops is a way for you to express through the use of art (1) how your character strengths manifest in your life, (2) how you feel that they shape who you are as a person, and (3) how they relate to your view of yourself and your life circumstances. Your masks are meant solely as a means of self-expression and reflection and do not require any artistic ability. The masks are *not* intended as a substitute for any type of therapy or counseling that you are currently receiving. Furthermore, you are not required, nor will you be asked, to share your mask with anyone beyond the scope of this study.

Details of the workshops are as follows:

When: Workshops will take place every other month, for up to 4 hours, for the length of the full “Character Strengths-Based Training.” Please note, you *are not* required to utilize the full 4 hours to complete your mask, although it is available to you.

How: A plaster of your face will be made prior to beginning the mask-making workshops, which will be used to make a copy of your face for all 6 ‘Expressions of the Self’ workshops. This process will take ~1 hr/one day. If you do not wish to make an actual plaster of your face to create your masks from, then you may choose to use a ready-made mask that will be provided to you.

Where: A private room will be reserved for you to complete both the Paper Mache plaster (should you choose to do so), as well as each time that you create a mask.

What: At the beginning of the workshops, you will be given a schedule of the mask-making workshops that will occur over the course of the study and the themes we will be focusing on. You will have materials available to you each time that you make a mask. These materials include, but are not limited to, the mask itself (either created from your personal plaster or premade), magazines, colored paper, glue, paints, fabric, paintbrushes, colored markers and pencils, air-dry clay, beads, and regular and decorative tape.

Why: The mask-making workshops are an opportunity for you to reflect on, re-imagine, and share your story in a way that is unique to you and your character strengths journey. The creation of a wearable image that is authored by no one else but you is a creative and powerful way for you to explore, express, and gain a deeper understanding of the character strengths that are most pertinent and unique to you.

Please sign and date below to indicate your understanding of the above information.

Participant Initials or study I.D. # _____

Date _____

“Expressions of the Self” Workshops: An Introduction

Thank you for participating in the “Expressions of the Self” workshop series! Recall that each expression of your face that you make and design is a way for you to portray for yourself a true and meaningful part of who you are and what your journey represents. This process is for your own personal reflection and is meant to enhance your insight and experience of your unique character strengths journey. Each mask will have a theme that will help you to explore some of the topics that we discuss in the interviews in a different way. These themes will be presented to you at the beginning of each mask-making workshop. As a participant in the mask-making workshop series, you will be asked to (1) create a mask every other month that showcases your character strengths (the best parts of who you are) in different capacities and at different stages of the character strength training, (2) complete bimonthly reflections related to your masks, which will be done following each mask-making workshop, and (3) keep your masks in a space where you can regularly see and reflect on them.

Below are some guidelines you may find useful in creating your masks:

- Your masks are your personal canvases to express both your inner and outer experiences throughout our time together. You are encouraged to **use both the inside and the outside of the masks** to express different aspects of yourself/your experience, as you wish. Often, the inside of the mask can be used to reflect a person’s inner self/experience (e.g., emotions), while the outside of the mask can be used to reflect a person’s outer self/experience, or ‘what the world sees’. How you choose to represent these elements in each of your masks is up to you!
- At the beginning of each mask-making session, please **select 5 or more of the “At My Best” Strengths Cards and/or VIA Strengths Cards**. We will be referring to both of these strength tools throughout our time together. This is simply a way to help you think about your unique character strengths and how they manifest in your life. The cards you choose may be the same or different each mask-making session. Reflect on and incorporate these into your mask in whatever way you find most meaningful.
- **Do not be concerned about artistic ability or “the right way” to make your masks**. Remember, these masks are about your own personal process and not about the product itself. There is no right way, and no one is going to be judging you on your artistic talent. Your experience will be far more enjoyable if you just

allow yourself to have fun with it. Consider your task not to make your masks look a certain way, but to give them each a voice!

If you read and understand all the above to your satisfaction, please initial below to indicate whether you are comfortable completing your masks as a group, or if you would prefer to create your mask individually. Either option is suitable and is based solely on your preference:

[] I have read and understand the above to my satisfaction, and elect to create masks as a group. I acknowledge that the group is there as a support, but that I **will not** be required to share details of my masks or mask reflections with other group members unless I choose to do so. I understand that the researcher will be present to help facilitate this process.

[] I have read and understand the above to my satisfaction, and elect to create masks individually. I understand that the researcher will be present to help facilitate this process.

Participant Initials/ study I.D. # _____

Photo Release Form

Permission to Use Photographs from “Expressions of the Self” Workshops

I grant Tiffany Miner, the student researcher, the right to take photographs of the masks I create in relation to the above-identified subject. I authorize Tiffany Miner to use the photographs of my masks, **without my name or any other identifying information**. I agree that these photographs may be used specifically for the following:

- Written and electronic publications of Tiffany Miner’s dissertation
- Research-related publications related to the dissertation topic; and,
- Educational activities related to the dissertation topic

I understand that to protect my confidentiality, any photographs taken will be of my masks **ONLY**, and not of myself or others. I agree that Tiffany Miner may share the story of my mask, in my words and from my perspective, for the purposes of informing her dissertation topic.

In signing and dating below, I indicate that I have read, understand, and consent to the above statement. I understand that this consent may be revoked in writing at any time,

except to the extent that action has already been taken in reliance upon this consent. Unless revoked by me, this consent will not expire.

Participant Initials _____

Participant study I.D. # _____

Date _____

Additional Comments or Qualifications (if any):

Detailed “Expressions of the Self” Workshop Schedule

Note: Participants will receive the ‘theme of the month’ and reflection questions at the beginning of each individual workshop.

Mask-Making Workshop 1

Old Me/True Me – Create a mask that is centered around this question: If no one knew about your former self, had heard about your past actions, or had an idea about you or your character, who would you be? As you make your mask, reflect on what you consider your core values, or what matters to you most, and how these things relate to your core character strengths. You may use the values handout provided as a guide in helping you to explore your values, as you find it useful.

List of Chosen Focus Strengths –

Mask Reflection – Describe your mask to me. What name do you give this mask and why? How does this mask reflect the strengths that you want to acknowledge and cultivate in yourself moving forward? In what ways do you think you have kept these character strengths from yourself in the past? How do you think your life and your relationship with ‘the old you’ [your struggles/offense behavior] would change if you could ‘wear’ the narrative of this mask every day for yourself and others to see? What must you release to fully embrace the knowledge of yourself that this mask holds? If your mask could speak, what would it say about you?

Mask-Making Workshop 2

Finding Strength in the Struggle – Create a mask that reflects your biggest struggles. These are often the parts of yourself or your life that have caused you the most difficulty and/or pain. It may include struggles related to your offense behavior, as well as other struggles that you feel have contributed to recurrent disorder in your life. As you make your mask, consider what strengths have gotten you through these challenging times in the past. Incorporate them into your mask in a way that is meaningful to you.

List of Chosen Focus Strengths –

Mask Reflection – Describe your mask to me. What name do you give to this mask and why? What, if anything, about this mask surprises you? Does this mask challenge the story or perception you had of yourself and/or your relationship with [your struggles/offense behavior] in any way? If so, how? If your mask could speak, what would it say about you?

Mask-Making Workshop 3

Imagining My Best Possible Self – Create a mask envisioning what it would look like if you experienced some relief from your current struggles, if your situation were resolved, or if there was a shift for the better. In what ways would you be different? How would the script of your life be transformed? Who or what would be present in your life that would make it “worth it”? Use your mask to reflect both your outer and inner experiences.

List of Chosen Focus Strengths –

Mask Reflection – Describe your mask to me. What name do you give this mask and why? What adjectives could you use to describe yourself/your life in your new story, as you have illustrated in your mask? As you reflect on the ways that your mask is different from your current self/life, what changes do you desire in your life now? How would you like the role that you currently play in your life to change? What will you need to do to facilitate this change? How will your relationship with [your struggles/offense behavior] need to change to this new and empowering story of yourself? If your mask could speak, what would it say about you?

Mask-Making Workshop 4

“We are all like the clay Buddha, covered with a shell of hardness created out of fear, and yet underneath each of us is a ‘golden Buddha,’ a ‘golden Christ,’ or a ‘golden essence,’ which is our real self. Somewhere along the way, between the ages of two and nine, we begin to cover up our ‘golden essence,’ our natural self. Much like the monk with the hammer and the chisel, our task now is to discover our true essence once again.” —Jack Canfield

Discovering the Golden Buddha – Create a mask that honors the story of the golden Buddha in you. Let a piece of your mask reflect your outer “shell of hardness,” which consists of the things that hide or diminish your virtues or “golden essence.” Let the other piece of your mask reflect your inner “golden Buddha,” which is all your hidden virtues, treasures, and the things most authentic and good about you that others may not initially see. Consider the following phrase as inspiration: Most people see me as _____, but if they knew the real me, they would know _____.

List of Chosen Focus Strengths –

Mask Reflection – Describe your mask to me. What name do you give this mask and why? What is your ‘shell of hardness’ made of (e.g., emotions, past hurts and regrets, labels from others, etc.)? What, if any, advantage is there in holding on to these things? In what ways does your ‘shell of hardness’ hold you back or prevent you from being your best possible self? How do you think that your ‘shell of hardness’ contributed to [your struggles/offense behavior]? What is your golden Buddha (e.g., your golden essence, which is what is real, true, and good about you) made of? How does it help you to act on your values and express the best parts of who you are? How can your golden essence help you overcome [your struggles/offense behavior] moving forward? How does familiarizing yourself with your golden essence help you to reframe and reexamine your struggles and offense behavior? If your mask could speak, what would it say about you?

Mask-Making Workshop 5

Coming Full Circle – Create a mask that honors the things that have gone well throughout this process, recognizing what it was about you and the situation that made you able to appreciate it. Let a piece of your mask reflect yourself at the beginning of this process, and a piece of your mask reflect yourself now.

List of Chosen Focus Strengths –

Mask Reflection – Describe your mask to me. What name do you give this mask and why? In what ways do you think that this mask reflects your growth as an individual throughout this process? How does this mask speak to the challenges that you have overcome? Does this mask illustrate a change in your relationship with [your struggles/offense behavior]? If so, in what way? If your mask could speak, what would it say about you?

Mask-Making Workshop 6

Looking Toward the Future – Create a mask that is a visual representation of the character strength(s) that you most identify with. As usual, you may choose to include strengths from the “At My Best” Strengths Cards or the VIA. You may also choose to include strengths that you have come to identify yourself. Illustrate how you have used these strengths throughout the process, and how you can continue using these strengths in the future to address [your struggles/offense behavior].

List of Chosen Focus Strengths –

Mask Reflection – Describe your mask to me. What name do you give this mask and why? How do you think your past story (struggles) will influence your new story moving forward? In what ways do you think that recognizing your character strengths has reframed your outlook of yourself/your offense behavior? How has using the strengths exemplified in your mask enriched your sense of self and your life? How will using these

particular strengths help you when you are faced with challenges in the future? How will they help you address issues related to your offense behavior? If your mask could speak, what would it say about you?

Mask-Making Workshops: Participant Feedback

Thank you for participating in the mask-making workshop series! Your participation has been vital to the completion of this study, and I hope you have found it to be valuable to you throughout this process. Your feedback is appreciated to help me better understand your experience of the mask-making workshops, what about them was the most beneficial to you, and how they might be strengthened in the future. You may choose to leave any question blank if you wish. Be assured that your answers will remain confidential.

With gratitude,

Tiffany Miner (student researcher)

Please answer the below questions to the best of your ability. Use the back of this paper as needed.

- 1. What about this process was the most beneficial to you?**

- 2. What, if anything, surprised you about this process?**

- 3. What was the most challenging part of this process for you?**

- 4. What, if anything, would have improved this experience for you?**

5. What words of advice would you give to someone else who is planning to participate in this process?

Appendix N: Primary Participant Weekly Strengths Journal

Many times, when we become absorbed in our daily routines and responsibilities, our brain is on autopilot. When this happens, we are not necessarily paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and how they are influencing our lives. Self-monitoring is one exercise that can help us be more aware of our experiences and learn what they are telling us. The purpose of this weekly journal is for you to reflect on your strengths-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as they are happening. This is meant to help you monitor and keep track of where you are at in your character strengths process. Everyone's process is different, so there are no right or wrong answers, only what is important to you.

There is no time limit on your writing, as long as you commit to writing in your journal at least once at the end of each week. **You may choose to write in your journal more often if desired.** Use the strengths chart below to highlight which strengths you feel you have used the most today/this week. Use the prompts provided to help organize your thoughts, but do not feel limited to them.

The character strength(s) I worked/used **THE MOST** this week were (circle all that apply):

creativity	curiosity	open-mindedness	love of learning
perspective/wisdom	courage/ bravery	persistence/ industriousness	honesty/integrity
zest/vitality	love/ attachment	kindness/generosity	intelligence/social skills
teamwork	fairness	leadership	forgiveness/mercy
humility/modesty	prudence	self-regulation/self control	appreciation of beauty and excellence
gratitude	hope/optimism	humor/playfulness	spirituality
supportive	positive	focused	organized
calm	empathetic	thoughtful	sincere
dependable	independent	rigorous	principled
determined	cooperative	decisive	approachable
warm	resilient	flexible	attentive
practical	insightful	strategic	detailed
analytical	patient	considered	passionate
understanding	guiding	conscientious	modest
adventurous	spontaneous	engaging	other_____

*Chart includes strengths from the **VALUES IN ACTION INVENTORY OF STRENGTHS** (2004) and the **AT MY BEST Strengths Card Deck** (2014).*

Please use the table below to chart your **STRENGTHS ENGAGEMENT** today/this week:

Adapted from R. M. Niemiec: *Character Strengths Interventions* (2018).

<i>Activity</i>	<i>How I Am Putting My Strengths into Action</i>	<i>Feelings/Emotions</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Insights Learned</i>
As you reflect on today/the past week, think about situations in which you used your character strengths. Choose one situation and describe —When did it occur? Where were you? Who were you with?	Describe the activity —What did you do? What did you say? What was the interaction on you had with others? Be as specific as possible	Describe your response —What was going through your head? What were you thinking? What were you feeling in the moment (positive and negative emotions)? Rate the intensity of each feeling, 0-10. Note —it is especially helpful to monitor these responses in the moment by using an app or simply pen and paper.	Describe your biggest challenge(s) —What was the most difficult thing about the activity/strengths practice? What helped you get through it?	Describe what happened afterwards —What did this activity/behavior lead to in the short run? What do you think it can lead to in the long-run?	Describe what you gained —What is the main take-away for you? What might you remind yourself moving forward?

Please use the following statements **AS A GUIDE** to help you brainstorm and develop your “strengths engagement” responses (above), as needed:

Today/this week, I decided to use my character strength(s) of _____ to work on/challenge my [struggles/offense behavior] _____.

When I was practicing my strength(s) this week, _____ happened.

When I used my top character strength of _____ today/this week, one thing I noticed was _____.

When I tried using my character strength of _____, instead of relying on _____ like I usually do, I felt _____.

I was surprised when _____ happened this week, when I was working on/using _____.

Practicing my character strength of _____ helped me to focus on _____.

Using my character strength of _____ was _____ for me, because it made me _____.

Three good things that happened when I used my character strengths this week were _____, _____, and _____.

The biggest thing I accomplished from using my character strengths this week was _____.

In the future, I want to use what I learned in this situation to _____.

Complete the sentence below to describe your NEXT STEPS/GOAL:

Next week, I want to work on _____ using my character strengths.

**Participant Initials and/or
study I.D. #**

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix O: Character Strength Approach: Participant Feedback

Thank you for participating in the 12-MONTH “STRENGTH-BUILDING INITIATIVE” FOR MEN CONVICTED OF CHILD SEXUAL OFFENSES! Your participation has been vital to the completion of this study, and I hope you have found it to be valuable to you. Your feedback is appreciated to help me better understand your experience of the character strengths approach, what about it was the most beneficial to you, and how it might be strengthened in the future. You may choose to leave any question blank if you wish. Be assured that your answers will remain confidential.

With gratitude,

Tiffany Miner (student researcher)

Circle the answer which best describes your role within the agency/group in which you currently participate:

A—Client/Core Member B—Community Volunteer

Please answer the below questions to the best of your ability. Use the back of this paper as needed.

- 1. What about this process was the most beneficial to you?**

- 2. What, if anything, surprised you about this process?**

- 3. What was the most challenging part of this process for you?**

- 4. What, if anything, would have improved this experience for you?**

- 5. What words of advice would you give to someone else who is planning to participate in this process?**

Appendix P: Community Participant Strengths Reflection Questionnaire

Dear Coordinator/Community Respondent,

Thank you for your participation.

The purpose of this study is to help men convicted of child sexual offenses explore and put the positive things about themselves to use by learning about and applying a strengths-based approach to address their unique needs and barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Below is a 3-part questionnaire that will be used to determine how often and in what ways you believe each study participant used the strengths I am asking you about. This questionnaire will be given to you to complete monthly and will help me to understand how and to what extent each participant is engaging in strengths practices in their daily lives. Your anonymity will be maintained, and your answers will remain confidential.

Please read each question carefully and respond as honestly as you can. Your responses should only pertain to the participant you note below. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this questionnaire, you may contact me directly at tminer@unm.edu.

Who is this questionnaire in reference to (please provide only the INITIALS of the primary participant you will be referencing in this questionnaire)?

_____.

Please provide a brief sentence to help the researcher understand how you know and interact with the above participant (e.g., I am his group leader/coordinator):

PART A: Please indicate, honestly and to the best of your ability, how often you believe the participant has used the below VIA-IS character strengths in the past month by circling the most appropriate response.

- 1. How often did the participant demonstrate CREATIVITY? For example, how often did he do something that was original or innovative when faced with a novel or challenging situation?**

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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- 2. How often did the participant demonstrate CURIOSITY? For example, how often did he explore something new or demonstrate openness to new experiences?**

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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3. How often did the participant demonstrate **OPEN-MINDEDNESS**? For example, how often did he think things through and not jump to conclusions, or challenge his assumptions in light of new evidence?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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4. How often did the participant demonstrate **LOVE OF LEARNING**? For example, how often did he try to master new skills or try to learn more about a topic?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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5. How often did the participant demonstrate **PERSPECTIVE** or **WISDOM**? For example, how often did he offer wise advice to others in need of it or demonstrate depth of insight in situations related to his own life circumstances?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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6. How often did the participant demonstrate **COURAGE** or **BRAVERY**? For example, how often did he face up to verbal or physical pressures with braveness, or speak up for what was right, even when it was unpopular or difficult?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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7. How often did the participant demonstrate **PERSISTENCE** or **INDUSTRIOUSNESS**? For example, how often did he persevere and finish what he started, even when faced with a difficult and time-consuming task?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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8. How often did the participant demonstrate **HONESTY** and **INTEGRITY**? For example, how often did he present himself and/or situations in a genuine way, even when painful or difficult?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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9. How often did the participant demonstrate **ZEST** or **VITALITY**? For example, how often did he approach life with excitement and energy?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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10. How often did the participant demonstrate LOVE or ATTACHMENT? For example, how often did he healthily engage with and connect to friends, family, or community members when it was possible to do so?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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11. How often did the participant demonstrate KINDNESS or GENEROSITY? For example, how often did he help others just for the sake of helping them or give freely without expecting something in return?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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12. How often did the participant demonstrate SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE or SOCIAL SKILLS? For example, how often was he able to navigate different social situations successfully or understand other people's perspectives and feelings?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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13. How often did the participant demonstrate TEAMWORK? For example, how often did he work well as a member of a group?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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14. How often did the participant demonstrate FAIRNESS? For example, how often did he give everyone a fair chance without displaying premature judgment?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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15. How often did the participant demonstrate LEADERSHIP? For example, how often did he take the initiative to get things done and to motivate others to be proactive?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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16. How often did the participant demonstrate FORGIVENESS and MERCY? For example, how often did he forgive others and not hold onto a grudge or negative energy?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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17. How often did the participant demonstrate humility or modesty? For example, how often did he let his accomplishments speak for themselves and not regard himself as more special than other people?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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18. How often did the participant demonstrate PRUDENCE? For example, how often did he show discretion or caution when tempted to do something he might regret later?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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19. How often did the participant demonstrate SELF-REGULATION? For example, how often was he able to be disciplined and show self-control, even when feeling frustrated or poorly?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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20. How often did the participant demonstrate APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY AND EXCELLENCE? For example, how often did he appear to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of beauty and goodness, both in the physical and social sense, in his personal life?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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21. How often did the participant demonstrate GRATITUDE? For example, how often was he able to recognize and show thankfulness for good things that happened to him?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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22. How often did the participant demonstrate HOPE and OPTIMISM? For example, how often did he continue to work toward and expect the best outcome, even after experiencing failure or a setback?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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23. How often did the participant demonstrate HUMOR or PLAYFULNESS? For example, how often did he like to laugh, see the light side of things and make others smile, even during challenging times?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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24. How often did the participant demonstrate SPIRITUALITY? For example, how often did he express a sense of connection to a higher being or universal force, or display the belief that there is a higher purpose or meaning to his life?

always	usually	half the time	not often	never
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PART B: The below chart includes strengths from the **Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)** and the **AT MY BEST Strengths** card deck. Please circle 5 to 7 strengths that you feel the participant **most clearly** demonstrated in the past month.

creativity	curiosity	open-mindedness	love of learning
perspective/wisdom	courage/ bravery	persistence/ industriousness	honesty/integrity
zest/vitality	love/ attachment	kindness/generosity	intelligence/social skills
teamwork	fairness	Leadership	forgiveness/mercy
humility/modesty	prudence	self-regulation/self control	appreciation of beauty and excellence
gratitude	hope/optimism	humor/playfulness	spirituality
supportive	positive	Focused	organized
calm	empathetic	Thoughtful	sincere
dependable	independent	Rigorous	principled
determined	cooperative	Decisive	approachable
warm	resilient	Flexible	attentive
practical	insightful	Strategic	detailed
analytical	patient	Considered	passionate
understanding	guiding	Conscientious	modest
adventurous	spontaneous	Engaging	other_____

PART C: Please provide a brief rationale or story of how the participant has demonstrated **each** of the 5 to 7 strengths that you circled in the past month. You may also elect to share your thoughts with the participant to help him learn and incorporate your insights about his “core strengths” into his daily strengths practice.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please provide your initials and/or study I.D., and the date below, to indicate that you give your consent for me to use the information you provided to inform the present research study, *Exploring the Role of Core Positive Selves with Men Convicted of Child Sexual Offenses: A Character Strengths Initiative*.

Initials of Community Respondent Study I.D. of Community Respondent Date

Researcher Signature

I have explained the purpose of this questionnaire to the coordinator/respondent and answered all his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described and freely consents to answering the above questions.

Name of Researcher Signature of Researcher Date

Appendix Q: Participant Withdrawal Letter

Researcher Name Tiffany A. Miner

Dear Tiffany A. Miner:

I want to end my participation in this study, effective immediately. Ending my participation means the researcher may only use and share the information as I indicate below:

I want to (please choose one):

[] End my participation in the study and fully revoke my Authorization. The researcher may not use any information collected about me prior to my withdrawal from the study or any information about me in the future.

[] End my active participation in the study, but retain my authorization for the researcher to use some of my information, as follows: I allow the researcher to continue to use information collected about me *prior* to my withdrawal from the study, specifically for:

- (a) Written and electronic publications of Tiffany Miner's dissertation
- (b) Research-related publications related to the dissertation topic; and/or,
- (c) Educational activities related to the dissertation topic

Optional – I am ending my participation in this study because:

Participant Initials or I.D. #

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix R: Interviews Thematic Framework

Theme	Files ^a	References ^b
Factors leading to unhealthy behavior	15	66
Difficult childhood and early exposure to crime and violence	12	28
Molestation and abuse	6	16
Problems with understanding social norms and sexuality	5	11
Pornography	3	8
Substance abuse	3	3
Barriers to healthy living and improvement	22	139
The sex offender label	12	27
Low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and negative self-perceptions	10	20
Failing to take responsibility or accept the magnitude of the offense	8	22
Accepting the situation and lack of effort to improve things	8	14
Over-relying on religion to avoid responsibility	7	8
Being torn between good and bad choices	6	17
Addictions	6	16
Unjust system	4	8
Focusing too much on the positive side of negative experiences	2	4
Affected relationships with friends and family	2	3
Ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement	24	299
Being involved and having something meaningful to do	17	61
Religion and being close to God	15	38
Willingness to change	12	35
Trust, support, and positive relationships with the family	11	26
Understanding the nature of what you have done and being open about it	10	35
Maintaining a positive mindset	10	23
Recognizing your own strengths and goodness	7	20
Taking responsibility for your actions	7	19
Socializing and learning from others	7	7
Being recognized and appreciated for your strengths	5	23
Experiences of kindness from other people	4	12

Theme	Files ^a	References ^b
Effects of the strengths approach	22	140
Actively working toward reaching your goals and self-improvement	16	49
Understanding your strengths and yourself better	14	35
Developing positive self-perceptions and mindset	10	19
Raised awareness of the need to change	7	21
Increased self-confidence	4	7
Acknowledging what you did and taking responsibility	4	4
Interpreting and understanding other people better	2	5
Self-perceptions of top character strengths	21	170
Kindness, empathy and compassion	15	35
Spirituality	10	39
Courage and bravery	6	17
Persistence and commitment	6	13
Forgiveness and mercy	5	13
Intelligence and social skills	5	13
Perspective and wisdom	4	10
Positive mindset, appreciation of beauty and excellence	4	7
Self-regulation and control	4	4
Fairness	2	12
Creativity	2	3
Leadership	2	2
Humility and modesty	1	2

Note. a = how many transcripts included the theme; b = how many times the theme appeared across all files.

Appendix S: Mask Reflections Thematic Framework

Theme	Files ^a	References ^b
Factors leading to unhealthy behavior	4	16
Molestation and abuse	2	7
Difficult childhood and early exposure to crime and violence	2	6
Problems with understanding social norms and sexuality	2	3
Barriers to healthy living and improvement	8	107
Low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and negative self-perceptions	6	25
Failing to take responsibility or accept the magnitude of the offense	4	20
Addictions	4	13
Accepting the situation and lack of effort to improve things	4	10
Over-relying on religion to avoid responsibility	3	11
Being torn between good and bad choices	3	9
Lack of support and not being understood	3	7
The sex offender label	2	10
Unjust system	2	2
Ways to overcome barriers to healthy living and improvement	9	47
Religion and being close to God	7	25
Willingness to change and overcome addictions	5	7
Being kind and being exposed to kindness	4	5
Trying to understand your needs and yourself better	3	5
Being involved and having something meaningful to do	2	4
Maintaining a positive mindset	1	1
Effects of the strengths approach	9	102
Talking about emotions more openly	8	34
Understanding your strengths and yourself better	8	28
Raised awareness of the need to change	7	12
Acknowledging what you did and taking responsibility	5	16
Forming ideas for how to improve yourself and your life	3	8
Increased self-confidence	2	4

Theme	Files ^a	References ^b
Self-perceptions of top character strengths	10	60
Spirituality	9	33
Kindness, empathy, and compassion	6	12
Courage and bravery	6	10
Creativity	3	3
Leadership	2	2

Note. a = how many transcripts included the theme; b = how many times the theme appeared across all files.