

Character strengths and inner peace

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Abstract: This research explored the relationships among inner peace and character strengths, both of which are understood to contribute to wellbeing, using a cross-sectional design. In Study One (N = 25,302), we examined individuals' perceptions of the strengths most relevant to fostering a sense of inner peace. In Study Two (N = 21,201), we examined relationships among individuals' scores on the 24 character strengths and serenity and harmony in life. Interestingly, the strengths individuals believed to be important for fostering inner peace (in Study One) were different from those found to actually correlate with measures of inner peace (in Study Two). Hope was most strongly associated with facets of serenity (inner haven, trust, and acceptance) and harmony in life. Our findings indicate that, hope, zest, and gratitude are likely primary facets of inner peace, with spirituality and forgiveness acting as secondary facets for inner peace. Implications and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: character strengths, inner peace, wellbeing, hope, zest, gratitude

“Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy and serenity.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh (1992)

1. Introduction

1.1 Character strengths and wellbeing

Character strengths are the positive parts of our personality that are core to our identity, produce positive outcomes for ourselves and others, and contribute to the greater good (Niemiec, 2018). They are qualities that other people tend to admire, respect, and cherish (Park & Peterson, 2009). The VIA Institute on Character classification of character strengths and virtues offers a system of 24 character strengths - nesting under six virtues, found to be universal across cultures, nations (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Like personality traits, these character strengths are assumed to be continuous and malleable as well as dimensional, meaning individuals possess each of these strengths to varying degrees and express them differently in different contexts and situations.

The first virtue is wisdom, which captures cognitive abilities, such as the acquisition and use of knowledge for purposes of good, and includes the strengths of creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective. The second virtue is courage, reflecting one's inclination to perform the right act (to do 'the right thing') in the face of external or internal opposition and/or a high risk of loss. Courage is comprised of the more specific strengths of bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest. The third virtue is humanity, which reflects interpersonal strengths such as attending to and befriending others and taking part in acts of generosity and kindness that inspire others. Related character strengths include love, kindness, and social intelligence. The fourth

virtue, justice, captures civic strengths that underlie healthy community life and accentuate a sense of fairness between people and society. Character strengths included in this virtue are teamwork, fairness, and leadership. The fifth virtue is temperance, which consists of having control over excess and the foresight to protect oneself from it. This virtue is demonstrated through the character strengths of forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation. Finally, transcendence, the sixth virtue, refers to the extent to which one reflects on life's meaning, and one's connection to the larger universe. Related character strengths are appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality.

Researchers have consistently demonstrated an association between self-reports of the presence of these 24 character strengths and measures of wellbeing including less negative affect and greater subjective wellbeing, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, sense of autonomy, and self-acceptance. In demonstrating more direct effects of character strengths and wellbeing, character strength interventions have been effective in improving aspects of wellbeing. For example, Proyer et al. (2013) conducted a strengths-based intervention ($n = 178$) where those in the experimental group completed activities focused on strengths highly correlated with subjective wellbeing (curiosity, gratitude, hope, humor, and zest), those in the first control group completed activities focused on strengths weakly correlated with subjective wellbeing (appreciation of beauty and excellence), and those in the second control group were waitlisted for the program. Subjective wellbeing was evaluated pre and post intervention for all groups. Results showed that both strengths-focused groups showed improvements in subjective wellbeing relative to the waitlisted group.

Schutte and Malouff (2019) conducted a meta-analysis on the impact of such character strength interventions on various indicators of wellbeing and found that interventions targeting individuals' highest-ranked character strengths out of 24, known as signature strengths, had an overall significant impact (weighted Hedges' g of 0.32). They concluded that signature strength interventions have the potential to contribute to beneficial outcomes (e.g., greater flourishing, happiness, less depression, and strengths use), but that more research is warranted. For example, most of these studies assessed wellbeing by measures of happiness or positive affect, rather than more comprehensive measures of wellbeing.

There are certainly other important indicators of wellbeing and aspects of living the 'good life', including the experience of peace. The study of the relationship between peace and character strengths is an area that has largely been neglected, although it has recently been described by Niemiec and Pearce (2021) as an area for positive psychology and character strengths that is 'ripe with potential'. The siloes of these two areas is surprising, given the robust quantity and quality of peace psychology research and character strengths research over the years. For example, there have been several-thousand studies of peace over the decades (Christie et al., 2008) and over 700 studies of character strengths in the last decade and a half (VIA Institute, 2022a). While a rigorous definition of inner peace has not been well established in the academic literature, many would agree that the experience of inner peace is assumed to be a highly beneficial state and one that reflects human flourishing (e.g., Xi & Lee, 2021). Recognizing the importance of finding new ways to tap into improving inner peace for promoting human flourishing, Niemiec (2021) has proposed a call for a new area of study for positive psychology in the domain of peace and character strengths. In the literature on peace (Christie et al., 2008; Neto and Marujo, 2017), an important distinction has been made between positive peace (e.g., building harmony, equity, balance) and negative peace (decreasing or eliminating of violence, war, and human conflict). In addition, peace can be studied at the intrapersonal level (i.e., inner peace), interpersonal level (relational peace) and intra/intergroup levels (e.g., within and between group peace). In this

paper, we focus on inner peace from the perspective of character strengths, given their potential as a mechanism for inner peace building.

1.2 Inner peace and wellbeing

The experience of inner peace (also referred to as personal peace, internal peace, and peace of mind) has been historically valued by many cultures and religions. For instance, in both Buddhism and Taoism, experiencing inner peace is termed *nirvana* and is considered the ultimate life goal (see Lee et al., 2013). Nirvana has been described as a state of serenity that is achieved through detaching oneself from the material world and a sense of wellbeing that is not dependent on internal and external stimuli (Mitchell, 2001). Drawing upon Hindu principles, inner peace is achieved through self-realization, where self-realization is synonymous with God-realization (Keskin, 2016). To highlight the importance of inner peace for many cultures, the Islam “Salam” and Judaism “Shalom” greetings both translate to *peace*. In addition, the focus of Sufism (sometimes referred to as Islamic mysticism), a spiritual doctrine which can be traced back to the 8th century, is inward-directed and with practices devoted to fostering inner peace. In this practice, “contemplation takes precedence over strict rituals”, involving meditation, chanting and dancing, and a connection with the divine (e.g., Bourcart, 2021). In many cultures, or in many societies, inner peace has been described as a deliberate state of either psychological or spiritual calmness, harmony and serenity, and tranquility even in the presence of stressors (Barua, 2014).

From a psychological perspective, it has been described as arising from the absence of “sufferings or mental disturbances such as worry, anxiety, greed, desire, hatred, ill-will, delusion and/or other defilements” (Gogava et al., 2018, p. 4). Inner peace can also be thought of as a homeostatic psychological state, or dynamic emotional equilibrium, achieved through emotional self-regulation which results in the optimal functioning of the mind (see Ward, 2010). In addition, there are clear links with the recent surge in research on harmony (e.g., Kjell & Diener, 2021), in which harmony has been argued to be at the heart of wellbeing and the various facets of life (Lomas, 2021; Wissing, 2022).

To summarize the above, and as defined in the current psychological literature, inner peace is comprised of both the experience of an internal state of peacefulness (i.e., low-arousal, positive affective states such as serenity) and a sense of internal harmony (e.g., Lee et al., 2013), both of which are related to wellbeing. For example, Soysa and colleagues (2021) found that dispositional serenity predicted lower stress and greater mental wellbeing (over and above mindfulness). In another example, Delle Fave et al. investigated 12 cultures and found that for 11 of them harmony was the single most common conception of life happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2016). However, inner peace and happiness are distinct affective states. However, inner peace must be distinguished from happiness, as they are distinct affective states. Happiness, closely related to the emotion of joy, is more of a high-arousal, positive affective state, whereas inner peace is related to low arousal, positive affective states. Having said that, both of these concepts are interrelated and work together in achieving subjective wellbeing (Demirci & Eksi, 2018). The research clearly affirms having a peaceful and joyful life would make any individual more functional, extroverted, tolerant, and optimistic. Furthermore, these states of peace and joy lead to increased resilience and improved relationships with others.

1.3 Character strengths and inner peace

The purpose of the present research was to explore the relationships among components of inner peace and character strengths, both of which are understood to contribute to wellbeing and the ‘good life.’ The logic here is that discovered relationships among character strengths and inner

peace could pave the way for the development of future strategies fostering inner peace (e.g., through the development of relevant strength-based interventions; Cohrs et al., 2013; Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). To date, no studies have examined specific relationships between character strengths and measures of inner peace such as serenity and harmony in life. There is, however, research demonstrating relationships among character strengths, happiness, and contentment, all constructs related to inner peace (e.g., Cohrs et al., 2013; Güsewell & Ruch, 2012; and Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In particular, character strengths that frequently emerge with the highest correlations to measures of contentment, happiness, and life satisfaction, include zest, hope, gratitude, love, humor, and curiosity (e.g., Park et al., 2004; Peterson et al., 2007). Similarly, we might expect these strengths to be important for creating a sense of inner peace. However, in order to inform potential hypotheses for this research, a deeper dive into the central components of inner peace (discussed above): serenity and inner harmony.

Serenity, according to the findings of Roberts and Aspy (1993), and Boyd-Wilson and colleagues (2004), is the psychological byproduct of three more specific cognitive and affective states: hope, humility, and joy. Hope stems from a sense of confidence, resilience, and inner strength; humility entails an acceptance of situations that are beyond one's control; and joy involves feeling love and a connection with the world. Building on this work, Kreitzer and colleagues (2009) found that serenity consists of what they termed inner haven, acceptance, and trust. Inner haven reflects a sense of peace, calm, and inner security; an acceptance (similar to Robert & Aspy's humility) of both ourselves and things we cannot control; and trust (similar to Robert & Aspy's love) as the power to believe in innate kindness, the meaning of life, and the wisdom of the universe. Like the three components highlighted by Boyd-Wilson et al. (2004), Soysa et al. (2021) found that these three factors resulted in less stress and greater wellbeing. Therefore, in terms of identifying character strengths that are similar in nature to some of the components of serenity, it appears that hope, humility, zest (similar to a sense of joy), spirituality (finding meaning in life, and connection to the outside world), and kindness might be relevant.

In terms of harmony in life, Delle Fave and colleagues (2016) identified the following four related components: inner peace, balance, contentment, and psychophysical wellbeing. Arguably, the main work on harmony comes from Kjell and colleagues (2011), who define harmony as the experience of psychological balance and flexibility in life. As a result of their findings, they created the "harmony in life scale" which revealed that harmony in life was significantly correlated with measures of peace and balance. These facets are not as closely connected conceptually to character strengths, as those of serenity. For this reason, forming hypotheses about which character strengths might be related to the experience of harmony in life would be more speculative. In fact, as outlined by Niemiec (2021), one could make the argument that each of the 24 character strengths has the ability to meaningfully contribute to the experience of inner peace. For example, one could leverage love to cultivate an inner state of joy, hope to confidently build a sense of agency and control over life events, find balance through leveraging perspective or forgiveness, and use gratitude to reflect on and believe in others' innate kindness.

2. Current research

This is an exploratory study of the relationships between character strengths and inner peace. Due to the lack of empirical research on this integration, we did not make scientific predictions about expected relationships among character strengths and measures of inner peace. However, based on previous research on serenity and harmony in life, and the strengths identified as correlated with the closely related concept of happiness, we expected that these measures of inner peace might be associated with curiosity, gratitude, humility, hope, kindness, love, spirituality,

and zest. Evaluating potential alignment or unalignment between perceived and observed strengths is a novel phenomenon ripe for exploring. Therefore, exploration was also one of our core research goals. In Study One, using a cross-sectional approach, we were interested in examining individuals' perceptions of the strengths they believe are important for inner peace. Then, in Study Two, also using a cross-sectional approach, we examined correlations among individuals' scores on the 24 character strengths and their endorsement of measures of inner peace (serenity and harmony in life specifically).

3. Study one

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited through the VIA Institute on Character. After completion of the VIA Inventory of Strengths (described below), participants were asked to select up to two character strengths that most strongly support or create a sense of 'inner peace' for them. Specifically, they were asked the following: "When you think of your own 'inner peace' (feeling calmness, tranquility, harmony) in a particular moment, either alone or with others, which character strength most strongly supports you or creates that 'inner peace' for you?" This question targets positive peace (Christie et al., 2008)—the building up of harmony in oneself as opposed to reducing inner conflict/tension (negative peace). Data was collected over seven consecutive days in February 2021. A total of 25,302 individuals responded to these questions. Demographic information is provided in Table 1. Participants were mostly women (64.7%), between 18-54 years of age (85.4%), many had a bachelor's (30.5%) or master's degree (18.5%), most were from the United States, Australia, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Canada (62.3%), many were fully employed (46.8%), with a mode household income of less than \$20,000USD (26.5%). Most participants (97.9%) did not indicate their ethnicity, nor their marital status (96.2%).

3.1.2 Character strengths

The VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS-P, where the "P" refers to all "positive" keyed items) (VIA Institute, 2022b) consists of 96 items (4 items for each strength) that assess character strengths. The VIA-IS-P is a derivative of the VIA-IS-R (192 items, where "R" refers to "revised"). Both instruments maintain good psychometrics, however, the VIA-IS-P, used in this study, is preferred when the goal is to balance test length with psychometrics (McGrath, 2019). The mean correlation across the 24 scales between the VIA-IS-R and the VIA-96-P is .92; the mean reliability across the 24 scales of the VIA-IS-P is .77, and when the criterion of strengths behaviors has been assessed, the mean correlation across the 24 strengths on the VIA-IS-P with the behavior criterion was .53 (McGrath, 2019). Respondents indicate their endorsement of statements about their strengths. Ratings are made on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). A sample item for curiosity is "I am always curious about the world", while a sample item for gratitude is, "I feel thankful for what I have received in life."

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the final sample ($N = 25,302$).

		N	.%
Gender	Male	6,249	24.7
	Female	13,449	53.2
	Other	177	.7
	Skipped	5,427	21.4
Age (years)	18-24	5,645	22.3
	25-34	4,482	17.7
	35-44	3,487	13.8
	45-54	2,535	10.0
	55-64	1,199	4.7
	65-74	324	1.3
	75+	63	0.2
	Skipped	7,567	29.8
Education	No schooling completed	363	1.4
	Nursery school to 8 th grade	138	0.5
	Some high school, no diploma	1,047	4.1
	High school graduate or equivalent	2,836	11.2
	Some college credit, no degree	2,459	9.7
	Trade/technical/vocational training	599	2.4
	Bachelor's degree	5,589	22.1
	Associate degree	836	3.3
	Master's degree	3,358	13.3
	Professional degree	724	2.9
	Doctorate degree	468	1.8
	Post Doctorate	124	.5
Skipped	6,761	26.7	
Location	United States	6,463	38.0
	Australia	1,856	10.9
	Canada	913	5.4
	United Kingdom	950	5.6
	Other	6,810	7.3
	Skipped	8,310	32.8
Employment Status	Employed full-time	7,948	46.8
	Employed part-time	2,069	12.2
	Student	3,520	20.7
	Active Military	460	1.8
	Homemaker	356	2.1
	Retired	348	2.0
	Unemployed	1,553	9.1
	Disabled or unable to work	125	0.7
	Other	1,073	4.2
	Skipped	7,850	31.0
Household Income (in USD)	Less than \$20,000	4,506	26.5
	\$20,000-\$34,999	1,959	11.5
	\$35,000-\$49,999	1,643	9.7
	\$50,000-\$74,999	2,137	12.6
	\$75,000-\$99,999	1,598	9.4
	Over \$100,000	3,598	21.2
	Skipped	9,861	39.0

3.2 Results

We were interested in evaluating the character strengths that individuals selected as being most critical to supporting a sense of inner peace for them. For this analysis, we calculated the frequency (percentage) with which a particular strength was mentioned overall (as first or second choice of strengths), and then compared the frequency with which individuals mentioned particular character strengths against ‘chance’ which we set to be above 8.3% ($1/24 * 2$). The frequencies of character strengths are listed in Table 2, in rank order. Out of the 24 strengths, 13 were selected as being most critical for fostering a sense of inner peace for individuals. In particular, the most important strengths identified were (in order): love, kindness, creativity, gratitude, perspective, spirituality, humor, honesty, hope, curiosity, love of learning, appreciation of beauty and excellence, and perseverance.

Table 2. Percentage of individuals mentioning particular character strengths as being important for creating inner peace.

Character Strengths	%
Love	20.0*
Kindness	18.1*
Creativity	15.3*
Gratitude	15.2*
Perspective	13.3*
Spirituality	12.1*
Humor	12.1*
Honesty	10.1*
Hope	9.6*
Curiosity	9.4*
Love of Learning	9.1*
Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	8.9*
Perseverance	8.5*
Self-Regulation	4.7
Fairness	4.3
Humility	4.1
Social Intelligence	3.9
Bravery	3.7
Leadership	3.3
Forgiveness	3.0
Teamwork	2.5
Judgment	1.8
Zest	1.7
Prudence	0.8
None	4.2

*indicates strengths mentioned above chance ($> 8.3\%$)

As a post-hoc analysis, we were interested in evaluating whether the strengths mentioned as being important for creating inner peace happened to be those most strongly endorsed by individuals and therefore most salient to participants. To test this idea, we rank ordered the mean VIA character strengths scores for participants and compared them against the list of strengths

identified as being important for creating inner peace. The results showed there was not strong alignment between the strengths most strongly endorsed by participants and those mentioned as being important for inner peace. In particular, the top five strengths most strongly endorsed by participants (in order) just to be consistent were: honesty, kindness, fairness, judgment, and curiosity, only one of which (kindness) was included in the top five strengths mentioned as being important for inner peace. Therefore, these findings more likely reflect participants' true perceptions about what strengths are important for inner peace, rather than a reflection of the strengths that they personally score high on.

4. Study two

4.1 Method

4.1.2 Participants and procedure

The second study examined character strengths and established measures of inner peace. Participants were recruited through the VIA Institute on Character. After completion of the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS-P) to evaluate character strengths scores, participants were invited to complete the two scales below with the following instructions, "We hope you will please take 2 minutes to help us with some important research we are conducting. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements. Please be open and honest in your responding." Over a seven-day period in May 2021, a total of 21,214 participants indicated consent by at least partially completing the two scales, with a final sample of 21,201 participants who completed both scales. Demographic information for our participants is provided in Table 3. Participants were mostly women (68.6%), between 18-54 years of age (89.9%), most had a high school diploma, associate degree or had trade/technical/vocational training (80%), many were from the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (39.8%), most were fully employed (56.4%) with a mode household income of over \$100,000 (27%). Most participants (98.6%) did not indicate their ethnicity, nor their marital status (97.2%).

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of the final sample ($N = 21,101$).

		n	.%
Gender	Male	5,030	23.7
	Female	11,290	53.3
	Other	142	0.7
	Skipped	4,739	22.4
Age (years)	18-24	3,717	17.5
	25-34	4,311	20.3
	35-44	3,592	16.9
	45-54	2,614	12.3
	55-64	1,230	5.8
	65-74	302	1.4
	75+	56	0.3
	Skipped	5,379	25.4

Table 3 (Cont.). Demographic characteristics of the final sample ($N = 21,101$)

Education	No schooling completed	75	0.5
	Nursery school to 8 th grade	26	0.2
	Some high school, no diploma	410	2.6
	High school graduate or equivalent	3,693	23.8
	Some college credit, no degree	590	3.8
	Trade/technical/vocational training	5,223	33.7
	Bachelor's degree	671	4.3
	Associate degree	3,505	22.6
	Master's degree	724	4.7
	Professional degree	460	3.0
	Doctorate degree	137	0.9
	Skipped	5,687	26.8
Location	United States	5,313	25.1
	Australia	1,842	8.7
	Canada	966	4.6
	United Kingdom	853	4.0
	Other	12,227	57.7
	Skipped	5,163	24.5
Employment Status	Employed full-time	8,353	56.4
	Employed part-time	1,633	11.0
	Student	1,832	12.4
	Active Military	359	2.4
	Homemaker	303	2.0
	Retired	310	2.1
	Unemployed	1,050	7.1
	Disabled or unable to work	156	1.1
	Other	810	5.5
	Skipped	6,395	30.2
Household Income (in USD)	Less than \$20,000	3,132	23.0
	\$20,000-\$34,999	1,805	13.2
	\$35,000-\$49,999	1,459	10.7
	\$50,000-\$74,999	1,964	14.4
	\$75,000-\$99,999	1,589	11.6
	Over \$100,000	3,691	27.1
	Skipped	7,561	35.7

4.1.3 Measures

4.1.3.1 Serenity

Serenity was assessed using the 22-item Brief Serenity Scale (BSS: Kreitzer et al., 2009), a shorter (an abridged version) version of the original 65-item scale developed by Roberts and Fitzgerald (1991). In their analyses, Kreitzer and colleagues found the presence of three factors: acceptance (10 items; e.g., "In problem situations, I do what I am able to do and then accept whatever

happens even if I dislike it”), inner haven (8 items; e.g., “I experience an inner quiet that does not depend on events”), and trust (4 items; e.g., “I see the good in painful events that have happened to me”). Specifically, the inner haven dimension relates most closely to our discussion of inner peace as these authors defined inner haven as a sense of inner peace, inner calm, inner security, inner strength, and inner centeredness. These authors acknowledged that their sample size was small (< 100), and that this factor structure should be confirmed by future researchers. Therefore, in order to confirm whether this factor structure were supported by our much larger sample, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. We specified the model such that the latent variables would correlate, each item would load on only one factor, and measurement error terms would not correlate. Our results indicated that the three-factor solution was an acceptable fit for our data [$\chi^2(207) = 139.57$, CFI = .86, TLI = .85, RMSEA = .08, and R2 ranging from .00-.77]. This model was stronger than a single-factor model which showed poor fit [$\chi^2(207) = 51062.48$, CFI = .75, TLI = .73, RMSEA = .11, and R2 ranging from .35-.79]. Therefore, we next calculated mean scores for each of the three subscales of acceptance, inner haven, and trust. Accordingly, the reliability of all subscales ranged from good to excellent (Cronbach’s α from .80-.90). Descriptive statistics for serenity scores are listed in Table 4.

4.1.3.2 Harmony in life

Harmony in life was targeted with the Harmony in Life Scale (HILS: Kjell et al., 2016), of which we used the abbreviated version (Kjell & Diener, 2021) containing 3 items (“Most aspects of my life are in balance”, “My lifestyle allows me to be in harmony”, and “I am in harmony”). Reliability for scale scores was excellent (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$), and descriptive statistics for this scale are provided in Table 4.

4.2 Results

In order to assess relationships among character strengths and inner peace measures, we first conducted bivariate correlations among the 24 character strengths, and the serenity and harmony in life subscales (see Table 4). We used a conservative $p < .001$ Bonferroni correction given the number of correlations performed (48). To highlight some of our findings, acceptance and trust shared the following top five character strengths (although in different orders): hope, zest, gratitude, spirituality, and self-regulation. However, inner haven and harmony in life shared the following top five character strengths (although in different orders): hope, gratitude, zest, self-regulation, and spirituality. While these correlations are informative, it is difficult to make firm conclusions about relationships among character strengths and inner peace measures with knowledge that the character strengths share variability (they are correlated with one another), and we therefore need to account for this potential shared variance in our analyses.

For this reason, we next conducted four multiple linear regressions entering the 24 character strengths simultaneously with predictors of acceptance, inner haven, trust, and harmony in life as outcome measures. Results for these analyses are summarized in Table 5, and indicate the unique variance accounted for in inner peace measures for each of the character strengths. Notably, after controlling for the influence of other character strengths, gratitude, hope, (lower levels of) kindness, and zest were among the five character strengths most strongly associated with both acceptance and inner haven. What differentiated them was that forgiveness was among the top five strengths for acceptance, and spirituality for inner haven. Hope was the strongest strength connected to both acceptance and inner haven. While trust was associated with gratitude and hope, trust also was related to forgiveness (similar to acceptance), spirituality (similar to inner haven), and uniquely to social intelligence. Finally, the five character strengths most

strongly associated with harmony in life were (in order): hope, gratitude, zest, and negatively with kindness and judgement.

Table 4. Correlations among character strengths and inner peace measures.

Character Strengths	Acceptance	Inner Haven	Trust	Harmony in Life	M	SD
Appreciation of Beauty	.238*	.294*	.255*	.196*	3.85	.75
Bravery	.279*	.297*	.165*	.192*	3.44	.77
Curiosity	.342*	.341*	.231*	.287*	3.82	.71
Creativity	.295*	.313*	.193*	.197*	3.58	.78
Fairness	.329*	.261*	.212*	.217*	3.96	.75
Forgiveness	.447*	.348*	.314*	.284*	3.66	.75
Gratitude	.495*	.520*	.475*	.492*	3.63	.78
Honesty	.312*	.279*	.204*	.287*	4.08	.65
Hope	.582*	.566*	.456*	.513*	3.71	.77
Humility	.208*	.225*	.186*	.171*	3.63	.70
Humor	.249*	.230*	.127*	.198*	3.71	.85
Judgment	.238*	.215*	.120*	.154*	3.86	.63
Kindness	.228*	.183*	.198*	.164*	3.98	.68
Leadership	.322*	.320*	.222*	.268*	3.52	.86
Love	.300*	.278*	.247*	.302*	3.64	.93
Love of Learning	.304*	.306*	.203*	.222*	3.85	.75
Perseverance	.333*	.331*	.200*	.339*	3.29	.85
Perspective	.294*	.312*	.224*	.244*	3.81	.71
Prudence	.215*	.236*	.150*	.211*	3.60	.81
Self Regulation	.327*	.352*	.234*	.356*	3.23	.86
Social Intelligence	.290*	.308*	.296*	.253*	3.80	.70
Spirituality	.374*	.482*	.582*	.347*	3.39	.98
Teamwork	.338*	.266*	.276*	.281*	3.74	.71
Zest	.472*	.485*	.368*	.485*	3.32	.84
M	3.35	3.08	3.32	4.63	-	-
SD	.63	.85	1.04	1.44	-	-
α	.80	.90	.86	.90		

Note. M and SD refer to the mean and standard deviation, respectively. Based on N = 21,201.

* $p < .001$

In fact, *hope* was the primary strength most strongly associated with all measures of inner peace with the exception of trust (which was most strongly associated with spirituality). In addition, gratitude, zest, and lower levels of kindness were common to all measures of inner peace. The strengths that seemed to differentiate the facets of inner peace were the strengths of social intelligence (for trust), lower levels of judgment (for harmony in life), spirituality (for inner haven and trust), and forgiveness (for acceptance and inner haven). As mentioned, it was interesting

Table 5. Regression coefficients for relationships among character strengths and inner peace measures.

	Acceptance		Inner Haven		Trust		Harmony in Life	
	β (SE)	<i>t</i>	β (SE)	<i>t</i>	β (SE)	<i>t</i>	β (SE)	<i>t</i>
CS								
Appreciation	-0.03 (.01)	-5.16*	0.03	4.48*	0.01 (.01)	0.93	-.04 (.01)	-6.00*
Bravery	0.03 (.01)	5.49*	0.06	7.85*	-0.04 (.01)	-4.62*	-.03 (.01)	-4.64*
Curiosity	0.02 (.01)	2.16	-0.01	-1.25	-0.06 (.01)	-4.73*	.04 (.02)	5.05*
Creativity	0.02 (.01)	3.72*	0.02	2.91	-0.01 (.01)	-1.34	-.05 (.01)	-6.42*
Fairness	0.02 (.01)	3.44*	0.01	0.70	0.00 (.01)	-0.10	-.01 (.01)	-1.36
Forgiveness	0.18 (.01)	31.58*	0.11	14.40*	0.10 (.01)	10.39*	.03 (.01)	4.79*
Gratitude	0.08 (.01)	11.62*	0.12	13.77*	0.14 (.01)	12.68*	.17 (.02)	20.49*
Honesty	0.01 (.01)	0.42	-0.03	-3.06	-0.02 (.01)	-1.91	.06 (.02)	8.02*
Hope	0.25 (.01)	37.96*	0.29	32.86*	0.29 (.01)	26.50*	.21 (.02)	25.95*
Humility	-0.01 (.01)	-1.66	0.05	6.08*	0.01 (.01)	1.41	.00 (.01)	-0.50
Humor	0.01 (.01)	2.47	0.02	2.74	-0.04 (.01)	-5.00*	.01 (.01)	0.81
Judgment	-0.04 (.01)	-4.96*	-0.08	-8.28*	-0.09 (.01)	-7.32*	-.10 (.02)	-13.19*
Kindness	-0.09 (.01)	-13.64*	-0.15	-17.69*	-0.05 (.01)	-4.32*	-.10 (.02)	-13.65*
Leadership	-0.01 (.01)	-0.17	0.01	1.77	-0.01 (.01)	-0.88	.00 (.01)	-0.48
Love	0.02 (.01)	5.55*	-0.01	-1.84	-0.04 (.01)	-5.47*	.07 (.01)	10.42*
Love of Learning	0.01 (.01)	1.20	0.01	1.19	-0.05 (.01)	-4.72*	-.03 (.01)	-3.98*
Perseverance	0.03 (.01)	4.63*	0.02	3.08	-0.03 (.01)	-3.40*	.05 (.01)	6.06*
Perspective	0.05 (.01)	8.65*	0.06	7.48*	0.05 (.01)	4.75*	.06 (.01)	7.86*
Prudence	0.02 (.01)	3.30*	0.07	8.62*	0.00 (.01)	-0.02	.06 (.01)	7.82*
Self Regulation	0.02 (.01)	3.75*	0.05	6.90*	0.01 (.01)	0.60	.08 (.01)	10.61*
Social Intelligence	-0.04 (.01)	-5.27*	0.01	1.55	0.09 (.01)	8.46*	-.01 (.02)	-1.11
Spirituality	0.02 (.01)	5.47*	0.16	27.70*	0.45 (.01)	62.03*	.02 (.01)	3.47
Teamwork	0.05 (.01)	8.53*	-0.04	-4.55*	0.05 (.01)	4.52*	.03 (.01)	4.75*
Zest	0.07 (.01)	10.64*	0.12	14.57*	0.04 (.01)	13.50*	.20 (.01)	23.51*

Note. β represents the standardized regression coefficients, and SE represents the standard error of the unstandardized coefficients.

* $p < .001$

that some character strengths were associated with *lower* levels of inner peace. Specifically, higher scores on judgment and kindness were significantly related to lower levels of perceived inner peace across all the variables to different degrees. The other strengths with significant (albeit not large) negative associations with more than one variable include appreciation of beauty/excellence (negative for acceptance and harmony in life, significantly positive for inner haven), bravery (negative for trust and harmony in life, significantly positive for acceptance and inner haven), and love of learning (negative for trust and harmony in life). Because of the widespread negative relationship for kindness and judgment, we explore those findings, which are notable for two reasons. First, recall that kindness was the only character strength that individuals personally endorsed as a signature strength and that they mentioned as important for nurturing a sense of inner peace. In other words, while many individuals have kindness as a top strength, and believe in its importance for building inner peace, when we examine the relationship

between kindness and inner peace measures, kindness scores are actually related to *less* experienced inner peace. These findings suggest that being more caring and altruistic could lead one to feel lower levels of inner peace as a result of susceptibility to compassion fatigue (you are more likely to be affected by the negative emotional states of others) and difficulties focusing on one's own needs, given a stronger sense of interdependency or 'enmeshment' with others. Second, regarding the negative relationship between judgment and some elements of inner peace, this might indicate an overuse of thinking and analysis (e.g., higher cognitive load) and potential for higher self-criticism (Niemiec, 2019) that might limit the extent to which one experiences a sense of inner peace.

Finally, it is interesting to note that there were some strengths that were uniquely associated with different facets of inner peace. For example, social intelligence and spirituality were more strongly associated with trust, where trust reflects beliefs in a larger life plan, and in the ultimate goodness of this plan. These findings suggest that the ability to empathize with others, easily adapt to social environments, and an awareness of one's own and others' motives (social intelligence) might allow one to take greater comfort in 'going with the flow' and believing that there is a greater (and good) purpose in life. In addition, beliefs in a greater purpose or life meaning, connecting outside oneself with something greater or transcendent (spirituality) may help foster a sense of trust with fellow human beings.

5. General discussion

5.1 Summary of findings

In Study One, we evaluated the character strengths that individuals perceived to be most critical to supporting a sense of inner peace. Out of the 24 strengths, 13 were selected as being most critical for fostering a sense of inner peace for individuals: love, kindness, creativity, gratitude, perspective, spirituality, humor, honesty, hope, curiosity, love of learning, appreciation of beauty and excellence, and perseverance. One might question whether these findings reflect participants' true perceptions about what strengths are important for inner peace, or, rather, whether these findings are simply a reflection of strengths most salient to individuals – perhaps because they are their signature strengths. We tested this idea and found that the top five strengths most strongly endorsed by participants in order were honesty, kindness, fairness, judgment, and curiosity, only one (kindness) of which was included in the top five strengths mentioned as being important for inner peace. In other words, rejecting this theory, the original findings likely reflect the strengths that individuals *believe* are most strongly tied to inner peace (love, kindness, creativity, gratitude, and perspective being the top five), rather than the strengths that they personally endorse.

In Study Two, we more directly assessed the relationships among character strengths and inner peace, by examining observed relationships among character strengths and measures of inner peace (acceptance, inner haven, trust, and harmony in life). After controlling for the influence of other character strengths, hope followed by zest and gratitude were observed to be the *primary strengths* for inner peace as they showed highly significant associations with both harmony in life and serenity, hence demonstrating a strong, well-rounded connection with inner peace. This is in line with findings that these three strengths are repeatedly associated with subjective wellbeing (happiness) and life satisfaction (e.g., Buschor, Proyer, & Ruch, 2013; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Indeed, hope entails a sense of inner strength, which is conceptually aligned with the aspect of inner peace to keep oneself strong in the face of stressors (so this sense of inner strength binds the two). In addition, hope is also related to thinking about and using

effective pathways to get to a desired future. These ‘pathways’ (e.g., optimistic explanatory style) likely lead one to experience psychological balance, or a sense of confidence and perspective that one’s life is within one’s control and therefore perceive less unresolved life conflicts. Gratitude involves connecting outside oneself to feel appreciation toward others and the universe. Hence, there is likely to be that connection between a harmonious balance and sense of serenity and being at peace. Zest involves being enthusiastic, vital, and feeling a passion for life; as the individual experiences and expresses this strength to others, it is likely this contributes to a well-rounded, or balanced wellbeing inclusive of acceptance, inner haven, and harmony.

In addition to hope, zest, and gratitude, the character strengths of spirituality and forgiveness, which we will call *secondary strengths* for inner peace, because they were highly significant with either serenity or harmony in life and strong across multiple variables (spirituality was especially strong for trust and inner haven and to a lesser significant degree for acceptance while forgiveness was especially strong for acceptance, among the top five strengths for inner haven and trust, and significant to a lesser degree for harmony in life). Spirituality and forgiveness (as well as the previously mentioned primary strengths) are spiritually-oriented strengths (Niemiec, Russo-Netzer, & Pargament, 2020), where spirituality is viewed as the search for or communing with the sacred (Pargament et al., 2013), a definition reflected in two-thirds of the scientific studies of spirituality (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010). The connection between these spiritually-oriented character strengths and inner haven and trust is perhaps not surprising. Specifically, spirituality reflects practices that connect with transcendence (which would lead to a sense of inner haven), and beliefs in a greater purpose, and a connection to something ‘greater’ and ‘good’ in nature (similar to trust) (Kreitzer et al., 2009). Indeed, inner peace is deeply connected to many spiritual practices, beliefs, and doctrines.

There were other character strengths with small but consistently significant relationships across the inner peace variables. These include perspective (significant for all variables in Table 5), prudence (significant for all but trust), and self-regulation (significant for all but trust). Each of these have a balance function to them in which the aim is to harmonize tensions, harmonize strengths and weakness, and harmonize self-interests and other-interests (Bacon, 2005). For example, prudence aims to balance competing intrapersonal interests such as long-term satisfaction and short-term pleasures (Bacon, 2005), while perspective involves finding balance across oneself, others, and the community (Sternberg, 1998), and self-regulation offers balance and harmonizing around impulses, emotional expressions, and displays of habit. These three strengths likely have an important role in inner peace, perhaps in relation to balancing and expressing the primary and secondary strengths, as well as managing strengths that might be overused.

Interestingly, some character strengths were more consistently related to *lower* levels of perceived inner peace (to varying degrees). Most notable, kindness and judgment were both negatively significant for both measures of inner peace and among the top five correlates for acceptance, inner haven, and harmony in life. As mentioned earlier, it was a somewhat surprising finding that kindness was negatively related to reports of inner peace, given that this was one of the strengths that, in Study One, individuals mentioned as being important for *building* a sense of inner peace. Limitations in individuals’ reports of their mental processes has been well documented (e.g., see the seminal work by Nisbet & Wilson, 1977), in addition to discrepancies between individuals’ attitudes and their actual observable behaviour and responses (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In terms of more specifically explaining this discrepancy, kindness is other-oriented, involved in being caring, generous, and/or compassionate to others, which may be draining upon one’s inner serenity. This latter phenomenon has been referred to as character

strengths overuse (Niemiec, 2019), and it is possible that too much kindness can reflect compassion-fatigue and overdoing it, impacting personal self-care and a sense of serenity and harmony. Similar logic can be applied to judgment in which too much critical thinking and analysis can lead one to feel out of balance and uncentered, especially when criticisms can quickly turn inward; as opposed to being constructive, self-evaluation can turn to self-reproach (Niemiec, 2019). While it is easy to see how these examples of strengths overuse could bring about disharmony in inner peace, it is important to remember that the phenomenon of “strengths overuse” described here is a hypothesis that needs testing.

Finally, these findings suggest that while there is some overlap among character strengths that are associated with perceptions of inner peace, and those associated with related constructs (such as zest, gratitude, and hope), there are important distinctions between inner peace and related constructs as well. While happiness and wellbeing tend to be more closely associated with the character strengths of love, humor, and curiosity, inner peace is more related to the strength of spirituality (e.g., Cohrs et al., 2013; Güsewell & Ruch, 2012; and Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

5.2 Limitations and future directions

There are some important strengths of this research including our large sample sizes. We are confident that our statistical analyses were adequately powered, (r^2 for Study Two = .38-.54), and that our sample was global-reaching (despite mostly representative of North America) and diverse (despite our samples veering toward females and those of higher education levels). Despite these two studies being the first we are aware of to examine relationships among character strengths and inner peace on a large scale, there are important limitations to note. First, while this research focused on two measures of inner strength (subscales of serenity and harmony in life), there are other facets and measures of inner peace yet to be explored, such as peace of mind (Lee et al., 2013), contentment (one of which uses the acronym PEACE for positive emotion assessment of contentment experience, Cordaro et al., 2021), and equanimity (Juneau, Shankland, & Dambrun, 2020; Rogers, Shires, & Cayoun, 2020).

Next, due to the correlational nature of this research, we are not able to infer causal relationships between facets of inner peace and character strengths. For example, it is not clear from this research whether strength-based interventions (focused on strengths most closely tied to each component of inner peace) would be effective methods of improving felt inner peace, or whether those who experience greater inner peace are those who also endorse particular strengths (or their strengths are a manifestation of that inner peace).

We therefore suggest future intervention studies to examine different causal pathways for character strengths and peace. Because of research on signature strengths showing benefit for numerous outcome variables such as flourishing, life satisfaction, depression, and strengths use (e.g., see meta-analysis by Schutte & Malouf, 2019), we wonder whether an individual's deliberate use of their signature strengths might create inner peace. That route, as well as the route of targeting the specific strengths we found to most highly correlate with inner peace (i.e., hope and gratitude; zest, spirituality, and forgiveness as secondary) provide two potential avenues for future randomized intervention studies on inner peace. A third potential avenue for an intervention study, perhaps adjunctive to one or both of the previous suggestions, is the role of balancing strengths. In the case of inner peace, interventions exploring the tempering effect—the use of a strength to bring balance to an overused strength (Niemiec, 2019)—could be deployed. Such an intervention would target strengths that can be easily overused or that might actually be “obstacles” to inner peace, such as our interpretations of judgment and kindness in our second study. Further testing on character strengths overuse and inner peace is needed.

The integration of character strengths and inner peace has substantial positive implications as a domain of research and practice for individuals, groups, and the larger society. As individuals struggle with mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness, amidst an increasingly complex, contradictory, fast-moving world, inner peace is becoming more difficult to realize. The potential for individuals to turn to their strongest inner qualities offers an immediate pathway to counterbalance external and internal challenges. This integration has ramifications to ripple from individuals to families, groups, and communities.

5.3 Summary and conclusion

As we forayed into the territory of inner peace and character strengths, we found hope to be the character strength of 24 ubiquitous strengths to be most closely tied to the experience of inner peace. Additional primary strengths for inner peace included zest and gratitude, while spirituality and forgiveness were denoted as secondary strengths for inner peace as they were particularly strong with one of the measures of inner peace. Other strengths likely play a supportive role such as perspective, prudence, and self-regulation. This research also suggests there might be additional benefit in finding balance with some strengths (e.g., kindness and judgment) that might be overused and getting in the way of inner peace—in other words, strengths that need to be tempered. While future research is needed before strong conclusions about “inner peace strengths” can be made – and the elucidating of causal relationship between strengths and inner peace will be critical therein – there is an important foundation being built for this integration. We hope these findings point the way to future, character strengths-based interventions as a new and critical method for exploring and increasing inner peace, for individuals, and ultimately the larger society.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Publishing Timeline

Received 24 February 2022

Revised version received 31 August 2022

Accepted 1 September 2022

Published 1 October 2022

Correction published 9 June 2023 (First seven words of Section 1.1 deleted because they should not have been there).

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