

Virtues, Narrative, & Resilience



Key Findings of the Life Paths Project on the Laws of Life Essay and Pathways to Resilience

People have been seeking ways to strengthen character and promote thriving for millennia. In recent years, two avenues have shown promise for these goals: narrative writing and positive psychology. One of the first narrative programs, the Laws of Life Essay, was developed by Sir John Templeton in 1987. For over 25 years, it has been helping middle- and high-school students tell their stories and think about their strengths. For



the Laws of Life Essay program, students are asked to reflect on their values and to write about them.

The Life Paths Research Program conducted the first scientific study of the original Laws of Life program. This report presents a summary of our findings, drawn from numerous scientific papers. Inside you will find information on:

- 1) The Resilience Portfolio Model. Understanding strengths is the key to showing how narrative & other programs work.
- 2) New measures that capture many under-studied strengths.
- 3) The 1st data showing the positive impact of the Laws of Life Essay.
- 4) Other findings on virtues.

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A Shifting Focus from Dysfunction to Well-being

Historically, psychologists have studied what can go wrong more than what can go right, and anyone without serious symptoms would be classified as “healthy.” **Defining health this way misses what most people want out of life: joy, love, and meaning.**

The Laws of Life Essay encourages youth to develop their own strengths because being a well-rounded, thriving person means more than just not being “sick.” We need to expand the definition of “health” to include multiple

aspects of well-being too – what people do well along with areas where they struggle. These strengths come in many forms, and can look different in different people.

“Resilient” refers to people who have faced adversity and overcome their tough experiences. Remarkably, many people who have experienced a great deal of adversity still achieve well-being.

“Protective factors” are resources that help people cope. Unfortunately, in research, many protective factors are just the opposite of risk fac-

tors -- for example, dropping out of school is considered a risk factor, while completing high school is considered a protective factor. However, this is a limited view of protective factors. **A focus on virtues is a more promising approach to advancing the science of narrative and resilience.**

We have identified several new protective factors and have explored them for the first time in this project.

The Resilience Portfolio Model

The Resilience Portfolio Model is a theoretical framework to develop our understanding of how the Laws of Life and other interventions promote resilience and character development. Resilience Portfolios focus on 3 main areas that past research has identified as especially important: regulatory strengths, interpersonal strengths, and meaning making strengths (see sections on each do-

main). The Resilience Portfolio Model lays out 3 main ways that strengths can help people overcome adversity: 1) Strengths can lower the number of adversities people experience; 2) Strengths can directly support or add to health and happiness; 3) Strengths can shape how people cope with adversity (or, “buffer” against the negative effects), including helping people to overcome small bumps in the

road to help them build coping “muscles” that they can use in the future.

Like a financial portfolio, a strong resilience portfolio can help people be better prepared to handle many of life’s unexpected stresses. A good portfolio has both “density and diversity” –strong abilities in each domain as well as a variety across all three domains – to sustain health and resilience.

Narrative as a path to resilience:

"It [the essay] forced you to look in depth at things and what you considered important in your life and I think if it wasn't for the Laws of Life essays I did the 3 years of high school, I probably wouldn't have started reflecting and my healing process would have been so much more delayed."

The Importance of Theory and Understanding Mechanisms

One surprising feature of past research has been the lack of attention to the questions of *why* and *how* narrative (also known as expressive writing) works. Many studies only examine psychological and physical health outcomes without asking what helped people become more healthy. Other studies have only examined a few processes and outcomes without doing any theoretical or empirical work to explore which processes and outcomes are most important. This can keep people from identifying the true impact of programs and from identifying the most important features of programs.

Narrative is thought to be beneficial for several reasons. The effort of creating a narrative such as a Laws of Life Essay helps people organize their thoughts and feelings about an event—in other words, it increases emotional awareness and emotional regulation. The act of telling a story naturally imposes an order on events and this can help people gain perspective and identify sources of post-traumatic growth. Narrative can also increase meaning and purpose and give people insights into their important relationships. Focusing on virtues and values, as the Laws of Life Essay does, can bolster these strengths even further. Stronger “*resilience portfolios*” will lead to better outcomes of all types, including psychological, physical and spiritual well-being.

Our Resilience Portfolio domains and measures were informed by an extensive review of the literature and the results of our pilot study. We also used our in-depth interviews to supplement what we learned. For example, one finding that emerged from the interviews is that people often use their meaning making and interpersonal strengths to shore up self-regulation. Our theoretically-informed, multi-faceted approach has helped us to identify the key benefits of narrative and advance our basic understanding of character virtues.

Methodology of the Life Paths Project

People who live in rural Appalachia do not often have the chance to share their stories with researchers, and we worked hard to give them the chance to communicate their experiences. We expected that their experiences would teach us new things about strengths and well-being.

Over 3,000 people participated in the study. Most participants were 12 to 45 years old. We talked to both men and women (36% male, 64% female), from Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama; almost

40% were from Franklin County, Tennessee, where both the Life Paths Research Program and the Laws of Life Essay Program originated. Most people (88%) reported that they lived in a small town or a rural area, with only 12% saying that they lived in a city or suburb. We talked to people from different economic classes; 40% of the people made less than \$20,000 per year, 36% made between \$20,000 and \$50,000, and 25% made more than \$50,000 per year.

Everyone completed a confidential, anonymous survey and over

200 people also took part in an in-depth interview about their lives (see below).

We recruited from community events, which is where we met most (75%) of the people who took part. We also reached people through word-of-mouth and advertising, including flyers, mailers, newspaper and radio ads. Survey participants received a \$30 Walmart gift card. Those participants who also did an in-depth interview received an additional \$50 gift card to thank them for their time.

Topics Covered in the Surveys and Interviews

Laws of Life Essay Writers

People who wrote a Laws of Life Essay were asked about their essay, such as when they wrote it and what they wrote about. They were also asked whether anybody encouraged them, whether they shared the essay, how long they spent on it, their engagement in the process, and the essay's impact on them.

Strengths

We assessed numerous strengths in the Resilience Portfolio domains of regulatory, interpersonal, and meaning-making strengths. See sections on each domain for details.

Resources and personal characteristics

We asked basic characteristics such as age, gender, and race. We also collected information about financial resources, and

relationships with romantic partners, family, and friends, because for many people, these are sources of both emotional and tangible support.

Challenges

In order to understand how people use their strengths to overcome adversity, it is important to understand more about the challenges that people have faced. To learn more about these challenges, we asked whether people had ever experienced a variety of challenging life events, including the death of a loved one, natural disasters, and victimization.

Well-being

We asked people about their physical health and mental health over the past 30 days. However, there is more to health than just symptoms, so we also asked people about

their subjective well-being, spiritual well-being, and post-traumatic growth. This produces a taxonomy of outcomes (see section on outcomes).

In-depth interviews

One-on-one interviews allowed us to explore these issues in more detail. We asked people to share stories about some of their happiest, saddest, and most challenging times. People shared stories about growing up and about their past, and then they told us where they saw their futures heading. For Laws of Life Essay writers, we asked them about their essay topic and ways that the essay impacted their life.

For details on all measures, please visit <http://lifepathsresearch.org>.

***New Measures of Strengths and Well-Being:
Filling a Need in the Positive Psychology Literature***

Surprisingly, despite the growing interest in character development and positive psychology, many important character traits did not have good measures available when we started our study. Limited measurement choices make it hard to identify the impact of programs such as the Laws of Life Essay.

We developed more than a dozen new measures for this project. We also adapted every measure for our young, rural sample. Our survey has a 6th grade reading level and can be used with youth as young as age 12.

All of our measures have excellent internal consistency and construct validity. We took many steps to establish reliability and validity, including a pilot study with 104 participants who brought a family member or friend. We believe we are the first to collect 2nd informant data for many of these measures.

*** New measures are highlighted in bold and italic throughout the document. All items and more details on reliability and validity are freely available online at <http://lifepathsresearch.org>.**

Interpersonal Strengths: Finding Support in Relationships

Interpersonal strengths promote the development and maintenance of close relationships with others, which in turn serve as sources of happiness and meaning as well as support and resilience during times of adversity. The perception of social support from others has long been recognized as a protective factor that helps people do well in life. For youth, attachment to caregivers is the most important relationship and has long-term effects on psychological health.

As we age, relationships be-

yond the family increase in importance and become potential sources of support and resilience. Peers, communities, and romantic partners provide both tangible and intangible support. For adults, the work setting can influence well-being.

Interpersonal strengths also include strengths that help individuals build and sustain relationships. Because the interpersonal domain is especially diverse, we have the most measures here:

Interpersonal skills:

Compassion

Forgiveness

Generativity

Generative roles *

Generosity

Gratitude

Relationship quality:

Attachment—parental

Attachment—romantic

Community support *

Social support—family *

Social support—others

Workplace Integration *

Regulatory Strengths: Moderation in All Things

Self-regulation is the ability to maintain emotional, cognitive, and behavioral control, even during times of stress. It is the ability to experience and cope with feelings without becoming overwhelmed. It also involves the ability to make good choices even when tensions are high. Most research in this area focuses

on how we manage feelings during times when we are actively experiencing a stressful situation. However, increasing attention is being paid to long-term regulation – maintaining focus, effort, and stability over an extended period of time, in the face of continuous or recurrent challenges, to attain academic, occupa-

tional, and relational goals. In the Life Paths Project, we measured:

Endurance *
Anger Management *
Emotional Regulation
Emotional Awareness
Coping
Honesty

Meaning Making : Connecting to Something Larger Than Yourself

Humans are deeply interested in finding meaning and fulfillment in their lives and have a strong desire to connect to something larger than themselves. The goal of meaning making is to make sense of major life events and to incorporate them into a broader view consistent with higher beliefs and values. Meaning is associated with doing better after stressful events. Meaning can be found in many ways. Religion and

spirituality provide meaning in many people's lives and have been neglected in much of the research on character and resilience. Meaning can also come from helping others and oneself (such as involving oneself in creative activities). Others draw meaning from following moral standards of belief and behavior or through caregiving and efforts to strengthen family ties. These are our meaning making measures:

Meaning Making—Family Care *
Meaning Making—Morals *
Meaning Making—Other oriented *
Meaning Making—Self oriented *
Optimism
Purpose
Religious Meaning Making

A Taxonomy of Outcomes: Multiple Aspects of Well-being

As mentioned, much of past research has focused only on the presence or absence of psychological symptoms. This is a very limited view of humanity and a very limited view of what it means to be a thriving and resilient person. We have expanded the range of outcomes that have been studied in most work on narrative, character development, and resilience. Psychological outcomes have received ex-

tensive attention. We added physical health, spiritual well-being, and subjective well-being. Another outcome receiving increasing attention is post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth does not mean re-defining bad events as good, but it involves making use of adversity to re-evaluate one's priorities and values and develop new perspectives on life. This wide range of outcomes allowed us

to learn more about pathways to thriving.

Awe Index *
Alcohol Use
Delinquency
Physical Health
Mental Health
Posttraumatic Growth
Subjective Well-Being

Poly-Strengths: New Ways of Thinking About Character

One of the main points of the Resilience Portfolio Model is that we need to think about a big picture or the entire package of an individual's strengths, rather than focusing on any particular strength or even category of strengths. Although there are inventories that assess many types of strengths, few studies assess the overall density of strengths. Well-being and health are not determined by one thing. Well-being is the

result of complex combinations and interactions between a range of strengths in addition to adversities and demographic factors. This “*poly-strength*” approach is vital to capturing the whole person and the collective effects of one's entire resilience portfolio.

Everyone has character strengths, but nobody has *every* character strength and our strengths and challenges change as we age. For exam-

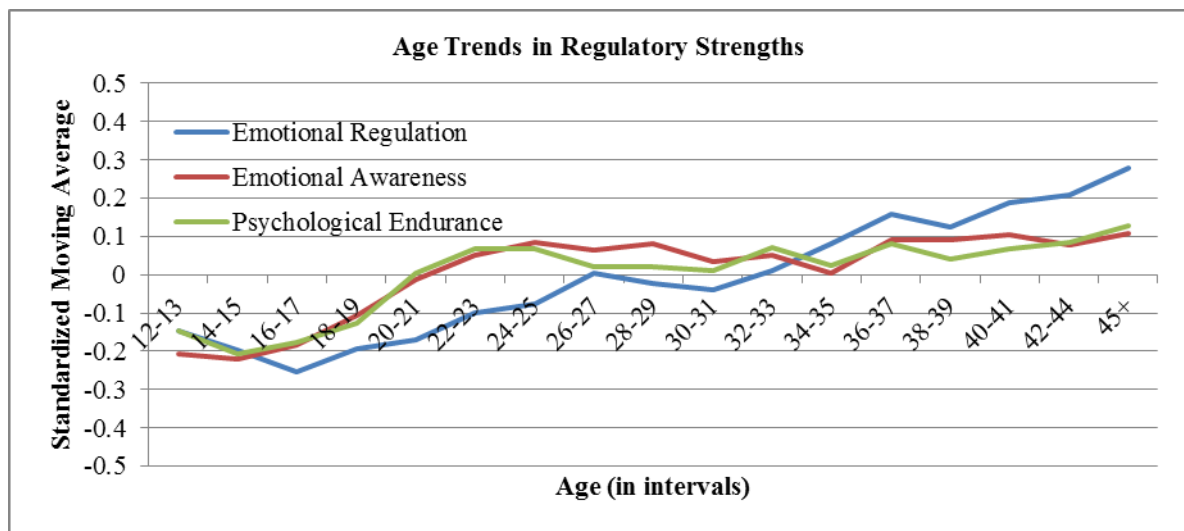
ple, the graphs in the next section will show that adolescents tend to report particularly low emotional regulation. However, they tend to report particularly high levels of interpersonal support. This idea of compensation – that strength in one domain can help to make up for and eventually overcome challenges in another – is an important contribution of the poly-strengths concept from the Resilience Portfolio Model.

Age Trends in Strengths

An important aspect of the Life Paths study is its inclusion of both adolescents and adults, which is surprisingly rare in most research. Understanding basic developmental patterns in character strengths is essential to understanding how programs can enhance character and promote resilience. Our large sample covering adolescence, young, and middle adulthood allowed us to explore age patterns in more detail than prior studies.

Age Trends in Regulatory Strengths

Regarding regulation, we found that adolescents reported fewer regulatory abilities than adults and that the capacity to self-regulate increased over the full age span included in our study. These findings are largely consistent with past work that examined adolescents or adults separately. We include 3 examples below. The findings were similar for all Regulatory Strengths.



Regulatory Strengths—The “Short Leg of the Stool”

The complex interplay among domains is hard to capture on questionnaires, but emerged in Life Path’s in-depth interviews. In the interviews, regulatory strengths were most often the longest-fought and the hardest-won. Regulatory struggles occurred especially during adolescence (also seen in the survey data). Although there were other patterns of cross-domain compensation that occurred, the following quotes represent common ways people relied on their meaning making or interpersonal strengths to gain or improve regulatory strengths.

Interpersonal Relationships as a Path to Strengthening Regulation

Perhaps the most common source of stability people discussed was their interpersonal relationships. Many participants spoke of family members who helped them to build regulatory skills, especially during adolescence. A 21-year-old woman looked back at the positive influence of her uncle, who helped her to overcome substance abuse and delinquency during her teenage years: *“He’s taught me...don’t let your friends, don’t let your peers, peer-pressure you into doing crazy things....He’s always told me to follow what I believe, stand up for what I believe, be a leader, not a follower.”*

As people enter young adulthood, regulatory problems do not disappear, but romantic relationships increase in importance and become potential sources of regulatory improvement. A 21-year-old man cited his girlfriend as a turning point, helping him to build long-term, goal-oriented regulation: *“I straightened up and just quit partying, all that stuff. Just started...working, going to school...trying to be successful and achieve my goals. Be somebody.”*

Becoming a parent was a common motivation to become better regulated. A 32-year-old woman spoke of her love of her unborn daughter: *“I was on drugs and everything before I got pregnant with my daughter, and I thank God every day that I have her because she straightened my life out. I promise you that.”*

Meaning Making As A Path to Strengthening Regulation

Religion and spirituality also often provided meaning, a purpose for living, and motivation to achieve greater emotional and behavioral regulation. A 44-year-old woman spoke of overcoming her substance abuse problems, attributing her success to her relationship with God: *“I was drinking and taking my pills and stuff and I got with God...in my younger days I used to drink a lot. As a matter of fact, I drunk so much, I had a miscarriage...but, when I turned to God, everything turned for me.”*

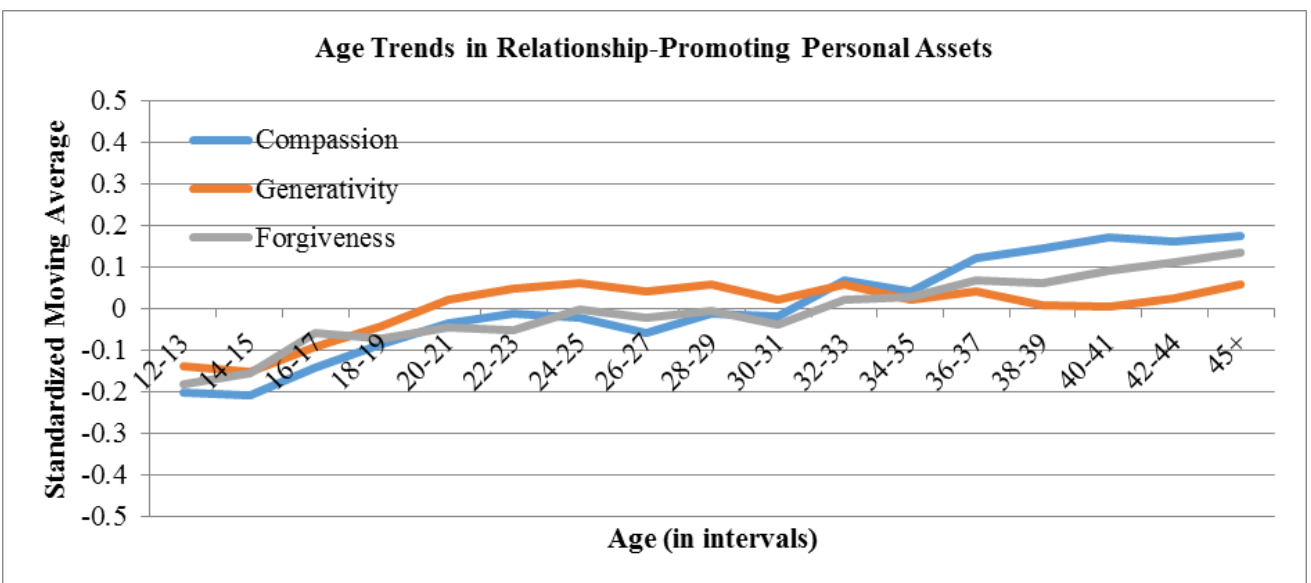
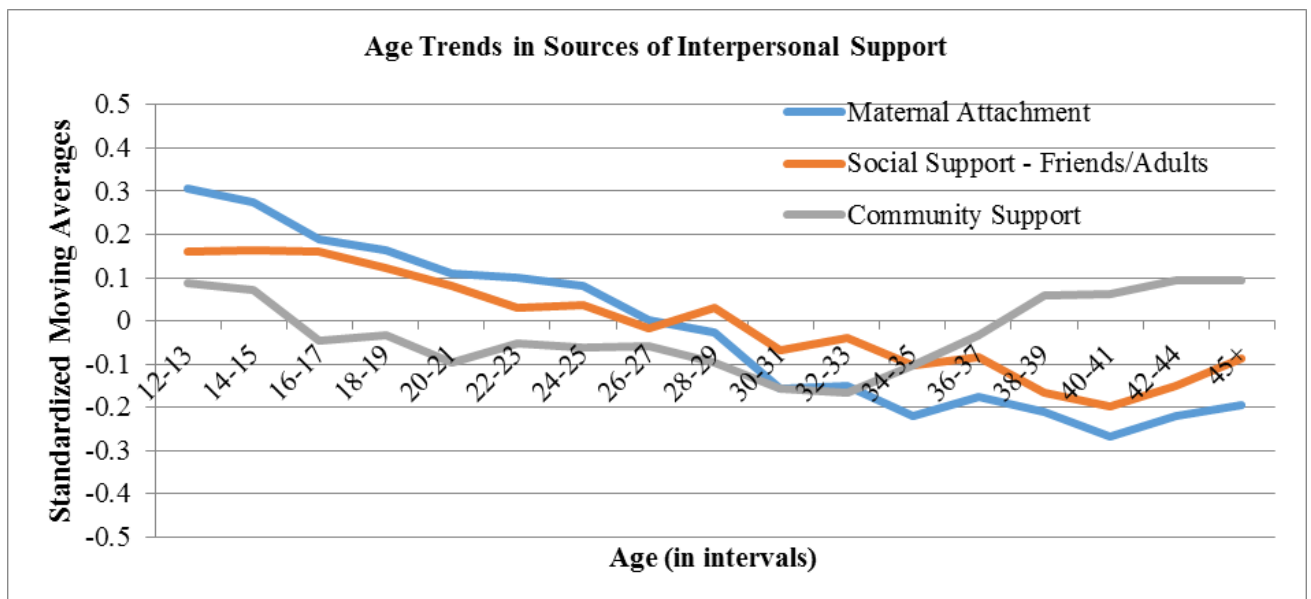
A 57-year-old woman discussed how her faith gave her perseverance and psychological endurance during a health crisis:

That illness was straight from hell....I went from kickboxing, just really strong, to nothing....I mean it was bad and depression was really bad, so I think that just persevering in that, and believing in, not in me, but in Him to carry me and bring me through this Suffering is such a part of life. We’re all going to go through suffering and it’s how you handle it....It’s like you flex your spiritual muscles: “Yes, I see now. Thank you, God, I can do this.”

Age Trends in Interpersonal Strengths

The data on interpersonal strengths provide a more positive view of adolescence, suggesting that they might have an important protective function during the period when regulatory strengths are low. Maternal attachment (deriving source of safety and security from one's mother or mother figure) and social support from friends and adults (sources of care, guidance, and stability) are highest in adolescence and decline steadily with age. Community support (neighborhood-wide social cohesion and trust) shows less variability with age. This makes sense, as the surrounding community is more or less the same whether viewed by a 16 year-old or 36 year-old. Interpersonal support is an important resource for young people in their teens and 20s. These are in the first graph below.

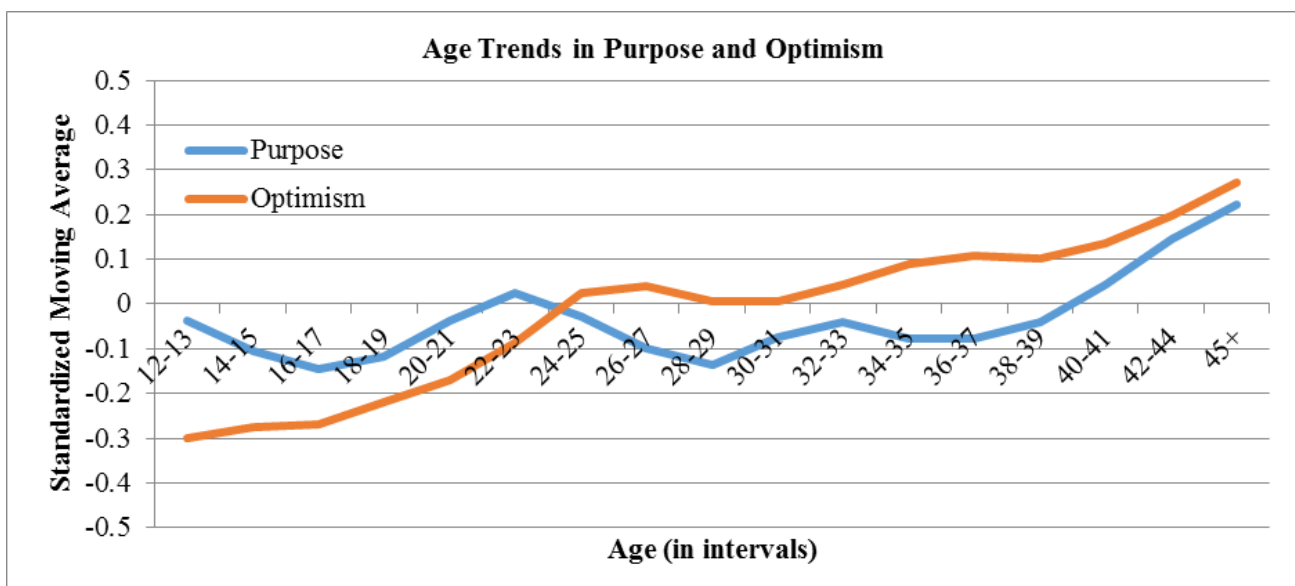
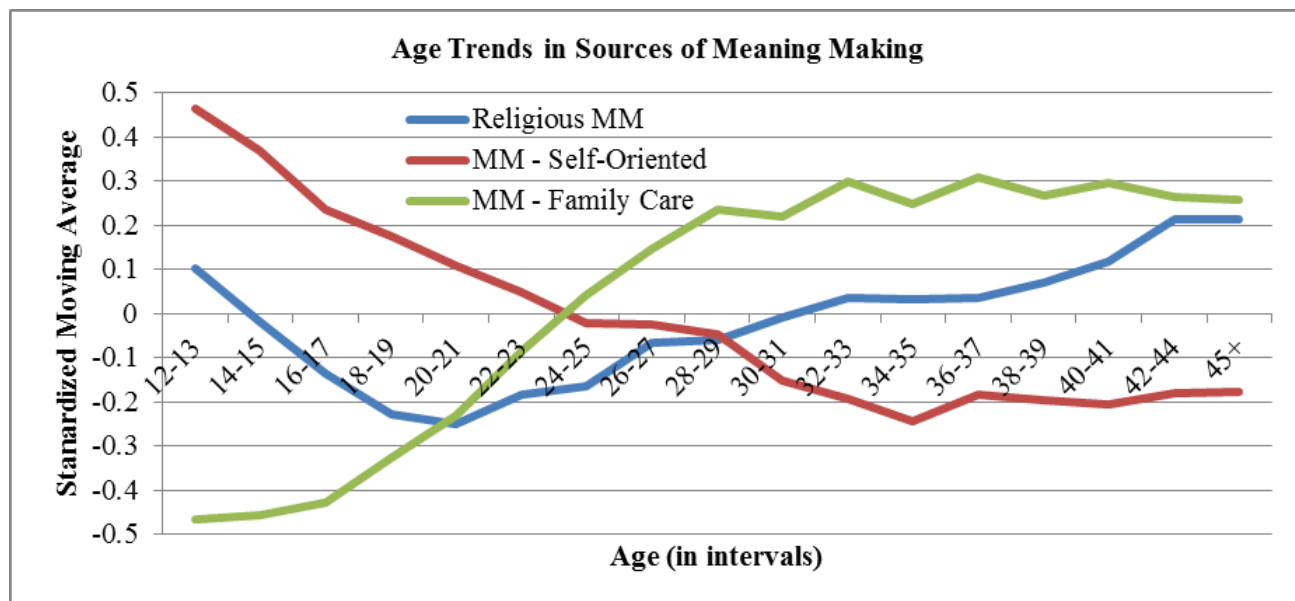
On the other hand, some of the interpersonal skills we assessed developed with age in a fashion more similar (but somewhat less dramatic) than regulatory strengths. See the second graph.



Age Trends in Meaning Making

Meaning making strengths showed some dramatic and complex changes across the lifespan. In the graph below, religious meaning making (finding meaning through prayer, reading religious texts, attending worship services, and/or other religious or spiritual practices) decreases through adolescence and emerging adulthood, reaching a low point in the early 20s before increasing steadily through middle adulthood. Self-oriented meaning making (practices that directly benefit one's own well-being such as keeping a journal and learning new skills) decreases markedly with age. Meanwhile, meaning making through family care (practices like keeping a scrapbook and planning family gatherings) increases, with both self-oriented and family care meaning making leveling out in middle adulthood.

The first graph shows trends in domains where people draw meaning and the second in overall ratings of purpose and optimism.



Why Character Strengths Matter: The Relationship Between Strengths and Outcomes

Another important step toward understanding how we can promote character development and resilience through the Laws of Life Essay or other means is to better understand how strengths and various measures of health and well-being relate to each other. In the analyses reported below, we look at which strengths have the *strongest unique associations* with each outcome. This is one way of answering the question about which strengths are most important for well-being and resilience. This can help guide programs to focus on these areas. These analyses control for age, gender, financial strain, & history of adversity.

Mental Health

People who could manage their emotions and were more aware of their emotions were more likely to have better mental health (as indicated by fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety). Those who were optimistic and felt a strong sense of purpose also tended to have good mental health. Also, people with higher “poly-strength” scores—higher overall density of strengths (see page 7) also had better mental health.

Strengths That Are Most Strongly Associated with Mental Health		
<i>Regulatory Strengths</i>	<i>Meaning Making Strengths</i>	<i>Interpersonal Strengths</i>
Emotional Regulation	Purpose	(none significant)
Emotional Awareness	Optimism	
Poly-strengths		

Spiritual Well-Being

The Awe Index assessed a sense of spiritual well-being from diverse sources, including one’s sense of God as well as less religious sources such as connectedness to nature. People who reported good coping and exhibited endurance were more likely to report higher levels of spiritual well-being. Additionally, people who draw on religious meaning, a moral code, and a sense of purpose showed greater spiritual well-being, as well as people who had compassion, forgiveness, and generativity (helping children or others develop). Poly-strengths was also associated with greater awe.

Spiritual Well-Being and Strengths		
<i>Regulatory Strengths</i>	<i>Meaning Making Strengths</i>	<i>Interpersonal Strengths</i>
Endurance	Religious-based Meaning Making	Compassion
Coping	Purpose	Forgiveness
	Meaning Making - Morals	Generative Roles
Poly-strengths		

Physical Health

Physical health is a vital component of well-being. To summarize the table below, people who were able to regulate their emotions, as well as those who used self-oriented meaning making practices and who have strong moral principles were likely to have better physical health. Additionally, good physical health was associated with more community support.

Strengths That Are Most Strongly Associated with Physical Health		
<i>Regulatory Strengths</i>	<i>Meaning Making Strengths</i>	<i>Interpersonal Strengths</i>
Emotional Regulation	Self-Oriented Meaning	Community Support
	Meaning Making - Morals	

Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being refers to how people experience the quality of their lives and includes both emotional reactions and cognitive judgments. People who had high levels of endurance, good anger management, as well as those who were optimistic and demonstrated generativity were more likely to be satisfied with their lives. Poly-strengths (see p. 7) were associated with well-being too.

Subjective Well-Being and Strengths		
<i>Regulatory Strengths</i>	<i>Meaning Making Strengths</i>	<i>Interpersonal Strengths</i>
Endurance	Purpose	Generativity
Anger Management	Optimism	
Poly-strengths		

Post-traumatic Growth

People who are aware of their emotions and can manage them well, have good coping strategies and showed psychological endurance were more likely to grow and learn from a stressful event. Religious, purposeful, and compassionate people were also more likely to learn and grow from a trying experience. Poly-strengths were associated with post-traumatic growth.

Posttraumatic Growth and Strengths		
<i>Regulatory Strengths</i>	<i>Meaning Making Strengths</i>	<i>Interpersonal Strengths</i>
Endurance	Religious-based Meaning Making	Compassion
Emotional Regulation	Purpose	
Emotional Awareness		
Coping		
Poly-strengths		

The Psychological Benefits of Writing About Virtues & Values

The foundational work on strengths and resilience guided our exploration of the impact of the Laws of Life Essay. **This was the first scientific study of the Laws of Life Essay**, a “values narrative” program that encourages youth to reflect on their own values and write a story on their primary Law of Life. We looked at the impact in two different ways.

First, we compared people who had written an essay to people who had not. In that analysis,

we also looked at whether writers had invested in the process. Our results showed that it is important that writers take some personal responsibility for engaging with the writing task in order to receive the benefit.

Second, we looked at individual differences in essay writers. Does it matter what you write about or how long you spend writing? Our research suggests the answers to those and other questions are “yes”—see more

in the following sections.

Notably, we saw few signs of a “backlash” effect. Fewer than 1% of writers reported an overall negative impact.

Unfortunately, some youth programs can actually make some youth worse (for example, Scared Straight can scare kids crooked and some drug abuse prevention increases drug use!). Too few programs look for backlash. Values narratives may prove to be especially safe interventions.

Self-reported Benefits of the Laws of Life Essay

The Life Paths project found that engaged essay writers reported **higher levels of 12 current strengths** assessing qualities of self-regulation, meaning making, and current, post-essay well-being.

Engaged essay writers had higher levels of the following strengths & forms of well-being (in order from strongest to smallest but still significant effect):

Endurance
Posttraumatic growth
Purpose
Subjective Well-being
Family Care Meaning Making
Other-oriented Meaning Making
Anger Management
Spiritual Well-being
Moral Meaning Making
Religious Meaning Making
Self-oriented Meaning Making
Coping

Note: The meaning making scales measure different ways that people find purpose and meaning (such as caring for family or others).

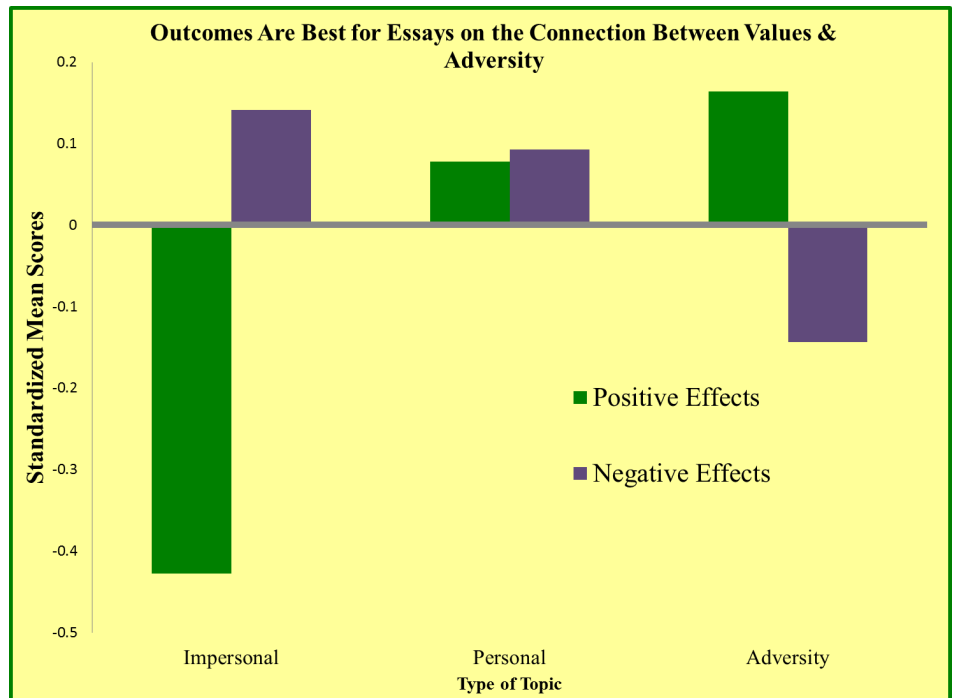
Perhaps not surprisingly, we found that participants who reported little effort on the essay, using our new Narrative Engagement Index, were not significantly different than non-writers. It shows that a personal investment in the process is part of what makes it work.

The Laws of Life Essay Toolkit

We have prepared a 12-page toolkit to help providers implement the Laws of Life Essay program. In addition to the results presented here, the toolkit has detailed instructions, sample essay excerpts, and the history of the program. This toolkit is available for free. See Hamby, S. Banyard, V., Hagler, M., Kaczowski, W., Taylor, E., Roberts, L, & Grych, J. (2015). The Laws of Life Essay Toolkit. Sewanee, TN: Life Paths Research Program. <http://lifepathsresearch.org>

People Who Write About Adversities Get the Most Benefit

People who wrote about Laws of Life they learned from hard times had more positive impact and less negative impact than people who wrote about personal (but not bad) experiences or impersonal experiences. As can be seen in the graph, impersonal topics showed little benefit.



In Their Own Words: Results from the In-Depth Interviews

The interviews also revealed the impact of the Laws of Life Essay writers, which we organized into the following themes.

1) Realizing that sharing your story can help others

"Words can touch people, and it all depends on how you want to touch them. Good or bad."

Many people benefit from the opportunity to pass on their wisdom to others. This can be especially powerful for people who do not always feel that they have the chance to help others. Starting to understand that words can have positive impact on others is an underappreciated benefit of narrative and storytelling.

2) Finding your voice

"The last one [essay] was a gateway for me. I owned it. I was no longer a victim. I was a survivor."

"Finding your voice" means learning how to express yourself. It helps to think about how events—even the bad ones—have been part of a journey toward the person you want to become. Writing it down helps people become the author of their own lives.

3) Re-affirming your values

"I think the essay kind of helps me, I guess, put in words what is essentially most valuable to me."

Many of the people we have spoken to have mentioned that

pausing to tell your story can be a good reminder of your priorities. It is so easy to get swept up in the day-to-day hustle and bustle. Taking some time to focus on values can be beneficial.

4) Finding peace, finding hope

"Just actually sitting down and writing probably helped me find that, that peace...."

What's the difference between someone who has achieved resilience and someone who has not? People who have found their voice, shared their story, and reaffirmed their values often find a sense of peace and a hopefulness that they did not have before.

How to Get the Most Impact

Our study suggests the following to get the most out of the Laws of Life Essay:

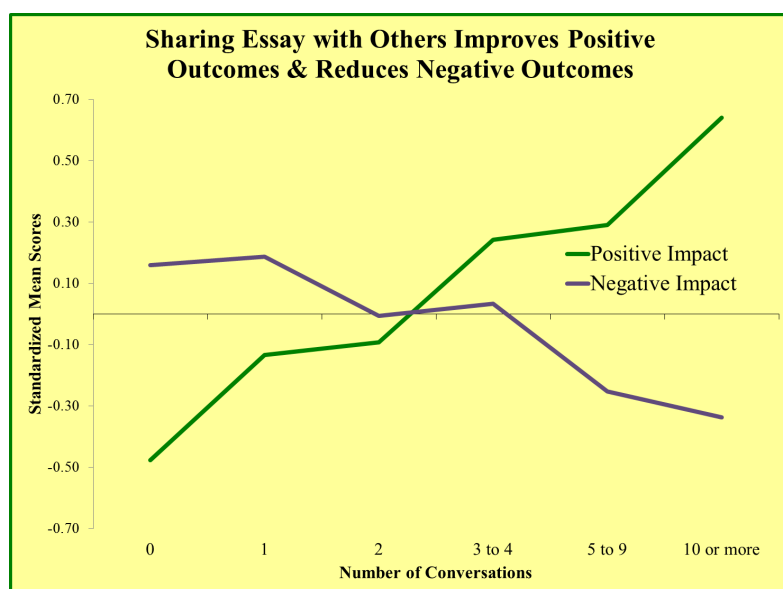
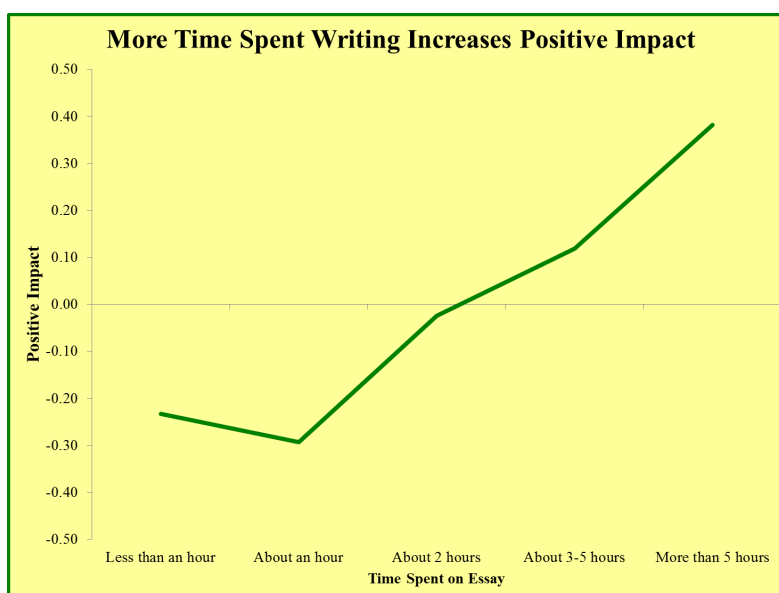
- 1) Spend 2 or more hours writing.
- 2) Encourage writers to discuss the essay with family, friends, or other writers.
- 3) Provide encouragement to writers.
- 4) Write on an adversity. If not on an adversity, write about something else personally meaningful, such as a person or an event that inspired the writer. Avoid impersonal topics.

Spend a Few Hours

Narrative has been called the “2-minute miracle.” It is truly remarkable how quickly narrative can have benefits on so many dimensions of psychological and physical health.

However, 2 minutes is probably not the optimum amount of time to get maximum benefit! Our study suggests 2 or more hours to get the most optimal results.

On the other hand, existing research suggests there is no need to commit long-term to keeping a journal or diary to enjoy the benefits of narrative.



Talk About It!

People also reported that the more they talked about their Laws of Life Essay with other people, the more benefits they experienced. As you can see in the graph, 3 or more conversations with others was associated with more positive benefits and fewer negative outcomes.

Work: An Important Path to Character & Well-being

Our unusually rich dataset allowed us to uncover new issues. Surprisingly, one area that has received almost no prior study but was mentioned by many Life Paths participants was the importance of work in their lives.

Previous research mostly defines the benefits of work as the absence of unemployment's negative outcomes or as benefits to employers, such as increased productivity. However, work was important to many Life Paths' participants. In the in-depth interviews, the majority (74.8 %) of participants mentioned work at least once during the interview.

Two main themes on the protective benefits of work arose: self-oriented benefits and other-oriented benefits. Each main theme was further divided into three subthemes. Self-oriented subthemes were autonomy, personal development, and empowerment; other-oriented subthemes were generativity, providing for dependents, and helping others. Participants spoke about how each of these benefits enhances their well-being and happiness. For example, empowerment was associated with better workplace integration. Work is one of the main activities of most adults and an important aspect of character, and the study of the psychological benefits of work can improve our understanding of adult well-being and happiness.

For example, here are some quotes that represented the ways that work strengthens character:

Self-Oriented, Learning Lessons, Skills and Responsibility

"I got the chance to go out and meet people... and learned some things and different fields....It made me care about something other than myself....I actually learned a lot about how to manage money and pay the bills.....So this job actually...is what made me responsible." – 20 year-old, M

Other-Oriented, Generativity:

"These young people...were engaged...with the animals...as I had been. And I felt like I had successfully communicated to them...the 'beingness' of these creatures...the potential for more people...to learn about these creatures." – 69 year-old, F, former zookeeper

The Importance of Family & Extended Social Networks

Virtues and resilience are often thought of as individual achievements, but our relationships are an important part of who we are. Although we included many more measures on family and community than most studies of virtues, narratives, or resilience, we believe this is still one of the most important areas for further work.

As an example, our results indicate a need to develop a measure of family well-being. Too many studies of caregiving focus on the concept of "caregiver burden." As parents, we recognize that there are certain sacrifices involved in the sleepless nights, etc. However, we know from our own experience and from many of the interviews that these sacrifices are willingly made and provide meaning, purpose and fulfillment to people's lives. Thus, although someone caring for young children or aging parents might, in some respects, seem to experience more stress and less personal well-being than others, we need to learn more about the benefits from these efforts, much in the same way that our interviews revealed under-studied benefits of work (something else that can be stressful but also brings purpose and fulfillment). These are important areas for future research.

Additional Implications of These Findings for Prevention & Intervention

Our findings have implications for future prevention and intervention. As already mentioned, there is the potential of the Laws of Life Essay and the values narrative approach to expressive writing. An approach that encourages writers to identify their own values and connect them to their own experiences has several advantages over most existing narrative programs, which often require participants to write about their most traumatic experience or the presenting problem in a treatment setting. It is likely to be more positively perceived than prescriptive approaches. Further, the values narrative approach is ideally suited to universal prevention settings, where it can be used with everyone, no matter what their adversity history is. By encouraging people to focus on the connection between their values and their personal experiences, it involves the self and identity development and takes advantage of the “self-reference” effect, which shows that personal information is what we remember best. Thus, narrative may prove to be far superior to many existing psycho-educational efforts.

In addition to the Laws of Life approach, our findings suggest that youth development and violence prevention would be better served by focusing on programs and activities that are known to increase the key strengths of Resilience Portfolio domains. Below we highlight a few activities that are known to increase character strengths. Ironically, providers often do not recommend what many of us do ourselves to cope with the adversities that almost everyone will experience at some point.

Mindfulness meditation improves:

- Compassion
- Emotional awareness
- Emotional regulation

Spirituality and religious involvement improve:

- Purpose
- Social Support

Religion is often neglected in many programs. However, these are important to many people & have many established benefits.



Volunteering improves:

- Generativity
- Community support



Regular exercise (most routines, even sleep!) improves:

- Endurance
- Optimism

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Useful Online Resources

- Life Paths Research Program: <http://lifepathsresearch.org/>
- Laws of Life Program: <http://lawsoflifeprogram.com/>
- The John Templeton Foundation: <http://www.templeton.org/>
- Tips on Better Writing Feedback : <http://www.betterwritingfeedback.com/>
- Life Paths Research Program's Measurements Packet:
<http://lifepathsresearch.org/strengths-measures/>
- Laws Of Life Essay Program Handbook [PDF]: <http://lifepathsresearch.org/build/wp-content/uploads/ProgramHandbook2013-2014.pdf>
- A Teachers' Guide to the Laws of Life Essay Program [PDF]:
<http://lifepathsresearch.org/build/wp-content/uploads/LOL-teachers-manual-web.pdf>
- Laws Of Life Essay Program's Tips for Teachers [PDF]:
<http://lifepathsresearch.org/build/wp-content/uploads/writingprompts.pdf>
- "Writing and Health: A Practical Advice" by Dr. James W. Pennebaker:
<http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/faculty/pennebaker/home2000/WritingandHealth.html>
- "Resilience... and 4 Benefits to Sharing Your Story" by Dr. Sherry Hamby:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-web-violence/201309/resilience-and-4-benefits-sharing-your-story>

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**Exploring,
Understanding,
Overcoming**

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The Life Paths Research Program is a research unit of the Department of Psychology at the University of the South that is dedicated to advancing resilience and improving well-being after adversity.

We are located in Sewanee, Tennessee, in the southernmost region of Appalachia. We also have a special interest in understanding and promoting the resilience of rural Appalachian communities.

Dr. Sherry Hamby is Director of the Life Paths Research Program.

For the Laws of Life Essay study, we partnered with:

*Dr. Victoria Banyard of the University of New Hampshire and
Dr. John Grych of Marquette University.*

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