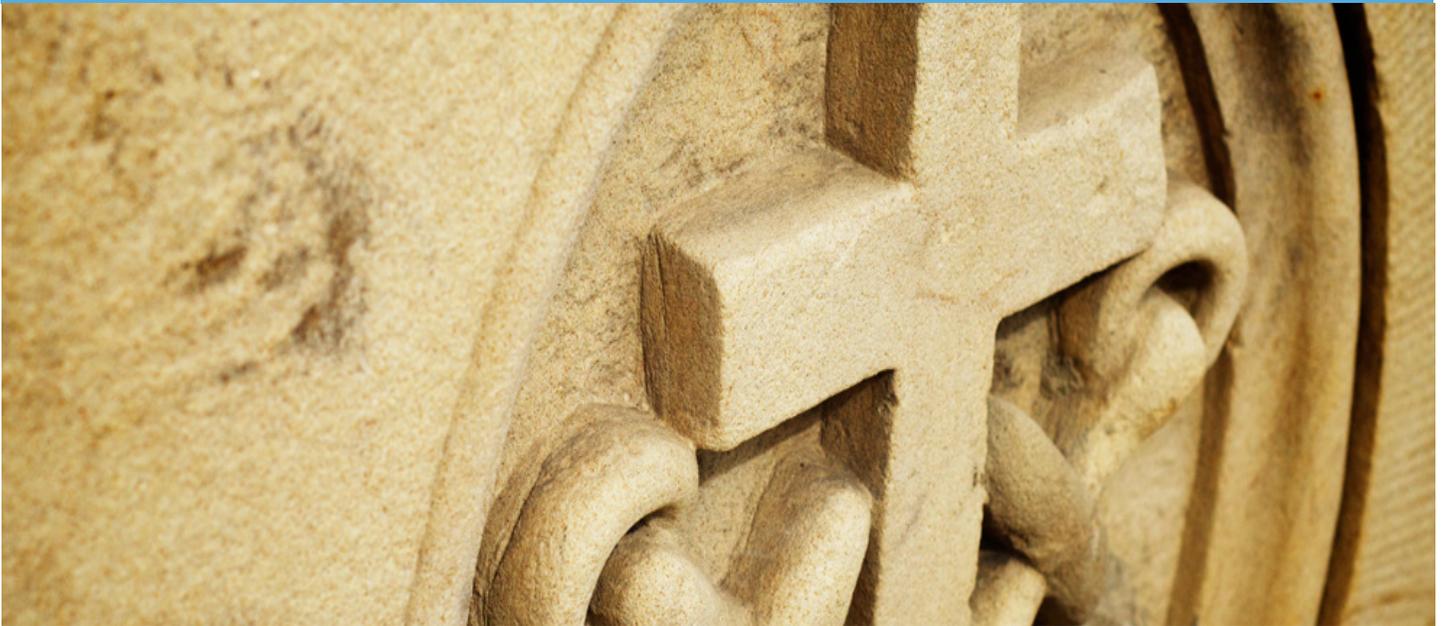


# Exploring Your Values

The Journey Toward a More Meaningful, Purposeful Life



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# Understanding You at Your Best

## **Overview**

We have all had experiences when we felt that we were at our very best. These are moments when we not only found ourselves performing at our best, but we also found ourselves profoundly enjoying what we were doing. We felt truly alive and we were filled with passion and excitement. These are moments when we felt that we were living up to our truest potential as a human being.

We use the term to “optimal experiences” describe moments when you were at your best, in the “zone”, experiencing “flow.” Optimal experiences are those when you find yourself doing exactly what you want to be doing and you don’t want it to end. You “experience a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like<sup>1</sup>.” You find yourself performing at high levels and loving it. They are optimal because they are moments of both peak performance and peak experience.

One of the important features of these moments is that you are operating on your core strengths. In their book, “Now, Discover Your Strengths,” Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton argue that the conventional wisdom which urges us to focus on overcoming our weaknesses is misguided. While they do not advocate ignoring weaknesses, their compelling argument – which is supported by a large body of research – is that most of our time should be spent on developing our strengths and placing ourselves in situations where those strengths are critical success factors. Each of us has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Truly high-performing people are those who have found their talents, developed those talents into strengths, and placed themselves in situations where those strengths form the cornerstones of success.

Equally important to achieving these optimal experiences is enacting goals that are consistent with your core values<sup>1</sup>. Core values represent the things that matter most to you in life. They are based upon your deeply held beliefs, your ideas about the fundamental truths of life, and what you think makes for an excellent life, a life well-lived. People find themselves feeling at their best when they are enacting their core values.

The final piece to the optimal experience puzzle is challenge. Each of us has a deep need to grow, to become better, and to move toward our fullest potential. Situations that do not challenge us are boring and unsatisfying largely because we do not see any real reason to work hard. Challenges inspire and stretch us to not only work hard, but to become the best person we can be.

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<sup>1</sup> **Edward L. Deci, Richard Ryan. 1996. Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation. Penguin USA**

The equation for achieving optimal experiences is:



The following exercise is designed to help you explore your strengths and core values. Like any such exercise, it requires your willingness to explore, examine, and think deeply about yourself.

The good news is that this exercise is based upon an extensive body of research and some proven techniques! Given a reasonable amount of effort, I think you will be very surprised and rewarded by the results you get from using it.

## **Phase 1: Looking Inside**

Phase 1 is a set of activities designed to help you investigate what you know about yourself. It provides you with a structured way of thinking about your core values and your personal strengths. The key to this phase is really the effort you put into it. With sincere attention and meaningful effort, people are able to gain deep and important insights into themselves. In fact, they are often surprised and very pleased with the results!

### **Step 1**

Start by brainstorming a list of things that are important to you. DO NOT attempt to filter, screen, sort, or categorize this list! The important thing is to put down whatever you think about when you answer some of the questions below. At this point, just record what comes to mind when you try to answer these questions:

- *What matters most to me in life?*
- *What do I really believe in?*
- *What do I really stand for?*
- *What excites and enthuses me? What causes me the deepest concern or sorrow?*
- *What do I long for in life?*
- *What am I most passionate about?*
- *What are my deepest aspirations for my life?*

One of the best ways to approach this activity is through the process of journaling. Journaling involves simply writing about your thoughts over time. You can express them in words or pictures.

You can write about thoughts, ideas, concepts, or insights. The key is to journal over a period of time. Write a bit, set it aside, then come back to it at a later time. Usually, waiting a day in between sessions is a good idea. The break allows you a fresh look at the questions and it gives your subconscious time to work on the questions too. This “incubation” or background processing time is a critical part of any self-discovery process.

Continue this phase by gathering information about your personal strengths. There are two excellent resources you can use to help you discover your strengths. Researchers agree that both are valid, reliable measures, so they are well worth your time and effort.

The first approach has a small cost. Purchase either Buckingham and Clifton’s “Now, Discover Your Strengths,” or Tom Rath’s “StrengthsFinder 2.0.” Both come with a personal code that you can use to take an on-line self assessment tool. Take the test and then look at the 5 signature strengths that emerge from your answers. Both books provide wonderful insights into each of your strengths, so be sure to spend some time reading these sections.

This approach is based upon the idea that strengths are a combination of something you have a natural aptitude or talent for and something that you love to do. Talents alone are not strengths. Some things we can do well we may not enjoy very much. For me, math is a talent: I have an innate talent for math, but don’t particularly enjoy it. For one of my sons, math is a strength: he’s good at it and he really loves math!

The second approach is free. The web site [www.authentichappiness.com](http://www.authentichappiness.com) is a wonderful resource created and managed by some of the top researchers in the field of positive psychology. You will have to register – it is free – and you can be assured that your information will be protected and held in strictest confidence. Take the “VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire.” Like the StrengthsFinder, you will receive a list of your top 5 signature strengths.

This assessment is based upon the idea that we most fulfilled and motivated when we are pursuing goals and objectives that reflect our core life values. In other words, it views strengths as a combination of natural talent combined with the values and beliefs that guide our life. There is a growing body of research that supports this idea. It seems that we really are at our best when we are doing things that we can do well and things that matter most to us. We are intrinsically motivated to strive toward those things that are most important to us and we feel great when we are doing that. We love the feeling of giving our best to achieve something that really matters. So, knowing how our talents are connected to our core life values provides some very important insights into what makes us tick.

There is important truth in both approaches, so gather information using each of the tools. Once you get this information, think about what you have learned. Think back on your life and ask yourself these questions. Where have you seen these strengths at work in your life? How have these strengths played a part in my personal success or life achievements? How do these strengths show up in the things I love to do and also the things I can do well? Remember, journaling is a great way to work through this phase. It is simply thinking out loud, in writing, and research shows that it is one

of the best tools for personal discovery.

**Besuretotakesometimetodothiswork.Focusonitforawhile,thensetitaside foratleastadaybeforeyoustartagain.Workonitoverseveraldaysorweeksto allow insights to bubble up. Avoid rushing forward: take time to reflect.**

## **Step 2**

Now, group the items in your list of important things into logical categories. It is important for you to decide how these things go together. Make as many or as few categories as you feel is necessary.

Start by trying to see what things seem to go together. Some people find it helpful to write each item from Step 1 on a note card. Then, they can sort the note cards and move them around as necessary. Once a group starts to form, it is helpful to write a brief title for each group. Usually one or a very few words is enough. Again, doing this over a period of time is usually the best approach.

You should feel free to iterate back-and-forth between Step 1 and Step 2. The key is to avoid evaluating what “sounds good” or “looks impressive” or – worst of all – “seems right to others!” You need to follow your instinct or “gut” on this one, and work through the periods of uncertainty by taking a break for a while, then going back to the activity once again.

**Besuretotakesometimetodothiswork.Focusonitforawhile,thensetitaside foratleastadaybeforeyoustartagain.Workonitoverseveraldaysorweeksto allow insights to bubble up. Avoid rushing forward: take time to reflect.**

## **Step 3**

Now, reflect on moments when you felt you were having an optimal experience, or at least one that was really close. Think of a time when you felt that you were at your very best. You are looking for events or situations that stand out in your memory as extraordinary and good. These are moments where you were proud of yourself and where you felt that you were doing something really worthwhile. These moments are often some of your fondest memories, the ones you like to relive again and again.

Now, see if you can map your strengths onto the groups you created at step 2. Look for new insights about your core values and beliefs. See if you can notice the places in your life where you were using a talent versus a strength. These are moments where you were performing well, but did not feel as fulfilled or comfortable or satisfied. No, think about the times you performed well and loved it. Those are moments where you were using your strengths. You want to focus on strengths, not talents!

Try to answer some of the following questions:

- *What were you doing?*
- *Where were you? What was the situation like? Was there something about the context in which this even occurred that was important?*
- *What other people were there? How were they important to your optimal experience?*
- *What was fun, exciting, or rewarding about the experience*
- *What did you find challenging about the experience? What parts felt like they were stretching you, testing your skills, or pushing you to new levels of performance?*
- *What were you doing well? In detail, how were you performing well? What strengths or skills were you using? Which ones were critical for high performance in this experience?*

Try to reflect on at least three of these memories. Record them in as much detail as you can. Things that may seem small and insignificant now might be a key to realizing your signature strengths or core values later. The key is to get a rich description of the event.

Journaling is often a useful way to approach this activity too. Sometimes it takes a while to remember these special memories. Just going through the process over time will often jog your memory enough that forgotten experiences will come to mind. Some people find it useful to look at photographs or other material they have collected. For now, avoid asking other people for information; this will be important in a later step in the process.

**Be sure to take some time to do this work. Focus on it for a while, then set it aside for at least a day before you start again. Work on it over several weeks to allow insights to bubble up. Avoid rushing forward: take time to reflect.**

## **Phase 2: Looking Outside**

During this phase you will examine other people as a way to gain insights about yourself. We admire people for good reasons, and those reasons can tell us a lot about our own values and beliefs. This set of activities asks you to focus on those people that you admire. Try to think do this without comparing them to yourself. Work hard to think of these people as objectively as possible. Later, you will integrate the insights you uncover in this phase with your insights about yourself.

### **Step 1**

Begin by listing the people that you really admire. This is another brain storming activity: list

anyone that comes to mind, then rank them in order of how much you admire them. It is OK to have ties – you can have two or three people in the top slot. You should have a least two people, more is better.

## **Step 2**

Once you have your list, go back to the top two to five people. Write down all the reasons you admire these people. Take them one at a time. Again, the goal here is to put down whatever comes to mind; no filtering, screening, judging, or evaluating. Think about the admirable things they did. What do you think were their core values and beliefs? How did they enact those strengths? How did they live out those values and beliefs? What strengths did they exhibit?

## **Step 3**

Now, go back to this list and once again form categories of the reasons you admire these people. DO NOT revisit the list and categories of things from Phase 1. Do this step independently for now by trying to determine some of the major reasons you admire these people. Again, you decide how many and what kinds of categories to use. You may want to use note cards again.

At this point you are treating this as a separate activity. You should avoid going back to the material you generated during phase 1. You will merge the outcomes of Phase 1 and Phase 2 a little later on.

**Once again, be sure to take some time to do this work. Focus on it for a while, set it aside, and allow insights to emerge.**

## **Phase 3: Enlist the Support of Other People**

This is the time to start involving other people in the process. It is also one of the most important stages. Please do not skip it! Asking other people for help can sometimes be difficult, but their insights will be invaluable to you.

One way to approach this is to think about these people as your own board of advisors or board of directors. These are the people you would trust to help you think through important issues in your life or the ones you would go to for advice during times of challenge. They need to be people with whom you have a significant history, people that know you very well. These significant others should also be people who are willing to be candid with you. So, please choose your significant others carefully! You need to pick at least 5, but probably no more than 10. The ideal number is usually between 5 and 7.

## **Step 1**

Ask these significant others to do the following for you. Tell them that candor and honesty really matter!

Ask them to make a list of things that they think are important to *you*. Ask them to list what they think matters most to you in life. What do they think you really stand for? What do they think you really believe in? What do they think you are most happy about? Most sad about? Most passionate about? You are asking them to describe what they think are *your* core values.

When they have finished that step, ask them to reflect on moments when they say you “in the zone,” or at your very best. What were you doing? What do they think you found exciting about the situation? What do they think you found challenging? What did they see you doing well – what strengths did they see you using?

The keys to this phase are:

1. *Engage people who really know you well and*
2. *Engage people who will be candid.*

We have included a form in this booklet that you can copy and give to the people you ask to help you. You might suggest that they use a journaling process too. No matter the process they use, encourage them to take time. As was the case with you, they need to give this some time so that all of their memories, insights, and ideas can come to the surface. Writing down their thoughts is important too. Not only is it hard to remember all of the important details and nuances, but the process of writing is itself a way to both stimulate our thinking and to clarify our thoughts.

## **Step 2**

Once they have had time to reflect on their lists, talk with them about their insights and ideas. Hear their feedback first. Don't respond until they have told you everything they can. You might have to encourage them to do so, but hear it while reserving any response but those meant to encourage free sharing by the other person. It will be helpful to you if they have lists and notes they can give you.

You might go do this over a series of meetings, taking a few insights at a time and discussing them fully. The process of talking will often stimulate new insights either your own or from your significant other. At this point you are treating this as a separate activity. You should avoid going back to the material you generated during Phases 1 and 2 for now. You will get to this very soon.

### **Step 3**

Now is the time to share with them what you found out about yourself and the people you admire. Start an ongoing dialogue with them. Ongoing means you will need to do this several times with this person. Take time to share with them, hear their feedback, and then share some more. Use them as a sounding board to clarify your thoughts and use them as a source for new ideas, inspiration, and confirmation. Again, time seems to be a key here: do not try to pack it all into one of a few meetings. It is better to go a bit at a time!

## **Phase 4: Building a Foundation**

### **Step 1**

Now you are ready to combine your lists and categories from the “Looking Inside” and “Looking Outside” activities and those of your significant others. Look for overlap. Look for things that are missing from your “Looking Inside” list that you wish were there. Look for things on that list that you wish were not there. Make a new, integrated list, one that combines the insights from all the activities so far.

### **Step 2**

With the help of your advisors, start discerning what values and strengths these lists suggest to you. Begin making a list of core values. Then move to a list of personal strengths. Strive for at least three values, but no more than seven. Do the same thing for strengths: at least three signature strengths, but no more than seven.

You should ask your significant others for help. Have them reflect on what you have created. You need their help and their honest feedback. Which of the values and strengths seems to fit you and which ones do not fit? Which values and strengths are missing from the list? Get their candid feedback – compliments made only to help you feel good are not real help.

Share your mission statement or credo with your significant others too. Ask them to reflect on what they have read in terms of what they know about you.

Sample Core Value Areas. This list is meant only to get you started: do not rely exclusively on this list!

<b>Achievement</b>	<b>Friendships</b>	<b>Adventure</b>
<b>Advancement and promotion</b>	<b>Growth</b>	<b>Pleasure</b>
<b>Adventure</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Power/Authority</b>
<b>Affection (love and caring)</b>	<b>Helping other people</b>	<b>Privacy</b>
<b>Arts</b>	<b>Helping society</b>	<b>Public service</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Honesty</b>	<b>Purity</b>
<b>Change and variety</b>	<b>Independence</b>	<b>Science</b>
<b>Influencing others</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Inner harmony</b>
<b>Recognition</b>	<b>Respect</b>	<b>Competence</b>
<b>Integrity</b>	<b>Spirituality</b>	<b>Peace</b>
<b>Close relationships</b>	<b>Competition</b>	<b>Intellectual status</b>
<b>Reputation</b>	<b>Cooperation</b>	<b>Involvement</b>
<b>Responsibility/Accountability</b>	<b>Patriotism</b>	<b>Tranquility</b>
<b>Security</b>	<b>Creativity</b>	<b>Knowledge</b>
<b>Self-respect</b>	<b>Decisiveness</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
<b>Serenity</b>	<b>Democracy</b>	<b>Sophistication</b>
<b>Ecological awareness</b>	<b>Loyalty</b>	<b>Stability</b>
<b>Status</b>	<b>Effectiveness</b>	<b>Meaningful work</b>
<b>Joy</b>	<b>Morals/Ethics</b>	<b>Fun</b>
<b>Freedom</b>	<b>Money</b>	<b>Truth</b>
<b>Excellence</b>	<b>Nature</b>	<b>Wealth</b>
<b>Excitement</b>	<b>Wisdom</b>	<b>Fame</b>
<b>Order (tranquility)</b>	<b>Stability</b>	<b>Knowledge</b>
<b>Personal development</b>	<b>Invention</b>	<b>Excitement</b>

Sample Signature Strengths. This list is meant only to get you started: do not rely exclusively on this list! It comes from Dr. Martin Seligman's landmark and very important work on finding authentic happiness. You can take his strengths inventory on-line for no charge at [www.authentichappines.com](http://www.authentichappines.com).

**Gratitude**

**Spirituality, sense of purpose, and faith**

**Creativity, ingenuity, and originality**

**Judgment, critical thinking**

**Valor, bravery**

**Integrity, genuineness, honesty**

**Duty, loyalty, teamwork**

**Leadership**

**Prudence**

**Appreciation of beauty and excellence**

**Forgiveness, mercy**

**Zest, passion, enthusiasm**

**Love of learning**

**Capacity to love and be loved**

**Curiosity/Interest in the world**

**Perspective, wisdom**

**Perseverance, industry, diligence**

**Kindness and generosity**

**Fairness, equity**

**Self-control**

**Humility, modesty**

**Hope, optimism**

**Playfulness, humor**

## **Phase 5: Personal Mission Statement**

A good way to start making sense out of what you have discovered is to write a personal mission statement or personal credo. Start by trying to summarize what you really want to live for and achieve in life in no more than five sentences. This is a draft, so all you need to do is get a start.

List your 3-7 core values. Define what they mean to you. This can require several iterations, so don't worry if you find yourself coming up short at the beginning.

List your 3-7 signature strengths. Describe how you want to use them, how they can help you enact your core values, and how they help you achieve "flow" experiences. You should describe the situations or environments in which you think you can use them most productively.

Once again, rely on your significant others. They can become your personal board of directors, the people you go to for objective analysis, deep insights, and real help as you progress toward becoming the best you can be!

## **Phase 6: Keep Working!**

Take all that you learned from these people and keep working on your draft mission/credo and values. Go back to these people from time-to-time to get more feedback, ideas, inspiration, and confirmation!

## **UNDERSTANDING YOU AT YOUR BEST**

### **Cultivating Optimal Experiences**

Thank you for helping with this important project. You have been asked to help \_\_\_\_\_ think through their personal values and signature strengths. This form is designed as a guide, so use it to help you, but not to limit or constrain your thinking.

One way to start is to think about some of the experiences you have had with \_\_\_\_\_. Try to bring back the experience with as much detail as you can. Then, answer the following questions as you think about those experiences:

- *What matters most to this person in their life?*
- *What do they really stand for?*
- *What do they really believe in?*
- *What are they most happy about? What excites and enthuses them?*
- *What are they most sad about? What causes them deep sorrow or concern?*
- *What keeps them awake at night? What do they worry about most?*
- *What do you they long for in life? Where are their yearnings focused?*
- *What dreams do they still have, even those they think might never be fulfilled? Why do you think they dream about these things?*
- *What are they most passionate about?*
- *When have you seen them really enjoying themselves? What were they doing? Why do you think they were having such a good time?*
- *When have you seen them performing at their best? What kinds of activities were they doing? What skills or talents did they seem to be using? What do you think made them so good at what they were doing?*

## APPENDIX

Dr. Seligman has two excellent books that are worth reading. As a quick resources, these are his major signature strengths:

- **Gratitude** You are aware of the good things that happen to you, and you never take them for granted. Your friends and family members know that you are a grateful person because you always take the time to express your thanks.
- **Love of learning** You love learning new things, whether in a class or on your own. You have always loved school, reading, and museums-anywhere and everywhere there is an opportunity to learn.
- **Spirituality, sense of purpose, and faith** You have strong and coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe. You know where you fit in the larger scheme. Your beliefs shape your actions and are a source of comfort to you.
- **Capacity to love and be loved** You value close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated. The people to whom you feel most close are the same people who feel most close to you.
- **Creativity, ingenuity, and originality** Thinking of new ways to do things is a crucial part of who you are. You are never content with doing something the conventional way if a better way is possible.
- **Curiosity/Interest in the world.** You are very open to experiences. You tend to be very flexible about life. You have high tolerance for ambiguity and are intrigued by newness. You find yourself actively engage in new and exciting activities.
- **Judgment, critical thinking.** You like to examine things from all sides and are very deliberate in making decisions. You never jump to conclusions, but reply only after carefully considering solid evidence. You are, however, able to change your mind after being convinced.
- **Perspective, wisdom.** Other people come to you for advice and insights. People rely heavily on your experiences and opinions about matters of importance. You have a way of looking at the world that makes sense to others.
- **Valor, bravery.** You do not shrink from threats, challenges, pain, or adversity. Valor is bravery under fire. You are willing to take an unpopular stand and will defend it in the face of significant opposition. You are willing to face your fears.
- **Perseverance, industry, diligence.** Once you start something, you finish it. You like to take on difficult projects and see them through to completion. You are a truly industrious person, not a perfectionist, but someone who will work hard toward a valuable goal.

- Integrity, genuineness, honesty. You live your life in an authentic manner. You are down to earth and without pretense, a “real” person. You are a person who speaks the truth, even when it is difficult to do so.
- Kindness and generosity. You enjoy doing good deeds for others, even if you do not know them well. You are willing to drop what you are doing to help someone. You are empathetic.
- Duty, loyalty, teamwork. You excel as a member of a group. You are a loyal and dedicated teammate, you always do your shared, and you work hard for the success of the group.
- Fairness, equity. You do not let your personal feelings bias your decisions about other people. You give every person a fair change. You are guided in your daily decisions by larger principles of ethics and morality.
- Leadership. You do a good job of organizing activities and seeing to it that they happen. You are able to help maintain good relations among a group of people.
- Self-control. You can easily hold your desires, needs, and impulses in check. You only act when you know that your actions are correct. When something bad happens, you can regulate your emotions.
- Prudence. You are a careful person. You do not say or do things you will regret later. You are far-sighted and deliberative.
- Humility, modesty. You do not seek the spotlight, but prefer to let your accomplishments speak for themselves. You do not regard yourself as special. You are unpretentious.
- Appreciation of beauty and excellence. You stop to smell the roses. You notice excellence and beauty, and you help other people recognize them too. You find yourself in awe of special beauty or excellence.
- Hope, optimism. You expect the future to turn out well, and you plan your work and life in order to achieve it. You take a positive stance toward the future in whatever you do.
- Forgiveness, mercy. You are able to truly forgive others who do wrong. You are always willing to give others a second change. Your guiding principle is mercy, not revenge.
- Playfulness, humor. You like to laugh and you are good at making other people laugh. You are the life of the party. You love to play, and you are good at it.
- Zest, passion, enthusiasm. You are a spirited person. You throw your whole self into the activities you undertake. You wake up full of energy and ready to go.

