

Innovative
Resources

STRENGTH CARDS®

Unlimited

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A guide for using the cards

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Innovative Resources acknowledges the Jaara people of Dja Dja Wurrung country, the traditional custodians of the land upon which our premises are located and where our resources are developed and published. We pay our respects to the elders—past, present and future—for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and other First Nations peoples. We must remember that underneath this earth, upon which we so firmly stand, this is, was and always will be, the traditional land of First Nations peoples.

Welcome to *Strength Cards® Unlimited*

Every day, we see people drawing on their strengths. We see people creating, thinking, growing, giving, making, fixing, healing, imagining, building and helping. They use individual strengths or they combine their strengths. Sometimes they borrow strengths from others.

We also hear inspiring stories of people overcoming adversity. Many times we are amazed, not only by people's resilience, but also by their capacity to give to others, even in the face of tragedy or trauma.

When we talk about strengths, people mostly think of personal qualities like resilience, courage, empathy, curiosity, flexibility, determination or having a sense of humour. However, strengths can be anything that creates a sense of hope and possibility.

Strength Cards® Unlimited expands the notion of what a strength is, enabling us to talk about strengths in more nuanced and expansive ways. These 40 cards are perfect for talking about the many different strengths people can draw on to overcome challenges, reconnect with others and imagine a positive future.

They are perfect to combine with other strength cards like *Choosing Strengths*, *The Nature of Strengths*, the original *Strength Cards®* or *Strength Cards® for Kids*, all of which have a focus on personal qualities.

What are strengths?

Strengths can be a number of things. They can be personal qualities, skills, abilities or knowledge and they can also be a range of other things.

They can be a person's 'social capital', which might include social networks, family or friends, culture, religion or community. Strengths can also include environmental resources such as a place to live, a car or bike, furniture or clothes, a garden, access to support services or a stable food source.

Of course, environmental resources could also include things found in the natural world – these strengths or resources might include things such as having access to interesting outdoor spaces like lakes or forests, shared public spaces like pools or playgrounds, or a community garden.

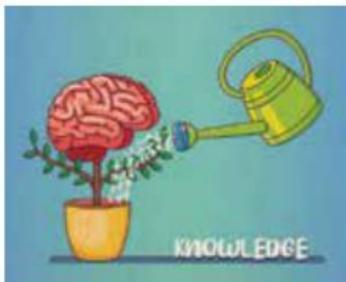
Strengths can also be experiences, values, beliefs or interests. The wisdom we gather as we go through life—the challenges and the good stuff—can be a great source of strength, insight and hope. Our values and beliefs can give us a lot of comfort and motivation when we are working through difficult times, while our hobbies and interests can bring meaning and a sense of joy to life.

More abstract things like time, choices or rights can also be powerful strengths. Many people feel time-poor or feel that they have limited options so these strengths can be great to talk about with people who may feel that they

don't have many tangible strengths (of course they do, but sometime people find it uncomfortable to name their strengths).

As you can imagine, the list of potential strengths can be almost endless.

Strength Cards® Unlimited includes a range of cards that enable conversations about all of these different types of strengths, resources, skills, relationships and experiences.



The wisdom we gather as we go through life—the challenges and the good stuff—can be a great source of strength, insight and hope.

Why talk about strengths?

There are many benefits of talking to people about their strengths, capacities, resources and skills.

While everyone has strengths, when people are feeling disempowered, they may not recognise these strengths in themselves. It can be especially valuable to encourage people to notice their strengths and resources when they are going through a tough time as it can help put the problem in perspective and it can generate a sense of optimism. Where possible, encourage people to think about the different strengths or resources they have drawn on to help them manage. You might say, 'That sounds like it was really tough. What helped you get through?' If it feels appropriate, you might name strengths you've noticed them using. 'It sounds like you have some great friends. They sound like they really care about you. And you care about them.'

Additionally, as funding is often allocated to resolve problems, many support services are designed around deficits—family violence, mental health, homelessness, drug and alcohol, sexual abuse, etc. As a result, services often spend a lot of time focusing on what isn't working rather than what is, which can feel overwhelming and disempowering for the people accessing these services.

By shifting people's focus to what they can do, rather than what they can't, we help create a space for new possibilities to emerge. When we decide to notice our strengths, resources, skills, and the strengths of the people around us, we are more likely to see a way forward and imagine a more positive future.

People may already have a number of resources they are drawing on, including friends and family, services, pets, community groups, sports clubs, online networks and groups, religious or spiritual communities and workplaces. These resources may provide material, emotional or spiritual support. Sometimes people feel very alone as they haven't noticed the number of people who are there to offer support. It can be useful for them to name these resources or supports.

Identifying strengths and resources can be an important step in people realising that they have valuable tools, and people, to draw on. They may then be able to mobilise some of the strengths and resources in different parts of their lives to help them address other issues. For example, if someone helps make a community meal once a month, they are probably resourceful and organised, able to work collaboratively with other people, have cooking and food preparation skills and find meaning in connection and supporting others. These could be highly valuable skills when looking for work or connecting with their children. Noticing our strengths can feel motivating and hopeful, which helps create the conditions for sustainable change.

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Hidden strengths

Recognising our own strengths builds self-esteem and helps us develop resilience.

Sometimes, strengths are hidden in perceived 'weaknesses'. Reframing the perceived weakness as a strength can be a useful strategy. Being shy, for example, could also mean that the person is a good listener and is empathetic. Having anxiety could also mean that the person thinks deeply about things and can see a situation from different angles.

Some people are embarrassed to talk about their strengths as they may think this is bragging or big-noting themselves. One way to overcome this is to invite people to choose cards they think others would see as strengths in them. You might ask something like, 'What does your closest friend say you are good at?' or, 'What do you think the people at work would say they admire about you?'

Often, people don't consider the things they can do or their personal qualities as strengths. They may underplay or dismiss suggestions that these are assets. For example, a young person who plays a lot of computer games may have only been told that this is a problem. However, they are likely to have a range of excellent technology-related skills and may have a strong online community of gamers. They may also have highly developed problem-solving skills and an ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances.

Use *Strength Cards® Unlimited* to encourage people to explore hidden strengths, reframe aspects of themselves they are uncomfortable with, and to notice personal qualities and resources they'd never thought about as strengths.

Shadow strengths

Strengths can sometimes have a shadow side. This can be particularly true if we become overly dependent on a particular strength. For example, confidence is a strength but over-confidence may lead people to take unnecessary risks. Or a great sense of humour is a strength, but if people use humour to avoid talking about important or serious issues, it may damage relationships.

Use the cards to talk about how to recognise when a strength is being overused or when a strength is starting to negatively impact on life in some way.

Strengths and diversity

We are surrounded by many different cultures. We not only live alongside people from different countries and backgrounds but we also interact with the many different mini-cultures found in families, schools, communities, clubs and workplaces.

Each of these cultures may emphasise different strengths—for example, ‘standing out’ may be admired in one setting, and in another, ‘blending in’ may be highly prized. Learning to recognise the strengths that are emphasised in our own culture and those of others is part of developing ‘strengths literacy’.

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Sometimes a person's strengths may run counter to a culture they are part of. That can be very tough; it is easy to feel like an outsider. But recognising strengths that are invisible to a dominant culture is a very important part of developing healthy self-esteem ... and an equitable society.

Strength Cards® Unlimited are ideal for talking about what strengths are valued or undervalued within different cultures, religions, families, communities, relationships and groups.

Choosing strengths

Fundamental to a strengths approach is the concept of freedom: freedom to choose. In fact, we can also think of our strengths as the choices we make. While things are constantly happening in our lives (much of which may be beyond our control), we are still able to make choices about what we think and how we behave.

Sometimes 'strengths' are conceptualised as personality traits that can't be changed. But personalities are not predetermined even when shaped by powerful genetic predispositions and environmental forces.

Use the cards to talk about which strengths the person would like to grow or develop. How could they build that strength? What or who could help? Who do they know that already has that strength? What could be learnt from them?

You could also use the cards to explore the concept of choice—why do we choose to mobilise certain strengths in certain situations and not others? Could we choose to use our strengths in different circumstances?

Talking about strengths with people who have caused harm

When someone has caused harm to others, it can be easy to be judgmental or only focus on the behaviour. However, for people to change, they need to feel motivated.

For example, when people express anger, especially if that anger has caused someone else harm, the anger is often seen as the problem to be resolved. However, if we reframe the anger—for example, 'I can see you felt really angry and frustrated. That must mean that you care a lot about this.'—it can help us separate the behaviour from the motivation. Caring could then be seen as the underlying strength, enabling a conversation about how that caring could be expressed in more appropriate and helpful ways.

This doesn't mean we don't hold the person accountable for their actions. By trying to understand the motivation for the behaviour, we create options for change.

Strengths and social justice

Often people accessing services can feel disempowered by the system itself. The system may include oppressive structures, an exclusionary dominant culture or entrenched socio-economic or cultural structures that privilege certain groups.

These forms of oppression and exclusion are real.

Use the cards to talk about different strengths, resources, people and services that could help navigate systemic forms of oppression and exclusion.



A note on creating safe spaces for conversations

As most social workers, counsellors and teachers know, simple tools can be surprisingly powerful. This is something to take into careful consideration when using *Strength Cards® Unlimited* since this resource is designed to encourage reflection and conversation about people's experiences, attitudes and emotions. These topics go to the heart of our identity, our relationships and the values, beliefs and stories that shape us.

Remember, whenever you are using any card set with people, ask yourself:

- Am I familiar enough with the cards?
- Is this the right time? Have we got enough time?
- How will I ensure that people feel as safe and supported as possible if powerful emotions surface?
- How will I ensure that people from diverse backgrounds and with different gender identities feel respected?
- What will I do if I am triggered by the cards or conversation?
- What is my 'Plan B'?
- How will I follow up with people after the conversation?

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Who are the cards for?

Strength Cards® Unlimited are designed to be used by anyone. They are great for counsellors, psychologists, social workers, teachers and trainers, and other professionals working in the human services and education sectors. They are primarily aimed at adults and young people.

The cards have been designed to be used in a variety of settings, from therapeutic spaces, groups to educational spaces and are ideal for using one-on-one, in pairs, in groups or in classrooms. They are also perfect for use in supervision or with family groups.

Our original *Strength Cards®* focus primarily on personal qualities, which makes them perfect to combine with *Strength Cards® Unlimited*. Use the two card sets together to expand the conversation about strengths even further.

How to use the cards

There are many ways to use the *Strength Cards® Unlimited*. Here are two ways to get you started (see our website for more suggestions).

Deliberate Selection

This method involves spreading the cards out on a table or other flat surface and inviting an individual or group to look them over and make a selection based on a question or other prompt (see below for a few suggestions). Some activities may involve picking more than one card—or even a series of cards.

The cards can also be displayed on a wall, window or noticeboard. Spreading the cards out on the floor is another possibility. Then people can get a bird's eye view of the cards, walk around them or follow a line or meandering path of cards.

Activities that involve movement such as walking or shuffling cards can open up different pathways to learning, particularly for those who prefer a kinaesthetic learning approach.

The *Strength Cards® Unlimited* cards are designed to be conversation-starting tools. And what is the best way to start a conversation? Ask a question or two of course!

Here are a few questions you could ask people if you are doing a deliberate choice activity:

- Choose a card that represents something you are thinking about right now.
- Which card represents a strength you've used today?
- Which strengths do you use most often?
- What would your friends or family say is your biggest strength?
- Which card represents a strength you would like to develop? Who could help?
- Which cards best describe your family's strengths?

- Which strengths would you like to grow in your family?
- What strengths have you used in the past that could be mobilised now?
- If you put these strengths into action, what would you be doing differently?
What's stopping you?

Random Selection

Activities using random selection can bring a lightness into the room. Often an element of playfulness and serendipity enters the conversation with random selection.

Here are some easy random selection activities:

- Place all the cards in a bag or container and invite people to select one from the 'lucky dip'.
- Shuffle the deck and fan out the cards, face down. Invite the person to select three cards.
- If you are in a group or classroom, place one card randomly on each person's seat.

Here are a few questions you could ask when doing a random choice activity:

- Describe what your card means to you.
- Is this a strength you have?
- Who else do you know has this strength?
- If you wanted to grow this strength in your life, what would you do?

Building a strengths culture

When we are part of a group, family or classroom, we have the capacity to share our strengths. This can be a powerful way to create change and build an optimistic culture.

Here are a few activities and questions for building a culture of strengths:

- Spread the cards out on the floor or on a table. Invite all participants to select a strength they have. Then invite them to choose a strength they have noticed in others in the group or family. Combine all these strengths together to create a list or picture. What do they notice? Which strength would they like to 'borrow' from others in the group? How could they use their strengths to support each other more?
- As a group or family, choose a strength that you would like to cultivate. How will having that strength make a difference? What other strengths do you have collectively that could help you build this new strength? Who do you know that already has that strength? How could they help? How will you know when you have that strength? What will other people notice? The group may choose to focus on developing one new strength a week or a month.

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In supervision

When talking through challenging situations or issues, it can sometimes be helpful to step back and take a different approach. Noticing strengths, both the strengths of the practitioner or the strengths of other people involved in a situation, can be a great way to work through issues.

- Choose three cards that represent your strengths. How might these strengths help you in this situation?
- Choose three cards that represent strengths your colleagues or a client might say you have. How might these strengths be helping or hindering progress?
- Are there any strengths that you may be overusing?
- What other strengths could you draw on that could help?
- Which strength would you like to develop more?
- Which strengths do you think clients or colleagues would say you should focus on more?



About the authors

Andrew Shirres is a practice development coach and was the senior trainer at Innovative Resources for many years. He has a background in mental health services management and fine art.

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About the cards

Design by **Greengraphics** and **Sharon Dunn**.

About the Publisher

Innovative Resources is part of Anglicare Victoria, a community services organisation providing child, youth and family services. We publish card sets, stickers, digital and tactile materials to enrich conversations about feelings, strengths, relationships, values and goals. Our resources are for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, ability or age. They are used by counsellors, educators, social workers, mentors, managers and parents. We also offer 'strengths approach' training and 'tools' workshops, both online and in-person.

www.innovativeresources.org

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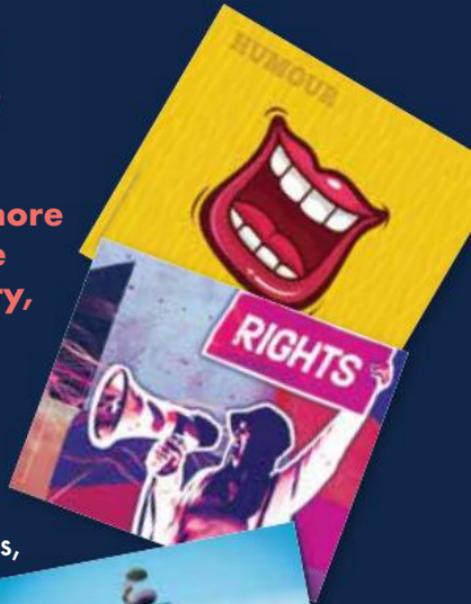
Everyone has strengths, and strengths are more than just personal qualities. They can include your relationships, culture, health, community, and the natural world.

Strength Cards® Unlimited expands the notion of what a strength is, enabling us to talk about strengths in different ways. These 40 visually-engaging cards are perfect for having conversations about the vast range of strengths people can draw on to overcome challenges, reconnect with others and create a more optimistic picture of the future.

Perfect for social workers, psychologists, teachers, counsellors and parents for use with adults and young people in one-on-one or group settings.



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