

**EPISODE 210**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:02.6] DH:** Welcome to episode 210 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. Whether you know it or not, you have a certain set of character strength that you're using every day. While character strengths have been written about academically, in many ways, it's a topic that has remained a bit of a mystery for the average person. With his new book, *The Power of Character Strengths: Appreciate and Ignite Your Positive Personality*, Ryan Niemiec and coauthor Robert McGrath have simplified character strengths and made them easy for us to tap into.

This week, Live Happy CEO Deborah Heisz sat down with Ryan to talk about his new book and what we can all learn from it.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:00:42.8] DH:** Ryan, welcome to the show.

**[0:00:45.0] RN:** Year, I'm very happy to be here Deb, thanks for having me.

**[0:00:48.4] DH:** You know, one of the things that we talk about a lot at Live Happy and that we've done a lot of content on and you know, that we're always excited to share and explore further because there's so much to talk about is character strengths. But for some people whose new to the podcast, this might be the first time they've heard of character strengths, maybe this is their first contact with Live Happy, maybe they have no idea what we're going to talk about today. Would you just give us just a brief overview of what we mean when we talk about character strengths?

**[0:01:15.8] RN:** Sure. You know, the way I like to think about it is to put the question back to the listener and to ask them, to think of a time when they were recently very happy. Or to think of a time when they were really engaged in the work that they were doing at their job. Or to think of a time when they were really connected with their child and their parenting or they were really feeling a sense of meaning in life. Any of these examples.

Then, to ask themselves what was really making up that experience, what were the ingredients that created that positive experience. The answer, although people might use different words, would always come back to character strength, that it's the character strengths, these universal qualities that are in all human beings that they're part of all of those positive experiences.

We know that character strengths can cause happiness and that all 24 of these character strengths can be part of our happiness. We know that they help us to parent better, to be healthier, to be more engaged in our work. It's those strengths that are the pathways to those good things. It's the strength of love and forgiveness that help us to become better friends and it's strength like curiosity and perseverance that help us to engage more in our work.

Strength like gratitude and hope, an appreciation of beauty that help us define more meaning in life. That's kind of one way to think about these character strengths.

**[0:02:43.4] DH:** I know we can talk about character strength for probably eight hours continuously and not scratch the surface. You're the education director for the VIA Institute on Character which develops – didn't develop but explores a lot of these character strengths and what they mean and how to put them into action and how to discover them and all of these fantastic information that the institute on character makes available to us quite for free by the way for those of you who want to check out, give me your web address real quick?

**[0:03:14.4] RN:** Yeah, it's [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org) and that's where people can go there and they can learn all they need to know about character strengths and as you said for free and watch videos, get activities and exercises but probably the biggest service that we offer to the world is that people can take the VIA survey for free and get their results and they'll get a list of their highest to lowest strength of character.

From one to 24. So they can see what strength they might want to better put into action in their life.

**[0:03:45.9] DH:** I love that tool, I love the exploration about yourself that comes from taking that survey and getting that answer back. In fact, I think everybody on the Live Happy team takes it within the first 30 days of working with us and it's always enlightening. You've taken the time to

– quite a bit of time to write a new book, *The Power of Character Strengths* with Dr. McGrath. How did the book come about?

**[0:04:14.8] RN:** You know, the book, this is the first trade book or kind of general public book on character strength that's been written and it's really, I would say, it was 15 year process perhaps, you know? Because when the original scholarly book came out in 2004 which is the classification of these character strengths that's out there for researchers and academics, I immediately was sort of devouring that and finding it to be so applicable and so useful for the people that I was coaching, the people I was doing therapy with people that I was helping and supporting, my family life and so on.

I wanted to make it immediately practical for people, for the world but the timing just wasn't right year after year, and we would talk about it on the team at the VIA Institute and with others. It wasn't until just a couple of years ago when we decided that we really need to bring this forth now, the timing seems to be right, people are ready for it, there's now been millions of people that have taken this VIA survey, people are hungry for more ways to apply this work.

Let's go ahead and do it and I was having that conversation with the VIA team and at the same time, Robert McGrath, my coauthor who is a VIA senior scientist but isn't actually on location here in Cincinnati, he was having the same conversation with someone else on the VIA team. It was kind of like these two conversations then were brought together and we decided hey, let's do this together and the collaboration unfolded and it's really a wonderful collaboration.

**[0:05:44.2] DH:** One of the things that you said a minute ago is that the first book that's really for the general public on character strengths. But it's not the kind of book that you're just going to sit down and read cover to cover. I mean, it's not a novel. Can you or even a history or you know, it is a different kind of book, can you explain to us how you see readers using this book?

**[0:06:05.5] RN:** Sure, yeah. The book is structured by having an introduction that it's very user friendly for people to relate to about these character strengths. Then it goes into the what, the why and the how of each of these 24 strengths. What is meant by creativity and curiosity hat's meant by fairness and love? Then it goes into the why.

What's the research behind gratitude or what's behind team work or leadership? Then the biggest section for each of the strengths that we spend time with is the how. What's the how of our critical thinking, what's the how of bravery. How do we really bring forth perseverance and zest and social intelligence? We kind of offer stories and we offer exploratory questions and several different activities for each of the strengths.

As well as overuse, under use of the strength. Then with the third section of the book, goes into sort of a four-step program that people can apply. Then to get to your questions, how do people use all of that from this book, this we generally recommend people to start with the introduction, we have a note to the reader that's kind of the two of us, the two authors, kind of engagement with the reader and you know, why this book is written and the introduction which goes a little bit into just how to make this work user friendly with exercise and strength spotting and things like that.

Then we would recommend, after people look at the introduction to maybe read two or three of the character strengths that intrigued them most. Maybe you're really interested in building up more bravery in your life. You would go to bravery. Somebody else might say hey, I've been hearing a lot about gratitude and hope these days.

I want to look to those, somebody else might say hey, my highest strength, my signature strength is love. I want to see what they have to say about the best practical ways to apply the strength more. Or, someone else might say hey, my lowest strength is self-regulation or prudence or humility.

Let me kind of read more on that so that I can kind of buildup that strength in my life. Yeah, you're right, people wouldn't initially read those cover to cover, they would just go through those strengths that intrigued them most and there's so much kind of points of action for people that after any sitting, if they were reading the book for one minute or if they're reading the book for say two hours, they could find something in there already to take action with.

We always try to come back to making it very practical for people.

**[0:08:28.8] DH:** What are you hoping people get out of this book? Really, I guess what I'm asking is what difference does it make for people when they begin to understand strengths. How

does that appear in their own lives once they begin to understand what character strengths are and what their best qualities are. How does that actually manifest itself?

**[0:08:51.0] RN:** Yeah, it's an important question and I can answer it from a couple of different angles. Maybe the first angle is to answer it from the research perspective which sends this field all comes from research. This work that I do and that you all do is kind of spurred by research. What the research says is that when we bring our character strengths in action, we have better relationships, that we ourselves feel happier, that we can be healthier in using our character strengths.

That we achieve more things in our life. In other words, any goal that a person could have in their life, say they want to connect more with a strange family member or they want to be more engaged in the work that they're doing every day or they want to do better in school. Any goal that a person could have.

These character strengths can be the pathways to reaching that goal. That's kind of a bit on kind of why this would matter and this book kind of offers the template for them how to do that, how to follow your character strengths and use your character strengths to do that.

That's kind of from the research perspective, the other way I would answer it is to say that the more that we can come to know ourselves, then the more authentic we are because we're being more true to ourselves. If we come to discover that we're really high in curiosity and we're really high in perseverance and we're really high in team work and fairness, then that's speaking to how unique we are.

And speaking to our own uniqueness so that we can then express those strengths more clearly and you know, just living a more kind of authentic, complete, life in that way. Kind of different ways we can think about that, good question.

**[0:10:29.7] DH:** You've mentioned before there are 24 character strengths and obviously, we don't have time to go through 24 character strengths on a 25-minute podcast or we could but it would be a very uninteresting list. We have these 24 character strengths, you have a lot of information available on this, there's tons and tons of research.

How did you whittle it down? How did you take all of that and make it into a concise applicable book? What approach did you take?

**[0:10:55.8] RN:** You know, since my job is to education director of VIA and since I've been at VIA since 2009. I've been doing work with character strengths before that but formerly at VIA since 2009. I've been gathering information, I've been gathering research, I've been gathering practices, I've been talking to people around the world and how they're applying it, researchers around the world.

That's kind of my job is to connect with all these people across spheres, so across the workplace, the education sphere, health, coaching, the general public and so on. I have – I couldn't even guess, hundreds of files from kind of articles to summaries, to handouts to all sorts of things, kind of more scientific, all the way down to very practical.

In putting together a book like this where you know, I feel kind of the pressure to be incredibly comprehensive but also I know it's for the general public, it can't just be a dictionary of stuff or an encyclopedia, it has to be very applicable and useful. I would go through all of the information on any given strength or a general strength topic and select where is the research strongest or where are the points of practice that are used most widely around the world that are most likely to be useful for the reader.

That's kind of how I make those selections. Rather than saying, I'm going to give an exhaustive list of every possible way you can use curiosity or level of learning or something. Yeah, that's what we try to do. To whittle it down into you know, several different practices for each strength in that tense.

I'll say that that last section, the third section of the book that's called strength builder which I mentioned is that four step program. For that, I try to bring forth four of the best activities that people respond best to, whether it's in workshops or whether it's from research studies or whether it's applying it in the work place for activities to really resonate with people and we'd begun testing that as a program itself and then also, each of those is very strong in their own way.

[0:12:56.1] DH: Let's talk about the strengths builder program because you know, that is, on an actuated human being, great, I read that what do I do? And I love the section of the book. So walk us through what the strengths builder program looks like?

[0:13:09.9] RN: Sure, so it is trying to help people to take the various points, the key ideas from the rest of the book into four steps. So to try to make it very real for people that want to just follow something that is structured and personal and so that is very doable for their own life. So the way the four steps work is step one is often that first step that we suggest to people when it comes to the strengths work, which is to begin to do strengths bonding.

So begin to build this language of character strengths, to understand this 24 words, these positive qualities that they just begin to percolate throughout our mind and our body. We begin to just remember them. So we can do that and we can build up that strength fluency in ourselves by spotting strengths in people. So we encourage people to spot strengths in people in their life. So what is a particular character strength that your father is using or that your brother is using or that your best friend is using.

So maybe you spot curiosity because they are asking a lot of questions or you spot that they are very grateful to so many good things that happened in their life and so we encouraged people to spot the strength and then to give an explanation for how they see that strength in the person. So that is the first step of the strengths builder is there is a different activities and tracking of yourself with spotting the strengths in people in your life.

And some of that might be outside of one's personal life and spotting strengths that are going on in social media or in your favorite movie character or your favorite TV series character or book character that you are reading, because we can spot these strengths in the actions of anybody. The second step is to for the individual to explore and to begin using their own highest strengths more frequently. So we call those signature strengths.

So just be very clear on what your highest five, six, seven strengths are to really have those memorized and then to begin to use those more in your life in some unique way. So really expanding the way that you use them rather than just using them the same old way but becoming more creative with them. The third step is to apply strengths to problems or to life challenges. So this is where each day people select small problems and challenges or little irks.

Little daily hassles and begin bringing character strengths there and the fourth step is to be even more concrete down the direction you want to go in your life. So it is around using character strengths in goal setting and when it comes to goal setting, one of the biggest pieces is to be able to overcome the obstacles to the goal because anybody can set a goal and say, I want to be able to do this or I want to do this. I want to graduate. I want to get this certification or I want to be able to be in a good relationship with somebody.

I want to have better health and lower my cholesterol, whatever it might be because anybody could set lots of goals, but there is always going to be so many obstacles that will get in the way to reaching this goals. So the challenge then is to help how you might use your character strengths to help you overcome those obstacles. Why not turn to your best sources of energy? Those best parts of you to help you to do that. So that is what step four is about. So that is the strength builder program in a nutshell.

**[0:16:18.1] DH:** I like it because it does give people actions they can take to improve their own wellbeing because at Live Happy, we are always about sharing the science behind what we call happier life if we are really talking about having better wellbeing in your life and so I like it because it gives somebody something to do as oppose to, "Yeah that is great information" the four steps. You know really when you break it down to something that people can take action or to not take action against, it really to me that is the most helpful piece of everything.

Because having – we all know that we can choose to be happier but the question is how and this is a big part of the answers to how. One of the questions I have is you know you wrote a book, you set a goal. You did it, so what did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about your own character strengths through this process?

**[0:17:10.3] RN:** Yeah, thanks for asking that. It is a question that I meandered with because I have written a number of books. It is my 9<sup>th</sup> book and I have others coming. So it is something I thought about often and I guess learned about myself through each book and each article or different things that I write. You know what I have learned and it has become more clear to me is the use of my highest strengths and the use of the lower strengths of mine.

So for one, one of my biggest drivers for me is this character strength of hope and I think anybody, whatever the person's highest like one or two or three strengths are. They're probably very unique drivers in that person's life that they maybe know drive the other strengths for that person. Probably almost anything in that person's life can come back to those strengths in one way shape or form. So for me, one of those big character strength drivers is hope.

So whenever I am writing or thinking about writing a book, hope is always there and because hope is about looking to the future and looking to possibilities and being able to see lots of possibilities and to be able to see lots of pathways to be able to get to those goals. To get to those possibilities and to be positive and optimistic that you can do it that you can get to that spot. So that is what essentially the whole character strength is all about and so that is what it's like for me with writing and thinking about writing is I am looking to that future with a particular vision in mind.

And that is always their percolating within me as I am typing away or jotting down notes or something like that. The other thing and a more practical way is, I always have to have a structure in my mind before I really can commit to a book. You know I might have lots of ideas for books I had. I like to read on this topic or that topic but for it to really materialize I really do need a very clear structure at least in my mind that is just not written down but I have it all like a template in my mind for how it will look.

What some of the main points are the sub points and is there enough there throughout all of it? And so that is the character strength of perspective of seeing that they can picture in that sense and links it with what is the main purpose am I going to try to help people with this book, what is the main sense. You know and then I would say that I tend to use some lower strengths like prudence is the lowest strength for me, which is about being very planful with things and perseverance is probably a middle strength for me.

Which is about overcoming any obstacle that gets in the way and in writing any book they'll be many, many obstacles that will try to get in the way and so I think my strengths of hope and strengths like creativity and other strengths just keep pushing me forward and they kind of help to lift off my lower strengths so they help me to be more perseverant and they help me to be more disciplined or self-regulated more planful with the writing schedule or making sure that I have enough time on a given week to write.

Because I'm not especially prudent, I don't sit there and like I always write in the six in the morning till 10 in the morning and every day and equals out to this many hundreds of hours, I'm not at all like that, but it's kind of more general like okay, these next couple of days will be basically writing days, yeah, I'll do some emails and do some of the things that will distract me but I'll still also write and I'll percolate while I do emails and then I'll write, then I'll percolate again and I'll write.

It's a combination of all 24 strengths if I really thought about it. Generally speaking, it's signature strengths but also lower strengths as well. I guess part of the joy of it, because I get to use many strengths, I'm not just being a little creative or not just being hopeful, I get to use all of these strengths and that's also great fun.

**[0:20:48.3] DH:** I love that answer because it's one of the things about character strengths that I think confuses a lot of people. You could use all 24 strengths, it's not like you just get three, it's not like you as a human being only have six or seven strengths, you have pieces of all of these.

**[0:21:03.1] RN:** Exactly, yeah. I think that's a huge point and some people can get too locked in on the signature strength piece and while that's really important and that's where the research is really strong in terms of the use of our signature strengths for greater happiness, less depression, greater flourishing and so on.

Your point is so important which is that all 24 matter. Whenever I'm coaching somebody or whenever I'm doing a workshop, I always encourage people to keep both of those principles simultaneously in mind. I would say that for all the readers and the listeners here which is the principle of all 24 of these strengths matter, they're all in you so that's kind of one principle that you can use any of them and build up any of them.

That's something new that we know from personality literature that we can actually build up any of them. Then the other piece to keep simultaneous to that is that probably your signature strengths matter the most because they're most authentic to who you are and will help you the most in the long run, because they're most you, the real you.

But you don't want to exclusively just look at yourself in a box like you only have these five strengths. If you keep both those principles I mind, I think it's really helpful for people.

**[0:22:08.2] DH:** Well Ryan, it's been a pleasure talking to you today, listeners, if you want to know more about character strengths, check out *The Power of Character Strengths*, it's a great book, put the action plan into your life to make a difference in your own life.

I mean, the strengths builder program is something you can do right now, check out the book, check out the strengths builder program. This is such a fundamental key, whether you understand it or not, you're using your strengths every day. It's a fundamental key I think to improving our own wellbeing and it's something we can actually take action toward as supposed to just feeling grateful, we can learn how to become more grateful or have to develop the strengths of gratitude is always a key thing in my life. Thank you Ryan for being on the show today, we appreciate it.

**[0:22:50.1] RN:** Thanks so much Deb, speaking of gratitude, I just want to say, I'm very grateful for you and Chris and Paul and everybody at Live Happy and all the incredible work that you all are doing to make the world not only a happier but a better place. Thanks for having me.

**[0:23:03.2] DH:** Well, our pleasure, it's a gift that we've been given. Thank you.

**[0:23:10.5] PF:** That was Live Happy CEO Deborah Heisz talking with Ryan Niemiec about his new book, *The Power of Character Strengths: Appreciate and Ignite Your Positive Personality*. If you like to learn more about that book, visit us at [livehappynow.com](http://livehappynow.com) where you can find a link to download a free chapter about *The Strength of Curiosity*.

We hope you're already a subscriber to Live Happy Now but if you're not, you can find us on the Pandora podcast network, Spotify, Sound Cloud, Stitcher, iTunes and Google Play. Just find us on your favorite platform and hit subscribe so you will never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week, we'll meet you back here again next week for an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felps, reminding you to make everything a happy one.

[END]