

# Strength

## CARDS<sup>®</sup>



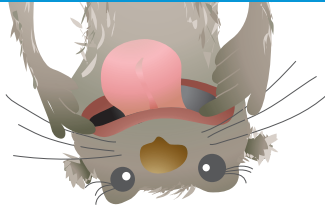
Author: **Russell Deal** Illustrator: **Katie Jardine**

**Innovative**  
Resources





# Strength CARDS®



Author: **Russell Deal**  
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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.



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## Foreword by Di O'Neil

As I travel across Australia delivering '*Strengths Approach*' training to a variety of human service providers, I am constantly amazed at the number of people who have seen and used *Strengths Cards*<sup>®</sup>. When I produce the cards in workshops it is not uncommon for many participants to identify themselves as '*Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> fans'. They immediately start telling others about how and when they use them, and recommending that others try them too!

*Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> are attractive, fun-loving tools that have the power to turn strengths into applicable capacities. We often find it hard to talk about our strengths. It can feel like bragging to say we are 'responsible', 'wise', 'skillful' or 'patient'. But when we think about how we can use these and other strengths to build our dreams and solutions, they become not just qualities to talk about but useful tools to apply in our everyday lives:

- How can I use 'patient' in this situation?
- What will it allow me to do?
- How will that help?



Our strengths have so much to teach us. While our existing strengths are great resources for us, sometimes our well-developed strengths may not be the most useful ones to apply in a particular situation. For example, I might value being patient and want to keep it in my repertoire of strengths, but in some circumstances it might be holding me back or delaying action. In this way, our strengths are always teaching us more about strengths.

The real value in the cards comes from their capacity to promote conversation in a fun, but serious, client-owned partnership. Unlike many therapeutic tools, the cards can be spread out on the floor or table, moved around, chosen or discarded, cried over, laughed about and grouped to enhance the uniqueness and skill of each individual using them. This therapeutic process is a great equaliser; a participant and facilitator work alongside each other.

This new edition of *Strength Cards*® will stimulate many memorable conversations. The lightness of the graphics makes the cards unobtrusive while still carrying the power of previous editions. Enjoy them and remember that their use will only be limited by your imagination.

Di O'Neil,  
Former Executive Director,  
St Luke's Anglicare (now part of Anglicare  
Victoria)



## *The journey of Strength Cards®*

The idea behind *Strength Cards®* was a remarkably simple one—to produce a set of cards with lighthearted illustrations that can help individuals and families identify and use their strengths.

The origins of this hands-on, conversation-building tool were also entirely pragmatic. In 1990 a wide range of child and family service workers were introduced to a radically new way of working with families who were struggling with issues of child abuse and neglect. What was known generically as ‘intensive family services’ aimed to strengthen distressed families and avoid the unnecessary removal of children and their placement in foster care or residential care.

Family workers at St Luke’s Anglicare in Bendigo (now part of Anglicare Victoria) enthusiastically added their voice to other agencies keen to explore the effectiveness of working with each family for up to 20 hours per week, over seven days per week if necessary, for no more than six weeks. The idea was that this relatively short and intensive service may help to create significant change and remove the imminent threat of having children removed.

It was an exciting time because it generated considerable debate in child protection and support services about the nature of ‘good practice’.

As family workers embraced this new way of engaging with families they asked about possible tools they could use to generate and monitor change in these struggling families.

The search for existing conversation-building tools that were therapeutic, respectful and culturally-relevant to Australian families produced such fruitless results that it was nicknamed ‘The Search for the Yeti’.



It was then that a number of St Luke's staff sat down with a dictionary and generated a list of 48 words that could be used to describe the strengths that people use every day to work on issues. These were then coupled with some simple illustrations to create the prototype cards.

It was only when other human service workers discovered the cards and wanted to purchase them that we recognised we had stumbled onto something unique and valuable—the power of an artifact to build life-changing conversations.

Throughout their journey of over twenty years *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> have touched the lives of countless workers and clients, teachers and students, counsellors and managers. *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> have also become the icon for the human services social movement known as 'strengths-based practice' or simply 'the strengths approach'.

For many people who have received training in the strengths approach through Innovative Resources, *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> provide the symbol for, and tangible reminder of, what constitutes good practice.



***Many people over the years have contributed to the success of Strength Cards®:***

John Veeken for his illustrations and design of the first edition; Katie Jardine for the design and illustrations of the second edition; Jeanie Brooks whose research into useful tools created the awareness of the vacuum that existed; Jo Goldsworthy from the Australian Council for Educational Research who became the first retailer of *Strength Cards*®; the administrators of the Anita Morowitz Scholarship who funded research into applications of the *Strength Cards*® and investigation of other possible tools; our customers (many of whose stories about using the cards feature in this booklet); the editorial team at Innovative Resources who steered the cards through design changes and numerous reprints; and finally all those who have bumped into *Strength Cards*® and discovered something new in themselves and in others.

A final thank you to everyone who has journeyed with *Strength Cards*® so far. We hope that this edition (launched in 2008) will ensure that many more people will be touched by the life-changing potential of this humble and 'seriously optimistic' set of cards.



## The strengths of *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup>

*Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> has become an invaluable component in the 'tool kits' of many human service workers—counsellors, social workers, psychologists, family therapists, occupational therapists, teachers, pastoral care workers, child care workers and more.

**Professionals, volunteers, students and clients alike are drawn to *Strength Cards* for different reasons. People value the cards for their:**

- simplicity
- gentle humour
- colour
- originality
- versatility
- plain language
- quality and durability
- balance of playfulness and soulfulness
- seriously optimistic message
- conversation-building capacity.



For many people it is a combination of these factors that has endowed *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> with a potential for inviting conversations that, at times, seems quite magical. If, however, the cards are experienced as magical, it is not through any sleight of hand but rather, it is the simple power of combining carefully chosen visual metaphors with carefully chosen words.

Any magic is in the chemical reaction of this mix. Stephen Page, the director of Australia's Bangarra Dance Theatre once said, 'Art is the medicine for humanity.' The art in *Strengths Cards*<sup>®</sup> magnifies the power of the words, and the result is medicine that can offer healing and growth across many domains and in countless applications.

***Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can be used for:**

- ① problem solving
- ① solution finding
- ① goal setting
- ① self-esteem building
- ① risk taking
- ① undoing stuckness
- ① creative writing
- ① critical reflection
- ① values exploration
- ① gifting with affirmations
- ① reframing
- ① evaluation and ...

***Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can also be used for:**

- ① personal reflection and inspiration
- ① one-on-one counselling
- ① group work
- ① staff meetings
- ① team building
- ① supervision
- ① job interviews.



- ① education and training
- ① coaching
- ① mentoring and ...

***Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> have been used in settings and domains as different as:**

- ① prisons
- ① primary and secondary schools
- ① sexual assault prevention and treatment
- ① child protection, chaplaincy
- ① palliative care
- ① tutoring
- ① disability services
- ① financial counselling
- ① hospitality training
- ① family therapy
- ① employment services
- ① sermons, funerals and ...



*Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> is primarily a conversation-building tool that inspires and invites curiosity. The cards can provide tantalising prompts to pursue curiosity along some very different pathways. For many people, the cards ignite questions that beg to be explored.

The questions that will interest you, the reader, will be determined by your purpose, passion, creativity, imagination and respect. We cannot predict which questions you will engage with as you use the cards, and we certainly do not wish to prescribe questions to anyone.

The array of possible questions is vast (and is certainly more than 101!) We like to fill our booklets with loads of suggested questions, not to confuse or overwhelm, but to reflect the endless array of possibilities for intriguing, and perhaps even life-changing, conversations.

One of the key strengths of *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> is that there are no instructions attached. We hope anyone can pick up these cards (and any of the other seriously optimistic resources in our range) and find them useful and enjoyable without needing a script or a preliminary training course.

While our resources do not come with an instruction manual, we do like to include questions for building conversations and suggestions for activities in the booklets that accompany each product. Of course, the user's own creativity, purpose, passion, discernment, respect and sense of timing will determine how and when *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> might best be introduced into a conversation.

**However, there are several cautions that should always be remembered:**

- ❶ No tool is guaranteed to work at all times, in all situations.
- ❷ All tools need to be assessed for their cultural appropriateness.
- ❸ The person introducing the tool should be familiar and comfortable with the tool.
- ❹ Discernment about timing and confidentiality is always required.
- ❺ Do not underestimate the ability of a seemingly simple card set to evoke powerful memories and feelings. Be prepared for unexpected emotions to arise.
- ❻ A degree of risk is always present in introducing a tool. Always have a plan B for when the tool may not be working.
- ❼ Continue to ask, 'Am I being respectful?'

The final strength of *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> lies in the simplicity of the medium itself. *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup>, like all Innovative Resources' card sets (and unlike most books) does not have to be 'read' from front to back; there is no prescribed sequence or hierarchy. Equally, there is no need to use the entire card set—a powerfully therapeutic conversation can be built around a selection of cards, or even just a single card.

**In general, there are three ways to introduce *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> into a conversation:**

### **1. The Three Ss: Spread, Scan and Select**

*Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> have been designed so that they can be spread on a table or on the floor, and visually scanned (and comprehended) by an individual or a small group. Selection and sorting can then take place according to the questions that are considered most relevant and useful. (Many such questions are listed in the following section.) Remember, you may not need to use the entire pack of cards in your spread, scan and select activity.

### **2. The Forth S: Serendipity**

At times, introducing an activity based on random choice can add a layer of serendipity, surprise and fun—and can open up meaningful insight. Choosing one or more *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> from the pack at random and building the conversation around what relevance this serendipitous choice has for the person or people concerned, emphasises the active meaning-making role we all adopt in interpreting the cards. It can be refreshing to hear the stories that emerge from 'the cards that life deals us' and the sense we make out of this example of a chance event.

If one card is chosen in this way you can ask:

- ① Of all the cards you could have turned over, do you wonder why you chose this particular card?
- ① Are you surprised by your reaction to this card?
- ① Do you think this card might have an important message for you?

If you turn over a small number of cards you can ask:

- ① How do these cards relate to your life at present?
- ① How do you think the cards relate to each other?
- ① Do they sit together in harmony and complement each other?
- ① Or are they discordant and generators of uncertainty, tension or stress in your life?
- ① Do all the cards you selected fit into your repertoire of strengths?

### **3. Bump-into Therapy**

An alternative to the controlled manner of introduction suggested by the 'S' methods is the 'bump-into' method. This is simply having the cards present when a conversation is taking place. They can be placed on a desk, on a coffee table, on a shelf. They might take up residence in an office, in a classroom, in a kitchen or common room. They might be kept in a box or in a bag of 'tools'. This placement of the cards allows the client or student to discover the cards for themselves.

When curiosity or inquisitiveness leads someone to make their own discovery of a resource, the learning opportunity can have enhanced resonance. Many workers construct their own boxes containing a range of visual and tactile materials that can all work as conversation-building metaphors.



When these are 'bumped into', the experience of active discovery can reinforce solution-finding skills and learning that are easily overlooked in prescribed activities.

These three general ways of introducing *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> into a conversation have an infinite array of variations and applications. This versatility is demonstrated in the range of suggested uses in the next section of this booklet.





adventurous



assertive



attentive



brave



capable



careful



caring



co-operative



committed



confident



contented



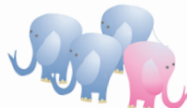
creative



curious



determined



different



encouraging



enthusiastic



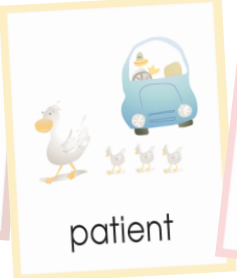
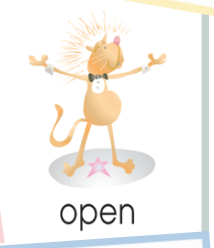
energetic



fair



flexible





practical



protective



purposeful



relaxed



resourceful



reliable



resilient



respectful



responsible



skillful



strong



thoughtful



understanding



wise



## Questions for parents and families

*Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> began their life in the hope that they would be a useful resource for families struggling with difficult issues. Sometimes, families can be so overwhelmed by issues they can forget to notice their strengths—and forget that it is strengths that provide possible solutions to problems.

***Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can offer three things to families facing difficulties:**

- Reminders that we all have strengths and that it helps if we can identify and name our strengths
- Reminders of how we might mobilise and use our strengths to address particular problems
- Reminders of the importance of sharing and celebrating our strengths.

**When times are tough, identifying and naming strengths can help keep the problem in perspective:**

- What strengths do you have as a family?
- What different strengths do individuals members bring to the family?
- What strengths have you used in the past to get through difficult times?
- Have you told each other lately what strengths you see in each other?

This last question can be powerful for families who have forgotten the importance of sharing messages of strengths or who have lost sight of how to do this.

**Mobilising strengths can be encouraged through such questions as:**

- ① What strengths do you have now (or have had in the past) that might be useful right now?
- ① If you were to put these strengths into action, what would you be doing differently?
- ① What's stopping you?
- ① What other strengths could your family use at present?
- ① How might you go about searching for these strengths?

**Strengths are meant to be shared and celebrated. It might be as simple as remembering to talk about strengths at meal times or developing little rituals such as:**

- ① building conversations around *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> at birthday parties or other celebrations
- ① choosing a card to talk about as part of book reading/storytelling rituals at bedtimes (If you put a *Strength Card*<sup>®</sup> under your pillow it seeps through while you sleep—strengths-building by osmosis)
- ① reminding a child of their strengths by putting a *Strength Card*<sup>®</sup> sticker in with their lunch—lunch box therapy
- ① putting a card on the fridge door to remind the family of a strength.





## The iceberg

Over many years of working from a strengths perspective, many seriously optimistic discoveries have emerged. One of these is: strengths rarely exist in isolation. This can be a vitally important—and even transformational—reminder for those of us who may find it difficult to identify many, or even any, strengths.

Sometimes a person's self-esteem may have taken such a battering that they can't articulate the possession of any strengths at all. At these times an audience question (see 'Audience question' section later in this booklet) may be useful or the interviewer can share their perception of the strengths that may be lying just below the surface.

This idea that everyone has strengths, even if they are not clearly visible, is invaluable and can be enriched by building the iceberg metaphor. That is, we all have hidden strengths, and even if we can only identify one or two it can be useful to explore the claim that each 'visible' strength is supported by other strengths beneath the surface, if only we look and listen closely enough.

In such a situation you might try questions such as:

- Strengths are like icebergs; we all have strengths below the surface that we may not be fully aware of. Would you like to explore what these hidden strengths might be for you?
- You said that your only strength is ... But as you talk about your situation, I also see other strengths such as ... Can you see how these other strengths enable you to enact the strength you named?

An activity that can reinforce this metaphor in a small group situation is to have each group member talk about their situation and their key strengths while the other members listen intently attempting to identify any submerged strengths they notice in the conversation.

## Importing strengths

We all use strengths continually to overcome the myriad of issues that daily life generates for us. Everyone has a repertoire of strengths sufficient to get them through most of life's challenges.

However, it is clearly unrealistic to expect to be totally self-sufficient in strengths all the time. We all have times when we need to draw on the strengths of others—our partners, families, friends, neighbours, colleagues and specialist professionals—to complement our own array of strengths.

Perhaps it is the size or unexpectedness of the problem that is overwhelming, or perhaps our own strengths are depleted or we have lost confidence in their effectiveness. But sometimes, in the face of these bigger problems, we find it hard to ask for help. We may not know who to ask or how to go about it. We might feel inadequate, self-conscious or guilty. We might remember previous times when our requests for help went unheard.

Whatever the reason, we can become stuck in a problem and unable to seek additional strengths to add to our own.

**Questions about importing strengths are designed to address this 'stuckness'.**

- What particular strengths, skills and resources would be most helpful?
- Can you think of a person who might have some of these strengths, skills and resources?
- How might you go about seeking their help?
- Do you think you can 'borrow' someone else's strengths and make them your own?
- What strategies have you used successfully in the past? How could you 'reignite' these strengths and use them in the present?



## Gifting with strengths

Not only can we borrow strengths from others, we can also share our strengths. It has been said on numerous occasions that strengths grow when they are shared. The idea of 'gifting' is appropriate in thinking about how we share our strengths. We can gift with tangible objects but we can also gift with our time, our interest, our skills, our knowledge and our values.

We can give a surprise gift, without any expectations of reciprocity. We can gift anonymously. We can gift co-operatively and in a way that avoids dependency and enhances the strengths and self-esteem of the receiver.

### Some ways of thinking about gifting with strengths are:

- What strengths do I have that could assist this other person in their struggles?
- How can I share my strengths in a way that enhances their strengths?
- How can I ensure I am being respectful? Is the timing right?
- What might the consequences be, for each of us, if I don't share my strengths?

One of the reasons that Innovative Resources publishes many of its card sets in sticker form is to encourage gifting. To gift someone with a sticker that names a strength you see in them, or describes something that you value in your relationship, can convey a message that far outweighs the nature or cost of the gift. Cards and stickers alike provide simple but powerful ways of gifting, with tangible reminders of a person's strengths.



## When unwanted visitors call

Problems, issues, struggles and challenges can all be likened to 'uninvited and unwanted visitors'. Proponents of narrative approaches talk about the value of objectifying and naming these unwanted visitors—they call this 'externalising'. In doing this, the problem is seen as external to who we are; as something that impacts our lives or infiltrates our situation.

Creating this picture of problems as unwanted visitors or external invaders reinforces the understanding that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem. It also builds awareness of the effects the unwelcome visitor has and enables discussion about strategies for dealing with the unwelcome visitor.

When faced with the presence of an unwanted visitor it is our strengths that provide both a security system for keeping the visitor out and the resources to minimise the negative impact on our lives.

### **Questions for integrating *Strength Cards*® into processes of externalisation might include:**

- At other times when anxiety has come knocking on your door, what strengths did you use to keep it out?
- You have told me that misery has snuck into your life. Can you list the strengths that you might use to keep misery as a mild irritation and prevent it turning into something worse, like depression?
- How have you stopped 'Mr Busy' from pushing you around in the past? Do you think the strengths you used previously have retained their potency or do you think you need to develop new strengths?

## Exceptions, practice and pretending



When things are tough and our confidence and resilience are low it can be hard to think of ourselves as having any strengths.

Sometimes it is important to be persistent with a search for strengths with someone who can't readily identify any strengths of their own. Exceptions to the problem refer to those times when the grip that a problem has on us is lessened, even slightly.

The understanding behind exceptions is that our relationship with a problem never stays the same all the time. At times the problem may dominate our thinking and feelings, but at other times we may feel more in control and less 'pushed around' by it.

**If someone struggles to identify any strengths it could be a sign that the problem is in ascendancy. Perhaps you could ask:**

- It may be hard to think of any strengths right now, but has there been a time in your life when you were aware of having strengths?
- Can you think of a time when you came close to having a strength?
- The problem seems to have pushed you around for a long time—but you are still here! It hasn't completely gotten the better of you. I wonder which of your strengths have gotten you through so far?

Exceptions suggest indicators of how we might assert control over the problem. There is much to be learned from uncovering hidden strengths and pondering the times when our strengths have kept the problem subdued.

**Sometimes, it can be useful to suggest that exceptions can even be practised to see how effective they might be:**

- ① You said you've noticed how sometimes your strengths have helped keep the problem under control. How would it be if we thought about ways you could practise those strengths so you could call on them more often when you need them?

**Further still there is the intriguing possibility of what might happen if we could pretend we had those strengths:**

- ① You may not feel like you have these strengths right now but what if you pretended you had them?
- ① Do you think others might notice a difference?
- ① Do you think you would feel different?
- ① If you imagined having a useful strength, which one would you choose?
- ① What if you pretended to have a hidden strength lurking inside you, and then you pretended to let it out when you wanted? What would change?



## Shadow questions

At times, there is a fine line between what we identify as strengths and what we perceive as deficits. What may be a strength in one situation, may be a deficit in another. What we may think of as an important strength for us, may be experienced differently by others. And sometimes we can all overuse—or inappropriately use—certain strengths.

**‘Shadow questions’ provide a way to explore the tipping points that can turn strengths into deficits and in so doing help ensure that we do not look at strengths through rose-coloured glasses. Some powerful shadow questions include:**

- What strengths might you have that could get in the way of other people developing their own strengths?
- What strengths might you have that can get in the way of you developing other strengths?
- Do you overly rely on a few strengths?
- Do you have strengths that sometimes do battle with each other? Which strengths tend to ‘win’?
- Which of the strengths named on *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> are challenging, confronting or the hardest to enact in your life? Are there any that you avoid using?
- Are there strengths that you once used but no longer do so? How might you reclaim these into your repertoire?

## Audience questions

Sometimes using a real life audience to provide feedback can have immense power. To hear first-hand from significant people in our lives their perceptions of our strengths can be particularly moving and transformative for everyone involved. While occasionally it may be possible to consider creating such an event, most often this is not easily achieved.

However, in most situations it is easy to create an imaginary audience by using an 'audience question' such as:

- What would those people who know you well say were your greatest strengths?

An audience question such as this has an element of novelty that can open up fresh insights. Immediately, a third person is brought into the conversation. Talking about someone else's perceptions may help a person who is self-conscious about claiming strengths for themselves. Even more than this, such a question can evoke memories of positive relationships and people who are or have been significant in our lives. This can add layers of meaning to any conversation about strengths.

You can be as specific as you want by naming who the imaginary person might be—your loved ones, your partner, your children, your parents, a special person, your favourite teacher or your work colleagues. For children and adolescents who are in conflict with their parents, it might be what their grandparents or friends would say were their strengths.

Audience questions then lead to explorations of the strengths chosen, the significance of particular relationships, memories of positive times and the fact that different people see us in different ways.

If you are looking for a really light-hearted approach try:

- What would your dog/cat/goldfish or pot plant say were your greatest strengths?

## Reframing questions

We are all makers of meaning. We use our perceptual skills to make sense of the world around us. Perception involves filtering the data received through our senses. Perhaps the most important filter of all is that of language. How we 'language' the world is how we experience it.

Reframing is the name for the conscious cognitive process of testing the meanings we make by changing our language. It is a technique that grew out of narrative approaches that question our interpretation of reality by suggesting linguistic alternatives.

One well-known example is the work of Finnish psychiatrist, Ben Furman. In his book *Kids' Skills* (published by Innovative Resources) Furman challenges the widespread use of the term 'behavioural problem' to describe particular undesired behaviours of children. He suggests that such behaviour can readily be renamed as a skill yet to be learned. This is more than an example of mere semantics because the renaming immediately normalises the behaviours (we all have skills yet to be learned), removes guilt and stigma, and invites the child and parents to be a part of the search for ways to learn the skill. In so doing, this reframing is more useful and effective than 'pathologising' the situation.

**When problem-saturated language is so prevalent, exploring alternative words is vital to ensure we are not seduced into only seeing the deficits. So building on Ben Furman's Kids Skills model, a teacher, childcare worker or parent might be asked:**

- Using the *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup>, can you describe the child?

- By focussing on the problem/deficit are we blind to the child's strengths, strengths that could be used to develop new skills?
- Could it be that the problem is due to the inappropriate or over-use of certain strengths?
- By looking at the 'exceptions' to the problem (when the problem is either not there at all or at least not as dominant) can you see strengths in the child that may be waiting to unfold?

Reframing also places the focus on what the person is valuing. For example, if someone is seeking help with their angry feelings towards others, then what they may be valuing is harmony in their relationships. Focussing on what people value, rather than the presenting issue, opens up more hopeful conversations about strengths and solutions. This reframe can be a powerfully transformative way of loosening the focus on 'the problem'.

A simple and useful reframing question might be:

- What am I/the child/the client valuing?





## In the classroom

***Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> have been used across all levels of education for a variety of purposes:**

- Storytelling
- Creative writing
- Team building
- Self-esteem building
- Problem solving
- Literacy education.

**In ‘Strength of the day’ or ‘Strength of the week’ activities the cards can be used to:**

- identify a strength to be noticed that day or over a week
- discuss the meaning of the word and other related words
- practise spelling the word and using it in sentences
- tell stories around the theme of the word
- discuss behaviours that correspond with the strength
- identify examples of the strength being used in history, in contemporary events or in the school itself.

**Another example of the creative use of *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> in primary schools is ‘Star of the week’. Over the school year each student in a class is nominated to be the star for a whole week. Depending on the age of the child, the star can receive such special privileges as:**

- having a special seat
- being trusted with symbols of stardom (such as a crown, or a wand or a special figure or puppet)
- creating their own storybook with photos, stories and affirmations from their teacher and classmates

- having each of their friends choose a card or sticker from *Strength Cards*® that identifies a strength of the star. These stickers or copies of the cards can be added to the book with stories about why they were chosen.

At the end of the week each star receives a bound book that is full of affirmations and positive feedback—a wonderful self-esteem building tool that can be taken home to show their parents and incorporated into a class set of readers.

## Relationship building

*Strength Cards*® have found a place in the toolkits of many relationship educators and counsellors. The gentle humour and positive nature of the cards allow them to be easily integrated into most relationship-building conversations and activities. Often, the cards play a part in facilitating new insights for both people.

When both people in a relationship are asked the same question, their answers can highlight differing perceptions and assumptions, sometimes shedding light on sources of tension and misunderstanding. In this way, *Strength Cards*® can uncover hidden viewpoints and promote greater mutual understanding. Here are some questions that might be useful:

- Which strengths do you most admire and appreciate in your partner?
- Which strengths did each of you inherit from your families of origin?
- How similar and how different are these strengths? Have the differences ever been a source of conflict?

- ❶ Which strengths would you like to 'do more of' within your partnership? Why?
- ❷ Which strengths do each of you use to resolve issues when they arise?
- ❸ Which strengths did you notice in your partner when you first met them?
- ❹ Have your partner's strengths changed over time?

*Strength Cards*® can be prompts for delightfully affirming and even humorous storytelling between partners. However, they can also be invaluable in situations of stress and challenge when couples face difficult decisions.

At times of great stress we can all forget the strengths we, and our partners, have—just when we need to remember them the most. Gentle reminders of these in the form of *Strength Cards*® can be the tiny points of hope that get us through.



## Team building

Initially *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> was conceived as a tool for individuals and couples to talk about their strengths. However, the relevance of the cards to families was almost immediately obvious, and from there, a range of applications for groups, organisations and teams of any sort quickly emerged.

***Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> has been successfully used with teams in a variety of ways. Firstly, they can be used to talk about the strengths we each contribute to our team:**

- What strengths do you as an individual bring to your team?
- Everyone in this team has strengths, how do we maximise everyone's contribution?

**Then the cards can be used to talk about the collective strengths the team possesses:**

- What strengths are the hallmarks of our organisation?
- What would observers or other teams say were our strengths?
- What are the strengths we do well or easily?
- What are the strengths we need to work on?
- What strengths should we be aiming to celebrate in 12 months time?

**Finally *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can open up conversations about the way leadership is enacted by the team:**

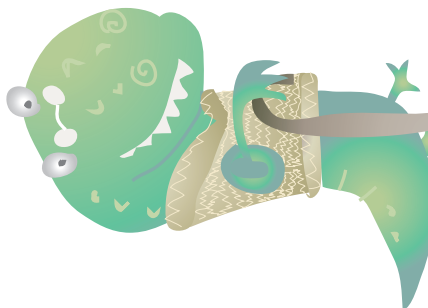
- Who would you say are the leaders in this team and what are their strengths?
- What are your qualities as a leader?
- In times of change or crisis what leadership strengths come to the fore?

## Journalling and creative writing

Creative writing is appearing more and more in human service work. While some forms of writing, such as journalling and diary-writing, have long been used as therapeutic tools, there is an increasing awareness of the life changing potential of creative activities. More recently other forms of creative writing are also being embraced as tools for reflection, growth and change—not to mention the sheer pleasure and deeply healing experience that accessing one's own creativity can bestow.

*Strength Cards*® can act as a source of inspiration and reflection for creative writing in a wide range of forms including:

- ① poetry
- ① collage
- ① letters
- ① postcards
- ① short stories
- ① micro-stories
- ① journalling
- ① memoirs.



**Hands-on tools like *Strength Cards*® can play a number of useful roles but are particularly adept at challenging 'stuckness'. New and surprising insights can arise from questions such as:**

- ① Which cards remind you of something or someone you would like to write about?

- ① Do any of the cards remind you of stories from either your present or past?
- ① Do any of the cards remind you of a hero or mentor?
- ① If you are finding it hard to get started, could you simply choose a card and start writing down all the words that come to mind?
- ① Can you start with one of the cards and build a poem around it?
- ① Which card do you find most challenging?  
Can you write a story about why this might be?
- ① Can you write an autobiographical story where one of the words from the cards appears in the title?



## Storytelling and public speaking

Hands-on tools or artifacts such as *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can provide useful prompts for a wide range of public speaking or storytelling activities. Many of us find public speaking an anxiety-producing ordeal. However, *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can help ease the stresses by providing a structure around which to build the presentation. For example, if the speech is about another person (in settings such as birthday parties, weddings, farewells or even funerals) a selection of *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can be used to create a simple and uplifting way of acknowledging the qualities of the person being honoured.

We know that *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> has been used respectfully and successfully at many such events. They provide a structure around which to build anecdotes; and if the audience is not too large, holding up the cards themselves can create great visual reinforcement for what is said.

***Strength Cards* can also play a role in encouraging others in storytelling and public speaking through such questions as:**

- Can you select a card and tell us about a time when you used this strength?
- Can you tell us a story about a time you saw someone else use this strength?
- Does a significant person in your life come to mind when you think of this strength?

At events such as birthday parties, anniversaries or farewells guests can be invited to choose a card and use it to tell a story about the honoured guest.

Beyond that *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can add layers of meaning and light to many presentations, workshops and even sermons!

## Invitations to engagement

Invitations to engagement are often called ‘ice breakers’—a misleading term in some ways because of the implication that these activities are mere warm-ups for the real work to be done later—entrees before the main course.

However, how we invite others to engage with us in either individual counselling or group work plays a vital role in setting up the tone and style of the whole conversation. For example, invitations to engagement often include activities and discussions that set expectations, establish ground rules for etiquette, set a tone of honesty and trust, and encourage participants to reveal something of themselves. In this way, invitations to engagement can greatly influence the outcome of the whole encounter. Far from being idle small talk, invitations to engagement should be purposeful, respectful and carefully considered.

***Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> can set a respectful, light-hearted yet meaningful tone to these invitations through simple questions such as:**

- ① What are your key strengths?
- ① What are the strengths that others most often notice?
- ① What would those people who know you well say were your greatest strengths? (see audience questions)
- ① What strengths did you use to decide to come to this interview or group?
- ① What strengths would you most like to practise in this group?
- ① What strengths have you had to work hardest to achieve?

*Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> also allow for simple rituals of introduction. Many people like to have the stickers available as participants in a workshop, training or group enter the room. Each person can select a sticker for themselves and place it on or near their name tag. Also, throughout the session participants can be given



stickers that match the cards they choose. In this way, the stickers act as 'take-home' reminders for participants of their strengths and goals.



## Job interviews

Soon after *Strength Cards*<sup>®</sup> were first published someone had the idea of using them in a job interview. Being interviewed as an applicant for an employment position is often stressful. Introducing the cards to an applicant during an interview often reduces stress by providing a novel way to talk about one's strengths, skills and goals.

**Generally, about half the card set would be selected and offered to the applicant with questions such as:**

- We assume that you have all these strengths but could you choose five of the key strengths that you would bring to this position if you were successful?
- What are the key strengths we are likely to notice in you if you were in this position?

**For a more senior position you might ask:**

- If you were successful in obtaining this position what strengths would we see in you as a leader after your first six months on the job?
- What do you imagine your referees will say are your key strengths?

## About Innovative Resources

Innovative Resources is part of Anglicare Victoria, a community services organisation providing child, youth and family services in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia. We publish card sets, stickers, books, and 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](http://www.innovativeresources.org)







# Strength CARDS®



## EVERYONE HAS STRENGTHS!

Wherever we go, whatever we do,  
in times of struggle and in times of ease  
**OUR STRENGTHS CAN LEAD THE WAY!**

These 54 iconic *Strength Cards*® are for anyone who wants to create positive outcomes by focussing on strengths and capacities rather than problems and deficits. Strengths can be noticed, appreciated, shared and borrowed. That's how you create cultures of strengths in families, teams, communities, schools and organisations!

### Use the cards to:

- identify and build your own strengths.
- notice and learn from the strengths of others.
- build healthy relationships wherever people live, learn or work.
- focus on strengths in counselling, social work, training, supervision and even job interviews.

**Innovative  
Resources**

[innovativeresources.org](http://innovativeresources.org)