

Strength-based Youth Rehabilitation: What Works in the “MindSport” Programme?



Dr Yvonne K.S. LEE¹, Ms. Celia W.S. HO²

¹ Senior Clinical Psychologist, CSD

² Clinical Psychologist, CSD

Why a Strength-based Approach is important for youth rehabilitation?

Contemporary correctional rehabilitation integrates the desistance framework into the traditional Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model to achieve two key goals: **reducing re-offending and cultivating a positive self-identity**. Pioneering desistance research in Hong Kong has found that incarceration can serve as a turning point in life for persons in custody (PICs) when strength-based rehabilitation programmes are provided, opening up new learning opportunities (HKCSD, 2025). Supplementing the RNR model’s focus on risks and needs, a strength-based approach serves as a valuable add-on by empowering individuals to see themselves not merely as problems to be solved, but as individuals with possibilities to grow.



Psychologically, this is a prime moment to introduce strength-based interventions for youth. Developmental psychology highlights that one of the central tasks of adolescence is the exploration, understanding and commitment to personal identity (Erikson, 1968). In answering the question “Who am I?”, identifying and building personal

strengths help adolescents form healthy self-identities such as “I’m a sporty teen”, “I’m outgoing and sociable”, etc. For young PICs, constructing a new pro-social identity is particularly salient during the identity desistance stage, laying the foundation for long-term desistance from crime and fostering positive personal growth (Maruna, 2001).

What is the “MindSport” Programme?

“MindSport,” an innovative programme specially designed for young male PICs in Hong Kong, integrates Character Strength Intervention (CSI) into sports activities to empower youth to lead thriving, resilient and prosocial lives by leveraging their inherent character strengths (Ho, Kam & Tam, 2025). **Focusing on “what’s strong” rather than “what’s wrong”**, the programme run by clinical psychologists in partnership with sports coaches from a voluntary community agency, supports the development of a healthier self-concept during the transition to adulthood. In fact, the “MindSport” initiative is firmly grounded in the responsivity principle of RNR model. It harnesses identity-building, activity-oriented and competitive elements that align with the learning styles of young males, thereby enhancing their treatment motivation and improving outcomes.

What is the Essence of Character Strength Intervention (CSI)?

Character Strength Intervention (CSI), an evidence and strength-based positive psychology approach, focuses on identifying, cultivating and applying individuals’ inherent positive traits to enhance well-being, resilience, identity formation and prosocial behaviour (Niemiec, 2018). In their landmark study, Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified **24 character strengths**



— such as teamwork, perseverance, creativity, love of learning and hope — which are **considered universal, morally valued and measurable traits that contribute to human flourishing**. Under the “MindSport” Programme, clinical psychologists guide young PICs, working in groups of 6, to identify their unique character strengths through the VIA Character Strength Survey and Top 5 Report, experiential exercises, and feedback from their parents, sport coaches and psychological staff. Young PICs are encouraged to continuously apply their character strengths in daily life and set actionable goals aligned with their emerging prosocial identities as part of their desistance journey. For example, one PIC expressed gratitude to a dedicated sports coach who provided regular training as a volunteer, which reminded him to appreciate his mother’s consistent prison visits despite long travel times. During personal reflection, another PIC shared “Change isn’t easy, but I value the chance to improve — it’s what makes my life meaningful”.

How can Therapeutic Sports Activities be implemented?



Under the “MindSport” Programme, four bodyweight training sessions — run by a sport coach from a voluntary community agency — form the active core of the intervention, providing an **experiential and engaging platform for putting character strengths into practice**. Alongside learning and performing essential bodyweight exercises, participants

engage in collaborative pair activities, monitoring each other’s posture and technique. They are guided to recognise and articulate the strengths they draw upon during training—for example, perseverance in completing a demanding set, teamwork in supporting a peer, or bravery in attempting a new exercise.

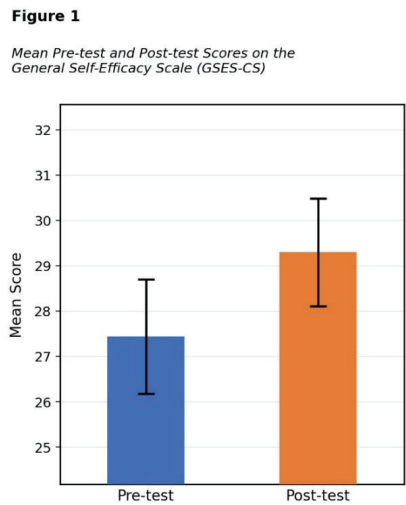
What has the “MindSport” Programme achieved?

Analysis of the VIA Survey results provided insights into the strengths profile of young male PICs. Among the 64 participants, the most frequently identified character strengths were Kindness (44%), Hope (38%), Humour (35%), Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (32%) and Curiosity (32%). From a psychological perspective, these findings are noteworthy:

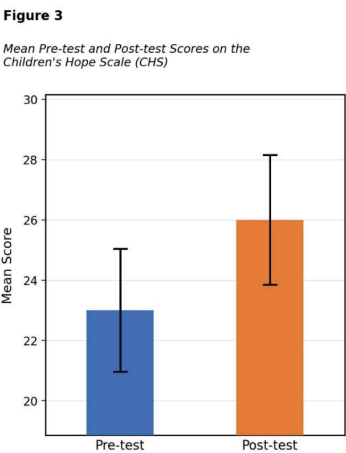
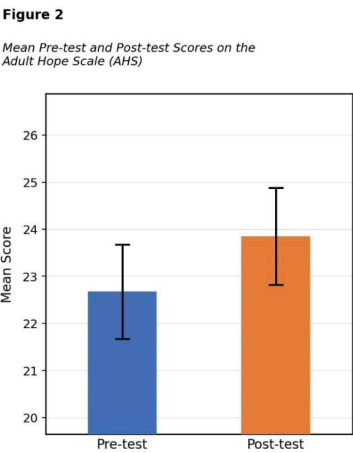


Strengths Profile of Young Male PICs based on the VIA Survey.

strengths, namely Kindness and Hope, which embody prosocial orientations and a forward-looking disposition, are often absent from the self-narratives of justice-involved youth. **The “MindSport” Programme appears to help uncover inherent positive traits that may be obscured by offending behaviour and internalised negative self-concepts.**



Besides, preliminary analysis of pre- and post-programme psychological measures indicated very positive outcomes. Paired-sample t-tests revealed statistically significant improvements on measures of self-efficacy and hope after programme completion. **The enhanced confidence in one’s capability and hope for the future** are critical psychological resources in the desistance process, empowering the justice-involved youth to believe in their capacity for change, sustain motivation through setbacks and envision a prosocial future.



Measures	N/n	T1 M (SD)	T2 M (SD)	Mean diff	t	p	d
GSES-CS	64	27.44 (5.14)	29.30 (4.83)	1.86	2.71	.009	0.34
AHS	46	22.67 (3.47)	23.85 (3.57)	1.17	2.45	.018	0.36
CHS	18	23.00 (4.41)	26.00 (4.65)	3.00	2.23	.040	0.52

Table 1. Paired-sample t-tests on pre- and post-programme psychological measures
 GSES-CS: General Self-efficacy Scale – Chinese Scale; AHS: Adult Hope Scale; CHS: Children’s Hope Scale

1. Strength-based Rehabilitation as the Integrative Key

- Strengths Intervention that focuses on “what’s strong” instead of “what’s wrong” empowers people to build positive personal identities, develop pro-social orientation and ultimately flourish.

2. Character Strengths as Foundations for Positive Identities

- The 24 character strengths are universal, morally valued and measurable traits that foster a resilient, pro-social self for the ultimate goal of sustainable personal growth and human flourishing.

3. Character Strengths Intervention enhances Self-efficacy and Hope

- The enhanced confidence in one’s capability and optimism for the future empower the justice-involved youth to believe in their capacity for change, sustain motivation through setbacks and envision a prosocial future in their desistance journey.

References

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Ho, C. W. S., Kam, E. N. M. & Tam, J. S. Y. (2025). Rise and Shine: Supporting the Desistance Journey for Young Persons in Hong Kong Through Psychologically-Informed Intervention. *Advanced Corrections*, 19, 166-178.

Hong Kong Correctional Services Department (HKCSD, 2025). *Desistance from Crime of Chinese Persons-In-Custody in Hong Kong: A Literature Review and Qualitative Study (Research Report)*. Hong Kong Correctional Services Department.

Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. American Psychological Association.

Niemiec, R. M. (2018). *Character strengths interventions: A field guide for practitioners*. Hogrefe Publishing GmbH.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press.