StrengthsSHIFT™ is a strengths-based framework that helps us see, name, and use strengths to support well-being, deepen connection, and guide everyday action.

Developed by Mary Beth Wighton and Jessica Luh Kim (2025).

StrengthsSHIFT™ Framework

How to Use This Handout

This is a free, open-access resource. Download it, share it, and return to it as you put the framework into practice. To cite this framework: Luh Kim, J. & Wighton, M. B. (2025). StrengthsSHIFT™ Framework: Seeing Strengths, Expanding Possibilities. Retrieved from www.jlk-cc.com

StrengthsSHIFT™ – Seeing Strengths, Expanding Possibilities

At the heart of StrengthsSHIFT™ is the belief that people living with dementia deserve to live with dignity, meaning, and connection. When we shift the lens from decline to strengths and possibility, we begin to honour choice, support well-being, and create new opportunities for living well - for people living with dementia, for care partners, and for communities.

The StrengthsSHIFT™ framework offers five interconnected, strengths-based shifts that help us move from a deficit view to one that highlights strengths, well-being, and relationships, and supports the move from intention into practice. Each shift invites reflection and choice about what we can do differently in our roles, whether as family members or professionals, to help people living with dementia and those who support them truly thrive.

The Five Shifts

1. See Differently 👁️ – shift the lens from decline to strengths
2. Highlight Strengths ⭐ – spot, name strengths, talents, and abilities
3. Integrate Well-Being ❤️ – use strengths to support well-being and meaningful experiences
4. Foster Connection 🤝 – move from doing for to doing with
5. Transform Action ➡️ – turn insights into daily practices

The StrengthsSHIFT™ framework grew out of the lived and professional experiences of Mary Beth Wighton, dementia advocate and Jessica Luh Kim, educator, consultant, and family care partner.

Our original five-shift approach is specifically designed for the dementia community. It is rooted in the wisdom of people living with dementia, the insights of culture-change leaders like Dr. Allen Power and The Eden Alternative®, and the By Us For Us© Guides. Our work is also inspired by the pioneering evidence-based research of Gallup® CliftonStrengths® and the VIA Institute on Character Strengths®. We have adapted these global concepts into a practical, relationship-centered framework that moves beyond theory into daily practice. At its heart, it's about moving from insight into action. It is a way to shift the way we see, think, and respond so that strengths and well-being become part of daily practice.

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Shift 1 - See Differently

Seeing differently involves recognizing the unique capabilities and potential within each individual living with dementia, as well as among care partners. It means shifting focus from loss and limitations to ongoing abilities, humanity, and potential. This is the mindset foundation for all that follows, and it opens new pathways for care and connection.

With this shift, we ask:

- *Am I focusing on decline or can I see strengths and possibilities instead?*
- *How can I reframe or rethink the way we see and understand people, especially those who are living with and affected by dementia?*

New Definition of Dementia

Seeing differently starts with a new definition of dementia. ***"Dementia is a shift in the way people [perceive and] experience the world around them."*** (Adapted from Dr. Allen Power, MD, author of 'Dementia Beyond Drugs' and 'Dementia Beyond Disease', RIA Chair in Aging and Dementia Innovation).

Language Matters

When we start seeing dementia through this strengths-based definition, our everyday language and actions begin to change. When we change our words, we change what we notice and what becomes possible. Below are some examples.

Non-Strengths-Based	**Strengths-Based**
Deficits, problems, pathology	Talents, strengths, focus on the whole person
Declining	Adapting
Difficult	Expressive
Manage	Empower
At risk	Potential
Disruptive	Seeking connection

Note: Next time you observe someone, ask: *"What's working well here? What strength am I seeing in action?"* Then try naming it out loud.

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Shift 2 - Highlight Strengths

What happens when we notice what's strong in people instead of what's not? It changes the way we view the person (including ourselves) and how we interact with them. We turn our focus to what the person can do and how they naturally think, feel, and act - valuing lived experience, creativity, and resilience.

With this shift, we ask:

- *What abilities, skills, or strengths are present or untapped?*
- *How are we spotting them in others (and ourselves), naming them, affirming them, and helping to aim them to live well?*

Strengths Menu

When we speak in the language of strengths, things open up. This Strengths Menu offers clear themes to help notice, name, and grow what people do well. Use it to spot clues, choose uplifting words, and build on what's strong.

Relational Strengths

- Caring
- Listening
- Compassionate insight
- Generosity of spirit
- Collaborative nature

Creative/Expressive Strengths

- Creativity
- Humour
- Playfulness
- Storytelling
- Appreciation of beauty

Endurance Strengths

- Optimism
- Flexibility
- Fluidity
- Calm
- Courage

Practical Wisdom Strengths

- Practical wisdom
- Problem-solving
- Organization
- Decision-making
- Dependability

Drive & Development Strengths

- Enthusiasm
- Leadership
- Initiative
- Eager to learn
- Curiosity

Note: Every person, including people living with dementia, holds strengths like these. They may change or show up differently, but they remain an essential part of who we are. Strengths appear where there is energy, engagement, or ease.

(Inspired by Gallup® CliftonStrengths®, 2026 and VIA Institute on Character Strengths®, 2026)

Note on Language: Seeing strengths is a practice, not a fixed list. While this menu provides a starting point, I encourage you to use whatever language resonates most with you whether it's these terms,

your own words, or established tools like CliftonStrengths® or VIA Character Strengths®. The goal isn't to follow a specific model, but to build the habit of scanning for what is strong, not what is wrong.

Shift 3 - Integrate Well-Being

Strengths become a bridge to whole person well-being. When we intentionally combine strengths with what matters most to someone, more transformation happens.

Two well-being models help us frame what matters most - the Eden Alternative Domains of Well-Being (2022) and the Seven Meaningful Experiences named by people living with dementia in the By Us For Us Guide (2018). If you look closely, both models align. Both are intended to help someone live well and thrive.

Well-Being Models – Two Complementary Models of Well-Being

The Eden Alternative Domains of Well-Being®	By Us For Us: Meaningful Experiences
1. **Identity** – Being well-known; personhood; individuality; history	1. **Being Me** – Authentic self-expression. Experiences connected with current or past interests.
2. **Connectedness** – Belonging; engagement; ties to people, place, nature	2. **Being With** – Connection and community with others
3. **Security** – Safety, assurance, privacy, dignity, respect	3. **Finding Balance** – Balance between "relaxation" and "keeping busy"
4. **Autonomy** – Liberty; self-determination; freedom of choice	4. **Seeking Freedom** – Escape from restrictive social & physical environments; "break from the norm" or "escape" from stress
5. **Meaning** – Hope, purpose, value, reflection	5. **Making a Difference** – Purpose and opportunities to contribute; feel helpful & valued
6. **Growth** – Development, enrichment, evolving	6. **Growing & Developing** – Opportunity to challenge mind and body; learning new things
7. **Joy** – Happiness, delight, contentment	7. **Having Fun** – Enjoyment, happiness, and playfulness
(Source: The Eden Alternative, 2022)	(Source: Adapted from MAREP/RIA, 2018)

"Well-being is elusive, highly subjective, and the most valuable of all human possessions."

Dr. William (Bill) Thomas

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Shift 3 - Integrate Well-Being - continued

With this shift, we ask:

- *What does the person (or you) need to live well?*
- *Which domains of well-being or meaningful experiences are supported?*
- *Which domains are being eroded or need more support?*
- *How do we honour well-being and build on what's already supporting the person?*
- *What talents and strengths can we tap into or support further, to help them live more fully and thrive?*

Shift 4 - Foster Connection

This shift is about partnership and shared power, moving from having power over, to giving power to, to sharing power with. When we share power and partner with someone, it shifts how we interact, fostering trust and connection.

With this shift, we ask:

- *How can I "do with" rather than "do for" or "do to"?*
- *How can I empower them to do for themselves?*
- *How might we work together?*

Simple yet powerful everyday choices:

- Inviting, not insisting
- Asking, not assuming
- Adjusting to the person's rhythm, not ours

It's in our tone, our timing, and our willingness to share control. These simple actions send a powerful message - "**You matter, you belong, you still have influence here.**"

Note: Fostering connection is about complementary partnerships — where people living with dementia and care partners each bring their unique strengths to achieve shared goals. We complement, not replace, the strengths of others. In StrengthsSHIFT™, Foster Connection is specifically about partnership and shared power, distinct from, though complementary to, the Connection domain of well-being and the Being With meaningful experience.

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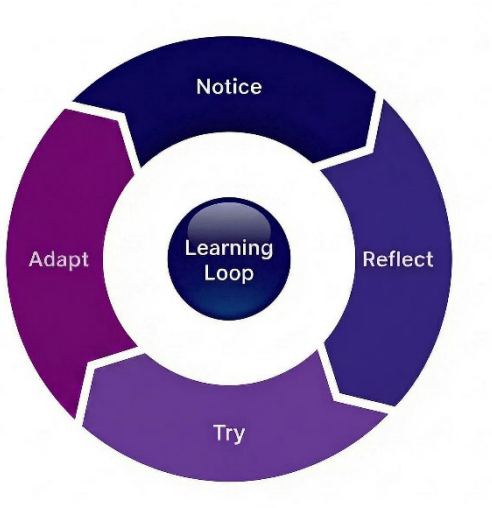
Shift 5 - Transform Action

At the heart of this shift is the StrengthsSHIFT™ Learning Loop: Notice → Reflect → Try → Adapt.

Transformation happens when insights turn into daily practice through small, intentional learning loops. We start by **noticing** what's working, even small moments. Then we **reflect**. Why did it work? What strengths or conditions made it possible? Next, we **try** something small, something doable. And finally, we **adapt**. We check in, adjust, and repeat. This is the rhythm of sustainable change.

With this shift, we ask:

- *What's already working that we can build on?*
- *What's not working that we need to stop or change?*
- *What small step or creative idea can we try or adapt next?*
- *How will we reflect on whether it's helping the person (and ourselves) thrive?*



Note: As you try something small, reflect and adapt. It is also important to ensure you include the person living with dementia and their circle of care in the process. They are central to the loop, not observers.

Helpful Resources

The following are helpful resources that have informed the StrengthsSHIFT™ framework and practice supporting people living with dementia, along with the contact information for the framework creators:

- Dementia Beyond Drugs: Changing the Culture of Care, Second Edition. G. Allen Power (2016)
- Dementia Beyond Disease: Enhancing Well-Being. G. Allen Power (2016)
- Behavioural Supports Ontario (BSO) Person-Centred Language resources [www.behaviouralsupportsontario.ca/pledge]
- The Eden Alternative website [www.edenalt.org]

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- Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging (RIA) website [www.the-ria.ca]
    - Resources - By Us For Us Guides - "*Living and Celebrating Life through Leisure"* [https://the-ria.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/BUFU_LivingandCelebratingLife_eversion_A.pdf]
- Gallup CliftonStrengths website [www.gallup.com]
- VIA Institute on Character website [www.viacharacter.org]
- Partnerships in Dementia Care (PiDC) Alliance website [www.uwaterloo.ca/partnerships-in-dementia-care/]
- Dementia Action Alliance website [www.daanow.org]

We Would Love to Connect

If you would like to learn more about this framework or bring it to your organisation, we would love to hear from you. Please contact us at:

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Transformation begins in small actions.

Thank you for helping change the story of dementia.

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