

The Sailboat

Happiness

Metaphor

n/a

Client

No

"I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship." - Louisa May Alcott

This quote beautifully summarizes what can be considered the most important practical aim of positive psychology: enhancing autonomy and resilience. The goal of every helping professional is to eventually become redundant by helping the client to both realize that he/she is the captain of his/her own ship and act accordingly. More precisely, the realization that he/she is the only one who can change his/her own behaviour and reality allows the client to behave in line with personal values and take responsibility for his/her own actions.

A key step in this process is the development of a balanced and complete perspective on the self: a perspective that takes into consideration the many factors that determine daily behaviour and experiences, both positive and negative, controllable and uncontrollable. By becoming aware of personal strengths and weaknesses, of factors that can be controlled and those that are beyond control, of positive and negative social forces, autonomy is facilitated. By comparing human functioning to a sailboat and its journey, this tool offers a multi-faceted, yet easy to understand perspective on the self.

Author

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Goal

The goal of this sailboat metaphor is to offer a simple and multi-faceted perspective on the self. The metaphor attempts to address human functioning from a holistic perspective, taking into account the many factors, both positive and negative, that influence well-being.



Advice

- The metaphor can be used to explain complex psychological constructs in a relatively simple way. For instance, effective coping can be compared to a boat that stays on course despite stormy weather or effectively gets back on course after stormy weather. Rumination (dwelling on negative thoughts about past failures) can be compared to spending a lot of time looking at the wake (wake pattern) behind the boat.
- The metaphor can be used to communicate complex interactive psychological processes (see the section “Interaction between elements” on p.9.).
- Clients can use the metaphor to explain their current state. For some clients, the metaphor offers a “safe” way to describe their personal feelings. It allows them to talk about their private experiences in a more indirect and less vulnerable way, without losing the essence of the message. Another related advantage of using the boat metaphor is its flexibility to different interpretations. Allowing the client to explain their understanding of the different elements can enable the practitioner to better grasp the reality of the client. By encouraging the client to explain their own connection to each element (rather than forcing a rigid definition) it promotes a greater connection to the metaphor due to being self-constructed. Examples of potential client use:
 - » “I don’t feel like my boat is moving. It is floating in one place, bobbing on the waves”: the client may experience a lack of meaning and/or autonomy.
 - » “I feel like I am sailing in a direction that other sailors want me to sail”: the client is experiencing a high level of social pressure and lack of autonomy.
 - » “I feel like all I can see is the leaking boat – I keep taking on water”: the client indicates that he/she experiences an excessive focus on his/her problems.
 - » “I am afraid that my boat will not withstand the stormy weather that is coming”: the client experiences low levels of self-efficacy and has doubts about his/her own coping skills.
- The boat metaphor can be used to address both the current experiences of a client as well as future aspirations. For instance, the metaphor can be used as a valuable starting point for an intervention. A client may respond to questions like: What aspect of your boat has the highest priority at the moment? In an ideal world, what would your boat look like? What kind of destination would you like to reach with your boat?
- The metaphor can be used in a group context as well. Teams can be perceived as a fleet of boats that, in an ideal situation, sail in the same direction. In other words, the team members are on the same mission. Note, however, that this does not mean that all the boats are similar. On the contrary, it can be better to have different boats, meaning team members with different strengths, so they can work synergistically together in a complementary way.



Suggested Readings

Keyes, C. L. M. (2005). Mental illness and/or mental health? Investigating axioms of the complete state model of health. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 73*, 539–548.

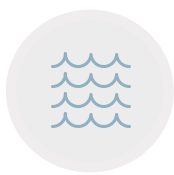
Linley, A., Willars, J., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). *The strengths book: What you can do, love to do, and find it hard to do – and why it matters*. Coventry, UK: CAPP Press.

Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology, 23*, 603–619.

Tool Description

Instructions

Humans are complex beings. This metaphor compares human functioning to a sailboat. It was designed to increase understanding of the many different aspects of ourselves and our surroundings that affect how we feel and act on a daily basis. A graphical representation of the metaphor is shown in fig. 1 on the next page. A detailed description of each element is provided below.



1. Water

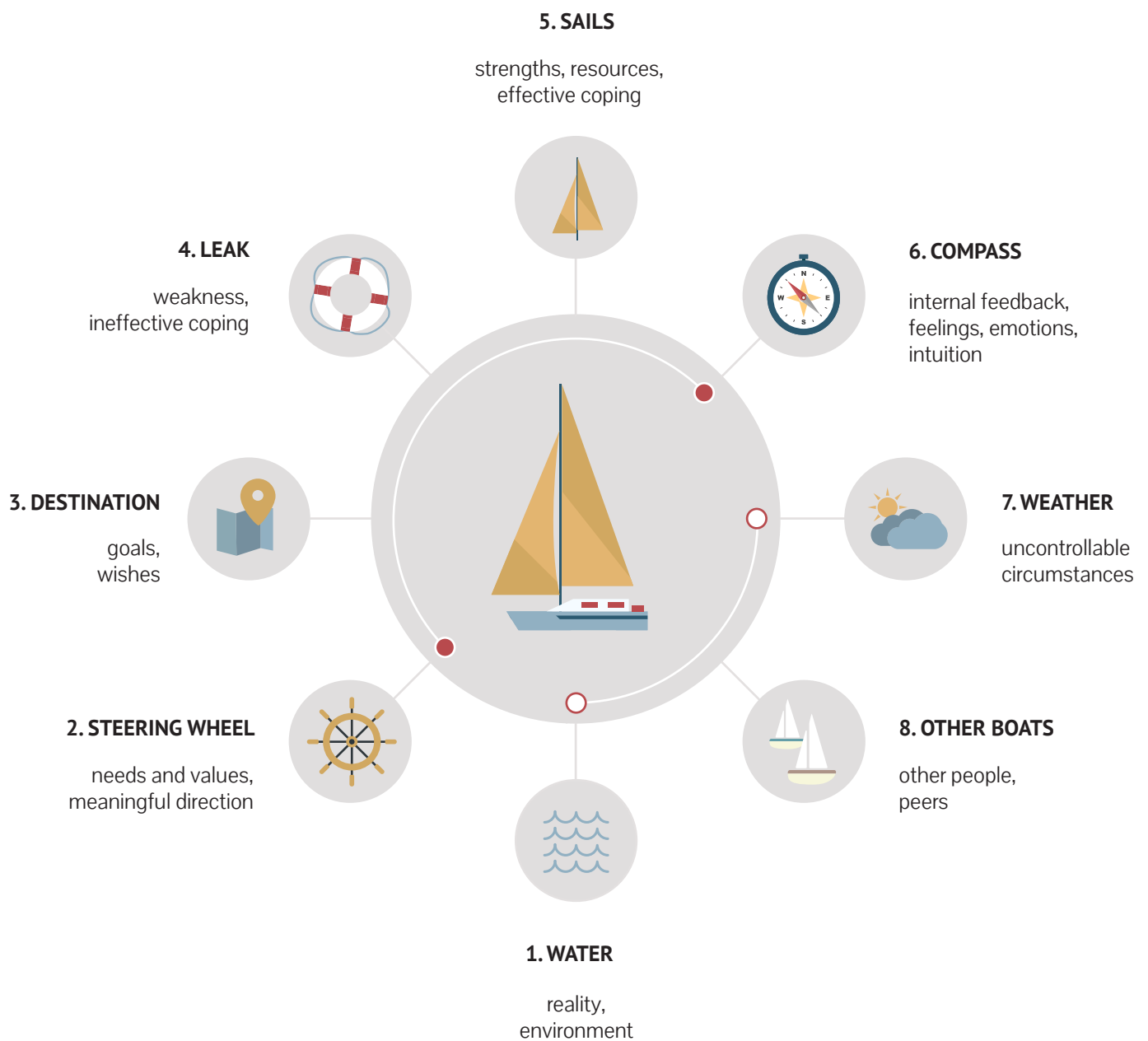
No boat moves in isolation from the water. The water can be compared to what we could call the “playground of life”. Just like the water entails the space in which the boat moves, this is the direct environment that we live in and interact with. This environment is characterized by many factors, like our job, our house, our possessions, geographical location, etc. In short, it is our direct physical reality.

All the other elements of the boat metaphor influence the way we perceive and interact with our environment. For instance, a person who holds the belief that he/she cannot achieve anything (this is a “leak” in the boat: element 4) is unlikely to leave his/her comfort zone and is likely to stay in a rather static environment: he/she is unlikely to explore new areas of the sea. In a similar vein, the direct environment of a person who lives in line with his/her personal value of “social connectedness” (steering wheel: element 2) is likely to be characterized by cherished social connections (other boats; element 8).

Many clients visit a practitioner because they are unsatisfied with the water upon which they sail: they wish to change their daily reality. Changing the water without considering the other elements of the boat metaphor is possible. We can decide to steer our boat in a different direction so that we move to another area of the sea. Consequently, the water we sail on changes. For instance, we may change our job or leave our hometown. Note, however, that changing one’s environment will not automatically increase well-being. There can be many reasons for changing the environment, like avoidance of negative experiences, such as in the case of a person who chooses another job due to an inability to deal with the negative impact of a current boss. Although he/she has successfully changed the water upon which he/she sails, and avoided the negative experiences with the boss, he/she may soon be struggling again, because the real leak has not been repaired: the water has simply changed. In the new environment, the boss may be replaced by a colleague (another boat: element 8) who brings the experience of the same uncomfortable feelings again because the colleague’s style is very similar to that of the former boss. This case illustrates that it can sometimes be valuable to address the other elements of the boat first, before changing the physical environment.

Fig. 1 The Sailboat Metaphor

A graphical representation of the 8 elements of the boat metaphor is shown below. The two lines in the central circle divide the elements in two differential processes: elements 2-6 refer to processes “inside” the self. Elements 1, 7, and 8 refer to processes “outside” the self.





2. Steering Wheel

The steering wheel represents personal values. In the same way as the steering wheel determines where the boat will go to, values determine how we want to live our life. They are the answer to the question: what do you find important in life?

Just like the steering wheel determines a certain direction, values can also be best compared to directions, rather than destinations. Whereas goals can be achieved, values cannot be achieved. For example, a value of being creative can never be fulfilled. Even if the person creates a painting (a concrete goal), it would be silly to say, “Now that I have created this painting, I’ve accomplished creativity. Now I’ll proceed to the next thing.” Therefore, values are best formulated as verbs, in that they are not something that is ever fully achieved. For example, a value might be “being creative” or “contributing to other’s well-being”.

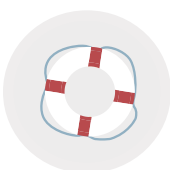
Note that the steering wheel represents our current values, whether they are adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive values contribute to our well-being while maladaptive values reduce well-being. When clients have lost connection with their adaptive values, it is often because one or more other elements of the boat receive a disproportionate level of attention. For instance, a client who experiences fear (compass: element 6), may spend a lot of time trying to control and reduce the fear. He/she is constantly monitoring and trying to control his/her inner experiences. In other words, undue attention is focused on the compass and “safety” and “control” become the main direction of his/her boat. Paradoxically, sailing in this direction may cause fear to increase. The values “safety” and “control” thus affect his/her well-being in a negative way.

Another client may focus too much on the values of other people (other boats: element 8). This focus may be the result of a need for approval: a value that is currently guiding his/her behaviour, but which does not contribute to his/her well-being in a positive way.



3. Destination

Just like a boat can sail to certain destinations, people can reach goals. While a value is a general direction of the boat, a goal is a specific and concrete destination of the boat. Goal setting and achievement are important processes that can help to concretize values. Goals can help to enhance focus, energize, and translate abstract values like “creativity” into practice. Achieving personally meaningful goals can help to build confidence. Or in terms of the boat metaphor, the sails of the boat (element 5) are becoming stronger.



4. Leak

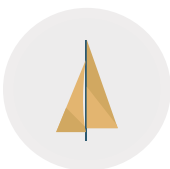
A leak in the boat represents weaknesses: factors that hinder valued living and goal achievement. They reduce personal well-being. In a clinical context, these factors often consist of patterns of behaving and thinking that negatively affect well-being, producing emotions like fear, anxiety and stress. Examples include negative thinking about the past, suppressing difficult emotions, and acting impulsively. Relating to performance, these are the factors that can de-energize you,

resulting in poorer outcomes in task performance. When these weaknesses are used, they lead to feelings of negativity, disengagement, and lack of motivation.” (p.68 Linley, Willars, Biswas-Diener, 2010). In either context, the weaknesses get in the way of flourishing.

When we adopt a weakness focus, we focus solely on the leak. Although the leak is not the only defining characteristic of the boat (e.g. the boat has sails, a steering wheel, etc.) we focus our attention only on this specific aspect of the boat. In other words, we focus on what is wrong with an individual or ourselves. We direct attention on negative aspects of the individual. In the context of work and performance, a weakness focus means that we are primarily concerned with behaviour that is causing suboptimal or low performance. For instance, during work evaluation, the employer is only focused on why an employee is not reaching his/her sales targets, or why he/she is not able to communicate well with customers. In a clinical context, this means that the focus is on behavioural or cognitive patterns that cause suffering and reduce well-being. For example, a psychologist is only focusing on the problems that the client experiences. Using this perspective, he/she may discover that the client thinks negatively about the past and has trouble dealing with these thoughts.

The idea behind the weakness focus is clear and well-meaning: by fixing the weakness, we aim to increase well-being. In the terms of the boat metaphor: by fixing the leak, we expect the boat to be able to sail again. Indeed, if we do not fix the leak, then the boat will sink and the client will not be able to sail anywhere.

However, aiming to increase well-being by only focusing on repairing the leak of the boat is unlikely to result in success. This approach ignores the fact that the absence of problems or illness does not automatically imply well-being (see for instance Keyes, 2005). In terms of the metaphor, even if you would be able to repair the leak, your client may still not be able to get anywhere. It are his/her sails—the next component of the metaphor—that actually give your client’s boat forward momentum. In sum, it is important to address weaknesses (to prevent the boat from sinking), but one must also hoist the sails to catch a favourable wind (opportunity) and move forward.



5. Sails

The sails of the boat represent personal strengths: factors that facilitate valued living and goal achievement: they increase personal well-being. These factors are positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). The sails include ways of behaving, thinking or feeling that are authentic and energizing to the user. They enable optimal functioning, development, and performance (Linley, 2008). Examples of strengths are effective coping styles, like optimism or acceptance, but also activities that provide energy and enthusiasm, like writing or painting.



6. Compass

A compass is an instrument used for navigation and orientation that shows direction relative to the environment. It provides feedback on the current direction in which we are heading. In a similar vein, inner experiences like feelings, emotions and intuition serve as a tool for navigation and orientation. Both positive and negative emotions/feelings are signals that provide feedback on the route we are taking in life. They can serve as a valuable guide on our journey. For this reason, it is important to pay attention to them and allow them to be present. Positive feelings like joy, energy, and gratitude signal personal well-being and inform us that we are on the right track. They can serve as a direct reinforcer and over time, build long-lasting resources (sails: element 5).

Negative emotions like fear and anxiety inform us that attention is required. Rather than suppressing these negative feelings, allowing them to be present without acting upon them can reveal valuable information that may assist us on our route. Fear, for instance, may signal that we are approaching the edge of our comfort zone. Since we are uncertain about what the other side of the ocean looks like, we experience fear. Fear may indicate that we have a chance to broaden our horizons and expand our comfort zone. Possibly, we may also conclude that the thing causing us fear seems important to us (why would we experience fear if we did not care about it?) and may give us insight into a personal value.

Note that an emotion itself is never the problem. In terms of the boat metaphor, the compass is not the problem: it just provides information and feedback. The problem is that clients often use their compass in an ineffective way. The negative emotions that are indicated by the compass cause many clients to attempt to control or avoid them, which paradoxically can lead to increased negative emotions. The inability to use the compass is a common leak (element 4) of the boat.



7. Weather

The weather can be compared to uncontrollable circumstances in life. Just like we cannot control the weather, both positive and negative events will take place that cannot be controlled. Sometimes the wind blows in our sails and we encounter situations that allow us to use our strengths to the maximum. Other times the wind and the rain make it difficult to keep traveling in our preferred direction. Real life examples include the loss of beloved one, getting stuck in traffic, winning the lottery, falling in love, etc.

Although these circumstances are completely beyond our control, especially in the case of difficult circumstances, they can have a serious impact on our well-being depending on the way we deal with them. The ability to deal with these circumstances in an effective way can build resilience and help us to stay on track, despite any challenges that accompanied the circumstances. In concrete terms, this means that we fully utilize our strengths and become aware of what we can or cannot control.



8. Other Boats

The other boats in the sea represent the people that surround us. These boats can be compared to our social network. Others can influence us in many ways, both positively and negatively. For instance, when we decide to turn the steering wheel and take a different course, we may experience support by peers who motivate us to pursue our new direction. At the same time, there may be others who disapprove of the new direction and provoke feelings of self-doubt and fear within us (compass: element 6). In the latter case, it is important to stay true to one's own values and direction, rather than letting others determine the course of the boat. Our social network may also offer support in difficult times. In times of stormy weather, other boats can help us stay on our course and remind us of what is truly important on our journey (our core values).

Interaction between elements

The different components of the boat metaphor do not exist in isolation but are interacting with each other continuously. Some examples of how the elements of the boat work together synergistically are described below.

- Ignoring weaknesses (leak: element 4) while boosting use of strengths (sails: element 5) will give the boat momentum but will gradually cause the boat to sink. In other words, it is important to address both weakness and strengths.
- A boat that sails in a personally valuable direction (steering wheel: element 2) will be more likely to stay on track during stormy weather (element 7) compared to a boat that is sailing in a direction that is not perceived as personally meaningful. Stated differently, valued living can enhance resilience.
- A boat that is not willing to choose a different direction (element 2) because of fear (compass: element 6) of leaving the “comfort zone” will be unlikely to sail in new waters (element 1). Using more psychological terms, this means that structural changes of the client’s environment are unlikely to emerge when avoidance-based coping is used to deal with negative emotions.
- The nature of the water (quiet, turbulent, etc.) is not only influenced by uncontrollable circumstances, like the weather (element 7), but also by the deliberate choice of the boat sailing in another direction (steering wheel: element 2). This new direction might cause the boat to enter a new zone that is characterized by (temporary) turbulent or quiet waters, rocky or dangerous areas, etc. Likewise, other boats (element 8) can block the sail route, making it difficult to sail in a certain direction. These examples illustrate that the daily reality a person is facing is influenced by many factors, internal and external, all varying in the degree of controllability. Not only uncontrollable events like the loss of a friend or the negative influence of other people influence daily reality, but also the deliberate choices we make in life. By making the deliberate choice to live by the influence of your personal values, the changes we typically experience (both behavioural and circumstantial) will tend to align with those values. In terms of the boat metaphor, this means that we deliberately choose a different route and will encounter different waters. This new route will be characterized by easy and difficult parts.

For clients, it is often helpful to consider the parts of the new route that will be potentially challenging and evaluate the degree of controllability. By doing so, a client can prevent him/herself from trying to influence uncontrollable events. For instance, a client who decides to quit drinking may anticipate ex-fellow drinkers (other boats: element 8) to be unsupportive of the new direction. Rather than attempting to gain control by trying to convince these people to choose the same direction, the client may wisely decide to focus on controllable elements of the boat, like the direction of the boat or the sails. The client may decide to steer the boat in a direction that allows more frequent encounters with supportive boats or may decide to deliberately use his/her personal strengths to deal with the challenges.

Key ingredients for well-being

Taking all of the different elements of the boat into consideration can help to understand what contributes to personal well-being. Some considerations are listed below:

Action

For well-being to increase, awareness of the different elements of the boat metaphor is not sufficient. A person who becomes aware of the fact that his/her boat is sailing in a direction that does not promote personal well-being, must take action and turn the wheel in a valuable and adaptive direction in order to increase well-being. In other words, in addition to becoming aware of one's values, one must take specific behavioural steps in order to benefit from this awareness. Likewise, it is not enough to hoist the sails of the boat (element 5). One must also steer the boat

in a direction (element 2) or turn the sails in a position that allows them to catch the wind. So in order to increase well-being, merely becoming aware of one's own strengths is not sufficient. In addition to (increased) awareness, behavioural and circumstantial changes that allow strengths to be used are required.

Balance between elements

A balanced amount of attention to the different elements can be considered a baseline condition for well-being. Too much focus on any component is unlikely to result in well-being. For instance, a client may focus too much on the destination of the boat (goals: element 3) and consequently fails to enjoy the view during his/her journey (positive emotions: element 6). Another client may focus too much on the uncontrollability of the weather (uncontrollable events: element 7) and experiences learned helplessness (leak: element 4).

Taking all elements into consideration

Ignoring elements is likely to result in low levels of well-being. For instance, the destination of a boat (element 3) that is too strongly determined by the destination of the other boats (element 8) may ignore its compass (element 6). Consequently, the boat is lacking a sense of autonomy (steering wheel: element 2) and feels like it is being controlled from outside elements. A boat that ignores its sails (strengths: element 5) will have a hard time going through stormy weather (element 7) and may lack a sense of energy and enthusiasm (compass: element 6).

Continuous involvement

All the elements of the boat metaphor require continuous attention. For example, even if a client manages to repair a leak and focus on strengths, the water will still create a strong pressure on that leak: clients will repeatedly be tested in their weaknesses. Therefore, it is not sufficient to temporarily repair or patch the leak. The client needs to consistently check the leak (reflect) and strengthen the repair (consciously work on weaknesses). Weaknesses do not simply vanish in a day and typically require continuous attention. The same holds for the steering wheel of the boat. As stated before, values are chosen actions, that can never be obtained like an object, but can only be concretised from moment to moment. This means that valued living is an on going process that requires continuous attention.

Moreover, continuous involvement is also the key to strength development. Through effort, challenging oneself, learning how to deal with failure and taking risks, the client can increase his/her sails. By increasing the size of his/her sails and learning how to effectively use the sails, the client forces more wind to hit the sails. Consequently, the boat will become faster and stronger. In other words, continuously working on strengths will also increase their beneficial effects.

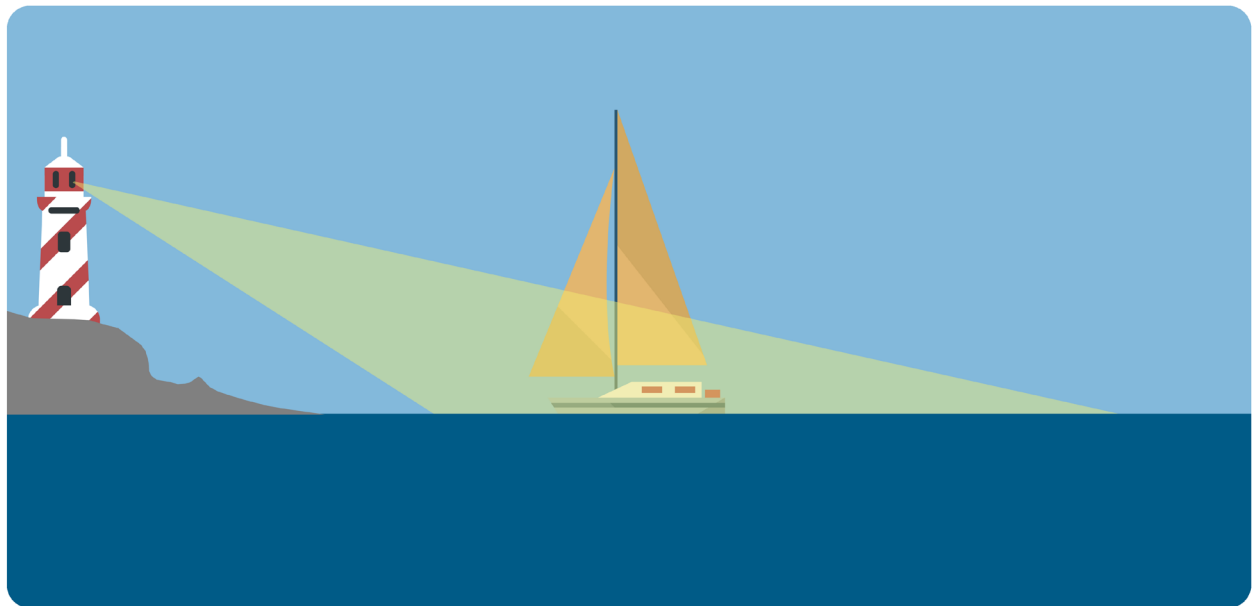
Flexibility

Rather than perceiving the elements of the boat as static and attempting to maintain their current state, they should be considered as highly dynamic. One is always allowed to change direction (values: element 2) and destinations (goals: element 3) at any given moment. Likewise, the compass, the weather, and the social environment are constantly changing. The importance of flexibility is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the sails (strengths: element 5) of the boat. The sails are dependent on external factors like the weather (element 7). The wind may not blow in a direction for the sails to catch it. In this case, the sailor must be flexible enough to change the direction of the boat, adjust the sails to catch the wind or wait until the wind turns in a favourable direction again. In other words, optimal strength use requires careful consideration of the situation and context one is facing. Rather than just blindly using a strength to its fullest degree, one must be able to flexibly interact with the environment.

The role of the practitioner

The role of the practitioner can be introduced by extending the sailboat metaphor. The practitioner can be compared to a lighthouse (see fig. 2). The similarities between a lighthouse and a practitioner are summarized in the table below.

Fig. 2 The Lighthouse Metaphor



Lighthouse	Practitioner
assists in navigation by signalling safe entries to harbours but also by marking dangerous coastlines and hazardous reefs	assists the client in achieving his/her aspirations/valued living by highlighting possibilities and potential pitfalls
does not dictate the direction or destination of the boat	does not determine which values and goals the client should have
is a temporary aid on a journey, not a permanent one	is a temporary aid for the client, with the ultimate goal of achieving independence of the client
is particularly valuable in case of bad weather circumstances/turbulent sea	is particularly valuable in case of difficult life circumstances
always operates in service of the journey of the boat	always operates in service of the preferred goals and values of the client
helps to clarify the current position of the boat	helps the client to increase awareness of his/her current values, goals, strengths, weaknesses, etc.
illuminates the current environment of the boat	sheds (new) light on current circumstances