

13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do

By Amy Morin

Oust the weak links in your thinking and behavior patterns.

For more than a decade in my work as a psychotherapist, I helped clients identify their existing talents, skills and support systems. Then we'd figure out how to address their struggles by expanding on their existing strengths. For much of my career, I felt like this positive plan of attack was an effective way to help people overcome adversity.

But when I experienced tragedy firsthand, I began to rethink this optimistic method. In 2003 my mother died unexpectedly. Then two days before the third anniversary of her death, my 26-year-old husband suffered a fatal heart attack. Seven years later, I lost my father-in-law.

Throughout my grief, I realized that focusing on my strengths—and ignoring my weaknesses—had serious limitations. If I wanted to emerge from that painful period stronger than before, I needed to pay close attention to the bad habits that held me back. Letting myself feel like a victim, complaining about my circumstances and distracting myself from the pain might help me feel better in the short term but would only cause more problems over the long term.

My hardships taught me that it only takes one or two bad habits—no matter how minor they might seem—to stall progress.

Reaching your greatest potential doesn't require you to work harder by adding desirable habits to your already busy life. Instead you can work smarter by eliminating the routines that erode effectiveness and siphon off mental strength.

Here are the 13 things mentally strong people don't do:

1. Waste time feeling sorry for themselves.

It's futile to wallow in your problems, exaggerate your misfortune and keep score of how many hardships you've endured. Whether you're struggling to pay your bills or experiencing a serious health problem, throwing a pity party only makes things worse. Self-pity keeps you focused on the problem and prevents you from developing a solution.

Hardship and sorrow are inevitable, but feeling sorry for yourself is a choice. Even when you can't solve the problem, you can choose to control your attitude. Find three things to be grateful for every day to keep self-pity at bay.

2. Give away their power.

You can't feel like a victim and be mentally strong; that's impossible. If your thoughts send you into victim mode—My sister-in-law drives me crazy or My boss makes me feel bad about myself—you give others power over you. No one has power over the way you think, feel or behave.

Changing your daily vocabulary is one way to recognize that the choices you make are yours. Rather than saying, "I have to work late today," edit that sentiment to "I'm choosing to stay late." There may be consequences if you don't work late, but it's still a choice. Empowering yourself is an essential component to creating the kind of life you want.

3. Shy away from change.

If you worry that change will make things worse, you'll stay stuck in your old ways. The world is changing, and your success depends on your ability to adapt. The more you practice tolerating distress from various sources—perhaps taking a new job or leaving an unhealthy relationship—the more confident you'll become in your ability to adapt and create positive change in yourself.

4. Squander energy on things they can't control.

Complaining, worrying and wishful thinking don't solve problems; they only waste your energy. But if you invest that same energy in the things you can control, you'll be much better prepared for whatever life throws your way.

Pay attention to the times when you're tempted to worry about things you can't control—such as the choices other people make or how your competitor behaves—and devote that energy to something more productive, such as finishing a project at work or home or helping a friend with hers. Accept situations that are beyond your control and focus on influencing, rather than controlling, people around you.

5. Worry about pleasing everyone.

Whether you're nervous that your father-in-law will criticize your latest endeavor or you attend an event you'd rather skip to avoid a guilt trip from your mother, trying to make other people happy drains your mental strength and causes you to lose sight of your goals.

Making choices that disappoint or upset others takes courage, but living an authentic life requires you to act according to your values. Write down your top five values and focus your energy on staying true to them, even when your choices aren't met with favor.

6. Fear taking risks.

If something seems scary, you might not take the risk, even a small one. On the contrary, if you're excited about a new opportunity, you may overlook a giant risk and forge ahead. Emotions cloud your judgment and interfere with your ability to accurately calculate risk. You can't become extraordinary without taking chances, but a successful outcome depends on your ability to take the right risks. Acknowledge how you're feeling about a certain risk and recognize how your emotions influence your thoughts. Create a list of the pros and cons of taking the risk to help you make a decision based on a balance of emotion and logic.

7. Dwell on the past.

While learning from the past helps you build mental strength, ruminating is harmful. Constantly questioning your past choices or romanticizing about the good ol' days keeps you from both enjoying the present and making the future as good as it can be.

Make peace with the past. Sometimes doing so will involve forgiving someone who hurt you, and other times, moving forward means letting go of regret. Rather than reliving your past, work through the painful emotions that keep you stuck.

8. Repeat their mistakes.

Whether you felt embarrassed when you gave the wrong answer in class or you were scolded for messing up, you may have learned from a young age that mistakes are bad. So you may hide or excuse your mistakes to bury the shame associated with them, and doing so will prevent you from learning from them.

Whether you gained back the weight that you worked hard to lose or you forgot an important deadline, view each misstep as an opportunity for growth. Set aside your pride and humbly evaluate why you goofed up. Use that knowledge to move forward better than before.

9. Resent other people's successes.

Watching a co-worker receive a promotion, hearing a friend talk about her latest achievement or seeing a family member buy a car you can't afford can stir up feelings of envy. But jealousy shifts the focus from your efforts and interferes with your ability to reach your goals.

Write down your definition of success. When you're secure in that definition, you'll stop resenting others for attaining their goals, and you'll stay committed to reaching yours. Recognize that when other people reach their goals, their accomplishments don't minimize your achievements.

10. Give up after their first failure.

Some people avoid failure at all costs because it unravels their sense of self-worth. Not trying at all or giving up after your first attempt will prevent you from reaching your potential. Almost every story about a wildly successful person starts with tales of repeated failure (consider Thomas Edison's thousands of failures before he invented a viable light bulb, for instance).

Face your fear of defeat head-on by stretching yourself to your limits. Even when you feel embarrassed, rejected or ashamed, hold your head high and refuse to let lack of success define you as a person. Focus on improving your skills and be willing to try again after you fail.

11. Fear "alone time."

Solitude can sometimes feel unproductive; for some people, the thought of being alone with their thoughts is downright scary. Most people avoid silence by filling their days with a flurry of activity and background noise.

Alone time, however, is an essential component to building mental strength. Carve out at least 10 minutes each day to gather your thoughts without the distractions of the world. Use the time to reflect on your progress and create goals for the future.

12. Feel the world owes them Something.

We like to think that if we put in enough hard work or tough it out through bad times, then we deserve success. But waiting for the world to give you what you think you're owed isn't a productive life strategy.

Take notice of times when you feel as though you deserve something better. Intentionally focus on all that you have to give rather than what you think you deserve. Regardless of whether you think you've been dealt a fair hand in life, you have gifts to share with others.

13. Expect immediate results.

Self-growth develops slowly. Whether you're trying to shed your procrastination tendencies or improve your marriage, expecting instant results will lead to disappointment. Think of your efforts as a marathon, not a sprint. View bumps in the road as minor setbacks rather than as total roadblocks.

You'll need all the mental strength you can muster at some point in your life, whether it's the loss of a loved one, a financial hardship or a major health problem. Mental strength will give you the resilience to push through the challenges.

And the great news is that everyone can strengthen his or her mental muscle. Practice being your own mental strength coach. Pay attention to areas in which you're doing well and figure out where you need improvement. Create opportunities for growth and then challenge yourself to become a little better today than you were yesterday.