

13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do

Summary

By Amy Morin

How often do you write "to-do lists"? Well, have you ever written a "to-*not*-do list"? It might just be time to start.

Many of us had read "think positive" books on what to do to be better and more fulfilled. *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*, is a quirky take on what not to do. We tend to focus on the do's rather than the don'ts, so we're given 13 common bad habits, and shown how avoiding them makes us mentally strong.

Through her own hardships, psychotherapist Amy Morin discovered that while good habits matter, it's often our bad habits that hold us back. Morin is well equipped to advise us on what "to do" in the face of adversity. However, when personal tragedy struck, she realized, that the counter-intuitive therapeutic frameworks she'd previously relied on, weren't working. She began to realize that the "don'ts" matter just as much as the "do's."

In 2003, Morin's mother passed away unexpectedly. Three years later, and two days prior to the anniversary of her mother's passing, she lost her 26-year old husband to a sudden heart attack. Seven years later, she lost her father-in-law to cancer. Through such staggering loss and grief, she found the traditional "optimistic" approach so often used in psychotherapy, which focuses on strengths and neglects weaknesses, had its limitations. No matter how "positively" we try to think, feel or behave, it takes only one or two bad habits, no matter how minor, to stall

progress.

So when her father-in-law was diagnosed with a terminal illness, she decided to do something a little unconventional. She sat down and wrote a list to help her stay mentally strong. However, instead of listing what she needed to do, she focused on what *not* to do. She knew all too well how easy it was to fall prey to bad habits: like going into victim mode, complaining, and finding unhealthy ways to distract herself from pain. For Morin, bad habits are like heavyweights. No matter how talented we are, or how hard we work, they can drag us down, tire us out, and frustrate us.

We'll briefly explore Morin's personal story and how she defines mental strength. We'll debunk some misconceptions that come with being told to "be strong," and learn about the 13 things that mentally strong people *don't* do. To bounce back successfully, we need to offset the bad habits that keep us from reaching our full potential. In times of hardship, it's what we don't do that makes all the difference. Before we dive into details, let's unpack Morin's stance on mental strength.

We Can All Improve Our Mental Strength

All of us possess some degree of mental strength, with room to improve. Two phrases Morin often hears are, 'I can't help the way I feel,' or 'I just can't get rid of these negative thoughts in my head.' We all feel and think like this at times. It's hard to summon the mental strength to change how we think, act, and feel. However, no matter what our circumstances, there's always hope.

Just as there are those, who are predisposed to develop physical strength more easily than others, mental strength also seems to come

more naturally to some people. There are several factors at play. Genetics play a role in whether we may be more prone to mental health issues, such as mood disorders. Some people have personality traits that help them think more realistically, and behave more positively. Life experiences also influence how we view ourselves, others, and the world around us. However, this doesn't mean that we can't improve our mental state. Anyone has the power to increase their mental strength.

Mental strength comes down to improving our ability to regulate emotions, manage thoughts, and behave positively in accordance with our values, *despite* our circumstances. But developing mental strength requires a three-pronged approach. We need to be aware of how our thoughts, behaviors, and emotions control, and sometimes hinder rather than help us. We need to choose behavior that's based on balanced feelings and rational thoughts.

To understand this further, a negative self-perpetuating cycle is described in the following example. In a social situation, where someone initially feels shy about talking to colleagues, he may start to avoid initiating conversations, which leads to them engaging less with him. He then thinks that he's being ignored because he "lacks social skills." The more he gets caught up in this thought pattern, the more anxious he becomes in future social situations. If we learn to identify irrational thoughts, and replace them with more realistic ones, we start to behave in ways that are in sync with our deepest values, and we can manage our emotions instead of them controlling us.

You might be thinking that this is easier said than done, but do we really understand what it means to be mentally strong?

The Myths About Mental Strength

First off, mental strength isn't positive thinking. Being overly optimistic can be just as detrimental as being very negative; it's about being realistic and rational. Being mentally strong isn't about acting tough, but rather about acting in alignment with our values. It doesn't mean ignoring our emotions, but understanding how they influence our thinking and behavior. It's not about treating our bodies like machines that we push to their limits, to prove we can ignore pain. Instead, it's about understanding our thoughts and feelings well enough to decide when to listen to them or know when to challenge them. Mental strength isn't self-reliance; it's about admitting that we don't have all the answers, and knowing when to ask for help. Lastly, mental strength isn't synonymous with mental health. The healthcare industry often talks in terms of mental health versus mental illness. Mental strength is different. Just as we can be physically healthy even with specific ailments, like diabetes, so too can we be mentally healthy, even if we have depression, anxiety, or other mental health difficulties.

It's all too easy to feel mentally strong when life is going well, but we have to access mental strength when challenges inevitably arise. What happens when we lose our jobs or we have a family crisis? In situations such as these, what if we learned what *not* to do so that we could be *more* resilient in the face of stress—particularly on the hard days? The question is, 'how can we strive to be a little stronger than who we were yesterday?'

Gaining strength can be achieved by taking note of the 13 habits.

Don't Waste Time Feeling Sorry for Yourself

Mentally strong people take responsibility for their life's circumstances. They understand that life isn't always fair. Indulging in self-pity can be destructive—it wastes time, fuels negative feelings, and hurts relationships. Morin says that the key is to 'affirm the good in the world and appreciate what you have.'

Consider an inspiring example of mental strength, displayed by long-distance runner Marla Runyan. She has a master's degree, has written a book, and completed the New York Marathon in just over two hours. What's particularly impressive is that she's accomplished all this while being legally blind. At the age of nine, she was diagnosed with Stargardt's disease, a degenerative eye disease leading to blindness. Despite the challenges, Runyan focuses on what she's grateful for, what she can do, and refuses to give in to self-pity. Her secret to success is to appreciate what you have, and what you can do. So, even if you can't solve a problem, you can always choose to control your attitude.

Don't Give Away Your Power

Did you know that before recording an album that went on to sell 10 million copies, Madonna received a letter of rejection from a leading record company?

Stories such as these are not unique, and we have all faced moments of rejection. Negative opinions do affect how we feel. The trick however, isn't to let ourselves go into victim mode.

Take Oprah for example. She's overcome poverty, abuse, and, at the age of 14, endured the trauma of losing her child shortly after she gave birth. She was mocked for being poor, but chose not to let the opinions of others affect her. During the early stages of her career, she was even fired as she was considered "unsuitable" to be on air. Despite all this, she studied, worked hard, and became a world-renowned Talk Show host. Morin writes, 'she chose to define who she was going to be in life, by not giving away her power.'

What distinguishes mentally strong people, like Madonna and Oprah, is that they don't let others' opinions determine their fate. They refuse to hand over their power to others. We need to stand up for ourselves, draw a line in the sand, and remember that we have the ultimate authority over how we think, feel, and behave.

Don't Shy Away From Change

Is there a change you're looking to make? Perhaps it's taking on a new job or ending an unhealthy relationship. Personal growth stems from our ability to embrace change, and adapt to unique circumstances. So how can you adopt the right attitude towards change? Remember, it's hard to leave the safety net of our comfort zone, but to avoid change, means to prevent the fullness of what life has to offer.

Focus on Things You Can't Control

Accept that some things are out of our control. We tend to spend a lot of time worrying about all the *wrong* stuff. Complaining, worrying, and wishful thinking doesn't solve problems. What complaining does do, is

waste precious time and energy.

Consider the Canadian athlete, humanitarian, and cancer research activist Terry Fox. At the age of 18, he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a severe type of bone cancer. His leg was amputated, and he was told that he only had a 15% chance of survival. A day before his operation, Fox found out about a person who had a prosthetic leg and ran the New York Marathon. Inspired, he began running soon after his operation, and completed his first marathon. In 1980, he set forth on an east to west cross-Canada run to raise funds and awareness for cancer research. Halfway through this journey, his cancer returned, and he wasn't able to continue, but despite this, he still managed to raise \$23 million in support of cancer research. He passed away shortly after but left a legacy that teaches us about the power of courage, ambition, and channeling our energy correctly.

Don't Worry About Pleasing Everyone

People-pleasing can drain our mental strength, and cause us to lose sight of what's important to us. It's easy to make choices that are less aligned to our needs and values, but instead geared to keep others happy. It takes bravery to displease others and not forgo what we hold true. To help with this, the suggestion is to write down our top five values, and focus on staying true to them, even if they aren't met with favor.

Don't Fear Taking Calculated Risks

If you quit your day job with a desire to turn a passion into a business, with no prior business experience, that's risky. It might seem bold, but it could leave you without an income should it fail. But to avoid the risk

altogether isn't the answer either. The mentally strong, minimize risk, but they're not afraid to take calculated ones. We need to be rational and not base our choices on our emotions.

Let's look at the story of renowned psychologist Albert Ellis. The young Ellis feared the risk of rejection, and shied away from talking to women. However, after giving it some thought, he concluded that rejection wouldn't feel as bad as he assumed. He put this to the test.

Every day he went to his local park, and sat down to chat with women sitting alone. After some time, he'd ask if they'd like to go for a drink. The result is that he spoke to 130 women, 30 of whom stood up and left as soon as he sat down. Of the remaining 100, only one accepted his drink invite, but sadly didn't show up for the date. While this sounds dismal, for Ellis it didn't matter. For him, he faced the reality of rejection, but no longer feared it.

Fear is an unreliable benchmark to avoid risk. So, what's holding you back, and what might be worth a calculated risk?

Don't Dwell on the Past

We can come to terms with the past, but we don't have to live there. Reflecting on the past, and learning from it can be helpful, but ruminating on it too much can be harmful. If we continuously relive painful experiences, or fantasize about the glory days, we prevent ourselves from enjoying the present or imagining the future. We need to factor out emotions, focus on the facts, and then let go of regrets and forgive the hurts.

Don't Make the Same Mistakes Over and Over

Another crucial characteristic of mentally strong people, is that they avoid repeating the same mistakes. Although it would be nice to learn from each mistake and ensure that we never repeat it, the reality is that we're prone to make the same mistakes over and over.

The key is to set aside pride and call upon humility. We don't need to hide our mistakes or make excuses for them. Instead, see them as learning opportunities. The idea is to accept responsibility and make a creative, thoughtful plan in the future. The next time something goes wrong, take time to ask the following three questions: What did I do wrong? What could I have done better? And what can I do differently the next time around? Avoid the negative self-chat and self-doubt and answer both humbly and honestly.

Don't Resent Other People's Success

It's easy to feel thrown off course by the ambitions and accomplishments of others. Watching another boast about their achievements can quickly stir up feelings of jealousy. But another's success doesn't have to cost us our own. Securing our definition of success, stops us from being wavered by another. Morin explains, 'focusing on another person's success will not pave the way to your own.' So what does success look like to you?

Also, look for ways to help others succeed. Here's food for thought. H.B Reese was an employee of the famous chocolatier, Milton Hershey. While under Hershey's employ, Reese started building up a rival candy company in the same city. Instead of turning towards anger or

resentment, to Reese's surprise, Hershey offered his full support. Reese went on to create the famous peanut butter cup, and Hershey provided the chocolate for this. They continued to collaborate throughout their careers, supporting each other's ideas and successes, and both built profitable businesses that eventually merged.

Don't Give Up After the First Failure

The strong don't easily give up. Who better than Thomas Edison to remind us of perseverance in the light of failure. He gave us the light bulb, but did you know he also invented a ghost machine and an electric pen? Probably not. Why? Because they were complete failures. But he didn't see them as such. Instead, he saw failure as a learning opportunity: a chance to figure out what worked and what didn't. He considered each failure a step closer to success.

Self-compassion can help us change how we think about failure. A 2012 study looked at students who failed an exam, but were given a chance to retake the test and improve their results. Those who adopted a more self-compassionate stance, in other words, didn't equate failure with their self-worth, studied 25% more, and scored higher than those who took failure closer to heart. No one likes to fail, but it's important to remember that failure is part and parcel of success. It's proof that we're pushing ourselves to our limits to reach our full potential.

Don't Fear Alone Time

When was the last time you carved 10 minutes of your day, for some quiet alone time? In today's busy world, it can be a challenge to take time-out for some quiet time-in. For some, solitude can feel unproductive, or

the thought of being alone with our thoughts is just downright scary. Instead, we fill the silent spaces with frenetic activity and background noise. However, the mentally strong take comfort in alone time. Studies show that alone time enhances our capacity for empathy, sparks creativity, and offers restoration. It's an opportunity to be with our thoughts, reflect on our progress, and create future goals.

Don't Feel that the World Owes You Anything

The book warns, 'waiting for the world or the people in it to give us what we think we're owed isn't a helpful life strategy.'

Instead, we can learn from the example set by activist Sarah Robinson. In her early twenties, Sarah found out that she had a brain tumor. She battled for a year and a half before she passed, but during that time, she refused to see life as unfair, or believe that the world owed her something because of her misfortune. Instead, she focused on how she could be of service to others. She realized that many cancer-fighting patients she met, lived far from the treatment centers. They traveled for hours to receive treatment. So she sourced funding for an overnight house near the medical center. To this day, "Sarah's house" is maintained by her family and friends, and remains an overnight home for cancer patients.

So, what if, like Sarah, we intentionally focus on all that we have to give, rather than on what we think we deserve?

Don't Expect Immediate Results

When was the last time you stuck to a New Year's resolution? A study

conducted in 1972, looked at whether or not people succeed with their New Year goals, and found that 25% of participants abandoned them after just 15 weeks. A similar study done in 1989, showed people tend to abandon their resolutions after only one week.

The trouble is, that it's easy to overestimate our abilities, and underestimate how long change takes. We've become accustomed to a world where we don't have to wait for things, and we tend to expect immediate results. This goes against the very idea of self-growth. Self-growth takes time, it's a marathon, not a sprint, and there will be some bumps and setbacks along the way. What's required are realistic expectations. Success doesn't happen overnight, and progress isn't always immediate or recognizable. Sometimes it feels as if we're taking a step back. In order to combat this feeling, it's suggested, 'keep your eyes on the prize and relentlessly work toward your long-term goals.'

In Conclusion

Mental strength can be compared to physical strength. An exercise regime isn't useful if, after our gym session, we snack on a box of doughnuts. To build lean muscle, we also have to eliminate unhealthy eating habits. Building mental muscle requires hard work and dedication. Besides adopting healthy habits, we need to avoid detrimental ones—negative thoughts, unproductive behaviors, and self-destructive emotions.

With a little self-awareness and a lot of practice, we learn to recognize the areas that need work, avoid the pitfalls, and commit to finding better ways to cope with the challenges that life throws us. If we examine our thoughts, pay close attention to how we feel, and monitor our behavior, we can start to let go of habits that no longer serve us. No matter our

goals, avoiding these 13 habits will leave us better equipped to reach our full potential, and maximize our mental strength.

So, the question is, which habit will you choose *not* to do?