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Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I’m Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I’m also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You’re listening to The Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Don’t forget to subscribe to us on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let’s dive into today’s episode!

I get a lot of questions from listeners and readers about mental strength. And one of the most common questions people ask me is, “How do I know if I’m getting mentally stronger?”

That’s a good question. After all, it’s easy to tell if you’re getting physically stronger. You’ll see bigger muscles and you’ll be able to lift heavier weights.

Mental strength is a little more complicated. A lot of changes happen on the inside—like you’ll be able to respond to negative thoughts in a healthier way and you’ll get better at dealing with emotions.

Some changes you can see—like changes in your behavior. As you grow mentally stronger, you might start taking better care of yourself or challenging yourself to do hard things.

But those aren’t always the hallmarks of mental strength. In some cases, a person who is growing mentally stronger might actually slow down. Rather than keep striving for more achievement, they might give themselves permission to enjoy life more.
Since some of your growth only happens on the inside and the changes in behavior can look a little different from person to person, other people might not necessarily see when you’re growing stronger.

Not only might other people not notice, but they might also get it wrong. The things other people assume are signs of mental strength aren’t always indicators of personal growth.

Imagine two people who both work out in the gym for 5 hours a week. They lift similar weights and do similar cardio exercises. So to anyone else at the gym, they look quite similar.

One of those people might truly love themselves. They might be working out because it helps them feel better physically and emotionally. They may find exercise is a great way to build more mental strength.

The other person might hate themselves. They might be working out because they’re trying to punish themselves or because they’re trying to change their body so they can finally look good enough. They might spend their workouts criticizing themselves for not being attractive enough.

Two people with similar behavior but they have very different things going on inside their minds.

So the point is, you’re the only one who is really going to know if you’re growing mentally stronger.

The best way to do this is by asking yourself one question at the end of every day: What did I do today that helped me grow mentally stronger?

The reason that question is so powerful is because that’s one thing you can always control. No matter what life threw at you today, you made choices in how to respond.

And every day is an opportunity to make choices that will help you grow mentally stronger.
Maybe you stayed calm during a disagreement with someone or you practiced some helpful anger management skills. You can't control what the other person said or what they did but you can choose to manage your emotions and your behavior.

Or maybe you did something brave, like you made a phone call that was tough to make. Despite feeling nervous, you did it anyway.

Or maybe all day long you were tempted to do something that you know isn’t good for you—and you resisted the urge. No one else will know how hard you fought that temptation all day—but you will.

Asking yourself this question can help you avoid focusing on things that are outside your control.

For example, you can't control whether your boss picks you for a promotion. But you can control how much effort you put into your work.

You can’t control whether someone breaks a promise, but you can control how you respond when it happens.

You might be tempted to judge your mental strength based on how well things went—even though some of those things you might have zero control over.

So it's important to take a step back and assess yourself a little more objectively.

Asking yourself a question about your growth is a strategy that therapists often use too. We get tempted to gauge how we're doing based on the percentage of our clients who are getting better. When we have some huge success stories or we're seeing a fair amount of clients feeling better, we might want credit for helping them make progress. But then, when we have more clients struggling, we might get down on ourselves for not doing a good enough job.
So we often remind each other that at the end of the work day, the best thing we can do is ask ourselves, “What did I do today that sharpened my therapy skills?”

This question gives a chance to review what we did well. Then we often spend a little time thinking about how we can do better tomorrow. That prevents us from completely judging ourselves based on the ups and downs of our clients’ lives. So if you see a good therapist, know that they’re constantly working on sharpening their skills so they can serve you better.

Similarly, we can all work on sharpening our mental strength skills every day.

When we take a step back and look at what we did to grow mentally stronger, we’re able to see things from a slightly different perspective. You might see how saying no to something was a real sign of strength in one case and accepting an invitation to do something else that also felt scary was also a sign of mental strength.

Once you answer that question for yourself, you can ask yourself what you want to do better tomorrow.

Answering that question can also help you uncover areas of your life that could use a little more work—like maybe you want to sharpen your listening skills so you can better connect with people or maybe you want to work to better understand people before jumping to conclusions.

So I encourage you at the end of every day to ask yourself, “What did I do today that helped me grow mentally stronger?” If you really want to get the most out of this exercise, write down your answer.

You don’t have to write 10 pages about your day. Instead, you might write a paragraph. Or you might just have a monthly planner where you write something you did to grow stronger on each day of the month.

But, writing down your answer—however you choose to do it—can help you make better sense of things that might be swirling around in your head. It
also gives you a chance to look back over all the things you’ve done to build mental muscle. When you read over that list, you’ll be reminded of all the things you’re doing to grow mentally stronger.

You don’t necessarily have to do anything heroic to grow mentally stronger. Here are some examples of things you might notice:

- When I started thinking negatively about myself after making a mistake, I reminded myself to use self-compassion and talk to myself with kindness.
- When my co-worker disagreed with me in the meeting, I let them talk. When they were done, I shared some facts to back up my opinion without getting upset.
- I made time to read today even though I didn’t feel like it.
- I said no to a family member who tried to guilt me into going to a family gathering.

Those are just a few examples. But remember, the thoughts, feelings and actions you’re working on are unique to you. Someone else’s signs of mental strength might be the opposite (like instead of going to the gym, taking a day off from the gym might be a sign of strength). It all depends on your goals and the things you’re doing to become the best version of yourself.

But give it a shot. I suspect if you commit to asking yourself every day for a month about what you did to grow mentally stronger, you’ll see a difference over the course of 30 days. You’ll take less responsibility for things outside of your control, accept responsibility for your thoughts, feelings and behavior, and you’ll start looking for opportunities every day to grow stronger.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them! Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.
Do you want free access to my online course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Full Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course. Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who tries to avoid tying his happiness to the Major League Baseball standings), Nick Valentin.