Follow Our Show:

Verywell Mind - Apple - Spotify - Google
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!

Today, I’m talking about the difference between acting tough and being strong.

It’s something that easily gets confused. And the misconceptions about mental strength can lead to a lot of unhealthy behavior.

First let me talk about mental toughness. People define mental toughness in lots of different ways. Sometimes people use mental toughness to describe healthy behavior—like someone who is persevering through a struggle. At other times, it’s used to describe someone who more likely has a fragile ego who is trying to prove to others that they’re good enough.

So when someone asks if mental strength is the same as mental toughness, my answer is it depends on how you’re defining what mental toughness is.
Mental strength is about the way you think, feel, and behave. It involves being able to respond to unhelpful thoughts in a healthy way. And when it comes to emotions, it’s about knowing that you have choices in how you manage your emotions—like you might allow yourself to feel uncomfortable emotions while also recognizing when it’s helpful to shift your emotional state. And when it comes to behavior, it involves taking helpful action—which depending on the circumstance might involve pushing yourself to do something hard or it might involve stepping away from something that’s not serving you well.

Ultimately, mental strength is about knowing what your values are living according to those values.

But sometimes people just act tough because they think it makes them look like they’re strong. And other people often reinforce that notion by saying, “oh you’re so strong,” when someone is just acting tough.

Why does it matter if you’re acting tough or being strong? People who act tough on the outside are often suffering greatly on the inside. And the more they stay focused on looking tough, the harder it is to do let down their guard and do the things they need to feel better.

As a therapist, I’ve seen so many people suffer for years and not know how to open up to someone about their problems because they were afraid they’d convinced people they were so tough that nothing bothered them—and they were really lonely on the inside because no one knew the private pain they were struggling with.

Being strong takes a different approach. When you’re focused on being strong, you’ll stop worrying about whether people are judging you for your struggles.

So let’s get into some concrete examples. Here are six key differences between acting tough and being strong.

1. **Acting tough is about suppressing your emotions. Being strong is about acknowledging them.**

Being mentally strong does sometimes mean you have to put your feelings aside and push through tough circumstances. But when you do that it’s temporary and it’s so you can function to complete a specific tasks. A paramedic needs to be able to push their feelings aside to their job when they come across victims of a car accident. Soldiers on a battlefield need to set aside their fear to complete their mission.

Even if your job doesn’t call for you to set aside your emotions, there will be times when you need to shove those emotions aside. Let’s say your mom has a serious health
problem and you want to go talk to the doctor with her. In order to have a productive conversation, you might need to shove down all the fear and sadness so you can spend the appointment gathering information, not crying uncontrollably.

So yes, putting on a brave face has a time and a place. But when people are acting tough, their brave face is usually about wanting to be perceived as someone who is impervious to pain, rather than because they need to temporarily set aside their feelings to take productive action.

Sometimes, it takes more mental strength to acknowledge and express emotions than it does to ignore them or pretend they don’t exist.

When someone asks you how you are doing, you might be tempted to insist you’re doing great. Or you might pretend as though you have everything together when you’re really stressed to the max. But talking about your emotions and asking for help when you need it is part of being strong.

2. **Acting tough is about saying failure isn’t an option. Being strong is about acknowledging that failure is part of the process.**

People who act tough are often embarrassed by failure. So they’re tempted to only do things that they’re good at or take risks where they’re fairly confident they’ll succeed. Losing or failing just feels too bad.

Being strong is about wanting to do well but recognizing that failure is an opportunity to learn and grow.

It takes a lot of courage to admit you made a mistake, you failed, or you got rejected. But when you try to hide those things from other people, you’ll experience a deep sense of shame in your life and it becomes harder to work on getting better.

3. **Acting tough is about masking insecurities while being strong is about acknowledging them.**

People who act tough want to create a persona that says, “Look how great I am!” Consequently, they don’t want anyone to see their flaws.

People who are acting tough want to appear as though they’re completely confident all the time about everything.

Mental strength however tends to involve talking about vulnerabilities and insecurities in appropriate settings. You might accept some weaknesses and attempt to work on others.
It’s OK to acknowledge that you feel bad about something, whether it’s your lack of athletic skills or you struggle with money. In fact, it takes a lot of courage to admit that you’re having a hard time—and sometimes it’s hard to even admit that yourself.

4. **Acting tough focuses on reputation. Mental strength focuses on character.**

When people are acting tough, they want others to admire them. When people are intent on building mental strength, they have an internal desire to become better. Acting tough might cause you to worry more about getting to top, rather than the process it took to get there.

There’s this silly thing we’ve probably all done at one time or another—when you work really hard on something but then claim you didn’t put in that much effort. Like when you study hard for a test but then you tell your friends that you barely studied at all because the only thing worse than failing is putting in a ton of effort and doing your best and then failing.

It’s this desire to focus on reputation that sometimes causes people to do things that seem really out of character. Your usually honest teenager might cheat on a test. Or a co-worker who is usually trustworthy might lie to get ahead at work. Caring too much about what other people think about you rather than how you feel about yourself can cause you to do things that don’t line up with your values.

5. **Acting tough involves trying to control other people. Being strong involves controlling yourself.**

When someone acts in a way you don’t like, you’ll likely have some sort of emotional response. Then, you have two choices, do you focus on managing your response or do you put your energy into controlling the other person?

There are plenty of times when it makes sense to set healthy boundaries that help you keep your inner peace. Tell your ex you aren’t going to answer the phone late at night anymore. Say no when your sister asks to borrow money again.

But, when people try to act tough they insist on controlling other people at all costs. Sometimes it’s small things, like a boss who tries to micromanage employees. At other times it’s big things, like giving out ultimatums in an attempt to try and force someone to change because they can’t manage their inner turmoil.
6. **Acting tough is about tolerating pain while mental strength is about learning from pain.**

Tough people often pride themselves on tolerating pain and suffering—sometimes just to show off and other times to gain admiration.

Sometimes it involves denying that you even feel pain, like when you brag about having your wisdom teeth removed without any pain meds and you claim you hardly felt a thing.

But mental strength involves trusting that you can tolerate painful experiences but you don’t put yourself in harms way just to brag about how you survived something awful. Again it seems sort of silly on the surface but we’ve probably all done like this at one time or another.

You do something really hard and then claim it was easy. Or you do hard things for no real reason other than to torture yourself.

I have this concern sometimes about people who sit in ice water or take freezing cold showers. People ask me all the time if that’s something I do. The answer is no way and for me, there’s a personal reason behind why I’m not doing it. My parents grew up in some pretty rough circumstances. My mom didn’t have a shower or a bath tub. She worked really hard in her life so I could take a hot shower. There’s no way I would now purposely take cold showers to toughen myself up after she worked so hard.

But that’s just me. I hear a lot of people who say stepping into an ice bath helps them see that they can tolerate more pain than they think because their brain tells them to get out and they stay longer.

I’m all for challenging ourselves to do hard things. But honestly, I don’t think most of us have to sit in ice cold water to do that. Life is hard enough and there are plenty of challenging things you can do every day just to get through the day.

But no matter what you do to challenge yourself, make sure the sole purpose isn’t to just show other people how tough you are. You’ll never get enough admiration to satisfy your needs.

Painful experiences can be learning opportunities. But you’ll miss out on those learning opportunities if you’re just focused on ensuring everyone else is watching you.
So those are the key differences between acting tough and being strong. When people say things like, “they’re tired of being strong,” they’re not. They’re tired of acting tough. Or when someone says, “Make sure to check on your strong friends,” they probably mean, “Check on your friends who feel pressured to act tough.”

When you’re being strong, you’ll be willing to be vulnerable and ask for help when you need it. I know that it’s tough to raise your hand and say, “I don’t have all this figured,” or “I’m really struggling here.” But breaking free from that need to act tough could be the best thing you ever do for yourself. And all those fears you have about being judged or letting people down are most likely unfounded. In fact, something we’ve talked about on the show before is that you’ll have better relationships with people when you focus on connecting with them, not impressing them.

If you want to learn more about how to do this, listen to episode 105, “How to See Vulnerability as a Strength, Not a Weakness.” That might be a good place to start.

If you know someone who could benefit from learning about how to shed a tough exterior, share this show 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 Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. 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!