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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!

Now let’s dive into today’s episode!

Today I’m talking about how to create an environment that is conducive to building mental strength.

Before I talk about what it means to change your environment or when to do it, I want you to think about how you might answer these questions:

- If you work in a really stressful environment and it’s starting to impact your health, should you change jobs or work on finding better ways to manage your stress?
• If you aren’t happy with the place you live, should you practice more gratitude or should you find a new place to live?

• If you feel bad about the size of your body, should you work on losing weight or practice accepting yourself just the way you are?

There’s no absolute right angle to tackle a problem. But, we all get into patterns where we tackle all our problems from the exact same angle. That’s where the problem comes in.

Some people always work on themselves when they feel like something isn’t going well in their lives. They take a deep breath and try to force themselves to do better or feel better—even when they’re in a tough situation.

Other people always try to fix the situation. If they’re not happy, they change jobs, move to new places, end relationships, or do anything they can to create the perfect environment when the real problem is they lack inner peace.

Most of what I talk about on the podcast and in my books is about how to build inner strength so you can cope with whatever life throws your way.

When we’re not happy with ourselves or we want to be happier or less anxious, quite often, we think the change needs to come from within. We think the solution is to work harder on fixing ourselves. We chalk up our problems to character flaws, moral weaknesses, lack of skills, or a lack of mental strength.

But, sometimes, the problem isn’t us. It’s the environment. Making a few changes to the outer world could go a long way toward helping you build inner strength.

I’ve worked with a lot of therapy clients over the years who found themselves in unhealthy situations but rather than change the circumstance, they tried to change
themselves. I’m positive we all do this sometimes. We work too many hours and get mad at ourselves for not being good at time management—when the real problem is that we’re trying to cram way too much work into way too little time.

Or we get into a relationship that isn’t right for us and rather than change the relationship, we try to change ourselves.

We often beat ourselves up for not being good enough—when in reality, we put ourselves in nearly impossible situations.

I’ll give you a few examples from my therapy office. There was a woman in her mid 40s who said she was so anxious she couldn’t sleep. She wanted to work on her anxiety because she was struggling to function. She said the anxiety was sudden and started about a month ago. So I asked her whether anything in her life had changed around that time.

She explained she was married but had been having an affair with her married boss for several months. About one month earlier, her husband and the boss’ wife discovered the affair. So she and the boss decided to move in together that night. She moved into the boss’ house right away and he asked his wife to leave.

She had been friends with the wife for years. And now she found herself living in this home with her boss and his teenage children (whom she had never previously met) and all of the boss’ belongings were still there. Her husband and her three children had not had any contact with her and she didn’t have any of her own belongings.

She said, “I feel sort of like I just took on my friend’s life. I can’t go back and change things now though. I have nothing. And if I left, I wouldn’t even have a job.”

So she was in hopes that talk therapy would reduce her anxiety.
But the truth was, she should have felt anxious. Her entire world had changed. She had enjoyed the affair with her boss but she never imagined they’d have a relationship or that she’d leave her family.

Learning a few meditation skills or a few breathing exercises weren’t going to reduce her anxiety. Instead, she had to develop a healthier plan for herself. Within a few weeks, she decided to quit her job, move in with her parents, and spend some time focusing on what she wanted to do next. She had a lot of feelings to work through before she could make any long-term decisions. Before she could expect herself to begin feeling better though she had to make a major change to her environment.

Here’s another example. A man came into my therapy office because he was irritable toward his wife and kids and he felt bad about that. He really wanted to be the best father and husband he could be. To him, that meant working really hard to provide for his family. He worked as a mechanic and he worked as much overtime as he could—meaning he often worked more than 70 hours every week.

His wife homeschooled their kids so he wanted to give her a break from parenting duties as soon as he walked in the door. He also wanted to make sure he did his fair share of cooking and cleaning. But, he found himself short on patience. When his kids didn’t pick up their toys, he yelled. And when they didn’t move fast enough to brush their teeth, he yelled. He felt like his nerves were on edge all the time.

He blamed himself for being a bad dad. But, the reason he was so irritable was because he was working such long hours, wasn’t getting enough sleep, and didn’t have any spare time to take care of himself.

He had to make some changes to his life if he wanted to be less irritable. Cutting back on a few work hours, sleeping more hours, and allowing himself to have fun once in a while went a long way toward reducing his irritability.
But too often, we think we should be strong enough to handle anything and we put ourselves in these situations that set us up for failure.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to modify the environment in ways that help you feel strong. Here are five things you can do to create an environment that is conducive to building mental strength?

1. **Ask yourself, do I need to change the situation or change how I feel about the situation?**

   So often we tackle the problem from the wrong angle. Let’s say you have a huge pile of bills and not enough money to pay them. And you have a lot of anxiety about it.

   The solution isn’t to work on breathing skills. Although meditating and deep breaths will help you feel better for a minute, the real solution is to work on a plan to tackle your mounting debt.

   That’s not to say you can’t do some breathing exercises too, but changing your situation is sometimes the key to being able to build mental strength.

2. **Make good habits easily accessible.**

   Our brains are programmed to take the path of least resistance in almost anything we do. And if we encounter even the slightest challenge along the way, we get tempted to change course.

   That’s why it’s so important to make your good habits easily accessible. Then, you won’t waste precious brain power overcoming obstacles to get to your healthy habits.

   Sometimes, little things that make your good habits easy to access make a huge difference. Put the healthy snacks within reach so you aren’t tempted to eat the cookies.
Leave your gratitude journal on your nightstand so you remember to write in it before bed. Set a reminder on your phone to take your medication.

Do everything you can to set yourself up for success. Then, it becomes easier to keep building mental strength.

3. **Made unhealthy habits tougher to access.**

Sometimes, people put themselves in unhealthy situations under the premise that they should be strong enough to handle anything.

But that’s not true. If you’re trying to eat a healthier diet, don’t surround yourself with junk food all day. If you want to stop drinking, stop going to happy hour after work.

You only have so much mental energy. And the last thing you want to do is waste your brainpower fighting temptations all day.

Invest time into making any unhealthy habits tougher to access. It can make a huge difference.

I once worked with a woman who was trying to eat healthier. But her partner kept a fair amount of sweets in the house and they usually kept them on the countertop in the kitchen. So they made a deal that they’d keep his junk food on the highest shelf in the back of the pantry out of site. If she wanted a cookie, she had to go get a chair to even reach the cookies. That one little change made it so she didn’t just grab a snack on her way through the kitchen. And when she sometimes thought about having a cookie, she often decided it wasn’t worth the effort to get up to the top shelf.

Think about any unhealthy habits you want to change–and make them harder to access. Then, you’ll have a lot more mental energy to use on things that matter most.
4. Pay attention to the people you let into your life.

I had a woman come into my therapy office once stating she wanted me to help her feel more confident so she could stand up to her boyfriend who called her names. But, the reason she lacked confidence was because she was being verbally abused all day. It was taking a huge toll on her mental health.

The people around you greatly impact your mental health. And while it would be easy to say you should only surround yourself with positive people who inspire you, the truth is, that's not reasonable.

All human beings struggle. And just because your friend develops depression doesn't mean you can't be friends with them. Or if you have a parent with some serious mental health problems, you don't necessarily need to cut them out of your life.

You can establish healthy boundaries however. That may mean not answering the phone if you have an ex who calls you late at night to tell you about their problems. Or it may mean saying no to someone who asks a lot of favors from you.

Take a look around at the people around you sometimes. You might decide it's best to end some relationships, to change some of the ways you interact with people, or to start looking for some new people in your life.

Remember, emotions and behavior can be contagious. But so can kindness and happiness. The people around you make a huge difference to your mental strength.

5. Manage your physical environment.

This one might seem obvious, but it's often overlooked.
If you’re having trouble staying on task because you keep checking your phone, turn the internet off your phone. Or set it to do not disturb for 30 minutes so you can concentrate. Or clear the clutter off your desktop that keeps distracting you.

The same goes for your house. If you’re stressed out all the time but you’re living in a house that’s overflowing with clutter, bags of trash, and dirty clothes, you’re space is going to add to your stress.

I know it’s tough to get organized when you’re feeling awful. But, sometimes organizing your space is the first step in helping you feel calmer on the inside.

I will probably do a whole episode just on managing your physical space down the road because there are so many things to consider—from the lighting to the temperature to the colors of the walls. The things around you affect how you feel. The last thing you want to do is be in a space that drains you of mental strength. You want to control what you can—and if you can create an environment that makes it conducive to building mental muscle, you’ll be able to work smarter, not just harder.

So those are five changes you can make to the outside world to help you build more inner strength: ask yourself whether you need to change the situation or how you feel about the situation, make your good habits easily accessible, make your unhealthy habits harder to access, be mindful of the people you allow into your life, and manage your physical space.

Take a look around once in a while at the things you can do to create an environment that allows you to be the strongest and best version of yourself. You might find a few small changes makes a big difference.

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 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!

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who pays attention to everything from the lighting to the colors of the room so our floating podcast studio is conducive to building mental strength), Nick Valentin.