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**verywell  
mind  
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WITH THERAPIST  
**Amy Morin**

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## How to Be Mentally Strong When You're Dealing With Uncomfortable Emotions

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## 154 - Friday Fix: How to Be Mentally Strong When You're Experiencing Uncomfortable Emotions

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 stay mentally strong when you're experiencing uncomfortable emotions.

I received a question from someone on Instagram recently asking me how to know if you're being mentally strong when you're dealing with feelings like sadness and anger.

Many people think that their level of mental strength is directly proportional to how much they feel an emotion.

But that's not true.

Just because you feel a lot of sadness or a lot of anxiety doesn't mean you lack mental strength. In a minute we'll discuss what it does mean and how to stay strong when your emotions are intense.

Before we do though, let's talk about the 3 parts to mental strength: thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Your thoughts are the narration that's constantly running through your head.

Your feelings are the emotions you can experience, like happiness and sadness.

Your behavior is about the action you take in response to your thoughts and feelings.

It sounds obvious on the surface. But, those things get a little jumbled sometimes.

In therapy I might ask someone how they felt about the fact that their partner came home late. They might respond by saying, "I felt she was wrong." But "she was wrong," is a thought, not a feeling. The person may have actually felt angry or sad.

Or I might ask someone, "What did you do when your boss said you needed to meet?" They might respond by saying something like, "I got mad." But that's how they felt, not what they did. The action they took might involve pacing and venting to a co-worker.

You've probably heard someone say something along the lines of "Whatever you feel is OK. Your feelings aren't wrong." But people often confuse their thoughts and their feelings—either accidentally or as a weapon in an argument.

Here's an example. I had a man in my therapy office who used to say things to his partner like, "You expect me to do way too much. That's just how I feel. And I'm sorry if you think my feelings are wrong."

But, the idea that his partner was asking too much of him is a thought. His feelings were more likely angry or frustrated. And while he was entitled to his opinion that his partner's expectations were too high, he wasn't communicating his feelings in a healthy way.

So now, that we've covered the difference between thoughts, feelings and behavior, let's talk about how to stay mentally strong when you're dealing with uncomfortable emotions.

You can experience any emotion to various degrees. You might feel a little anxious when you're in the waiting room at the doctor's office just because it's a little uncomfortable to be there. But two days later when you're waiting for the lab to call to give you the results of a blood test, you might feel really anxious.

Your thoughts and your behavior affect your feelings.

So while you're in the waiting room at the doctor's office, you might be thinking, "I wonder what the doctor will say about my symptoms. I hope I don't have anything serious." If you're mostly confident that your health issue is minor, you might be able to keep your anxiety in check.

Your behavior would involve sitting in the waiting room and perhaps scrolling through your phone. Those actions might help you stay in a relatively calm state.

Two days later though as you're waiting for bloodwork results, you might be thinking about all the potential worst case scenarios. You might imagine your doctor calling to tell you that you have a terminal illness. And those thoughts cause your anxiety to spike.

And those thoughts and feelings are likely to affect your behavior. You might find yourself pacing around the room and doing tons of online research about the conditions you fear you might have. In turn, those actions might reinforce your thoughts that you're about to die which will fuel your anxious feelings and the cycle will continue.

So back to the question about how to stay mentally strong when you're experiencing a difficult emotion. It's all about how you respond to your uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

You can't control the first thought that pops into your head. But you can choose how to respond to it.

You also might not be able to control the fact that certain things cause a spike in uncomfortable feelings—but you can choose how you respond to those emotions.

Your choices about how you think and how you behave will either fuel your anxiety or decrease it.

When you start imagining something terrible, you can remind yourself that you aren't good at predicting the future. There's a chance something good might happen too. You can also remind yourself of your ability to handle whatever outcome you face.

You could ask yourself, "what would I say to my friend right now who had this concern?" After all, you probably wouldn't tell your friend, "You're going to get horrible news from the doctor today!" Instead, you might say something more reassuring like, "I think there's a good chance you'll be just fine." Give yourself those same kind, reassuring words.

You can also examine your behavior. For some people, looking through the internet for answers might temporarily relieve their anxiety. We often feel a little relief when we take some sort of action. But, for some people online research can become unhealthy and obsessive.

There are times when online research may also make anxiety worse. You're likely to find articles that point to worst case scenarios which can increase your anxiety.

So, while waiting for that call from the doctor, you might find it's helpful to distract yourself a bit. Talking to a friend about something other than your health, might give your brain a much-needed break from worrying. And then you might feel just a little better.

If you want to change how you feel, change what you're thinking and how you're behaving. You can shift your emotional state.

That's not to say you should always try and cheer yourself up or you should feel happy. Uncomfortable emotions can be healthy--and they can be really good for us.

Being mentally strong is about recognizing when those feelings are helpful and when they're potentially harmful.

Feeling sad can be helpful when it helps you honor something or someone that you've lost. Sadness isn't helpful when it causes you to isolate yourself and stay in bed all day. Anxiety can be helpful when it warns you that you're in danger. It's not helpful when it tries to talk you out of accepting a big opportunity at work. Anger might be helpful when it gives you courage to speak up for yourself. It's not helpful if it causes you to say something mean to someone you love.

When an emotion isn't helpful, you can shift your emotional state. When it is helpful, you can choose to reach for healthy coping skills to help you tolerate and manage it.

But keep in mind that a good coping skill isn't just something that feels good now. It should also be something that is good for you in the long-term.

So while reaching for a giant bowl of ice cream when you're stressed might give you a bit of an instant relief, doing that too often can take a toll on your health. It's important to assess your coping skills sometimes. What do you automatically reach for when you're feeling anxious, lonely, bored, or sad?

You might find that you spend way too much time on your phone lately. Or that you've been relying too much on TV to distract you from your emotions. Most people don't

really spend much time thinking about how they manage their emotions and those things become automatic.

So part of being mentally strong with your feelings requires you to check-in with yourself once in a while and examine your coping skills. Are they helpful? Are they good for you in both the short and the long-term? You can always experiment with new coping strategies. You might find getting more exercise helps you keep your anxiety in check or writing in a journal helps you manage sad feelings better than scrolling through your phone.

So here's a plan for how you can stay mentally strong when you're dealing with an uncomfortable emotion:

1. Name your feeling. Whether you're feeling sad or lonely, studies show just putting a name to your feeling can take some of the sting out of it. You'll help your brain and your body make more sense of what's going on when you put a label to whatever you're feeling. Just thinking, "I'm sad right now," might help you feel a little less sad.
2. Decide if your feeling is helpful or harmful. If your emotion is helpful, embrace it. This might mean using a healthy coping skill to help you deal with it. If it's harmful, you can shift your emotional state.
3. If you want to change how you feel, change your thoughts and your behaviors. Let's say you're feeling really sad. And you're thinking, "I just want to stay in bed today." If you stay in bed, you'll likely get sadder. You could respond to your sad feelings by changing the way you think first. You might remind yourself that staying in bed is likely to make you feel worse. You might think about what you can do when you get out of bed. Then, you can change your behavior. Push yourself to get up and go do something. Taking action might help you feel less sad. Change your behavior first and the feelings will often follow.

So those are 3 things you can do to stay mentally strong when you're experiencing an uncomfortable emotion. Name your feelings. Then, decide if your emotions are helpful or harmful. If your emotions are helpful, embrace them; but if they're harmful, change your thoughts and your behavior to shift them.

If you're struggling to deal with uncomfortable feelings, reach out to a therapist if you can. Therapists can help you find new ways to cope with uncomfortable feelings, and they can assist you in staying mentally strong when you're going through tough times.

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. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is [podcast@verywell.com](mailto: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 uses music to cope with lots of feelings), Nick Valentin.