Ways to strengthen your willpower

Willpower is a human trait that gives us self-confidence, energy, and a sense of achievement. It is also something many of us may feel we don’t have enough of.

In a recent Stress in America survey conducted by the American Psychological Association, 27% of respondents reported that their lack of willpower was the most significant barrier to change. However, a majority of respondents also believe that willpower is something that can be learned.

According to the APA, psychological scientists define willpower as:

- The ability to delay gratification resisting short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals.
- The capacity to override an unwanted thought, feeling or impulse.
- The ability to employ a “cool” cognitive system of behaviour rather than a “hot” emotional system.
- Conscious, effortful regulation of the self by the self.
- A limited resource capable of being depleted.

Recent research suggests some ways in which willpower can be strengthened with practice. Try these exercises to strengthen your willpower:

1. Organizing:
Make a decision to organize an inconsequential list of things. For example, decide on organizing files on your computer in a certain way, or organizing things in your room a certain way. Give everything a home. Clean up your work desk. These little things will help you strengthen your willpower. Plus, a cleaner work desk, helps with focus and increases positive energy.

2. Reverse procrastination:
Procrastination usually works by telling yourself that you’ll do something tough tomorrow so you can rest/do something easy today. Do the opposite. For example, if you’re trying to exercise more, tell yourself you’ll walk today and you can eat that ice cream tomorrow. The phrase is still, “I can always do that tomorrow”. But, “that” refers to something easy and unimportant.

3. Watch meditation:
This is another unique exercise for strengthening willpower. Simply take an analog watch and look at the second hand for five minutes. While you do that, try to only focus on the ticking hand and nothing else. Every time you lose focus, pull yourself back by sheer willpower. Do it regularly to strengthen mental self-control.

4. Trackers:
Track things related to your professional and personal life. Plan things out ahead of time and then execute those plans. The most empowering feeling is when you check something off of your to-do list.
Do We Really Feel It In Our Gut?

“My gut says I shouldn’t do that.” It’s something people say when they aren’t entirely sure why they feel as they do, but have a strong feeling. Have you ever had a “gut-wrenching” experience? Do certain situations make you “feel nauseous”? Have you ever felt “butterflies” in your stomach?

The gut-brain connection is no joke, according to Harvard Medical School. It can link anxiety to stomach problems and vice versa. The gastrointestinal tract is sensitive to emotion. Anger, anxiety, sadness, elation — all of these feelings (and others) can trigger symptoms in the gut.

The brain has a direct effect on the stomach and intestines. For example, the very thought of eating can release the stomach’s juices before food gets there. This connection goes both ways.

A troubled intestine can send signals to the brain, just as a troubled brain can send signals to the gut. Therefore, a person’s stomach or intestinal distress can be the cause or the product of anxiety, stress, or depression.

That’s because the brain and the gastrointestinal (GI) system are intimately connected.

Given how closely the gut and brain interact, it becomes easier to understand why you might feel nauseated before giving a presentation, or feel intestinal pain during times of stress. That doesn’t mean, however, that functional gastrointestinal conditions are imagined or “all in your head.” Stress, depression or other psychological factors can affect movement and contractions of the GI tract, make inflammation worse, or perhaps make you more susceptible to infection.

A review of 13 studies showed that patients who tried psychologically based approaches had greater improvement in their digestive symptoms compared with patients who received only conventional medical treatment.

Are you suffering from stomach or intestinal problems and could they be related to stress? Consider making an appointment with your health care provider to discuss your options.

Reasons why you may be tired at the gym

Everyone has had a bad workout. But what if you feel exhausted during almost every workout? Here are a few reasons why you may feel excessive fatigue at the gym:

1. You’re working out at the wrong time of day. Try working out at different times of the day and figure out when your energy levels peak. Despite the potential benefits of early morning workouts, they aren’t for everyone. And if you are sacrificing sleep to work out early, don’t. Sleep is crucial for recovery.

2. You aren’t eating enough, or you aren’t eating the right things. If you are trying to lose weight, you may be cutting calories or avoiding carbs. However, having too steep a deficit is going to be detrimental to your energy levels in the gym. Remember that calories are energy. Make sure to eat something about an hour or so before you work out. Ideally, your pre-workout snack or meal should have a substantial amount of protein to keep you satiated, but it should also include carbs to put fuel in your tank. A bagel or a high-protein granola bar is a good choice.

3. Your exercise routine is too intense. Obviously, you want to make gains. But going too hard, too soon, is only going to set you up for burnout. Make sure that your exercise goals are realistic for your lifestyle. If you are stumbling out of the gym every day with no energy left even to do the house chores or socialize, take a step back and analyze your routine. Make sure you are taking rest days; even professional athletes usually have at least one day off. If your workouts take over an hour, consider shortening them.

There are many more potential causes of fatigue in the gym, including not being adequately hydrated, not warming up properly, or spending too much time and energy on the warmup.

If you feel like you’ve tried everything and still can’t find an explanation for why you’re always so tired at the gym, it might be time to see a doctor. There are plenty of medical issues that can cause fatigue, from nutritional deficiencies to thyroid problems to medication side effects.
Colouring can help relieve stress

Colouring pages might be a solution if you want to reduce stress, improve focus, and adopt a calm mindset without trying to figure out how to meditate. Here’s why according to author and physician Dr. Joseph Mercola:

Healing mindset - Colouring activities do more than help relieve stress. They also help train your mind to focus on one activity, explains Mercola. Also called mindfulness, colouring may help reduce stress, improve your memory, reduce your emotional reactivity, and improve your cognitive flexibility.

Stress relief - Colouring pages may help relieve anxiety quickly. When you focus on adding colour to printed pictures, you become present in the moment. Since most concerns stem from what’s happened or fear of what could occur, while you’re colouring, you’re living in the here and now.

Creative expression - As well as pulling you into the present, colouring allows you to engage in creativity without demanding artistic talent. Simply adding colour between the lines is easy and fulfilling. Some people report feeling satisfied and relaxed as they engage in colouring.

Relaxed attention - Colouring pages may improve attentiveness. Some students have tried colouring pages while listening to lectures, notes Mercola. These students report that colouring helped them to relax while concentrating.

Positivity - Colouring pages consists of creating positive images or beautiful patterns. When you pour attention into observing an uplifting subject matter, this is likely to make you feel good.

For the best results, Mercola recommends selecting a colouring book with patterns or pictures that appeal to you. Consider colouring at a particular time like during the evening as you unwind. Try to be in a tranquil environment to help the association between calmness and colouring.

You can also try colouring just before a stressful event to calm your nerves, since you will have already forged a link between the activity and feeling relaxed.

Certain vegetables are better served cooked

When we talk about healthy snacks to keep in your fridge, we often mention keeping some fresh vegetables like carrot or celery sticks chopped and ready to go to stave off the munchies.

However there are some vegetables that are better for your health when cooked. Cooking vegetables can neutralize enzymes that would cause digestive problems and it also kills potentially harmful bacteria.

Here are some examples:

Cook Your Cruciferous Vegetables
Cabbage, Brussels Sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower and other cruciferous vegetables are fine to eat raw for most people. Some folks, however, experience gas and bloating from difficult-to-digest sugars found in raw cruciferous vegetables. These sugars become easier to digest once cooked. Although you may find many claims about foods you should and shouldn’t eat to ensure thyroid health, in general there are no specific foods you must avoid if you have hypothyroidism — including kale and spinach. Eating a healthy, balanced diet and carefully taking your medication as prescribed by your health care provider will go a long way toward effectively managing hypothyroidism.

Avoid Raw Potatoes
You can get away with munching on raw potatoes, but it isn’t great for your health. According to Utah State University, raw potatoes -- particularly green ones -- can have a high concentration of a dangerous toxin known as solanine. Raw potatoes also contain anti-nutrients. Though you can remove most of the anti-nutrients by peeling the potatoes, some still remain in the flesh. In addition, the uncooked starch in potatoes can result in digestive problems, gas and bloating. For the most benefit and the least risk from your potatoes, consider baking or steaming them.

Cooking Other Vegetables
A 2011 study published in Food Chemistry examined blanching (cooking asparagus briefly in boiling water) and saw a marked difference in the asparagus depending on how long the vegetable was submerged. In general, the longer the asparagus was blanched, the more nutrients it lost, though cooking it for too short a time resulted in hard stalks. The beta-carotene in cooked carrots is easier to absorb, and your body derives more iron, calcium and magnesium from cooked spinach.

Unless you have a specific reason to avoid the raw form of a vegetable, include both raw and cooked varieties in your diet. The American Heart Association recommends poaching, steaming, stir-frying, grilling or roasting your vegetables.
Dealing with the loss of the co-worker

It’s summer time and that means we are all supposed to be happy and excited about the great weather, the gatherings and everything else that makes this one of the finest seasons of the year. But perhaps something has occurred in your life recently that is leaving a gray haze over your sunny days. Your smile is firmly on your face as you carry in that three-bean-salad to yet another friend’s barbecue, but inside you just can’t make yourself support your smile. What if that “something” was the loss of a co-worker? Perhaps you didn’t know him or her all that well, but you saw each other in the mornings, and waved to each other at the end of the day. So you find yourself wondering, why can’t I get over this? Why have other colleagues been able to move on?

The American Psychology Association tells us our co-workers are very much like an extended family. We spend most of our waking hours with them, forging special bonds of trust and friendship in a way that is unlike our other relationships. Suddenly that person is missing. Whether it was due to a workplace incident or succumbing to a long illness, such a loss can cause you to experience feelings of guilt or anxiety, especially if you were ignoring her phone calls at work, or the last thing you said to him was in anger or frustration.

For some of us, thoughts of the deceased may make it hard to focus on our work for a short while. Others may find it difficult to get back on track. Preoccupation with a co-worker’s death may present safety hazards or a loss of concentration during your daily drive to and from work could easily lead to a crash.

According to the APA, grief is a natural process that requires time. Your experience, your feelings, and your grief matter. If you are having difficulty accepting a co-worker’s death, a qualified mental health professional can help you adjust to the loss. Here are a few other suggestions:

- Share your feelings. Your other co-workers may be experiencing the same feelings you are. Mutual support can help everyone get through the grieving process.
- Take advantage of Employee Assistance Programs, if available. Experienced counselors can offer the support. If you don’t have access to local therapists or support groups, there are virtual therapists and groups. The important thing to remember is you don’t have to go through this alone.

Handling a migraine at work

If you have ever suffered from a migraine headache, you know how painful they can be, and why it is important to try to avoid the onset of one.

An important step is to adjust your work routine and office environment as much as possible to eliminate the factors that can trigger a migraine. You might not be able to change everything about your work environment to avoid migraines, but it’s important to adjust what you can control to make episodes less likely to occur.

According to the Mayo Clinic, medications can help prevent some migraines and make them less painful. The right medicines, combined with self-help remedies and lifestyle changes, might help.

However, even the best preventative measures don’t work all the time, unfortunately. If you experience regular migraines, chances are you’ll find yourself riding one out at work. If that happens, try to take 20 minutes to a half hour in a quiet spot away from your desk to rest and take whatever acute migraine medicine you use, if any. Once the migraine (hopefully) clears, or at least subsides, you can return to work.

It is just as important to know when to call it quits on a work day if an episode isn’t getting any better. Some sufferers can tell when a migraine is here to stay based on the level of pain, or other factors, like nausea or light sensitivity. In those cases it’s important to go home get a quick nap and rest to get ready for the next day.

If you suffer from regular migraines, talk with your supervisor ahead of time so they know you might have to leave work early unexpectedly sometimes. And when you do get back to work it’s equally important not to overload yourself right away. Instead, try to ease back into your work and keep from getting too anxious, as excessive stress could trigger another episode.
Are Morning Pages for you?

With so many varieties of meditation to help you stay focused; or new hobbies to improve your self-worth, or ideas on how to relieve stress, you might find yourself confused about what to try. First of all, even thinking about self-improvement is a step in the right direction, so don’t get scared off after your first Internet search. Fact is there are indeed a ton of methods, some scientifically proven and some suggestions from self-proclaimed experts, to consider.

A little research and a little experimentation goes a long way in finding the right method for you. A solution to finding your inner peace is as individual as you are, and what works for your buddy or your sister may not work for you.

One such method is a practice known as Morning Pages. Coined by Julia B. Cameron, an award-winning American teacher and author, Morning Pages are three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing, ideally done first thing in the morning, much like journaling or keeping a diary.

Cameron explains that there is no wrong way to do Morning Pages – they are not high art. They are not even “writing.” They are about anything and everything that crosses your mind-and they are for your eyes only. Do not over-think Morning Pages Cameron says, just put together three pages of anything that comes to mind.

According to entrepreneur blogger Chris Winfield, Morning Pages have helped him focus his thoughts and produce more defined ideas and creations. If you find it hard to focus on assignments because there’s just too many good ideas running amok in your head, Morning Pages may help you get all those ideas out in the open and allow you to organize your brain to focus on those tasks you really need to get done today.

Think you might want to give Morning Pages a try? Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- The aim is three pages – this sounds daunting to start with, but you will get there. All advice recommends that you stop after three pages, to avoid over-thinking. Consider letter-sized paper.
- The pages must be handwritten – typing is too disconnected from reality, and the process of thinking through each word makes the process more effective.
- The pages are for you. Be honest, stay true to yourself and let the thoughts flow naturally. No-one has to see them and you can even shred them as soon as you are finished if it makes you feel better.

Try different ways of preparing your favourite meals

When it comes to nutrition and our health, the message is loud and clear: Increase our quota of fruits and veggies, and lower our intake of salt, sugar, and processed foods. Easier said than done, right?

Remember that “healthier” doesn’t mean “less tasty.” Enjoy the process as you experiment with fresh ingredients and create dishes that don’t rely on fat and salt for taste.

Here are a few tips from the Mayo Clinic to tweak your recipes for healthier eating:

- If you scale back fat and pump up flavour by adding herbs and spices, you can get the great taste you crave. For example, cook with 95% lean meat, if you choose to have meat in your diet. Then, use a heavier hand with the basil, oregano, garlic and other favourite flavours. Build up your store of herbs and spices, set the salt aside and you’ve got a solid formula for healthier, tastier eating.
- Learn some basic ingredient swaps and you’ll instantly up your healthy cooking quotient. Here are just a few examples:
  - 1 egg = 2 egg whites
  - Garlic salt = garlic powder
  - Syrup = pureed fruit
  - White rice = wild rice, pearl barley or cauliflower
- Beware the deep fryer! Eating a lot of deep fried food has been associated with a higher risk of type 2 diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Instead, learn to bake, grill, steam and roast.
- Stock the right tools such as a non-stick pan. Does your recipe call for sauteed vegetables in oil? Using a good non-stick pan, you can usually saute without added fat.
Quick ways to relieve sudden stress

Dealing with sudden stress such as a phone call with bad news, a fast-approaching deadline, or an argument with a family member, can start a cascade of physical and mental symptoms that can be hard to stop.

The first thing to do? Stanford University psychologist Emma Seppala suggests you pay attention to your breathing pattern, and make an effort to start taking slow, deep breaths.

Deep breathing gets more oxygen to your brain and may lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Another option is to do a quick fact check on your thoughts. When your brain starts to spin out of control in a suddenly stressful situation, stop and reframe your thinking.

If you’re stressed about something you fear happening, such as “I’m not going to get this project done and then my boss will fire me,” think instead of what a great opportunity it is to show your boss you’re a hard worker, suggests Lauren Miller, author of 5 minutes to stress relief. She suggests you resist the urge to cast yourself as the main character in dramas that have not even occurred.

Also, instead of asking why something is happening, ask yourself what you can do to fix it. Asking yourself ‘what’ instead of why will set your brain into problem-solving mode.

Cauliflower is considered a superfood because of its nutrient-rich content. It is high in fibre, and vitamins B and C. It also contains high concentrations of carotenoids (antioxidants) and glucosinolates.

Cauliflower is a cold season vegetable that prefers a sunny location and well-drained, fertile soil. Avoid extreme temperatures in the heat of the summer.

Look for large, white compact heads when choosing cauliflower. Don’t purchase if it has spots, dull colours or small flowers.

It will keep in the refrigerator for up to a week in a paper or plastic bag.

Cauliflower is a versatile vegetable that can be incorporated into a diet in a variety of ways, including:

- Steamed, pureed and blended into soups
- Steamed and mashed as a mashed potatoes alternative
- Served as a crudité with a dip
- Roasted in the oven or grilled as a side dish
- Finely chopped as a rice alternative.

Don’t forget to use the stem and leaves. These are also nutritious and edible.

Surviving summer heat without AC

(NC) Despite our notoriously cold winters, many parts of Canada have very hot summers – and with climate change, the number of extremely hot days is expected to rise. Yet many homes in Canada aren’t equipped with air conditioners to help relieve the heat.

Fortunately, if your home doesn’t have access to an AC system, there are plenty of things you can do to stay cool this summer. Health Canada has put together some tips to help you stay cool this summer:

Mind your windows. Block the sun by closing awnings, curtains or blinds during the day. If safe, open your windows at night to let cooler air into your home.

Meal prep. Prepare meals that don’t need to be cooked in the oven. Think salads and sandwiches, or quick stovetop meals. Taking a step back from the oven will keep the overall temperature of your home down.

Prepare for the heat. Stay on top of the weather and tune in regularly to local forecasts and alerts so you know when to take extra care. If you use a weather app, set it to notify you when there is an extreme heat warning coming up.

Stay hydrated. Thirst isn’t a good indicator of dehydration, often by the time you feel thirsty you’re already dehydrated. To prevent this, stay hydrated and drink plenty of cool liquids, especially water. Flavouring water with natural fruit juice can make it more appealing, especially for your kids.

Take a break from the heat. Try spending a few hours in a cool place. It could be a tree-shaded area, shopping mall, grocery store, or public library.