

How to Develop and Practice Self-Regulation

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Self-regulation is the ability to control one's behavior, emotions, and thoughts in the pursuit of long-term goals. More specifically, emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to manage disruptive emotions and impulses—in other words, to think before acting.

Self-regulation also involves the ability to rebound from disappointment and to act in a way consistent with your values. It is one of the five key components of [emotional intelligence](#).

This article discusses how self-regulation develops and the important impact it can have. It also covers some common problems you may face and what you can do to self-regulate more effectively.

Press Play for Advice On Dealing With Difficult Emotions

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How Self-Regulation Develops

Your ability to self-regulate as an adult has roots in your childhood. Learning how to self-regulate is an important skill that children learn both for emotional maturity and, later, for social connections.

In an ideal situation, a toddler who throws tantrums grows into a child who learns how to tolerate uncomfortable feelings without throwing a fit, and later into an adult who is able to

control impulses to act based on uncomfortable feelings.

In essence, maturity reflects the ability to face emotional, social, and cognitive threats in the environment with patience and thoughtfulness. If this description reminds you of mindfulness, that's no accident—mindfulness does indeed relate to the ability to self-regulate.

Why Self-Regulation Is Important

Self-regulation involves taking a pause between a feeling and an action—taking the time to think things through, make a plan, wait patiently. Children often struggle with these behaviors, and adults may as well.

It's easy to see how a lack of self-regulation will cause problems in life. A child who yells or hits other children out of frustration will not be popular among peers and may face discipline at school.

An adult with poor self-regulation skills may lack self-confidence and self-esteem and have trouble handling stress and frustration. Often, this might result in anger or anxiety. In more severe cases, it can even lead to being diagnosed with a mental health condition.

Qualities of Self-Regulators

In general, people who are adept at self-regulating tend to be able to:

- Act in accordance with their values
- Calm themselves when upset
- Cheer themselves when feeling down
- Maintain open communication
- Persist through difficult times
- Put forth their best effort
- Remain flexible and adapting to situations
- See the good in others
- Stay clear about their intentions
- Take control of situations when necessary
- View challenges as opportunities

Self-regulation allows you to act in accordance with your deeply held values or social conscience and to express yourself appropriately. If you value academic achievement, it will allow you to study instead of slack off before a test. If you value helping others, it will allow you to help a coworker with a project, even if you are on a tight deadline yourself.

In its most basic form, self-regulation allows us to be more resilient and bounce back from failure while also staying calm under pressure. Researchers have found that self-regulation skills are tied to a range of positive health outcomes. This includes better resilience to stress, increased happiness, and better overall well-being.

Recap

Self-regulation can play an important role in relationships, well-being, and overall success in life. People who can manage their emotions and control their behavior are better able to manage stress, deal with conflict, and achieve their goals.

Common Self-Regulation Problems

How do problems with self-regulation develop? It could start early, such as an infant being neglected. A child who does not feel safe and secure, or who is unsure whether their needs will be met, may have trouble self-soothing and self-regulating.

Later, a child, teen, or adult may struggle with self-regulation, either because this ability was not developed during childhood, or because of a lack of strategies for managing difficult feelings. When left unchecked, over time this could lead to more serious issues such as mental health disorders and risky behaviors such as substance use.

Effective Strategies for Self-Regulation

If self-regulation is so important, why were most of us never taught strategies for using this skill? Most often, parents, teachers, and other adults expect that children will "grow out of" the tantrum phase. While this is true for the most part, all children and adults can benefit from learning concrete strategies for self-regulation.

Mindfulness

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), mindfulness is "the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally."

By engaging in skills such as focused breathing and gratitude, mindfulness enables us to put some space between ourselves and our reactions, leading to better focus and feelings of calmness and relaxation.

In a 2019 review of 27 research studies, mindfulness was shown to improve attention, which in turn helped with regulating negative emotions and improving executive function.

Cognitive Reappraisal

Cognitive reappraisal, or cognitive reframing, is another strategy that can be used to improve self-regulation abilities. This strategy involves changing thought patterns. Specifically, cognitive reappraisal involves reinterpreting a situation in order to change the emotional response to it.

For example, imagine a friend did not return your calls or texts for several days. Rather than thinking that this reflected something about yourself, such as "my friend hates me," you might instead think, "my friend must be really busy." Research has shown that using cognitive reappraisal in everyday life is related to experiencing more positive and fewer negative emotions.

In a 2016 study examining the link between self-regulation strategies (i.e., mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, and emotion suppression) and emotional well-being, researchers found cognitive reappraisal to be associated with daily positive emotions, including feelings of enthusiasm, happiness, satisfaction, and excitement.

Some other useful strategies for self-regulation include acceptance and problem-solving. In contrast, unhelpful strategies that people sometimes use include avoidance, distraction, suppression, and worrying.

Recap

You can improve your self-regulation skills by practicing mindfulness and changing how you think about the situation.

Putting Self-Regulation Into Practice

If you or your child needs help with self-regulation, there are strategies you can use to improve skills in this area.

Helping Kids With Self-Regulation

In children, parents can help develop self-regulation through routines (e.g., regular mealtimes and consistent bedtime routines). Routines help children learn what to expect, which makes it easier for them to feel comfortable.

When children act in ways that don't demonstrate self-regulation, ignore their requests. For example, if they interrupt a conversation, don't stop your discussion to attend to their needs. Tell them that they will need to wait.

Self-Regulation Tips for Adults

The first step to practicing self-regulation is to recognize that everyone has a choice in how to react to situations. While you may feel like life has dealt you a bad hand, it's not the hand you are dealt, but how you react to it that matters most.

- **Recognize that in every situation you have three options:** approach, avoidance, and attack. While it may feel as though your choice of behavior is out of your control, it's not. Your feelings may sway you more toward one path, but you are more than those feelings.
- **Become aware of your emotions.** Do you feel like running away from a difficult situation? Do you feel like lashing out in anger at someone who has hurt you?
- **Monitor your body** to get clues about how you are feeling if it is not immediately obvious to you. For example, a rapidly increasing heart rate may be a sign that you are entering a state of rage or even experiencing a panic attack.

Start to restore balance by focusing on your deeply held values, rather than those transient emotions. Look beyond momentary discomfort to the larger picture.

Recap

Recognizing your options can help you put your self-regulation skills into practice. Focus on identifying what you are feeling, but remember that feelings are not facts.

Giving yourself time to stay calm and deliberate your options can help you make better choices.

A Word From Verywell

Once you've learned this delicate balancing act, you will begin to self-regulate more often, and it will become a way of life for you. Developing self-regulation skills will improve your resilience and ability to face difficult circumstances in life.

However, if you find you are unable to teach yourself to self-regulate, consider consulting a mental health professional. A trained therapist can help you learn and implement strategies and skills specific to your situation. Therapy can also be a great place to practice those skills for use in your everyday life.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How can I practice self-regulation?

You can practice self-regulation staying calm and thinking carefully before you react. Engaging in relaxation tactics like deep breathing or mindfulness can help you keep your cool while deliberately considering the consequences of your actions can help you focus on the potential outcomes.

What does it mean to be emotionally intelligent?

Emotional intelligence refers to a person's ability to recognize, interpret, and regulate emotions. This ability plays an important part in self-regulation and also contributes to the development and maintenance of healthy relationships.

How can I help my child learn self-regulation?

You can help teach your child self-control by managing your own stress, remaining calm, and modeling effective self-regulation skills. You can also strengthen this ability by helping children recognize their emotions, teaching

problem-solving skills, setting limits, and enforcing rules with natural consequences.

9 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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