Six mental health strategies to strengthen self-control

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MANY people struggle with staying focused at work, controlling spending habits or managing emotional reactions in stressful situations, experts say.



Self-control is often described as discipline, willpower, or grit. Psychosocial rehabilitation specialist and educator Kendra Cherry, MSEd, defines it as the ability to regulate behavior, resist unwanted impulses, and stay aligned with longterm goals.

Cherry, author of The Everything Psychology Book, explains that self-control is part of executive function, which involves planning, monitoring, and goalsetting. People with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), she notes, may experience challenges linked to this system.

She also breaks self-control into different areas: managing impulses, regulating emotions, and controlling physical behavior. Difficulties in these areas may lead to acting without thinking, emotional overwhelm, or restlessness, she notes.

Cherry adds that while self-control has a genetic component and can be limited in capacity, research shows it can be strengthened through practice. Strong selfcontrol in childhood has also been associated with better long-term health and financial outcomes in adulthood.

Experts from the Benilde Well-Being Center (BWC) of De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB), drawing from strategies highlighted by Cherry on Verywell Mind, outlined practical ways to build self-control.

1. Avoid temptation

Reducing exposure to triggers can help manage impulses. When urges arise, shifting attention to another activity, such as walking, calling a friend, or doing household tasks, may help redirect focus and prevent impulsive behavior.

2. Plan ahead

Anticipating situations that challenge discipline can make it easier to respond effectively. For example, those trying to reduce sugar intake may benefit from eating balanced meals with fiber, protein, and whole grains to prevent cravings later in the day.

3. Practice self-control regularly

Self-control can be strengthened through repetition. Engaging in small acts of discipline consistently is similar to training a muscle. Although effort may feel draining at first, regular practice can build endurance over time.

4. Focus on one goal at a time

Taking on multiple major goals at once may spread attention and reduce effectiveness. Experts suggest prioritizing one key goal until it becomes a habit before shifting energy to another area.

5. Practice meditation and mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation may help improve awareness of thoughts and impulses. By slowing mental activity, individuals may find it easier to pause before reacting and make more deliberate choices.

6. Remind yourself of consequences

Keeping long-term outcomes in mind can reinforce discipline. Poor self-control may affect health, finances, relationships, and overall well-being, making it important to stay mindful of the bigger picture when facing temptation.*