

*The* **EMOTIONAL  
INTELLIGENCE**

*Toolkit*



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# **The Emotional Intelligence Toolkit**

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# Introduction

Usually when we think of “intelligence” we associate it with things like logic, math, and science. However, according to psychologists such as Daniel Goleman, “emotional intelligence” (EQ) is another aspect of intelligence that is often over-looked.

The basic view of emotional intelligence is that emotions aren’t necessarily the opposite of thinking, but a different way of thinking about different types of problems that exist in our world.

In other words, emotions can be a very valuable tool in guiding our choices and decision-making.

In light of his theory of evolution, Charles Darwin theorized that our minds have evolved to experience emotions so that we can better adapt to our environment.

For example, we’ve evolved to experience a “negative” emotion such as fear so that we can better respond to a situation that is bad for survival. In this case, fear is an emotion that motivates us to avoid something when we are in danger.

On the other hand, a “positive” emotion, such as joy, can signal to us that a situation is good for survival. In this

case, joy is an emotion that motivates you to seek more of something.

This is a very basic and rudimentary analysis – and it doesn't come anywhere near describing the complexities of our emotional world (as well as social world) – but it gives you an idea on how different emotions can guide our behaviors in different ways.

Emotional intelligence is about being more aware of our emotions and what they are signaling to us.

Below you'll find descriptions of the 4 fundamental pillars that make up emotional intelligence as a whole and how you can apply them to your daily life.

## ***1. Self-Awareness***

The first pillar of emotional intelligence is paying attention to your own emotions.

Emotions often come in two main parts: 1) *The psychological component* – the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs that underlie most of our emotions, and 2) *The physical component* – the bodily sensations that often accompany different emotional states.

For example, an emotion such as nervousness may be a mixture of certain thoughts (“I'm not good at this” or “I'm

scared I'm going to make a mistake") and certain sensations in our bodies (a fluttery feeling in our stomach, ie "I have butterflies in my stomach").

Sometimes just being more aware of our emotional states (and all their components) is enough to manage them better. In one recent study, they found simply labeling negative emotions can help you overcome them.

The next time you're feeling a really strong emotion, try stepping back and just observing that emotion as it is. Ask yourself, "What am I feeling? What am I thinking? What physical sensations am I experiencing with this emotion?"

A little honest reflection of your emotions can really help you understand yourself better and how your mind really works.

## ***2. Self-Regulation***

Once you are more aware of your emotions, the next pillar of emotional intelligence is learning how to respond to them better.

Depending on the situation, there are many different strategies we can use to better regulate our emotions. Some of these strategies include:

- Channeling an emotion in a new and constructive way, such as through exercising, writing, or painting.
- Avoiding triggers – such as certain people, situations, or environments – that are more likely to bring out a negative emotion.
- Seeking positive experiences to reverse negative ruts (such as watching a comedy movie when we are feeling down, or listening to motivating music when we are lazy).
- Turning emotions around by doing the opposite of what you feel.
- Sitting and watching emotions as a passive observer, instead of acting on them impulsively.

These are all strategies available to us to help us regulate our emotions better on an everyday basis.

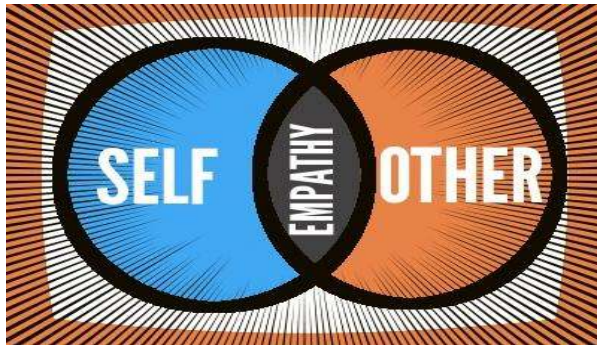
Think of “emotional intelligence” as a kind of toolkit. There are many different ways to respond to a particular emotion, and not every tool is going to work depending on what the situation is.

The more emotionally intelligent you become, the better you will be at deciding what is the best way to respond to an emotion. But that’s going to take steady practice and awareness.

### 3. Empathy

Understanding your own emotions is half of emotional intelligence, the other half is understanding the emotions of others.

As we improve “self-awareness,” we also improve “other-awareness.” We learn that there is sometimes a difference between our own thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feelings of others.



Empathy is our ability to see things from another person’s perspective – and to take into account their individual thoughts and feelings about an experience.

This venn diagram shows the relationship between “self-awareness” and “other-awareness” and how the area where they overlap is where we experience empathy: Of course, we can never understand another person’s mind completely, but we can actively learn about a

person's inner thoughts and feelings by paying attention to what they are communicating verbally and nonverbally.

Empathy is a kind of "mind-reading," but it's based on making inferences about people's internal worlds based on their external actions.

Another powerful tool for improving empathy is perspective taking. This is a mental exercise where you literally imagine yourself experiencing a situation from another person's perspective to better understand them.

Be more willing to ask yourself, "What is this person thinking? What is this person feeling? Why is this person acting in the way they do?" These types of questions will be a great starting point in building more empathy in your daily relationships.

#### ***4. Social Skills***

Once you understand the emotions of yourself and others, the next question is "How do I respond to other people's emotions?" This is where social skills comes in as the last pillar of emotional intelligence.

First, understand that a lot of our emotional world has a social component to it. For example, emotions such as love, guilt, rejection, and embarrassment are almost



strictly social emotions (they rarely exist outside the context of our relationships with others).

To build healthy relationships it's therefore important that we are attuned to other people's emotions, especially how they respond to our own actions and speech.

If your actions cause negative emotions in other people, then that can hurt a relationship and your ability to connect with others in a meaningful way.

Cultivating positive emotions – like joy, optimism, excitement, and humor – is key toward bonding with others in a strong and lasting way.

Have you ever walked into a room of people who are really depressed or stressed out, and you immediately begin to feel depressed and stressed too? This is an example of *emotional contagion*, which is the idea that our emotions can often spread to others like a virus.

In the same way that other people's emotions affect us, our emotions affect other people. So if you walk around life with a generally positive attitude, that is going to rub off on those you interact with (but you have to first have your own mind in order).

The social skills aspect of emotional intelligence is about becoming an "emotional leader" of sorts. But you need

to practice turning negative people around by first being positive in yourself.

# 1. Acceptance

Acceptance of our emotions is one of the first tools to emotional intelligence.

This means just taking a step back and being aware of what we are thinking and feeling in any given moment. After all, we can't respond to our emotions in an effective way if we aren't first aware of them and willing to acknowledge them.

A new [study](#) published in the journal *Psychological Science* has found that accepting your negative emotions as you experience them can actually help you overcome them.

Researchers at UCLA recruited 88 participants who all had a fear of spiders. The aim of the study was to test which "emotional regulation" strategies were most effective in overcoming this fear.

In the first part of the experiment, everyone was instructed to walk closer and closer to a live tarantula in an open container and eventually touch it if they could.

Each individual's fear response was measured based on how close the participant could get to the spider, their reported level of distress, and physiological responses

such as how much the person's hands were sweating (which is usually a sign of fear and anxiety).

The participants were then divided into 4 separate groups. Each group was seated in front of a tarantula in a closed container and instructed to do the following:

- Group A: Subjects were asked to describe the emotions they were experiencing and to label their reactions to the tarantula. For example: "I'm anxious and frightened by the ugly, terrifying spider."
- Group B: Subjects were asked to use neutral terms that did not convey their fear and were aimed at making the experience seem less threatening. For example: "That little spider can't hurt me; I'm not afraid of it."
- Group C: Subjects were asked to say something that wasn't relevant to the spider.
- Group D: Subjects were not asked to say anything. They were just exposed to the spider.

After this session, each participant was again asked to approach the tarantula in an open container, and their fear response was measured a second time.

Surprisingly, it was found that Group A significantly outperformed all other groups in overcoming their fear. Individuals who labeled and described their emotions were more likely to get closer to the spider than the other three groups. They also showed less physiological responses, such as less sweat.

In addition, psychologists analyzed the words people used to describe their fear – they found that those who used a larger number of negative words tended to face their fears better.

Michelle Craske, a professor of psychology at UCLA and the senior author of the study says:

*“The implication [of this research] is to encourage patients to label the emotional responses they are experiencing and label the characteristics of the stimuli — to verbalize their feelings. That lets people experience the very things they are afraid and say, ‘I feel scared and I’m here.’ They’re not trying to push it away and say it’s not so bad. **Be in the moment and allow yourself to experience whatever you’re experiencing.**”*

I’ve long advocated that self-improvement requires that you become more honest with yourself and give yourself permission to experience both the “good” and “bad” in your life.

This includes accepting your thoughts and emotions when they happen, whatever they may be - and not avoiding them or running away. Only then can we begin to understand ourselves better and grow as individuals.

## ***Just Sit and Observe***

Practice taking 10-15 minutes and just sitting and observing your emotions *exactly* as they are - without trying to change them, analyze them, or even do anything about them.

Sit back and watch your emotions as if you were watching a short movie.

Your mind can be like a child sometimes trying to get your attention. The more you ignore it, the louder it yells and screams. Sometimes, your emotions just want your attention. And once you accept and acknowledge them, they have fulfilled their purpose and are no longer needed.

When you accept your emotions, you are often much more capable of finally letting them go. Be comfortable actively engaging with your emotions, not suppressing them or avoiding them or pretending they don't exist or don't matter.

Also recognize you don't always have to act on your

emotions to change them. Your emotions change naturally and without effort. They are constantly flowing from one to the next. If you sit and observe your emotions long enough, you'll find that no single emotion is permanent.

This insight in itself can be tremendously powerful in becoming a more emotionally intelligent person.

## 2. Question Your Feelings

One of the main pillars of emotional intelligence is self-awareness. This is the process of better understanding your feelings through self-observation and self-inquiry.

The first tool we learned was "Acceptance," now we move on the use of "Questioning" our emotions.

This requires that we look at our emotions from an objective viewpoint, and then be honest about what's causing them and how they are influencing our actions.

Emotions guide human behavior. They are a type of knowledge, but they are often fast, intuitive, and impulsive reactions to our environment, and thus they can be prone to error.

Due to this, your feelings can be misleading if you always react to them without question. In certain times, it's a good idea to step back and question your feelings before you choose the best way to respond to them.

In a [study](#) published in the *Motivation and Emotion*, it was found that a bad mood (caused by listening to angry music) led individuals to more likely judge someone as wrong.



This is a perfect example of the pervasive influence of emotions and why we should question our feelings.

You might be in a bad mood for some random reason – maybe you got stuck in traffic or spilled coffee on your shirt – but then that mood will negatively influence your impression of someone.

Rationally, you know the two things have nothing to do with each other, but your brain still unconsciously makes the connection between your current feelings and the other person.

When you better understanding your feelings and where they come from, you avoid making this mistake so easily.

*Here's a guideline on how you to question your feelings.  
Ask yourself:*

- **What am I feeling?** Don't just say you feel "good" or "bad" – be specific. Is it "sadness" or "anger" or "disappointment?" Try your best to find one or two words that best describe your feeling.
- **When did I first notice this feeling?** How long has the feeling been going on for? Did you just begin feeling it, or has it been looming around for awhile?

- **What's the primary cause of this feeling?** Try to think of what event in your life caused you to feel this way. Is there something that happened that stands out?
- **What are possible secondary causes of this feeling?** What are some other factors that may be contributing to this emotion? Are there multiple "little things" that may have built up throughout the day?
- **Am I tired or stressed?** Often times general stress and fatigue can amplify our emotions. For example, this [study](#) found that sleepless nights are more likely to lead to anger and arguments among couples.
- **How should I respond to this feeling?** What's the best course of action to take in response to this emotion? Should you talk to someone, listen to music, go for a walk, or do something productive?
- **Should I just wait for this feeling to pass?** Just because you feel something doesn't mean you need to act on it. Sometimes it's better to just "ride out" an emotion until it subsides. Our feelings are only temporary, they don't last forever.

Individuals with more connections between the “thinking” and “feeling” parts of their brain often have more emotional intelligence.

This is because our ability to think about our feelings helps create a buffer between our emotions and responses, so that we don’t just act impulsively all of the time.

Just the simple act of *thinking* and *questioning* our feelings helps detach ourselves from the “heat of the moment.” The more you question your feelings, the more you can control them rather than let them control you.

And by truly listening to your emotions and seeking to understand them, you also learn how to better respond to them. It’s incredibly difficult to respond to an emotion if you don’t know why you feel that way or what’s the underlying cause.

### 3. Build a Positive Social Circle

Our emotions are often influenced by the people we are around more than anything else.

It's simple - if you hang around positive and optimistic people, you're going to adopt a more positive and optimistic mindset. But if you hang around negative and miserable people, you're going to adopt a more negative and miserable mindset.

As I mentioned before, emotions are very contagious. In fact, this not only applies to people we surround ourselves with in the "real world," but also in our "online worlds" as well.

For example, in one [study](#) it was discovered that emotions can also spread throughout our online social networks, such as Facebook. So if you're getting a lot of negative news popping up in your Facebook feed, your mood and emotions are being negatively influenced by that.

This same effect likely applies to Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, and virtually any other social website or online forum.

If you're interested in learning more about just how much

of an influence your social circle can have on you, check out this incredibly insightful [video](#) by sociologist Nicholas Christakis.

Think about the people you tend to be around in both your “real” and “online” social circles. What kind of impact are they having on your emotional health? Are they a positive influence or a negative one?

### ***Finding New Positive People***

An important step in becoming more emotionally intelligent is to begin to surround yourself with other emotionally intelligent people. This can often mean seeking new positive people to interact with - and minimizing time spent with negative people.

Of course, this is not always easy. There are likely family, friends, coworkers, and others who you can't possibly avoid entirely. But regardless, you have to try your best to make time with people who have a positive influence on you.

There are plenty of ways to find new and people to add to your social circle, no matter what your interests and preferences may be. Types of social activities you may want to join include:

- Play sports in a league
- Join a club in something you're interested in (reading, wine-tasting, cooking, etc.)
- Go to the gym
- Volunteer at a non-profit you believe in
- Check out a local [MeetUp](#) group
- Take a class in something new (dancing, yoga, drawing)
- Find other community activities to participate in (festivals, concerts, art shows)
- Join an online forum or message board

These are all great opportunities to meet new people. And just finding one really cool person can end up introducing you to a whole new social circle of friends.

We are a very social species, so we often depend on a healthy social circle to be truly happy and content with life. Don't underestimate the importance of surrounding yourself with positive people who actually motivate you, inspire you, and help you enjoy life more.

## ***Getting Support from Others***

One of the benefits to having a rich social circle is that you have people to support you and be there for you when you are going through difficult and tough times, or when you just want someone to talk to.

When we look toward others for social support, we're usually not looking for their advice or opinion, but just someone who is good at sitting there and listening to us. If you have people like that in your social circle, your emotional well-being can improve dramatically.

In a recent [study](#) published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers looked at how individuals can best provide social support to those who suffer from negative emotions and low self-esteem.

What they found was that individuals with low self-esteem didn't respond well to advice like "cheer up" or "look on the bright side." Instead, the type of social support they were looking for was *negative validation*.

Negative validation is giving others permission to feel negative and express their negative emotions. It allows the other person to feel that their negative emotions are natural and appropriate, and they don't need to avoid them.

We typically don't want people in our lives who try to change us (especially when it comes to our feelings). Instead, we want people who accept us as we are and allow us to feel our feelings are "normal."

In another [study](#) published in *Social Psychological and*

*Personality Science*, it was discovered that when people feel their emotions are shared with others, it can help reduce unnecessary stress related to those emotions.

It's always nice to know that people feel the same way as you do. That helps you to realize that you aren't alone in your feelings, so you don't have to feel bad about feeling bad.

When building your social circle, make sure you find people who accept you as you are, and don't always try to change you into something you're not. We need more people like that in our lives.



## 4. Creativity and Art Therapy

Creativity is one of the best ways to express your emotions in a healthy way.

While it's nice to have people to talk to, creativity can often allow us to express our emotions in a way that conversation and words don't always allow.

Instead, creativity allows us take an emotion and express it in a way using visuals, sounds, movement, and storytelling. And by expressing our emotions in more creative ways, we can often get a deeper understanding of our emotional world.

Creativity is a way to transform negative emotions into something positive and meaningful.

This is probably why so many artists and musicians take their feelings of sadness, anger, or guilt and use them as inspiration - a force that motivates them to *create* and *express* themselves in a healthy way.

There are many scientifically proven benefits to various forms of creativity and "Art Therapy" on our overall happiness and well-being.

Here are studies showing the benefits of creativity on our mental health:

- **Improving Positive Emotions:** A [meta-analysis](#) published in the *American Journal of Public Health* reviewed over 100 studies testing the effects of creativity on our physical and mental health. Individuals who were more likely to engage in creative activities also showed an increase in positive emotions, as well as a decrease in stress, anxiety, and negative emotions.
- **Reducing Stress and Improving Lifespan:** Another [study](#) published in the *Journal of Aging and Health* discovered that creative people tend to live longer lives than non-creative people, probably due to their ability to better manage stress (which is associated with a range of negative health outcomes, including heart disease and cancer).
- **Letting Go of the Past:** One fascinating [study](#) published in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology* found that many people use creative activities as a way to find “closure” after a bad breakup or the loss of a loved one (such as dedicating a song or poem to someone).

- **Managing Pain:** In a [study](#) published in *The Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, it was found that Art Therapy can help reduce pain and anxiety in cancer patients.
- **Treating Depression and PTSD:** Another [study](#) published in *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* found a whole range of benefits associated with writing and journaling, including long-term improvements in mood and stress, as well as a reduction in symptoms of depression and PTSD.
- **Reducing Worry and Anxiety:** A [study](#) published in *Science* found that just 10 minutes of writing about your worries before an academic exam can reduce performance anxiety and improve overall test performance.

Due to the growing evidence supporting the benefits of art and creativity, many psychologists are beginning to practice “Art Therapy” with their patients to help them better manage their stress and emotions.

Of course “Art Therapy” is something we can all practice in our own daily lives as well. And no matter who you are or what you do for a living, you would probably benefit from being a little more creative every now and then.

There are many different ways to satisfy our creative needs, including:

- Singing
- Dancing
- Acting
- Poetry
- Music
- Sculpting
- Journaling
- Screenwriting
- Photography
- Comedy
- Painting

All of these different creative activities provide us with a way to express ourselves and our emotions in a healthy and satisfying way.

From a personal standpoint - when I was going through a really difficult and depressing time many years ago - I strongly depended on my music and photography to help me get by. Without those as a type of self-therapy, I probably wouldn't even be here today.

It is very important for our emotional intelligence that we have creative activities we can go to when we are feeling down or need a way to express ourselves. Creativity is a

way to *transform* and *channel* our emotions in a new direction.

Creativity is a way to take more control over your emotional world.

You don't have to be an amazing professional to benefit from creativity, just enjoy the process of creating *something*. No matter what you create, it's going to be unique and meaningful to you, and that's what really matters.

## 5. Do the Opposite of What You Feel

Emotions can be very useful when they guide us to act in helpful and constructive ways, but sometimes they can also be misleading and dangerous.

In certain situations, it's better to disengage from our emotional instincts rather than act on them impulsively without questioning them or challenging them.

One technique used to challenge these destructive emotions is called "opposite action." It's a popular tool used in Dialectic-Behavioral Therapy (DBT) to help individuals who often act on their emotions too impulsively.

The key idea behind "opposite action" is that every emotion comes with an *action tendency*.

For example:

- **Anger** often causes us to lash out and be aggressive, whether verbally or physically.
- **Sadness** often causes us to isolate ourselves and not want to do anything.

- **Fear** often causes us to run away or avoid a situation.
- **Shame** often causes us to hide.

Often by following this “action tendency” we only strengthen the emotion and get trapped in a vicious, negative cycle.

However, when you know your emotions are working against you, try to do the exact opposite action from what your emotions are telling you.

One common situation this is useful for is when you are sad and you don’t want to go out with your friends. While this is a completely natural feeling, sometimes it is better to drag yourself out with your friends anyway – do the *opposite action*. Often you end up feeling glad that you did, even if at first you were hesitant about it.

In the same way, doing the “opposite action” in response to other emotions can help us reverse those feelings:

- When angry at a person, do something kind for them instead.
- When too afraid to try something new, encourage yourself to do it anyway.
- When sad and you don’t want to leave your bed, get up and get outside despite your feelings.

- When shameful about something you want to hide, be open and share it with others anyway.

This is all easier said than done. But when you focus on the “opposite action” from what these unhelpful emotions are telling you, then you’ll have an easier time ending their cycle.

This technique helps you to not become a slave to your emotions. Just because you feel one way doesn’t mean you have to act on it to relieve yourself.

We wrongly believe that we need to wait until we feel right before we take the right action. However, sometimes we need to take the right action before we can change the flow of our emotions.

Sometimes you should be kind to others, not because you want to be kind to them, but because that’s the smart thing to do if you want to keep yourself healthy and your emotions in check.

Here’s another example. Say you are ashamed about your weight, or a bad grade you got on a test, or some other problem in your life. The “action tendency” behind shame is usually to hide from these things, but the truth is when we talk about our problems we usually feel better about them.



Often you need to do things you don't want to do before you can realize that's exactly what you needed. Can you think of an example when doing the "opposite action" made you feel better?

## 6. Healthy Escapism and Distraction

One important aspect of emotional intelligence is knowing when to engage with an emotion vs. when to disengage from an emotion. By changing how we respond to our feelings, we can exercise more effective self-regulation and emotional management.

While often it is healthy to accept your emotions, reflect on them, and release them, sometimes it's actually healthy for you to avoid an emotion, or distract yourself from an emotion, or actively shift your awareness toward a different kind of emotional experience.

This is because emotions can take on a cyclical and self-fulfilling form.

There's a point where the more you indulge in sadness, or anger, or grief, the more you're conditioning those wirings in the brain that actually trigger those emotions, which makes you more susceptible to continue to experience those emotions in the future.

There's a popular theory in psychology called *catharsis*, which is basically the idea that you just need to act out your emotions to "release" them. However, recent

studies have shown that sometimes this emotional release actually strengthens the emotion and makes it worse.

For example, in one [study](#) published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, individuals who hit a punching bag as a way to “blow off steam” actually reported greater levels of anger than individuals who thought about going to the gym (a form of “distraction”), or individuals who did nothing at all.

Instead of venting your negative emotions, sometimes it is better to just shift your awareness toward something completely different that makes you forget about your troubles.

In many ways, this is the powerful role that entertainment plays in our lives. It is a way to escape from the stress, anxiety, and negativity of our everyday lives – and sometimes that is what we need to stay sane and healthy.

We practice distraction and escapism in all kinds of ways, including:

- Playing video games.
- Listening to music.
- Watching a movie.
- Socializing with friends.
- Reading a book.
- Going on vacation.

- Sleeping and dreaming.
- Sports and exercise.
- Safe and responsible drinking (or cannabis use).

These forms of distraction can be helpful in small doses. Our minds have an awesome ability to temporarily “disconnect” from our real world troubles and give ourselves a much-needed break.

So after a hard week at work, don't feel too bad if you want to grab a drink at the bar or go to the movies. In many ways, those little forms of escapism help keep you emotionally healthy and balanced.

When you feel completely overwhelmed by your emotions, sometimes the best strategy is to just walk away and do something else. Most of our emotions are temporary, if you wait them out they will often subside and lose their impact.

In one [study](#) published in *The Journal of Pain*, it was discovered that individuals can reduce pain intensity by listening to music. And in another [study](#) published in *Current Biology*, they found distracting individuals with a hard memory task can also reduce pain. And a third [study](#) published in *Pain Research and Management* found that video games can also be an effective distraction away from pain.

Interestingly, many hospitals are beginning to use video games to help distract people - especially young children - from painful procedures. You can check this [article](#) for more.

This is because any type of distraction away from pain and negative emotions activates neurons that *compete* for resources that other neurons use to signal pain and negative emotions. So if you distract yourself, the negative feelings become less intense, because your mental resources are being *divided* between the two experiences.

Of course, too much escapism can turn into an unhealthy addiction. You can't avoid your pain and negative emotions altogether - it's not possible and it's not healthy - sometimes you need to actually engage them, accept them, learn from them, and move on.

Distraction is just one option in your emotional intelligence toolbox, but it's not always going to be the answer. Use it in a balanced and healthy way - but remember it's *not* an excuse to avoid reality altogether.

## 7. Exercise

If you were a computer, your mind would be the software, but your body would be the hardware. Therefore, it should be no secret that we have to take care of our physical health if we want our mental health to be at its best.

A lot of research shows how exercise can improve many aspects of our mental health, including our mood and emotions.

One surprising [study](#) published in *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* discovered that exercise can be an effective secondary treatment for clinical depression. Of course, that doesn't mean exercise alone can cure depression, but that it can be a valuable way to reduce and alleviate symptoms.

One of the reasons exercise may help alleviate depression is because it releases neurotransmitters like endorphins, serotonin, and anandamide, which are known to elevate mood and feelings of pleasure. This experience is commonly referred to as "runner's high."

Another recent [study](#) published in *Medicine and Science in Sports*, has found that moderate exercise can also have protective effects against future stress and anxiety. They

discovered that individuals who had just exercised were better able to “bounce back” from emotional distress after viewing unpleasant or disturbing images.

In the same way, when we frequently exercise we’re going to be better capable of combating stress and negative emotions throughout our day.

Another [study](#) published in *PLOS ONE* discovered that this protective effect against stress even applies to the cellular level. Individuals who did vigorous physical activity for 42 minutes over a 3 day period (that’s less than 15 minutes a day) not only reduced stress, but also protected against stress-related cell aging and telomere length.

And even more interestingly, a [study](#) published in *The Journal of Neuroscience* found how exercise even changes our brains and rewires it at a neurological level to protect better against stress and anxiety.

Exercises has benefits at all levels - psychological, biological, and neurological. This is why it is essential to a happy and emotionally intelligent life. Are you getting a healthy dose of exercise? Or do you spend most of your days just sitting in front of the computer or TV?

Here are easy ways to start exercising and being more physically active:

- **Start small.** Any exercise is better than none at all, even if it just means starting your day with some sit-ups or push-ups, or a short walk around the block. Get up and moving, because everyone has to start somewhere.
- **Join a gym or community center.** A gym or community center can be an awesome resource for many different physical activities that you can't do at home. It's also an opportunity to meet like-minded people. And lastly, paying for a membership somewhere will give you that extra incentive to get off your butt and make use of it.
- **Participate in sports and friendly competition.** Another great option is joining a local sports league. Some people seem to have an easier time exercising if it's in the context of a competitive game rather than just going to the gym and working by themselves.
- **Find friends with similar goals.** It often helps to have people other people who motivate us toward our goals. Try to find people to join you while you exercise or play a sport, and who help hold you accountable if you miss a day.



- **Think of exercise as “fun.”** In a great [study](#), it was found that thinking of exercise as “fun” and not “work” promoted healthier behaviors. It’s simple - the more you want to do something, the more you enjoy it, the easier it is going to be to motivate yourself. Find types of physical activity you actually like doing.
- **Play more with your kids and/or pets.** If you have kids or pets, that can be a great excuse to go outside and be physically active (after all, they need exercise too). For example, once I got a new dog, it became a great reason to leave my house and go for more walks.
- **Think of yourself as a healthy and active person.** At the end of the day, you need to start identifying yourself and seeing yourself more as a healthy person. You have to stop saying to yourself, “I’m just not the type of person who exercises or eats rights,” and begin saying, “I’m the type of person who takes care of their body.”

Exercise is tremendously important for your physical and mental health. Don’t underestimate this one in your “emotional intelligence” toolkit. You’d be surprised how much a little more physical activity can benefit your overall mood and self-esteem.

## 8. Sleep

Sleep is an important yet underappreciated part of our lives. Without a good night's sleep we can often suffer different physical and mental issues, such as fatigue, stress, and distracted thinking.

Over time, these can build up and contribute to bigger problems such as depression and mood disorders.

Getting your sleep right can make a big and noticeable difference in your life. If you are currently experiencing difficulties with your sleep patterns, here are the key principles behind a good night's sleep.

### ***Know if you're an "early bird" or "night owl"***

Psychologists and biologists know that humans often fall into two main categories when it comes to sleep. These are based on differences in our circadian rhythms or "biological clocks."

An early bird prefers to go to bed earlier and wake up earlier, while a night owl prefers to stay up later and wake up later. This is because early birds tend to feel most energized in the morning and night owls tend to feel most energized in the evening and night.

Understanding your biological clock is important in catering your sleep schedule to meet your biological needs.

In general, getting 7-10 hours a sleep is usually the range most humans need, but when we should get this sleep can depend on whether you're more of an "early bird" or "night owl."

### ***Stay consistent with your sleep schedule***

One of the most important things you can do in developing healthy sleep patterns is to try to keep the same schedule every day. You should be going to sleep and waking up at relatively the same time everyday.

This is important to recognize, because many people will spend a night or two a week staying up really late, and then try to overcompensate by sleeping a lot the next day (usually on the weekends).

This inconsistency can really throw off your biological clock and hurt you from developing a steady rhythm to your sleeping patterns. Try your best to follow the same sleep routine everyday.

You can use an alarm clock to help set your sleep schedule, but ideally when you find your biological

rhythm you should be waking up naturally at the same time every day.

## ***Be physically active during the day***

Often a good night's sleep follows a good day's work. The more energy we exert while we are awake, the easier it is to fall asleep once the day comes to an end.

If you spend your days being lazy, not being physically active, or even taking a lot of naps, then that is going to make it much more difficult to fall asleep when it's actually time to get some rest.

All that energy you don't use throughout the day can make you very anxious and fidgety. Your body often needs to engage in physical activity to release this energy.

Our lives are often a cycle of "work" and "rest," so often you need to get the "work" part down if you also want to get the "rest" part down.

## ***Use your bedroom for only sleeping, limit other distractions***

If you spend a lot of time in your bedroom *not* sleeping, then your mind begins to associate it with all different types of activities.

One of the best things I've personally done in my bedroom is get rid of the television and computer. In this way, my bedroom is almost solely used for rest and sleeping. If I want to do something else then I have to go into another room.

This helps a lot, because our minds can be very sensitive to environmental cues, so limiting these distractions in your room helps you just focus on sleep.

## ***Minimize alcohol and drug use***

Alcohol and drugs can be a kind of sleep aid, but often they don't give you a healthy and productive sleep (they just knock you out and don't give you the proper amount of REM sleep).

Not to mention, it's not good to have a dependence on certain substances to manage your sleep cycle. For example, if you *need* a drink every night to fall asleep, it could be a sign that you need to find healthier sleep aids.

## ***Learn relaxation techniques to use before sleep***

Learning relaxation techniques to practice before sleep is often a better aid than relying on alcohol or drugs. One of the most popular techniques to use is called *progressive muscle relaxation*.

In this simple exercise, you focus on each muscle in your body, stretch it, and then release it, all while focusing on calmness in that specific area.

Start with focusing on the muscles in your toes, feet, bottom leg, and upper leg. Stretch and clench each muscle, then release until each muscle is free from stress and tension. Next move onto your groin, abs, chest, shoulders, arms, and back. And finish by focusing on the muscles in your face, around your mouth, eyes, and forehead.

With each muscle you move onto, you'll become gradually more relaxed, until your whole body is in a state of calmness. Your breathing begins to slow down and you'll begin to feel less sensation in your body until you're ready to let go completely and fall into a state of sleep.

## *Use positive affirmations*

Affirmations can be applied to almost any area of your life, including sleep.

Sometimes people who have trouble sleeping begin to have negative, self-fulfilling thoughts like, "I will never fall asleep" or "My mind is racing too much." We ruminate over these thoughts before we go to bed, and they become more and more difficult to overcome.

Instead of filling your head with negative thoughts before you sleep, you can use affirmations to fill your head with calm, relaxing thoughts. For example:

- *"I am falling asleep..."*
- *"My body and mind are going into a calm and relaxed state..."*
- *"All of my stress and anxiety is floating away..."*

These simple affirmations can help prepare your body and mind to begin going into a state of sleep. And often times using these types of affirmations in addition to the progressive muscle relaxation can make this exercise even more effective.

# Conclusion

It's ultimately up to you to use your "emotional intelligence" toolkit as you see fit. The important thing is to recognize that all of these tools are at your disposal when you need them.

Often times, which tool we choose to use (and which tool works best) is going to depend on the particular situation and person.

Maybe some situations you find "distraction" works best, but in other situations you need to practice more "acceptance." Or maybe some situations you want to channel your emotions with "creativity," or release them through "exercise," or look toward someone for "social support."

Balance is important to remember here. Every tool has a purpose, but every tool can be misused as well. You should try your best to use all of these tools to some degree throughout your life.

Overall, the more tools you have available to you when you need them, the more emotionally intelligent you're going to be. It's important to not depend on any single tool for all of your emotional support.



If you're just getting started, try choosing just one of these tools to focus on for the next week. Write down 3 easy and *simple* actions you can take that embody this tool. And when you find yourself needing an emotional boost, actually practice putting the tool into action.

Once you build one new tool in your life, move on to another one. And keep building and practicing. Give yourself as many options as possible when it comes to managing your emotions in positive and constructive ways.

As with everything in life, emotional intelligence takes practice and time.

I've been practicing these tools for years and years now, but I'm not perfect. I still make mistakes. I still handle my emotions in negative and counterproductive ways, sometimes. It's going to happen.

The important thing is to be patient with yourself as you build your "emotional intelligence" toolkit. Keep the long-term in mind each day. Pay attention to small progress. And one day you'll look back and be amazed by your progress.

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