How to Practice Self-Regulation

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Self-regulation can be defined in various ways. In the most basic sense, it involves controlling 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. It also reflects the ability to cheer yourself up after disappointments and to act in a way consistent with your deepest held values.

Development

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

Importance

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 reprimands 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 be expressed in terms of anger or anxiety, and in more severe cases, may be diagnosed as a mental disorder.
Self-regulation is also important in that it allows you to act in accordance with your deeply held values or social conscience and to express yourself in appropriate ways. If you value academic achievement, it will allow you to study instead of slacking 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 bounce back from failure and stay calm under pressure. These two abilities will carry you through life, more than other skills.

**Common Problems**

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

**Effective Strategies**

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**

Mindfulness involves the cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness through practical exercises such as deep breathing. This helps with self-regulation by allowing you to delay gratification and manage emotions. In a 2018 review of 27 research studies, mindfulness was shown to have an effect on attention, which in turn helped to regulate negative affect (feelings) and executive functioning (higher-order thinking).

**Cognitive Reappraisal**

Cognitive reappraisal is another strategy that can be used to improve self-regulation abilities. This strategy involves changing your thought patterns. In a 2017 study comparing mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, and emotion suppression, it was shown that as we age, use of cognitive reappraisal is associated with lower negative affect and higher positive effect.

Specifically, cognitive reappraisal means thinking about a situation in an adaptive way, rather than one that is likely to increase negative emotions. 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."

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.

**Qualities of Self-Regulators**

The benefits of self-regulation are numerous. In general, people who are adept at self-regulating tend to see the good in others, view challenges as opportunities, maintain open communication, are clear about their intentions, act in accordance with their values, put forth their best effort, keep going through difficult times, remain flexible and adapt to situations, take control of situations when necessary, and can calm themselves when upset and cheer themselves when feeling down.

**Putting Into Practice**

You are probably thinking that it sounds wonderful to be good at self-regulating, but you still don't know how to improve your skills.

In children, parents can help develop self-regulation through routines (e.g., set certain mealtimes, have a set of behaviors for each activity). 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, such as by making them wait if they interrupt a conversation.

As an adult, the first step to practice 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. How exactly do you learn this skill of self-regulation?

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.

The second step is to become aware of your transient feelings. 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 may be a sign that you are entering a state of rage or a panic attack.

Start to restore balance by focusing on your deeply held values, rather than those transient emotions. See beyond that discomfort at the moment to the larger picture. Then, act in a way...
that aligns with self-regulation.

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 visiting a mental health professional. The time may be useful to implement specific strategies for your situation.

Article Sources


- University of Pittsburgh. *Self-Regulation*. 