

Self Actualizing Self Care

By Margaret Brugger, LCSW

You awake with a slight jolt. Before you even open your eyes, your thoughts start racing. *Oh no! Did I forget to call so and so back, shucks, and I didn't email those other people. How am I ever going to get done what I need to today...ahh my work is piling up!* Without really being conscious of your actions, you're up running around getting ready for the day, or even worse, trying to fall back asleep because you woke up before dawn.

Sound familiar? As a person who deals with anxiety, this was often a reality for me -- waking up too early and getting my morning off to an unhealthy start. These strings of thoughts caused by anxiety were also what often prevented me from being fully present, happy and healthy with my life. Thankfully, through lots of self-work, I have been able to accept how anxiety affects my life and I have developed a **mental health skill set that I've built into my routine**. I have wired pathways in my brain to practice gratitude right away in the morning instead of getting anxious about all the things I need to do that day. This skill, along with others I have practiced over and over again, benefits not only me, but my friends, my family, and the clients I work with.

I wake up less anxious in the mornings, and you can too -- through consistent practice, we are able to physically rewire our brains and become the people we want to be. **In order to transform mental health challenges, it is important to choose at least one to four concrete self-soothing skills to practice every single day**, multiple times a day. Often, the gap between learning a skill and integrating a skill is *practice*.

In this article we will explore how and why practicing mental health skills can lead you to lasting health. I will explain in detail *how* to practice in order to get the best results, then I will provide examples of *what* skills could be helpful.

Reprogramming Pathways

Imagine that you are standing at the foot of a tall grassy field. If you walk the same way everyday through the field, what is going to happen? You are going to create a pathway, matting down the grass to make a trail. It becomes the easiest way to walk through the field, and your chosen path without consciously thinking about it. This can be true for

mental health as well. When you create a repeated pattern of thoughts in your mind, you are crunching down the grass on that trail -- you are physically creating a pathway in your brain. Now imagine that thought pattern is an unhealthy one: *I can't do this, I am not good enough, there is never enough time*. Every time you go down that path, following that thought pattern, you are reinforcing that trail until it is the path of least resistance.

Now imagine you want to change that pattern. You're done with feeling unhealthy and you want to make a change to feel happier and healthier. You want to blaze a new trail. Go, you! The first time you walk off your familiar, programmed path, the grass is still tall. You might feel that you are getting lost, or that the blades of grass are making uncomfortable cuts on your legs. You are probably going to want to go back on the trail you already created. At this point, the pathway to the unhealthy thought pattern or habit is going to feel more comfortable, and this new path is too difficult. You might want to give up. But please don't! Remember that at this time you are creating a new path and it will take a lot of conscious choice and many steps to make this new trail.

Now is a great time to ask yourself if you are really committed to doing the work to make lasting changes. **It takes a lot of hard work to physically reprogram your brain**, especially if unhealthy pathways have been consistently paved for years. It takes perseverance and patience. Hopefully you would be patient with a child learning to walk or read, you wouldn't give up on them after trying for three days. Will you promise not to give up on yourself even when the path seems really challenging? Think of something in your life you have worked really hard for. Maybe it was good grades in school, making a free throw, justice for your community, or a promotion at work. In our society, we are very willing to accept that hard work is what gets you to the place you want to be. At the same time, I've noticed a gap in the belief that hard work on mental health can lead to the same success. Why are we so committed to practice in other areas of our life, but not mental health? Maybe now is a good time to take a minute and ask yourself if you are as committed to your mental health as you are to other areas of your life.

Practice When You're Feeling Healthy

Two keys to transforming mental health are the **frequency and duration** with which one practices mental health skills. Mental health skills can be tools you use to calm your mind and body, and create healthy thoughts. In your own quest to be a healthier person, you may have read articles and books, listened to talks, or maybe even seen multiple therapists -- but you still don't see a shift in your life. You might have noticed a gap between the words on the page and true, lasting transformation. One thing that is often missing is an understanding that it is necessary to practice mental health skills multiple times a day, and possibly the rest of your life, in order to reach your mental health goals.

Practicing these skills every day does not mean just when you're already feeling anxious or upset. The key to integrating these skills and making them second nature is to practice them when you're feeling well. In order to habitually use skills when you're anxious, you have to practice them when you're calm. It's similar to sports: practicing before a game builds the active muscle memory that an athlete needs in order to perform those actions during game time, when emotions are heightened. An athlete would never expect to be able to make a free throw under pressure if she had not already practiced hundreds of times in a calm situation. Similarly, you can't expect these skills to help calm you down during a stressful situation if you don't have a strong foundation of practice. I often find people practice once and want to never be anxious again. If you practice five times a day when you are calm, your body can more naturally use that skill when it's "game time."

One theory that I have always used to explain this is Carla Shatz's summary of the Hebbian theory: "neurons that fire together, wire together." This speaks to how when we repeatedly perform a behavior, even subconsciously, our synapses physically bind together to create a neurological pathway that can be more easily repeated -- even without seemingly thinking at all. It is the reason people can tie their shoes or put on their seatbelts without thinking about all the many steps that go into performing these actions. "Practice makes perfect," you know the deal.

Frequency

So you're going to practice when you're calm. But not just once a day or once a week. You need to practice multiple times a day, every day. It is widely accepted that in order to be physically healthy, you have to eat healthy foods every day. Even if I eat healthy today, given the privilege of access to healthy foods, I have to eat healthy again tomorrow to continue to be physically healthy. With mental health it's the same thing. If I choose to focus on gratitude today to relieve anxiety, I have to continue this practice tomorrow to not get anxious tomorrow. Or sometimes, if I practice this minute, I may need to practice again in the next minute!

As with healthy eating, it's also helpful to be easy on yourself, especially when you're learning and creating new patterns. If you eat junk food one day, you can try again tomorrow. If you don't practice for four days in a row, make a new goal for tomorrow.

We expect quick solutions. With mental health, that is often just not how it works. If you want to be mentally healthy, you have to give yourself the gift of slowing down, the time to practice. People tell me they are too busy to practice skills, but you can literally practice anywhere -- on the bus, in the car, washing dishes. Practice is only going to help you and

give you more time, because it will allow you to be more in control of your emotions and make healthier decisions, which will save you time in the long run.

Often we say that we are too busy to practice self care. Really, it doesn't matter if you have ten kids and seven jobs, you can deep breathe on the bus or say something to yourself that you are grateful for that will help you be more mindful of your situation. Imagine all the other things you commit your time to. Which ones will be positively affected by your ability to live in harmony with your emotions?

Duration

Over the long term, I have to eat healthily every year of my life in order to be physically healthy, and I have to practice my self-soothing skills every year of my life to stay mentally healthy. Often, the initial commitment allows people to practice skills until they start to feel better, and then stop practicing when the new neural pathways to healthy patterns are just being laid. When mental health challenges recur, we say the skills aren't working. But really, it's ourselves who must commit to doing the work. So if you are thinking that maybe this is too much work, consider the consequences of not doing the work.

You know that morning, when you wake up a little too late and start to think about all the things you need to do that day and get stressed about time and then you spill your coffee and then run a stop sign by accident and then show up to work more frazzled than three minutes of accidentally oversleeping really warranted? And that's just spilt coffee -- think about how practicing mental health skills on a daily level can affect your ability to deal with the big stuff.

Overcome Resistance

It seems that sometimes what prevents us from practicing mental health skills as much as we need to is a resistance to accept that we need it. Admitting that consistently staying mentally healthy is a challenge opens you to be more dedicated to the work you have to do. Once I really accepted how much anxiety affects me, it became clear how often I needed to use my skills. A huge portion of the suffering that we experience in life is related to not accepting what is. Even if you're reading this and don't think you're an anxious person or someone dealing with depression, we live in such a high-paced society and at times really depressing world that anyone can benefit from practicing skills. Practicing skills can help us recognize the amazing things happening in the world and allow us to focus on beauty rather than fear. I also believe that accepting our challenges as well as the idea and knowledge

that many people deal with the same challenges can allow us to talk about it, creating a community of support and thus working to destigmatize mental health challenges.

It Works

It does work. I practice deep breathing every day, and sometimes notice now that I don't even realize that I am anxious until I find myself deep breathing and think, "Oh! I'm feeling anxious!" Now when I'm stressed, I crave deep breathing. Sometimes a skill can be so well practiced that the skills precede the conscious recognition of the emotion; it has become a new pathway.

Your brain is malleable, always ready for change. Committing to practicing mental health skills on a frequent, daily basis, and integrating them into your life can help you transform into a happier, healthier person. If we make a commitment to work on our own mental health, we help create healthier families, healthier communities, and a healthier world.

Sample Skills:

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a skill that most therapists will suggest for combating anxiety. Sure, you think that I am just another one of those therapists who is going to prescribe you air and expect it to work. If you're thinking that you've tried it and it hasn't worked then I want to ask you: have you really tried practicing deep breathing three to five times a day for at least a month, at times when you are calm?

The goal of deep breathing is to be able to use your breath to calm you when you're anxious or upset. **Deep breathing sends a message to your brain that it's okay to calm down.** This allows your brain to make more logical decisions instead of acting out of anxiety. But just like any other skill, it relies heavily on muscle memory and practice.

To take a deep breath first sit up straight, relax your shoulders, slowly inhale through your nose and now slowly exhale out your mouth as if blowing softly through a straw. Repeat this three to five times and see if you can make each inhale and exhale last for three to five seconds. Now put your hands on your stomach and see if when you inhale you can get the air to first fill your lungs all the way and then travel far enough to fill your stomach. Please remember to relax your shoulders. They should stay relaxed as you breathe.

Gratitude

Practice gratitude by simply saying, thinking or writing the things you are grateful for. Even when things are really challenging, you have things to be grateful for. If needed, focus on the things we tend to take for granted, be thankful you have food, clothing, shelter, that you can read this, that you are alive. Start by saying I am grateful for water, I am grateful that I can read, I am grateful I am alive and continue in this manner until you have calmed down. This is the practice that changed my morning routine and how I start my day. I start when I first wake up like this: *I am thankful I have a bed*, and continue while I brushed my teeth: *I am thankful I have clean water to brush my teeth*, and continue on through my morning routine. This is in large part what brings me peace even as I run around getting ready for work.

Practicing gratitude helps you calm down because what you think is what you feel. If you are thinking of what is lacking or other thoughts caused by anxiety you will feel this in your body. If you are focusing on what you are grateful for, even the smallest thing, you can feel the benefit of focusing on the health and beauty in your life. Your brain can really only focus well on one thought at a time. Therefore, if you are listing things you are grateful for, you will have less space to focus on or think thoughts that cause feelings of anxiety and depression. There is a space for these thoughts, but it is not healthy for them to overtake your life.

Feelings Recognition

Take time to slow down and ask yourself how you are feeling. Then label those feelings in this way: "I feel ____ because ____." For example: "I feel nervous because I didn't finish all of my work yesterday." In this way, we can start to be more aware of our feelings and how they affect our thoughts and behaviors. If we can recognize how we are feeling, we have a much better chance to deal with our emotions in a healthy way rather than reacting because of our emotions.

Grounding through your 5 senses

This is a great way to practice basic mindfulness and train your brain to think about/focus on what you choose. This skill may seem simple, or even silly, but this is a skill that has given me great freedom from anxiety. We have our five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. You can calm yourself and stop unhealthy thoughts by simply listing what you feel, taste, smell, see or hear. For example: I often notice that my thoughts wander when I am doing simple tasks such as laundry or the dishes. At times I find myself worrying about other things I need to get done or things I don't have control over. Have you been there? At this time, I literally say to myself: I feel the plate in my hand, the water feels warm, the plate is blue. This is a great one to mix with gratitude and say I am grateful I have dishes and

water. This brings me back to the present. It can also be helpful on a walk or a drive. You can practice picking out how many colors you see in a tree or a cloud. Using your senses to ground you to a healthy place out in nature has the extra added bonus of utilizing nature to calm yourself.

Into a Broader Context

I hope these suggestions and explanations help you find more peace in your life. When we dedicate ourselves to our work, family, and changing the world, we can get lost in the struggle and stress. Practicing self-care allows us to be our best selves and even become more productive in our work in the world. If we enjoy life and work towards mental health we can better support ourselves, our loved ones, and our community.

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