

# 8 Ways to Improve Self-Regulation

## "Feed Your Good Wolf"



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**Which wolf do you feed?**

There is a Native American story called "The Two Wolves." It starts with an old Cherokee telling his grandson about a battle that often goes on inside people.

He says, "My son, the fight is between two wolves. One is evil. It is angry, envious, jealous, sorrowful, regretful, greedy, arrogant, self-pitying, guilty, resentful, inferior, dishonest, proud, superior, and egotistical. The other is good. This wolf is joyful, peaceful, loving, hopeful, serene, humble, kind, benevolent, empathetic, generous, truthful, compassionate, and faithful."

His grandson thinks for a while, and then asks: "Which wolf wins, Grandfather?" The old Cherokee simply replies, "The one you feed."

## Regulating Your Emotions

The point of the story is that we all have a choice about how we react to situations: either in a positive or negative way. The more you practice thinking and behaving positively, the less negativity can affect you and the way you behave.

Let's apply the two wolves analogy to the workplace.

Imagine you've just been passed over for promotion. You start to think negatively about your boss, so much so that it interferes with your ability to do your work. But, after some deep breaths, you tell yourself positive things like, "Something better will come along," "The person best suited to this job got it," and, "It's nothing personal." These new thoughts help you to think clearly again, and allow you to put the situation into perspective.

Making a proactive choice to feed your "good wolf," and to manage the way you think and act, involves self-regulation.

## What is Self-Regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to keep disruptive emotions and impulses in check, and to think before acting. It's one of the five elements of [emotional intelligence](#) (knowing your emotions; managing your emotions/self-regulation; motivating yourself; recognizing and understanding other people's emotions, and managing relationships), a concept developed by psychologist Daniel Goleman.

According to Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, in their 2002 book "[The New Leaders: Transforming the Art of Leadership](#)," people who self-regulate see the good in other people, and are able to identify opportunities in different situations. They keep lines of communication open, make their motivations and intentions clear, and act in accordance with their values. They also work to the best of their abilities, and are able to keep going when times are tough.

Goleman and his colleagues found that self-regulated people can calm themselves down when they're angry or upset, and cheer themselves up when they're down. They are also flexible, and adapt their styles to work

with their colleagues (no matter who they are), and take charge of situations when necessary.

Emotional intelligence is a crucial leadership skill, because it gives you an awareness of your own emotions, as well as of others' feelings and needs. Self-regulation is also vital, because it means you can manage how you react to situations, and express yourself appropriately at all times.

## The Importance of Self-Regulation

When we know how to manage our emotions and impulses, we function at our best. It means we act in accordance with our "social conscience," rather than just doing what we want to do. For instance, we might help a team member with a piece of work even when we're pushed for time ourselves.

Self-regulation also prevents us from behaving in a way that could cost us, our team or our organization in the [long run](#), even when there are short-term benefits. It allows us to delay gratification and suppress our impulses long enough to think ahead to the possible consequences of our actions. So, for example, we can turn down invitations to do something fun when we're studying toward a qualification, and are able to rein in the desire to tell difficult team members what we really think of them! Being self-regulated means we're able to "bounce back" from negative feedback, which stops us from wallowing in self-pity and being less productive at work. And, if other people see we're able to keep calm under pressure, and accept feedback without getting upset, they're more likely to trust us with important work and projects. It also makes us more approachable, and strengthens our [reputations](#) at work.

## 8 Strategies to Develop Your Self-Regulation Skills

The good news is that you can learn self-regulation. Use the following eight strategies to develop it.

# 1. Leading With Integrity

Managers who are self-regulated lead with integrity. They are good role models, they practice what they preach, and they create trusting environments. They do the right thing for the right reasons, even when it means they don't take the easiest option.

People who live and work with integrity are often successful because others respect them. To behave with integrity, identify your [values](#). These are the things that you won't compromise on, even if they put you at a disadvantage. (Recognize that you'll sometimes lose opportunities by behaving ethically, but that you'll win "the long game.") Then, start living these values every day. Admit your mistakes, take responsibility for your actions, and listen to your inner voice.

People tend to treat you how you treat them, so, if you don't want to experience bad behaviors from others, don't exhibit them yourself. Equally, if you remain positive and optimistic – even in the face of adversity – you team members will likely do the same.

# 2. Being Open to Change

People who self-regulate cope well with change, and adapt their behavior to different situations easily. Importantly, they think about change positively, and see it as an exciting opportunity for self-development. (Conversely, people who resist change can experience a great deal of stress, and other negative physical and psychological effects.)

If you struggle to cope with change, try using the [Transactional Model of Stress and Coping](#) to look objectively at your change situation, and to analyze how you can respond to it effectively. Other tools like [SWOT](#), [Risk Analysis](#) and [Impact Analysis](#) can also help you discover new opportunities, and to manage and eliminate threats.

# 3. Identifying Your Triggers

An important part of being self-regulated is [self-awareness](#), particularly when it comes to knowing what your weaknesses are, and how other people's behavior can affect you negatively.

Identify your triggers by making a list of all the times when you've given in to your negative impulses at work. When you've identified emotions and reactions that aren't useful, replace them with more positive behaviors.

For example, you might discover that you tend to snap at colleagues when you feel your workload is out of control, because you have back-to-back meetings. If this is the case, you might want to schedule "free" appointments in your diary to avoid this situation.

### **Tip:**

Consider keeping a [Stress Diary](#) to identify where you need to improve your stress management skills, and to understand the levels of stress at which you are happiest and most effective.

## **4. Practicing Self-Discipline**

In their 2012 study, "[Masters of the Long Haul](#)," researchers Thomas Bateman and Bruce Barry said that self-regulation is the single most important factor in achieving long-term goals.

People who show initiative or work toward challenging goals often encounter difficulties and setbacks, but those who are able to keep going eventually succeed.

Develop self-regulation by working on persistence and self-discipline.

These are traits that keep you working hard, even when you are not "in the mood" and your goals seem out of reach. For example, keeping focused on how you'll feel when you've finished your project might be the best way to avoid procrastinating, or giving up on a difficult project completely.

## **5. Reframing Negative Thoughts**

People who are self-regulated are able to choose the wolf they feed. If you experience a negative event or obstacle at work, tune in to your negative thoughts. Ask yourself whether they're reasonable and stand up to fair scrutiny. For example, did you really not get the job because you're "not good enough," or was it because your colleague had more experience in a specific area?

Consider using [affirmations](#) and [visualization](#) to manage your negative thoughts and to control how you react to similar situations in the future. By rationally assessing the facts, you can undo the damage that negative thinking may have done. For instance, saying to yourself, "I can do this, I've done it before" is much more motivating than, "I can't do this, I'm hopeless!"

Another strategy is to find something positive about the situation. This small shift in [perspective](#) can transform your thinking and make you feel more optimistic about the future. For example, imagine you've received some feedback that upsets you and causes negative thoughts to spiral. Take the emotion out of the equation for a moment, and think about whether there's any element of truth in it. If there is, how can you improve your performance next time? If there isn't, take the [initiative](#) and talk to the other person to address any misunderstandings.

## 6. Keeping Calm Under Pressure

Self-regulation is about remaining calm in the face of adversity, and keeping your cool. If you're in a situation where you're losing control of your emotions, try to remove yourself for a few moments – either physically or mentally.

For example, [relaxation techniques](#) such as deep breathing can help you to calm down – it interrupts any negative thoughts, and puts you back on a more positive path. Breathe in slowly for five seconds, then breathe out for five. Focus on your breathing, and nothing else. Do this at least five times.

**Tip:**

Remember, the more you practice self-regulation, the more successful you'll be at it.

## 7. Considering the Consequences

If you find yourself in a difficult situation, or if you're trying to control your impulses, think before you act and consider the consequences. Remembering what happened when you reacted badly in the past can remind you why it's important to be self-regulated.

Or, imagine how you look and behave when you're not in control – this will give you some perspective on the situation. For instance, if you're about to shout at your team member, imagine how you would look. Is your face red and sweaty? Are you flailing your arms around? How would you feel working for that person? You'd probably not want to.

## 8. Believing in Yourself

Another important element of self-regulation is self-efficacy. This is your belief in your ability to achieve your goals. To develop this, work on your [self-confidence](#). Focus on the experiences in your life where you were successful, to put your mistakes and setbacks into perspective. Choose to believe in yourself, and surround yourself with other positive and confident people. The more you see the success of others whose skills and abilities are similar to yours, the more likely you are to believe that you can also achieve that success.

Combine all of this positive energy with great [stress management strategies](#), and you'll soon improve your levels of personal confidence.

## Key Points

Self-regulation is the ability to manage disruptive emotions and impulses, and to think before you react. It makes up one of the five elements of emotional intelligence, a concept developed by psychologist Daniel

Goleman, and it helps us stop unhelpful behavior, and keep calm under pressure.

We all have the ability to control the way we react to situations. Build on your skills by leading with integrity, being open to change, practicing self-discipline, and believing in yourself. Keep calm under pressure by identifying your triggers to stress and reframing negative thoughts, and always consider the consequences of your actions.