Stride

KEEP ON MOVING | WELLNESS GUIDE | RESEARCH-BACKED

Master Your Mindset

A quick guide to positive thinking, from Stanford psychologists to Harvard epidemiologists, told through one stalled routine.

What you believe about setbacks changes what you do next. Discover what the research says about mindset, optimism and stress, and five practices to put it to work.

CHAPTER 1

Three Missed Workouts and One Dangerous Sentence

> Priya had a plan. Monday, Wednesday, Friday: gym at 6 a.m. She kept it for two weeks, then a work deadline swallowed a Monday, a sick child swallowed a Wednesday, and by the third week the sneakers were still by the door, untouched.
>
> That night she said the sentence that would have kept her stuck for months: "I guess I'm just not a disciplined person."
>
> Notice what happened. A scheduling problem became an identity verdict. The behaviour did not fail; the *story* about the behaviour did.

This guide is about changing the story. Not with empty cheerleading, but with findings from psychology and medicine that show how what we believe shapes what we do, and sometimes how our bodies respond.

CHAPTER 2

The Research on Beliefs

Growth versus fixed mindset. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck spent decades studying how people interpret setbacks. Those with a *fixed* mindset treat ability as a trait you either have or don't; those with a *growth* mindset see ability as something developed through effort, strategy and feedback [1]. In a large national experiment led by David Yeager and colleagues, a brief online growth-mindset programme given to 12,490 ninth-graders in the United States modestly improved grades among lower-achieving students (about 0.1 grade points) [2].

An honest caveat: reviews of many mindset studies find that the *average* effect is small and varies by context, so mindset is a helpful lens, not a magic wand [3]. That is exactly how we use it here: as one tool among several.

10 pts

In a classic Harvard study, 84 hotel housekeepers were told that their daily work met the guidelines for an active lifestyle. Four weeks later, with no change in how they actually worked, the informed group had lost weight and had systolic blood pressure about 10 points lower, while a control group showed no change [4].

Psychologists Alia Crum and Ellen Langer called this "the placebo effect of exercise." The study was small and has not been replicated as widely as we would like, so treat it as intriguing rather than conclusive. But it points to a pattern researchers keep finding: how we *interpret* our efforts can change

how those efforts play out.

Stress beliefs. Researcher Abiola Keller and colleagues followed 28,753 U.S. adults for eight years. Among people reporting a lot of stress, those who also believed stress was harmful to their health had a 43% higher risk of premature death than those who reported similar stress but did not hold that belief [5]. Health psychologist Kelly McGonigal brought this finding to a wide audience in her TED talk on making stress your friend. The study is observational, so it cannot prove that the belief itself caused the difference, but it is a striking signal.

Optimism and a longer life. A team led by Lewina Lee and senior author Laura Kubzansky at Harvard and Boston University tracked 69,744 women and 1,429 men. The most optimistic participants had, on average, an 11–15% longer lifespan and 50–70% greater odds of living to age 85 or older, even after accounting for factors such as education, chronic illness and depression [6]. A broader review by Julia Boehm and Kubzansky also linked positive psychological well-being with better cardiovascular health [7]. Again, these are associations, but the authors note that optimism may be modifiable with relatively simple techniques [6].

Why might it work? Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory proposes that positive emotions widen our attention and help us build lasting resources such as skills, social bonds and resilience [8]. In other words, feeling hopeful is not a reward for success; it helps *create* the conditions for it.

CHAPTER 3

Five Practices You Can Start Tonight

Practice	How to do it	Why it works
1. Add the word "yet"	Turn "I'm not disciplined" into "I haven't built this routine **yet**."	Shifts a fixed verdict into a growth frame [1,2].
2. Write an if-then plan	"If it is 6:30 a.m. on Monday, then I put on my shoes and walk for ten minutes." Decide the cue and the action in advance.	Meta-analysis of 94 tests found "implementation intentions" had a medium-to-large effect (d = 0.65) on goal attainment [9].
3. Best possible self (10 min)	Write for ten minutes about your life a year from now if things go well and you have kept your health habits. Be specific and realistic.	Randomised studies found this kind of exercise boosted positive mood; it is a simple way to build optimism [10].
4. Reappraise stress	When your heart races, tell yourself: "This is my body mobilising energy to meet the challenge."	Based on research linking stress beliefs with health outcomes [5].
5. Miss a day? Resume tomorrow	Treat a missed day as data, not a verdict. Write one line on what got in the way and what you will adjust.	Missing one opportunity did not materially affect habit formation [11].

CHAPTER 4

Back to Priya

> Priya did not buy a new program. She changed one sentence and added one plan. “I haven’t built this routine yet,” she wrote in her notes app. “If I miss a workout, then I do ten minutes of stretching that evening and go again next day.”
>
> Three months later she had missed plenty of workouts and given up on none. She no longer measured herself by streaks. She measured herself by returns.

Positive thinking is not pretending

Optimism in the research is not denial. It is a realistic expectation that effort can help, paired with concrete plans. If you are feeling persistently low, anxious or hopeless, that is not a mindset problem to fix on your own; please talk to a doctor or licensed mental-health professional. In the U.S., you can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) any time.

A quick word on the evidence

Most findings on optimism and stress beliefs are observational, so they show links rather than proof of cause [5,6]. The hotel-housekeeper study was small [4], and the average effects of growth-mindset programmes are modest [2,3]. We include them because they are real, published and instructive, and because the practices above are low-risk and cost nothing to try.

This guide is for general education and inspiration. It is not medical advice and does not replace care from a licensed clinician or registered dietitian. Talk with your healthcare provider before making significant changes to your diet, activity or routines, especially if you are pregnant, managing a health condition, or taking medication. Characters in the opening stories are composites created for illustration; all research findings are real and cited.

SOURCES

References & Further Reading

Every number in this guide traces back to the sources below. Superscript numbers in the text match the numbered entries. Where a finding comes from observational research (which shows association, not proof of cause), we say so.

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6. Lee LO, James P, Zevon ES, et al. Optimism is associated with exceptional longevity in 2 epidemiologic cohorts of men and women. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2019;116(37):18357–18362. doi:10.1073/pnas.1900712116
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8. Fredrickson BL. The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*. 2001;56(3):218–226.
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Watch, Listen & Learn From the Experts

- **Carol Dweck, PhD** (Stanford University). TEDx talk: *The power of believing that you can improve* (2014).
- **Kelly McGonigal, PhD** (Stanford University). TED talk: *How to make stress your friend* (2013).
- **Alia Crum, PhD** (Stanford Mind & Body Lab). Public talks and lab summaries on mindset and health.
- **Laura Kubzansky, PhD** (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health). Research on optimism and health, Lee Kum Sheung Center for Health and Happiness.