

From Languishing to Flourishing:

11 Research Based Tools for Increasing Well-Being

www.TheFlourishingCenter.com
www.CertificateInPositivePsychology.com

(844) F-L-O-U-R-I-S-H or (844) 356-8747



Dear Flourisher,

A 2002 study by Dr. Corey Keyes from Emory University asked a simple yet profound question.[29] **Of the general population, how many people are mentally ill, healthy or flourishing?** The results are pretty astounding.

Here's what he found. Of the 3,032 participants in the study, **only 17.2% of people were flourishing.** Then 56.6% were moderately mentally healthy, 12.1% percent were languishing and 14.1% fit the DSM criteria for major depressive disorder.

It gets better. Up until recently, most psychology research focused on how to get that depressed population less depressed. **“What about the majority of people who aren't depressed?”** you ask. Great question!

That's exactly what the field of Positive Psychology is all about. It is also exactly the kind of information you're going to receive from us here at **The Flourishing Center** where we are dedicated to your personal and professional flourishing.

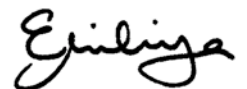
This eBook contains 11 practical and proven tools to move people from languishing to flourishing. “What does it mean to be languishing?” It's like that feeling you get when you get in your car and start driving only to realize you've left the emergency brake on. You know... that uncomfortable feeling of working but feeling like you're not really getting anywhere and everything feels hard. You're not quite depressed, but you sure aren't happy.

The tools I'm about to share with you have been proven to support people in moving “north of neutral” in their life before they get clinically depressed.

I encourage you to **share this eBook with your friends and family.** The more tools we all have in our tool kit for creating happier and healthier lives, the better. As my teacher would say, “If you only have a hammer, you treat everything like a nail.”

I hope these tools become empower you the way they have empowered myself and the thousands of people we've been sharing this with.

With love and light,



Emiliya Zhivotovskaya, MAPP, PCC, ERYT
Founder & President
The Flourishing Center



P.S. Did someone send this eBook to you? Stay in the know by signing up to our newsletter at www.theflourishingcenter.com.

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1. Oxytocin: The Hormone of Trust

Oxytocin is a neurotransmitter that acts as a hormone. It is well known for being released during breast feeding, but it is also released during orgasm, hugs, snuggling, holding hands, partner dance, massage, body work and mental imagery of closeness [1]. Oxytocin plays an essential role in living a flourishing life.

Oxytocin is the hormone of social bonding and it facilitates trust. It tells the brain, “I’m okay. Everything is alright.” When oxytocin is present in the body, brain scans show less activity in the amygdala, the emotional center of the brain that processes fear and anxiety [2]. It reduces blood pressure and lowers cortisol levels [3]. The oxytocin supported state shifts you away from fight-or-flight survival mode into feeling more calm and less stressed. Studies show that oxytocin improves couple communication [4]. Research also shows oxytocin increases prosocial behavior [5], meaning that people are more giving and trusting when it is present in the body.

Trust is key for enhancing the positive in your life. Imagine sitting down to meditate. You close your eyes. Where does your mind immediately go? Probably a thought of something you have to do or of something someone said. The key to getting your mind to quiet down is to invite in calm, trust and your own oxytocin. Otherwise, your mind says, “Don’t just sit there, do something.” Quieting your mind requires reassuring it, “It’s okay. Life is good. We can be calm and still for a little while.”



Here are five things you can do to boost your well-being and stimulate your body’s release of oxytocin (partner not included and not necessarily needed ☺):

1. *Spend time visualizing and feeling appreciation, love and affection* for people you care about. Just thinking about the person isn’t enough; feeling the “closeness” facilitates the emotional and hormonal shift.
2. *Get massaged and cuddled.* Babies that are not touched do not develop as well as those who are. We have a biological need for closeness. Don’t have a loving partner for intimacy right now? That’s fine. There is so much healing and well-being available through massage and body work from trained, loving professionals.
3. *Practice rhythmic patterns of both breath and touch* to help bring the body into a state of greater coherence and calm. Simply dancing and moving in a repeated pattern can induce a more meditative state which tells your brain, “Everything is okay.” When performed from a space of love and self care, stroking your own hair or skin with a dry brushing technique can release oxytocin. The same thing works for petting pets.
4. *Work with mantras or affirmations* such as “I trust,” or “I’m okay. Whatever life brings me, I will work through it. I have in the past I will in the future.”
5. *Use the power of visualization combined with breath work* by imagining a word or image that induces a sense of calmness and connection with others such as “I am loved.” Breathing is a powerful tool for stimulating the *parasympathetic system* (the part of the autonomic nervous system associated with calm, rest and digestion).

2. Fear: Why it Feels Good to Worry

Most of us think that worrying is a bad feeling. Fear, anxiety and worry all fit under the umbrella of emotions linked to the belief that something bad might happen.

Your brain sends messages to you to worry, and plans for worst case scenarios because it wants to protect you from future harm. But there is another reason why your brain does it: from your brain's perspective, worrying about the future actually feels good. That's right, it feels good.

In the book, *Mapping the Mind*, science writer Rita Carter says, “part of the brain's internal environment is a ceaseless pressure to seek out new stimuli and to gather information, especially about future events... [creating a] feeling of pleasurable anticipation” [6].



Researchers Ethan Martin and Okihide Hikosaka found that gathering information about the future activates the neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain [7]. Dopamine also functions as a neurohormone. It is associated with the pleasure centers of the brain, producing a sense of enjoyment and motivation to repeat certain behaviors. It gets released during enjoyable experiences such as eating and having sex.

Your brain is biologically wired for survival. As it ruminates about the future and gathers information, it releases dopamine to say, “Good job, keep me safe, stay alert to the worst things that could happen.” This inclination was important thousands of years ago when our ancestors faced life threatening conditions. However, nowadays most of the things you worry about are not likely to happen. Instead, worrying increases your stress and decreases your well-being.

Here are practical ways to redirect your brain from its masochistic tendency to stress and worry:

1. *Catch yourself* when you are ruminating or catastrophizing about the future. Identify what that voice sounds and feels like. Call it for what it is—a habitual pattern of thinking—and thank it for its reminder and desire to keep you safe. This type of acknowledgment and acceptance often makes the tendency diminish significantly.
2. *Remind yourself that the worries and catastrophic thoughts are probably unfounded.* These thoughts are just your brain not having anything else to get its dopamine fix. That doesn't mean you need to go stuff your worry with food or sex (although if you do it in reasonably healthy amounts... enjoy!).
3. *Use your brain's desire for novelty seeking and future-mindedness to think of things that you want* instead of what you don't want. You'll get a similar dopamine release in your brain, feel less stressed out and most importantly, your brain will focus on manifesting what you want.

3. Make Friends: You'll Live Longer

In 2010 a research study was conducted questioning whether having friends made people live longer. Psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad and her colleagues conducted a meta-analysis (a study that utilizes the data of many studies to test a hypothesis) of 308,849 participants and their mortality [8]. Those who had stronger social connections had a 50% greater chance of surviving regardless of their age, gender, initial health or cause of death! That's all the more reason to go to your next high school reunion, right?

Why does this happen? Nature/evolution rewards behaviors which promote survival of the species. Throughout evolution, being social and working in community increased survival odds. Thus, positive chemical changes occur in the body to encourage the body to repeat these behaviors:

- Natural killer cells are produced to increase immunity
- Feel-good hormones such as oxytocin and dopamine are released
- Cortisol, the stress hormone, decreases
- Artery functioning and mental performance improve
- The risk of heart disease, cancer, stroke and dementia decreases

Despite the increased evidence that social connections are important, a study in 2006 revealed a three-fold increase within 20 years of the number of people reporting they do not have a confidant [9]. Even worse, according to Dr. Aric Sigman, the amount of face to face time people get has fallen dramatically since 1987 [10]. In this digital world, there is a greater need now than ever for authentic connections. They can save your life!

Here are a few tips for expanding or enriching your social network:

1. *Identify and write down beliefs or judgments* that might stand in the way of you connecting with people. For example: "People don't want to talk to me," or "I never know what to say to people." Beliefs influence what you do and how you feel about yourself. Work with a coach to redirect your beliefs.
2. *Make social connection a priority.* Create more space and time in your life to do things that are meaningful for you and connect with others who do the same.
3. *Coordinate a gathering* inviting friends to bring their friends. Potlucks, board games, Wii Challenges and vision boarding parties are some ideas. Make it active, which is more likely to create a flowing experience, rather than passive entertainment, such as watching a movie.
4. *Join www.meetup.com, a free online network that brings people together who are interested in similar topics.* Simply type in your zip code and find events and opportunities to make friends in your area. Can't find a topic you're interested in? No worries, it's quick and easy to start your own group!



4. Savoring: The Deliciousness of Life

Positive emotions are a key component of flourishing. One simple and powerful tool for increasing your positivity is actively savoring the experiences of your life. I lovingly refer to this as “Falling in love with the deliciousness of life,” or “You’re here, might as well get the most out of it!” Savoring is a form of alchemy; by savoring you can instantaneously transform a mundane experience into one that boosts your positivity.

Savoring is defined as being attentive and appreciative of an experience. Savoring is a form of mindfulness. Bryant and Veroff, leading researchers in this field, identify three forms of savoring: anticipatory (looking forward to something in the future), attentive (using your senses to be mindful of it in the present) and retrospective (reminiscing positively about a memory) [11].

Savoring involves inducing a positive emotion. Where mindfulness involves being very present to an experience, reminiscing allows you to conjure up a memory. In order to savor, look for the beauty, fun, smile, joy, warmth and meaning behind an experience.

In and of itself, savoring is not difficult to do. The challenge is to remember to do it. The use of primers or reminders accessible to your eyes and ears is key. I recommend Post-it® notes, signs, phone alarms or verbal cues from friends. Over time, savoring practices can become more habitual.

Here are tips for upping your experiences of savoring:

1. *Set aside the time for a slow and indulgent meal.* Try engaging all five senses as you do so. Time yourself. How long can you stretch the experience for?
2. *Set an alarm on your phone* to go off at random times throughout the day. When it goes off, find something in your environment to savor.
3. *Withdraw from your sense of sight and increase the experience of your other senses.* Have a friend blindfold you and walk you around town, feed you a meal or sit with you in nature.



5. Your Work: Job, Career or Calling?

If you work a 40-60 hour work week, you spend 36-54% of your waking hours working. When you factor in the amount of time you spend commuting to work, thinking about work, talking about work, stressing about or ruminating on conversations from work, that number might be as high as 70+!

Research by psychologists Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton [12] shows there are three ways people orient themselves to their work:

- Work as a *job*: You do it because you have to. You're motivated by the money or other work benefits. When off the clock, you don't think much about work.
- Work as a *career*: You are motivated by both the benefits of work (monetary etc.) and the status symbols (promotions, titles, advancement etc.). If your work wasn't supporting your ascension towards a better position in the future, you might not do it.
- Work as a *calling*: You love your work, and it is meaningful to you. You appreciate being paid for doing it, however, you often say, "I'd do my work for free." You think about your work outside of work hours, not because you're a workaholic, but because your work brings you joy, engagement and purpose.

Research shows that people who view their work as a calling score higher on work and life satisfaction. Here are three processes for creating more meaningful work recommended by researchers Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton:

1. *Make a cognitive change*: Change your perceptions of your work. How does your work affect the world at large? How is your work a necessary part of a great functioning whole?
Example: A flight attendant reinforces the belief that her job is to ensure that customers feel safe and comfortable on their flight, rather than believing her job is simply to give people drinks and pretzels.
2. *Change your task orientation*: Find things to do at work that are challenging and beneficial to you and/or the company.
Example: A parking attendant creates a more efficient way to track the parked cars making it easier for his colleagues and making the company more effective.
3. *Focus on relational aspects of your work*: Create more opportunities to interact with people at work, and feel how the job you do benefits them.
Example: College honor society administrators get to interact with the students that benefit from their services and hear their successes and expression of gratitude.



6. Exercise: Mammals Have to Move

Here's a test. How many of the following describe you: (1) you're warm blooded, (2) your offspring are born alive, (3) you have hair/fur on your body, (4) you have vertebrae, (5) you have lungs to breathe air and (6) you consumed mother's milk as a baby. Hopefully you answered yes to all of these statements (unless you're undergoing some major laser hair removal ☺), which means you're a mammal. Being a mammal means you are wired for a lot of movement and physical activity.

Homo sapiens like you and I have been roaming this planet for 250,000 years trying to find ways to survive. Modern agriculture began just 8,000 years ago, which decreased our need to forage for food over time [13]. Evolution/nature rewards patterns that enable survival. Thus a number of chemical changes happen in your body when you exercise, including ones that boost your mood, cognitive function and immune system.

Exercise increases the presence of endorphins three to ten times more than periods of low physical activity. A study by Babyak et al., demonstrates that exercise is as effective as antidepressants and has significantly lower relapse rates [14]. The effects of exercise on mood are so strong that Dr. Tal Ben Shahar, the renowned Harvard "Happiness Professor", says that not exercising is like taking a depressant [15]! A study of 8,000 participants also found that exercisers were significantly happier and more satisfied with their life than non-exercisers [16].

Exercise improves working memory and attention [17] boosts the presence of disease fighting cells in the body, increases the production of growth hormone (the body's mechanism for regenerating cells) and increases the presence of testosterone (Men, you won't need Viagra!).

Here are tips for seamlessly integrating more physical activity into your daily life:

1. *Make it fun, and do something you love.* I have found a style of dancing that kicks my butt, but it's so much fun to do that I forget I'm exercising.
2. *Create opportunities to turn daily activities like climbing stairs, cleaning and walking into exercise.* Make it brisk and invigorating!
3. *Get other people involved.* Whether it be exercising with people or supporting each other's fitness goals, social support makes exercising exponentially more enjoyable. Check out phone apps like Cardio Trainer that let you log your workouts and share them with friends.
4. *Keep at it* until it becomes consistent and habitual.



7. Breathing: For Calm and Health

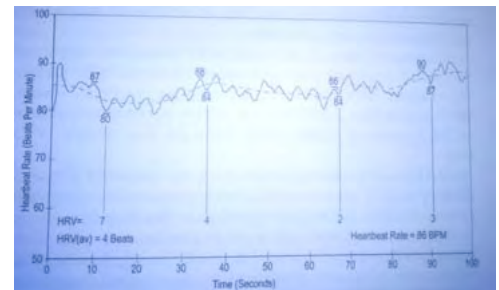
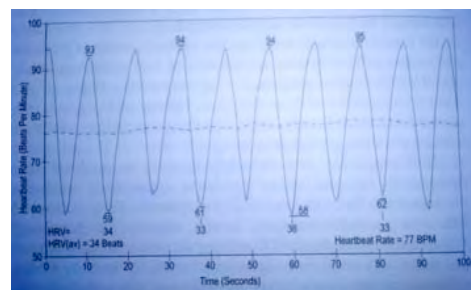
You came into this world taking your first breath, and one day your breath will stop and you will leave this world. The oxygen flowing into your body and out in the form of carbon dioxide, is your life force energy. Not only does breathing fuel every cell of your body, it is intimately connected to your autonomic nervous system. By learning to regulate your breath, you can master calming or invigorating yourself.

Breathing influences your heart rate variability (HRV), which is the variation between your heart beats. Taking deep inhales and long, slow exhales increases your HRV, which is positively correlated with good health [18].

When most people tune into their breath, they find that it tends to be short and shallow. This is because many people only breathe into their throat and upper chest instead of deep within their diaphragm. This keeps HRV low. When you get stressed, it gets even lower. One way to improve HRV, get more calm and more well-being is to slow and deepen your breathing.

Here are simple tools for working with your breath:

1. *In for 5 out for 5*, is encouraged by Stephen Elliot in his book, *The New Science of Breath* [19]. Inhaling for a slow count of 5 and exhaling for a slow count of 5 brings you down to 6 breathes a minute where most people usually breathe 15. A ratio of 5:5 has been proven to reduce HRV in just minutes.
2. *Belly breathing* refers to using your diaphragm, also known as your third lung, when breathing. Visualize a balloon in your stomach that you fill with breath as you inhale and exhale.
3. *Calm yourself when you're stressed* out or anxious by breathing at a ratio of 1:2, inhales to exhales (i.e. If you inhale for 3 counts, exhale for 6). Start slow. The more stressed or anxious you feel, the less natural it will feel to breathe this way. Start with in for 2, out for 4. Then progress to 3 or 4 counts to inhale and exhale for 6 or 8 counts. Repeat for at least 10 cycles. For a calm meditative state, try it for 5-10 minutes.
4. *Invigorate yourself when you're tired* or low energy by breathing at a ratio of 2:1, inhales to exhales (i.e. If you inhale for 6, exhale for 3). Start slow because you are flooding the body with rich oxygenated blood. A minute worth of invigorating breath maybe plenty. For advanced breathing techniques, work individually with a teacher.



Images: Left- displays HRV at 5 breathes per minute. Right- displays HRV at 15 breathes per minute [19].

8. Primers: Counter Out of Sight, Out of Mind

When you first set a goal there is a lot of energy around it. That energy is bound to fade quickly as time passes, particularly if the goal takes time and is multi-faceted. The saying, “Out of sight, out of mind,” rings true. It is much harder to stay committed to your goals with no visual reinforcement. Psychologists use the term primer to refer to conscious or unconscious cues that are paired together to create a behavioral change.

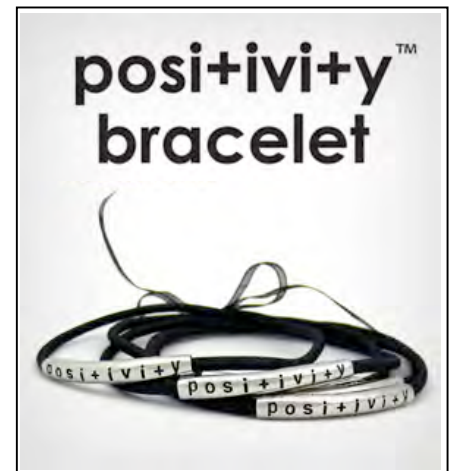
Many experiments have demonstrated that primers have a measurable effect on behavior. One study used an image of an athlete crossing the finish line to prime a success mindset for rookies doing fundraising. The study showed that the use of a primer lead to as much as an 85% increase in the amount of money raised [20].

Here are examples of primers that you can pair with your goals:

1. Post-it® notes or other signs
2. Passwords to frequently accessed sites (i.e. “Lose10in2011”)
3. Bracelets with charms or reminder words
4. Ring tones or alarms on your phone reminding you to do your goal
5. Vision boards or posters
6. Computer wallpaper or screensavers
7. Voicemails of your own voice reminding you of your goal

Despite your attempts to use primes, its effects can wear off as you adapt to the prime. (i.e. Your “Stay Mindful” bracelet becomes some band you have on your wrist.) Rotate your primers trying to create novelty, and thus, more energy around your goals.

Image reference [21]



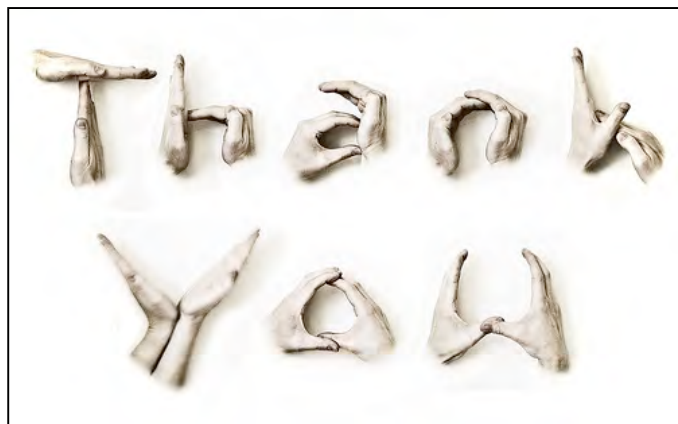
9. Gratitude: Social Glue

Research shows that gratitude is one of the most powerful and instantaneous ways to get into a more positive state [22]. People who practice gratitude are healthier, live longer and feel younger. From an evolutionary perspective, gratitude serves as social glue. Someone does something good for you, you say thank you. This communication encourages the good doer to do more good for you. The feeling of gratitude fills you. Through your biology, your body speaks to you and says, “Life is okay. Good things happen to me.”

Gratitude is fundamental for forming relationships. Imagine you go out with a few friends and the following day you get a message from one of them saying, “Thanks for coming out last night. It was great to see you!” How would you feel? Chances are you’d feel good and want to see that person again. Gratitude is not just fundamental courtesy. When it’s used above and beyond basic manners, it can be used to help people feel closer to you, like you more and want to do more good things with and for you.

Grow Your Gratitude:

1. *Be on the lookout for good things that happen to you.* Start by feeling the gratitude before you even attempt to express it (people can spot a phony).
2. *Look for details in the positive things.* Details enhance the experience of gratitude. Think of the people who bring good things into your life.
3. *Look for things that you usually give thanks for, and add an extra touch of gratitude.* My father always picks me up from the train station when I visit. I always say, “thanks” at the end of the car ride. Last time I sent him a text message with my added gratitude once I was on the train.
4. *Change up the words.* In addition to “thanks,” there is also, “I appreciate it.” “I’m grateful.” “It means a lot to me.” “Thank you for ____.” “_x_ has made me feel _y_, thank you.”
5. *Keep a gratitude journal of the things that you feel blessed by.* This makes for a great resource to turn to on days when feeling grateful is harder to access. Simply go back and read through the positive events.



10. Self-regulation: Flex this Muscle

According to Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, intentional activities (what you think, feel and do) account for 40% of your happiness [23]. Making your activities align with how you want to show up in the world requires self-regulation.

Here are two examples:

- Sally sets her alarm for 6:30 a.m. with the intention to wake up and go to the gym. The alarm goes off. She tells herself she's going to close her eyes for five more minutes, only to get up an hour later.
- Jim set the intention of avoiding sweets except for one "cheat day" a week. It's Tuesday and the temptation for a cupcake hits at the office. He tells himself he'll use his one cheat for the week. Friday comes along, and he is out to dinner with friends. Everyone orders dessert, so he does as well. He rationalizes by saying, "I'll start that intention next week."

Not exercising one morning or eating an extra dessert won't hurt Jim or Sally. The challenge to their happiness is telling themselves they will do one thing and actually do another. This easily turns into a pattern of rationalizing one's way out of doing things that are challenging or sacrificing short term pleasure for long term gain.

Research by Dr. Roy Baumeister shows that self-regulation is like a muscle [24]. The more often you use it, the stronger it gets. Self-regulation is also finite like a muscle; it gets fatigued after many repetitions and needs replenishing. Research shows that self-regulation is correlated with control over one's emotions, achievement and goal setting success, empathy and happiness.

Lacking will-power or self-regulation comes from frequently giving in to a habitual way of acting, thinking or feeling. Reclaim your happiness by creating space between your impulses and actions. Here are research-based tips to improve self-regulation:

1. *Use primers* (see #8) when setting goals, and be accountable to other people.
Example: Put signs up reminding you of your goal, and tell a friend about your intention.
2. *Distract yourself from the temptation.*
Example: Strike up a conversation with someone rather than making a second trip to the dessert table at a party.
3. *Reframe the temptation as something less desirable.*
Example: Think, "That chocolate fountain isn't chocolate, it's dog poo!"
4. *Avoid the temptation all together.*
Example: Download the Facebook Limiter software. It turns off your ability to access the site except during pre-determined times.
5. *Objectify the object of temptation.*
Example: Imagine a frame around the thing you are resisting. Tell yourself it isn't real and it is a picture of the thing you want to resist.
6. *Create an "If...then..." statement around your intention.*
Example: If I start feeling tempted to check my e-mail instead of working on my book, then I will remind myself of the book's importance and that I'll have a half hour to check e-mail once I'm finished



Image reference [25]

11. Self-efficacy: Beyond Self-Esteem

There's a strong yet subtle difference between self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem is a sense of feeling good about yourself, i.e., "I feel good about myself! Self-efficacy is a belief in your ability to utilize your skills in a given circumstance, i.e., "I can do this!" Self-esteem is one component to having healthy self-efficacy.

Research shows that people with high self-efficacy [26]:

- Have stronger feelings of control over their thoughts, feelings and actions, which are essential to well-being.
- Feel less helplessness, anxiety, stress and depression.
- Are more likely to adopt healthy behaviors and stop unhealthy ones.
- Have more feel-good chemicals released in their brain such as catecholamines (manage stress from threats) & endorphins (natural painkillers).
- Have higher self-regulation (see #10).
- Achieve their goals more often and set goals that are loftier and more effective.



Here are some tools to help you become more self-efficacious:

1. *Identify and remove negative beliefs about having high self-efficacy.* Self-confidence is different than self conceit. A healthy dose of self-efficacy increases your success and productivity.
2. *Reflect on the strengths that you have.* Take questionnaires such as the VIA Survey [27] to give you the words to describe your strengths.
3. *Reflect and write down what you have accomplished.* Drawing on your past experiences to feel good about your present!
4. *Recognize that self-efficacy is a spiral of self-fulfilling prophecies.* When you have positive expectations for your abilities, you're more likely to accomplish your goals. In accomplishing goals, your self-efficacy increases. Since it's a spiral, you have to start somewhere.
5. *Remember that you can handle it.* In Susan Jeffers' book, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* [28], she reminds us that the key to tackling our fears about our self-worth is to remind ourselves that "anything that has ever come [my] way, [I've] handled it!" And since you've handled it in the past, there is no logical reason for you to not handle it in the future!

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