Chapter 3: Skills and Strategies
Section 3: Behavioral Strategies

Being Mindful of Moods

When we are tired, distracted, anxious or angry, we are not mindfully engaged. These bits of negative thoughts and emotions pile up and crowd out the limited space available for encoding new memories. Information that is not rehearsed, or in some way actively encoded, will fade in as little as 10 seconds.

A. Mental Initiation

Anchor Points

Daily routines can be very helpful for those who may have trouble “getting going” with their day or starting on a task. Establishing habitual activities can serve as an anchor for the brain from which one can “hook” on other activities. Lack of scheduled activities makes it very difficult to get anything accomplished.

Sleep Habits

Begin preparing for a successful day by establishing evening routines. The brain consolidates information into well organized and formed memory during sleep. Sleep is essential towards reducing thought processing problems and mood disorders. Set a regular time to go to bed every night. You should aim for 8 hours of sleep. If your regular sleep time is 10:00 pm, you should be thinking of winding down activities by 8:00 pm.

Wind Down

Relaxing evening routines could include listening to relaxing music, reading or listening to books on tapes, drinking tea or engaging in evening meditation exercise. If you have trouble sleeping, analyze what you are doing before bed. Avoid working on high demand projects up until the minute you jump in bed. By writing your worries down before bed, you can release them knowing you have a plan for the next day.

Still Having Trouble Sleeping

Sometimes problems falling asleep and staying asleep can’t be written off by frequent trips to the bathroom. Signs of loud and chronic snoring, daytime sleepiness (no matter how much time you spend
in bed), choking, snorting, or gasping during sleep, long pauses in breathing or restless motor movements could be a sign of a sleep disorder.

The incidence of sleep disorders is more prevalent than you may think. More than 20 million Americans - 24% of adult men and 9% of adult women - are estimated to have some degree of obstructive sleep apnea. Only a fraction have been diagnosed and treated. A visit to your doctor can determine if you would benefit from a sleep study and/or consultation with a sleep disorder breathing specialist.

**Not Knowing Where to Start**

Problems with initiation can frequently be related to feeling overwhelmed with the task. Tasks that seem too big or lack organization are more likely to be avoided. Breaking tasks into smaller, more doable steps, prioritizing the steps and organizing them onto a timeline can reduce this sense of not knowing where to begin.

**Daytime Drowsiness**

Try to increase overall level of arousal with frequent short breaks including power walks, stimulating music, group interaction, household chores, or some variation in pace or outside stimulation to restore attention.

**All Tasks Are Not Equal**

It is important to appreciate that different tasks are inherently more interesting, fun or easier to complete. Tasks that are self-motivating or well understood may require less external prompting.

**To Do Lists**

Some people benefit from a “memo to self” as an external cue to begin an activity. Keeping a binder or “cook book” with lists of steps can guide you through an activity and make sure you don’t forget that essential ingredient.

**Mental Inertia is Not Laziness or Depression**

It is important to distinguish between mental fatigue, personality traits and an actual mood disorder. Mental inertia results from neurochemical changes to the brain associated with any number of issues, including aging, cardiovascular disease, infections, a sleep disorder or the use of pain medications. It is not a matter of not wanting to do something as much as it is “brain fog” and mental fatigue.

**B. Cognitive Flexibility**

If you find that it is difficult to adjust to a new situation or if you see that you tend to get stuck seeing a problem in the same way, the following suggestions may be helpful.
Recognize That Letting Go of the Reins Can Be Hard

Everybody likes some predictability in life. However, change can be more difficult for some than others. Unfortunately, aging tends to further deplete stores of neurochemicals that allow us to shift mental gears and go with the flow. Be aware that for those who may have always struggled with adaptability and life resiliency, a change in health, lifestyle, and relationships can cause significant internal resistance and distress. Be patient and go slowly in making adjustments.

Don’t Overdo

Resist the urge to overdo. You run the risk of depleting your body and it will take you longer to complete a goal.

Stay Present in the Moment

Keep your attention on the here and now. Stop looking in the rear view mirror and for fires on the horizon.

Have a Mental Map for your Day

Check your electronic schedule or day planners at the beginning and end of each day. Being able to anticipate the sequence of daily events, as well what needs to be tweaked tomorrow based on the outcome of today’s events, can help you feel more in control and prepared to deal with life’s changing scenarios.

Have a Financial Plan

Know what your financial resources are and meet with financial planner.

Heads Up

Prominently display a calendar or whiteboard in a communal area. Make sure family members get into the habit of putting appointments, regularly scheduled activities or planned events that involve you on the board. Having adequate time to prepare reduces frustration and anxiety. A friendly reminder of an upcoming event doesn’t hurt either.

Timers

Try using a timer on your computer, watch or cell phone to alert you to the passing of time. Having a nice Gregorian chime to signal that you need to change focus from one task to another can be all you need to stay on course throughout the day.

Time Out

For those who tend to be more emotionally sensitive, schedule rest breaks, leisure activities and exercise into the day. Be mindful that each task carries different demands. High demand tasks, which may be new, complex or stressful, should be alternated with more routine, self-motivating or meditative activities.
Chapter 3: Skills and Strategies

### One Thing at a Time

Attention involves both the ability to keep focused on the information you want to keep active as well as the ability to avoid becoming distracted by worrisome, irrelevant thoughts. Sometimes simply writing a fleeting thought or concern down in your day planner will allow you to refocus to the task at hand.

### Limit your Options

Recognize that unlimited options do not aid in decision making.

### C. Emotional Control

Our emotions broadcast to ourselves and others what we are experiencing. For some people, emotions can change as rapidly as the Colorado weather forecast; sunny and breezy one minute, stormy the next.

#### A, B, C’s

It is frequently more helpful to focus on the *antecedents*, or triggers, of certain *behaviors* than to focus on the *consequences*. Trying to avoid certain thoughts or limiting contact with certain people or situations that we know will upset us can be easier than dealing with runaway emotions “once the horse is out of the barn.”

### Put down the Power Saw if you’re Tired

Recognize that when you’re tired, you are not in control of your frontal lobe. You will not be able to access the necessary strategic problem-solving skills to successfully navigate your way through the mine fields of an emotionally charged thought or situation.

Rather than stew about, or impulsively decide to “set the record,” you should immediately head over to your day planner and make an appointment with your higher self. By setting an exact time and jotting down just a few notes, you can release it for the moment and not harm yourself in the process. You can get back to it when you are better able to access your higher order reasoning skills.

### Don’t Take Things Personally

Try to keep in mind that nothing others do is because of you. What others say and do is a projection of their own reality; you’re just the movie screen. You can prevent needless suffering when you become immune to the opinions and actions of others.

### Release the Need to be Right

If you are a secondary character in other people’s story, then what others may say or think about you is a projection of their reality. Another’s point of view or truth does not have to be yours. Let it go.
Always Do your Best

Accept that your best is relative to circumstances outside of your control. Your best is going to change from moment to moment. It will change due to aging, emotional duress or physical illness. By promising yourself to simply do your best, you can avoid self-judgment and regret.

Practice Discernment

While our suffering is real, the reason why we suffer may not be true at all.

Increase Organization and Predictability in your Living Space

De-clutter the environment to limit distractions. Less organized and unscheduled settings create confusion and unnecessary stress. Take a critical appraisal of your resources including time, energy and money. Prioritize your activities and commitments accordingly.

Hit the Pause Button

Learn delay strategies such as counting before responding, terminating conversation, or leaving a situation to cool off.

Recognize Your Warning Signs

Identify behaviors which can tip you off that you are angry or upset. Like a thermometer, rank the intensity level of your smoke signals. Recognize when you get into the “red zone” and identify specific “stop and think” methods to diffuse your feelings in the moment.

Establish Clear Boundaries

Set clear rules and behavioral expectations for yourself and others. Knowing in advance what is and is not acceptable behavior may provide a sense of predictability and feeling of control over the situation. In turn, it will help you recognize warning signs sooner so you can put your counter action in place.

Build a Support Network

Identify friends, family or a clergy member with whom you can talk about a situation that provokes feelings of sadness or anger. Have someone who can provide constructive feedback and an alternative way of looking at and handling a problem. Individual therapy can provide another beneficial avenue, so ask your doctor for a referral.