

Are You Mentally Strong or Are You Just Acting?

... and why it could be harmful to your health.

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Saying things like, "I'm not afraid of anything," or, "I didn't want that promotion anyway," doesn't necessarily mean you're mentally strong. The truth is, there's a good chance you might just be acting tough.

While acting tough may meet your needs in the short term by artificially boosting your ego or getting other people to back off, it's not a good long-term strategy. In fact, a new study by psychologists at Rutgers University found that men who act tough may suffer serious consequences. The study, which appeared in *The Journal of Health Psychology*, found that men who act tough visit doctors less often. They're also less forthcoming about their medical symptoms when they see a male physician. (Interestingly, these men were more likely to choose a male doctor because they believe male doctors are more competent than females.)

Researchers suspect that delaying medical appointments and minimizing symptoms could be one of the reasons why, on average, men die five years earlier than women.

But clearly, it's not only men who feel the need to act tough. Many women do, as well. Here are seven signs you're just acting tough:

1. You mask insecurities.

Acting tough involves developing a persona that says, "I'm the best." But behind that tough exterior, there's often a lot of self-doubt. Rather than wasting energy trying to cover up their weaknesses, mentally strong people invest their time in improving themselves. They acknowledge their shortcomings and strive to become better.

2. You think failure isn't an option.

Just saying, "Failure isn't an option," won't prevent you from failing—but it might prevent you from *trying*. People who act tough are usually more interested in showing off the skills they already have, rather than learning anything new. Mentally strong people view failure as a stepping stone to success. They trust in their ability to bounce back from setbacks, and they're prepared to learn from their mistakes.

3. Your self-worth depends on how others see you.

People who act tough are very concerned with their appearance. Their self-worth depends on other people's opinions of them. Mentally strong people, however, aren't worried about proving anything to anyone but themselves. They're willing to ask for help and fuel themselves through their internal desire to grow stronger.

4. You suppress your emotions.

Often, the only emotion tough people feel comfortable expressing is anger. They hide their sadness, fear, and excitement from others as much as possible. Mentally strong people are willing to admit when they're afraid, and they aren't shy about shedding a tear once in a while. Rather than ignore their emotions, they monitor them. They're acutely aware of the ways in which their feelings influence their thoughts and behavior.

5. You deny your pain.

People intent on acting tough pride themselves on tolerating a great deal of pain. Whether they treat their bodies like a machine or they refuse to acknowledge an injury, they view their willingness to keep going as a badge of honor. Mentally

strong people aren't interested in tolerating pain as a means to impress others. Instead, they learn from pain and try to turn suffering into an opportunity to become better.

6. You think you can do everything.

Healthy self-confidence is helpful, but acting tough involves grandiose proclamations like, "Nothing will ever stop me." People who act tough often overestimate their abilities and underestimate the work required to reach their goals. Mentally strong people are well-prepared for the realities of a challenge. They acknowledge potential obstacles in their way and recognize how much effort they'll realistically need to invest.

7. You try to control other people.

People who act tough thrive on feeling like they have power over other people. They want others to perceive them as being "in control," and they often micromanage others or make unreasonable demands. Mentally strong people, however, are interested in controlling *themselves* rather than the people around them. They're invested in regulating their thoughts, managing their emotions, and behaving productively, despite whatever circumstances they find themselves in.

Build Mental Strength

If you're guilty of putting up a fake exterior that helps you feel tough, consider the toll it may take on your life. Invest in building mental strength, so the way you feel on the inside matches how others see you on the outside. As your mental strength increases, your desire to act tough decreases.