



Practices to Help You Thrive in Challenging Times

Share these exercises with your co-workers for an organization where everyone blooms.

By Donna Stoneham

Our work can take a toll on our emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being, and we're being asked to do more all the time. That means we need to do everything in our power to bring our best selves to those we serve.

Focus on Five Spheres

Taking care of ourselves isn't selfish. We can't give our best to others when we're feeling depleted or stressed. To build our strength and resilience, we need to focus on five key areas:

1. CULTIVATE A STRONG BODY

Physical strength grounds us. It keeps our immunity high in times of stress so we don't get sick. A strong body gives us the power to impact the world, even in difficult times. Exercising regularly, getting good nutrition, and sleeping soundly all give us the energy to manage stress and uncertainty.

The Practice: Move your body for half an hour or more at least four times each week. Walk the dog. Use a treadmill or an elliptical while you're reading or watching TV. Run. Swim. Play basketball. Do yoga. Just move. Say good-bye to fast food. When you're hungry and need a snack, have

a piece of fruit, some nuts, or a food bar. Make sure you're consistently getting at least seven hours of sleep each night and be mindful of how much alcohol you ingest. Notice how you feel about your ability to manage your emotions when you make it a conscious practice to take care of your body.

How does the practice of caring for your body shift your attitude?

How does this practice help you navigate challenges?

How does it change your energy?

How does it affect your capacity to focus on what's most important?

2. CULTIVATE A STRONG SPIRIT

The poet Rumi said, "Come out of the circle of time and into the circle of love." That's what building a strong spirit helps us do. It gives us a higher perspective that isn't bound by time or circumstances. It allows us to experience a connection to something greater than ourselves and to have faith we're not alone. It helps us see that, even though we may not agree with another person's perspective, we're all part of one human family. It enables us to see beauty in the midst of chaos.

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Building a strong spirit helps us radiate compassion, not just for others but also for ourselves. It helps us become instruments of love, joy, and greater understanding. It helps us stay grounded and not lose our center when we feel attacked.

The Practice: Dedicate at least 10 minutes a day to communing with your spirit, whatever form that takes for you. Here are some ways that others find helpful. See if they work for you:

Set up a regular practice of prayer or meditation.

Find a community of fellow seekers, and meet with them on a regular basis.

Spend time with family and friends whose values dovetail with yours.

Commune with nature.

Schedule a regular gratitude practice. For instance, every morning when you wake up, or each night before you go to sleep, you could think about at least three things you’re grateful for. Or every noon while you’re having lunch, you could jot down three things that make you feel thankful. Or you might share three things with someone via e-mail each day.

Think about ways you can demonstrate compassion; then take those actions.

3. CULTIVATE A STRONG MIND

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, the psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl said, “The one thing you can’t take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one’s freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given circumstance.”

The mind is a powerful instrument. We have far more control over what we think than we credit ourselves with having. We’re constantly choosing, whether consciously or unconsciously, how we make meaning of our lives.

In this “post-truth” age, we must be vigilant about what we choose to consume. The old saying, “garbage in, garbage out” couldn’t be truer.

The Practice: Feed your mind with inspirational stories, great literature, informative blogs, TED talks, or movies that give you hope about the world. Calibrate how much time you listen to the news and spend on social media. Stay informed, but don’t let the media dictate your life or your mood. Every day, set an intention to fill your mind with things that expand what’s possible rather than things that cause you to contract or live in fear.

How does what you consume contribute to how you perceive and interact with the world? How does it enable or disable you from making your most important contributions?

How different is your day when you listen to the positive voice inside your head that cheers you rather than the voice of your inner critic?

How much more balanced do you feel when you create healthy boundaries between your work and life?

What do you notice changing as you become more conscious about what you’re thinking rather than allowing the noise of the world to manage your perceptions?

4. CULTIVATE A STRONG COMMUNITY

Martin Luther King said, “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly.”

We’re all connected and, especially when times are challenging, need people we can rely on for support. We need assurance that we’re not alone, that others have our backs, and that we’ll get through challenging times together.

We must reach out, engage in dialogue, and seek to understand those with different opinions and experiences. Building a strong web of community and support is crucial.

The Practice: Reach out to two or three friends or colleagues and plan to meet (virtually if necessary) at least once a month and be available by phone as needed. You can also volunteer to host a circle through groups like Dream Corp’s #lovearmy (thedreamcorps.org/lovearmy), designed to help us support one another and work across differences.

The point is to create a safe space where you can share your concerns and get support for the actions you plan to take. Ask yourself:

What shifts for you as you engage with support networks and communities, both personal and virtual?

How does what you contribute affect your sense of interrelatedness?

How do others’ contributions impact your sense of connectedness and well-being?

Do you see a change in yourself when you give your time and resources to people and causes who benefit from your support?

5. CULTIVATE A STRONG CHARACTER

Mark Twain said, “It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.” Our moral courage is a reflection of our character.

These times call for us to be both brave and resolute. We need to know what we stand for and what we’re unwilling to sacrifice, regardless of the cost.

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Exhibiting character may show itself in standing up for someone who is being ostracized or singled out. Honoring your character is knowing where you draw the line about how you'll treat others. Use your moral compass wisely to direct your actions and behaviors.

The Practice: Spend an hour this coming weekend reflecting on your most deeply held values. Write them down. Then spend time thinking about how you can put those values into action every day, at home and at work. Give thought to what ethical lines you're unwilling to cross, no matter the cost.

Each day upon waking, set an intention about how to show up in the world in a way that's aligned with your values and ethics. Then do your best to fulfill it. For example, you might start the day by setting an intention to be kind to all the people you interact with. Or maybe it's making a commitment to really listen to others' points of view. Living your values every day strengthens your character so you can rely on it in the times you need it most.

What happens as you become more mindful of living a life that's driven by your values and ethics?

How does living your values change how you interact with others?

Does value-based living shift the way you feel about yourself, the world, and the contributions you make?

What possibilities open up for you when you keep your values uppermost in your mind throughout the day?



Share the Practices with Others

Don't just do these exercises yourself. Teach them to everyone in your organization, and practice them together.

We each have the power to transform cynicism and misunderstanding, especially through the work we do. The author and anthropologist Margaret Meade said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Let's make today the day we commit to strengthening ourselves in these five areas. Then, collectively, we can create a world where everyone can thrive. 

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Wings in the Air, Feet on the Ground

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