

13

Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do

TAKE BACK
YOUR POWER,
EMBRACE
CHANGE, FACE
YOUR FEARS,
AND TRAIN
YOUR BRAIN
FOR
HAPPINESS
AND
SUCCESS

AMY
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WILLIAM MORROW

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DEDICATION

To all who strive to become better today than they were yesterday.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was twenty-three, my mother died suddenly from a brain aneurysm. She'd always been a healthy, hardworking, vibrant woman who had loved life right up until her last minute on earth. In fact, I saw her the night before she died. We met at an auditorium to watch a high school basketball tournament. She was laughing, talking, and enjoying life like she always did. But just twenty-four hours later she was gone. The loss of my mother affected me deeply. I couldn't imagine going through the rest of my life without her advice, laughter, or love.

At the time, I was working as a therapist at a community mental health center, and I took a few weeks off to privately deal with my grief. I knew I couldn't be effective at helping other people unless I was able to productively deal with my own feelings. Becoming used to a life that no longer included my mother was a process. It wasn't easy, but I worked hard to get myself back on my feet. From my training as a therapist, I knew that time doesn't heal anything; it's how we deal with that time that determines the speed at which we heal. I understood that grief was the necessary process that would eventually alleviate my pain, so I allowed myself to feel sad, to get angry, and to fully accept what I'd truly lost when my mother passed away. It wasn't just that I missed her—it was also the painful realization that she would never be there again during the important events in my life and that she would never experience the things she'd looked forward to—like retire from her job and become a grandmother. With supportive friends and family, and my faith in

God, I found a sense of peace; and as life went on, I was able to remember my mother with a smile, rather than with pangs of sadness.

A few years later, as we approached the third anniversary of my mother's death, my husband, Lincoln, and I discussed how to best honor her memory that weekend. Friends had invited us to watch a basketball game on Saturday evening. Coincidentally, the game was being played in the same auditorium where we'd last seen my mother. Lincoln and I talked about what it would be like to go back to the place where we'd seen her, just three years ago, on the night before she passed away.

We decided it could be a wonderful way to celebrate her life. After all, my memories of her that night were very good. We'd laughed, had a chance to talk about all kinds of things, and had an all-around great evening. My mother had even predicted my sister would get married to her boyfriend at the time—and a few years later that prediction came true.

So Lincoln and I returned to the auditorium and we enjoyed spending time with our friends. We knew it was what my mother would have wanted. It felt nice to go back and feel okay about being there. But just as I took a sigh of relief about my progress in dealing with my mother's death, my entire life was once again turned upside down.

After returning home from the basketball game, Lincoln complained of back pain. He'd broken several vertebrae in a car accident a few years prior, so back pain wasn't unusual for him. But just a few minutes later, he collapsed. I called for paramedics and they arrived within minutes and transported him to the hospital. I

called his mother, and his family met me in the emergency room. I had no idea what could possibly be wrong with him.

After a few minutes in the emergency room waiting area, we were called into a private room. Before the doctor even said a word, I knew what he was going to say. Lincoln had passed away. He'd had a heart attack.

On the same weekend that we honored the three-year anniversary of my mother's death, I now found myself a widow. It just didn't make any sense. Lincoln was only twenty-six and he didn't have any history of heart problems. How could he be here one minute and gone the next? I was still adjusting to life without my mother, and now I'd have to learn how to deal with life without Lincoln. I couldn't imagine how I would get through this.

Dealing with the death of a spouse is such a surreal experience. There were so many choices to be made at a time when I really wasn't in any shape to decide anything. Within a matter of hours, I had to start making decisions about everything from the funeral arrangements to the wording of the obituary. There wasn't any time to let the reality of the situation really sink in; it was completely overwhelming.

I was fortunate to have many people in my life who supported me. A journey through grief is an individual process, but loving friends and family certainly helped. There were times when it seemed to get a little easier and times when it would get worse. Just when I'd think I was getting better, I'd turn another corner to find overwhelming sadness waiting for me. Grief is an emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting process.

There were so many things to feel sad about too. I felt sad for my

husband's family, knowing how much they'd loved Lincoln. I felt sad about all the things Lincoln would never experience. And I was sad about all the things we'd never get to do together, not to mention, how much I missed him.

I took as much time off from work as I could. Those months are mostly a blur as I was focused on just putting one foot in front of the other every day. But I couldn't stay out of work forever. I was down to just one income and had to get back into the office.

After a couple of months, my supervisor called and asked about my plans to return to work. My clients had been told I would be out of the office indefinitely while I dealt with a family emergency. They weren't given any type of time frame about how long I'd be out, since we weren't really sure what was going to happen. But now, they needed an answer. I certainly wasn't done grieving, and I definitely wasn't "better," but I needed to go back to work.

Just like when I'd lost my mother, I had to allow myself time to experience the sorrow head-on. There was no ignoring it or pushing it away. I had to experience the pain while also proactively helping myself heal. I couldn't allow myself to stay stuck in my negative emotions. Although it would have been easy to pity myself or dwell on my past memories, I knew it wouldn't be healthy. I had to make a conscious choice to start down a long road to building a new life for myself.

I had to decide whether some of the goals Lincoln and I shared together were still going to be my goals. We'd been foster parents for a few years and had planned to eventually adopt a child. But did I still want to adopt a child as a single woman? I continued my work as a foster parent, providing mostly emergency and respite

placements, for the next few years, but I wasn't sure I still wanted to adopt a child without Lincoln.

I also had to create new goals for myself now that I was alone. I decided to venture out and try new things. I got my motorcycle license and bought a motorcycle. I also began writing. At first it was mostly a hobby, but eventually it turned into a part-time job. I had to renegotiate new relationships with people as well by figuring out which of Lincoln's friends would remain my friends and what my relationship with his family would be like without him. Fortunately for me, many of his closest friends maintained friendships with me. And his family continued to treat me like part of their family.

About four years later, I was fortunate enough to find love again. Or maybe I should say love found me. I was sort of getting used to life as a single person. But that all changed when I began dating Steve. We'd known each other for years and slowly our friendship turned into a relationship. Eventually, we started talking about a future together. Although I had never thought I'd get married again, with Steve it just seemed right.

I didn't want a formal wedding or a reception that parodied the ceremony I'd had with Lincoln. Although I knew my guests would be thrilled to see me marry again, I also knew it would conjure up pangs of sadness for people as they remembered Lincoln. I didn't want my wedding day to be a somber occasion, so Steve and I decided to have a nontraditional wedding. We eloped to Las Vegas and it was a completely joyous occasion that centered around our love and happiness.

About a year after we married, we decided to sell the house that Lincoln and I had lived in, and we moved a few hours away. We'd

be closer to my sister and my nieces and it gave us an opportunity to have a fresh start. I got a job at a busy medical practice and we were looking forward to enjoying our future together. Just as life seemed to be going great, our road to happiness took another strange twist when Steve's father was diagnosed with cancer.

Initially, doctors predicted that his treatment could help keep the cancer at bay for several years. But after a few months, it was clear that he wasn't likely to survive one year, let alone several. He'd tried a few different options but nothing really worked. As time went on the doctors grew more perplexed by his lack of response to treatment. After about seven months, he'd run out of treatment options.

The news hit me like a ton of bricks. Rob was so full of life. He was the kind of guy who could always pull a quarter from behind a kid's ear and he told some of the funniest stories I have ever heard. Although he lived in Minnesota and we lived in Maine, we saw him often. Since he was retired, he had the availability to visit with us for weeks at a time and I'd always joked with him that he was my favorite houseguest—because he was basically our only houseguest.

He was also one of my biggest fans when it came to my writing. He read whatever I wrote, whether it was an article about parenting or a piece on psychology. Quite often, he'd call me with story ideas and suggestions.

Even though Rob was seventy-two, it felt like he was too young to be so sick. Right up until the previous summer he was motorcycling across the country, sailing around Lake Superior, and cruising the countryside with the top down in his convertible. But now he was too sick, and the doctors were clear—he was only

going to get worse.

This time I had a different experience dealing with death. My mother's and Lincoln's deaths were completely unexpected and sudden. But this time, I had warning. I knew what was coming, and it filled me with a sense of dread.

I found myself thinking, *Here we go again*. I didn't want to go through such a staggering loss all over again. It just didn't seem right. I know plenty of people my age who haven't lost anyone, so why did I have to lose so many of my loved ones? I sat at the table thinking about how unfair it was, how hard it was going to be, and how much I wanted things to be different.

I also knew I couldn't let myself go down that road. After all, I'd been through this before and I'd be okay again. If I let myself fall into the trap of thinking my situation was worse than anyone else's, or if I convinced myself that I couldn't handle one more loss, it wasn't going to help. Instead, it would only hold me back from dealing with the reality of my situation.

It was at that moment that I sat down and wrote my list "13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do." They were the habits I'd fought so hard against to come out on the other side of my grief. They were the things that could hold me back from getting better, if I allowed them to take hold of me.

Not surprisingly, they were the same skills I was giving to the clients who entered my therapy office. But writing them down was something I needed to do to help me stay on track. It was a reminder that I could choose to be mentally strong. And I needed to be strong, because a few weeks after writing down that list, Rob passed away.

Psychotherapists are known for helping others build on their

strengths, doling out tips on how they should act and what they can do to improve themselves. But when I created my list on mental strength, I decided to stray for a moment from what has become second nature to me. And focusing on what *not* to do has made all the difference. Good habits are important, but it's often our bad habits that prevent us from reaching our full potential. You can have all the good habits in the world, but if you keep doing the bad habits alongside the good ones, you'll struggle to reach your goals. Think of it this way: you're only as good as your worst habits.

Bad habits are like heavy weights that you drag around as you go about your day. They'll slow you down, tire you out, and frustrate you. Despite your hard work and talent, you'll struggle to reach your full potential when you've got certain thoughts, behaviors, and feelings holding you back.

Picture a man who chooses to go to the gym every day. He works out for almost two hours. He keeps a careful record of the exercises he performs so he can track his progress. Over the course of six months, he isn't noticing much of a change. He feels frustrated that he's not losing weight and gaining muscle. He tells his friends and family that it just doesn't make sense why he's not looking and feeling better. After all, he rarely ever misses a workout. What he leaves out of the equation is the fact that he enjoys a treat on his drive home from the gym every day. After all that exercise, he feels hungry and tells himself, "I've worked hard. I deserve a treat!" So each day, he eats one dozen donuts on his drive home.

Seems ridiculous, right? But we all are guilty of this kind of behavior. We work hard to do the things that we think will make us better, but we forget to focus on the things that might be sabotaging

our efforts.

Avoiding these thirteen habits isn't just what will help you through grief. Getting rid of them will help you develop mental strength, which is essential to dealing with all life's problems—big or small. No matter what your goals are, you'll be better equipped to reach your full potential when you're feeling mentally strong.

WHAT IS MENTAL STRENGTH?

It's not that people are either mentally strong or mentally weak. We all possess some degree of mental strength, but there's always room for improvement. Developing mental strength is about improving your ability to regulate your emotions, manage your thoughts, and behave in a positive manner, despite your circumstances.

Just as there are those among us who are predisposed to develop physical strength more easily than others, mental strength seems to come more naturally to some people. There are several factors at play to determine the ease at which you develop mental strength:

- **Genetics**—Genes play a role in whether or not you may be more prone to mental health issues, such as mood disorders.
- **Personality**—Some people have personality traits that help them think more realistically and behave more positively by nature.
- **Experiences**—Your life experiences influence how you think about yourself, other people, and the world in general.

Obviously, you can't change some of these factors. You can't erase a bad childhood. You can't help it if you are genetically predisposed to ADHD. But that doesn't mean you can't increase your mental strength. Anyone has the power to increase mental strength by devoting time and energy on the self-improvement exercises throughout this book.