

A Definitive Guide to Self-Mastery: How to Break Through Psychological Resistance

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We learn to master ourselves by getting out of our own way. We strip away what we are *not* to realize who and what we really are, actualizing our potential in the process.

This guide is designed to assist you on your path. It highlights the pitfalls we all encounter on the road and offers guidance to support your efforts in whatever areas of development you choose.

Self-Mastery Meaning

Self-mastery is a path, an orientation we can choose for ourselves. This ongoing decision is a commitment to continual improvement and the process of becoming.

In making this decision, we realize that there are parts of us that will always try to hold us back. Our biggest naysayers aren't "out there." They are *within us*. Someone committed to this path of self-mastery finds ways to transcend their fears and break through their resistance. Self-mastery implies that one possesses the [self-awareness](#) necessary to identify the source of one's resistance and the resourcefulness to move beyond it.

Common Misconceptions About Self-Mastery

Self-mastery is often defined as self-control—the ability to exert a strong will against our impulses to steer our future to one of our choosing. This concept, I believe, leads many people astray.

Self-mastery isn't about willfulness or dominating your fears. Instead, it's about getting to know yourself more deeply so that you can become more integrated. Bring your inner tensions to consciousness and resolving them leads you toward greater wholeness. This allows the natural process of development to take hold.

Carlos Castaneda's teacher Don Juan explains self-mastery through the path of the warrior:¹

A warrior must cultivate the feeling that he has everything needed for the extravagant journey that is his life. What counts for a warrior is being alive. Life in itself is sufficient, self-explanatory and complete. Therefore, one may say without being presumptuous that the experience of experiences is being alive.

Self-Mastery is Our Destiny

In [The Farther Reaches of Human Nature](#), psychologist Abraham Maslow shares what he said to his doctoral students:²

You must want to be a first-class psychologist, meaning the best, the very best you are capable of becoming. If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life. You will be evading your own capacities, your own possibilities.

In essence, Maslow was reminding his students of their "call to adventure"—to realize their innate potential. As he often explains, developing our innate capacities *is* our destiny. Fighting this destiny brings depression and anxiety. Embracing this destiny leads to freedom and fulfillment.

The Inherent Motivation Toward Growth

We all have an [intrinsic motivation](#) toward growth. This drive toward growth is easily observable in an infant's will to master walking, basic motor skills, and language.

But what do we observe in most adults?

In a select few adults, we find curious individuals who remain committed to developing their minds and bodies, forging new skills for both work and play. We find [self-actualizing individuals](#) in virtually every field of interest, including business professionals, artists, musicians, philosophers, painters, doctors, psychologists, athletes, and martial artists.

¹ Carlos Castaneda, *Tales of Power*, 1991.

² Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, 1993.

Aborted Self-Actualization

Yet, the majority of adults seem consumed by life's countless demands and endless distractions. They demonstrate little interest in committing to continuous growth and development. Maslow called this resistance to internal growth "aborted self-actualization."

The truth is that we're all capable of stalling our development for a period. We might give ourselves excuses to forego our developmental path. We say things like:

- *I don't have time.*
- *I'm too tired.*
- *I'm just not sure what I want.*

But is there something else driving us away from growth, blocking our development?

Two Powerful Forces: Growth and Safety

In [Toward a Psychology of Being](#), Abraham Maslow explains there are two powerful sets of forces within the human condition: a drive for growth and its opposing force, a drive for safety.³ Growth propels us forward toward the wholeness of Self to discover our uniqueness (what Carl Jung called [individuation](#)). An opposing force leads us to defend our current selves, clinging to safety out of fear of the unknown.

The force of safety keeps us where we are now, clinging to the past and afraid to take chances to improve our current conditions (internally and externally). This safety-seeking side is afraid of independence, freedom, and separateness—the very things our growth side demands.

The Delight of Growth and the Anxiety of Safety

What we focus on tends to guide the direction of our lives. If we focus on the dangers of growth, our need for safety wins the day. But if we minimize the dangers of our emerging uniqueness and fuller expression of the Self while enhancing our attractions toward growth, a world of new possibilities presents itself.

Maslow points out that we are confronted with an ongoing series of choices throughout life between:

³ Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 1998.

- Safety and growth,
- Dependence and independence,
- Regression and progression,
- Immaturity and maturity.

In *Toward a Psychology of Being*, he writes, “We grow forward when the delights of growth and anxieties of safety are greater than the anxieties of growth and the delights of safety.”

The Dangers of Growth

There is a valid reason to fear growth. In addition to the rewards and gratifications, growth also brings pain. Each step forward brings us into the unfamiliar, into possible danger. Each step forward requires us to give up something familiar and potentially satisfying.

Growth can mean a *separation*—a kind of death and rebirth—as well as the grief and mourning that comes with the loss of the old. We grow toward greater complexity. This means when we grow, we might have to give up something easier and simpler.

The path of growth often means taking on more demands and responsibility; it sometimes can mean a more difficult life. Is there any wonder anyone would avoid such a path?

When Safety Trumps Growth

Does this mean we must throw aside our concern for safety in the service of our development? Absolutely not. Safety is a more basic human need than growth. In the absence of a feeling of safety, the will to grow is not generally present.

Consider, for example, a young child clinging to her mother’s leg while she attempts to walk for the first time. If the mother abruptly exits the room to answer the phone, the child will likely terminate her herculean effort.

Sometimes, choosing safety is wise and appropriate when it helps us to avoid more pain than we can bear at that moment. But ultimately, we know that if we consistently choose safety over growth, in the long run, we find ourselves in a state of disappointment.

If we cling to safety for too long, we wake up one day and look back on a life that never was—an unconscious life filled with regrets and missed opportunities. As mythologist Joseph Campbell put it in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “Regrets are illuminations come too late.” Moving in the direction of safety, we deny our unique destinies.

Indications Along the Road to Growth (and Safety)

How do you know when you're on the road to growth? There are numerous subjective indicators:

- You're more likely to experience feelings of serenity, joy, calmness, and a zest for living.
- You feel confident in your ability to handle the inevitable problems along the way and the stresses and anxieties that accompany them.

When the force of safety dominates us, we show signs of self-betrayal and regression and we become fixed and rigid out of fear. Many problems with addictions and bad habits arise under these internal conditions.

Here, we are consumed by a different set of emotions: anxiety, boredom, despair, inability to enjoy, aimlessness, deadness, intrinsic guilt, and intrinsic shame. Fear and the need for safety won't go away, nor should they. The drive for safety helps support our survival. But courage and the need for growth are also part of what it means to be human. By courageously walking the path of self-mastery, we can realize our true potential and live a uniquely meaningful life.

How Homeostasis Influences Our Growth and Development

We know that most people have an almost paralyzing fear of failure. Psychologist Carol Dweck calls this a [fixed mindset](#). With a fixed mindset, failure can evoke emotions like shame, embarrassment, humiliation, frustration, worthlessness, and defeat. It damages an already fragile self-image.

But did you know that many of us fear success, too? The reasons for this one aren't as obvious. Success can bring a sense of achievement, internal and external rewards, and greater confidence. It can also bring us a better quality of life and new opportunities.

So why fear success? And why do we often subconsciously self-sabotage our development?

In *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment*, aikido master George Leonard offers a powerful reason: *homeostasis*.⁴

⁴ George Leonard, *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment*, 1992.

What is Homeostasis?

We fear success for the same fundamental reason we fear failure. Movement in either direction—up or down—means moving out of the known and into the unknown. Our internal systems are designed to maintain *homeostasis*. We are biologically wired to stay in balance, to stay within what is known and relatively comfortable.

Our bodies, brains, and behavior have built-in mechanisms to stay within a narrow range and return to equilibrium when they move outside these narrow limits. Homeostasis refers to the body's automatic efforts to maintain a constant, "normal" state.

In our bloodstream alone, homeostasis regulates the content of water, salt, sugar, fat, protein, calcium, and oxygen. What would happen if your blood-sugar level dropped by 10 percent? Big trouble!

All self-regulating systems have ways of maintaining homeostasis and keeping us in familiar and safe territory. Keeping human beings in a state of homeostasis takes billions of interconnecting electrochemical signals coursing through our brains, nerve fibers, and bloodstream.

Homeostasis: An Illustration

To better understand homeostasis, consider your home's heating system. You set the temperature at, for example, 65 degrees. When the temperature drops below 65, a signal is sent through the system to kick the heat on until the environment returns to the set temperature.

Homeostasis is a vital function in all self-regulating systems.

The Biology of Homeostasis

The challenge is that homeostasis doesn't distinguish between "change for the better" and "change for the worse." Homeostasis resists *all* change. In a way, we each have a pre-installed biological mechanism designed to hinder our growth.

For example, let's say a 40-year-old man named Peter has lived a sedentary lifestyle without any exercise, stretching, or movement for many years. He knows this lifestyle isn't good for his long-term health, and he's beginning to feel its effects.

Peter decides to go for a light jog in his neighborhood. He's proud of himself for taking action, but around the third block, something happens: Peter starts feeling sick and a little dizzy, with a slight sense of panic. A few blocks later, Peter feels like he's going to die. He stops running and slowly walks home.

What Happened to Peter?

The sensations Peter experienced were homeostatic alarm signals detecting measurable changes in respiration, heart rate, and metabolism. His internal systems were telling him to stop what he was doing *immediately*.

Remember, *homeostasis is designed to maintain your current state*. After years of sedentary living, a light jog throws Peter's internal systems into high alert. Because Peter didn't know about homeostasis, he interpreted those signals as a threat.

"I tried," he tells himself. "Perhaps I'll join the gym one day." Unfortunately, he opted out of installing [good habits](#) and making beneficial life changes toward self-mastery. However, if Peter understood the principles of homeostasis, he could have persisted through the discomfort, slowly shifting his "normal state" to a stronger, healthier set point.

Homeostasis in Social Environments

Homeostasis isn't just biological; it operates in social and cultural spheres as well. Let's say Peter's peer group tends to be sedentary. They avoid physical exercise—at all costs.

When Peter decides to engage in physical activity, his friends will likely exert social pressure to stop his efforts. Not only does Peter have to contend with his biological resistance, but he must also overcome the gravity of his social group.

Whenever you adopt a new, empowering behavior, you can experience this downward pressure from others. Although you might expect your family or friends to support your new changes, group homeostasis often exerts pressure to maintain old patterns.

Homeostasis is an Unconscious Process

This process operates *unconsciously*, that is, those around you may not even be aware of their unsupportive attitudes. Despite the best intentions of your loved ones, those closest to you may try to keep you where you are (just as you might unknowingly do to others).

When you grow, you're different. The homeostasis of your environment, including friends, family, and co-workers, is affected. Growth can cause pressure and discomfort for others (since they have an unconscious desire for growth, too).

People in your environment may look at you differently. They may admire your changes; your efforts may inspire them. But a part of them also may envy you and secretly despise you. As a consequence, your friends and family may prefer the "old" you.

By being aware of these tendencies, you can allow yourself to feel these social pressures without enabling them to influence your behavior. It can also help you become more understanding toward yourself and others.

Self-Mastery Essentials: Knowing the Landscape

Maslow highlights thirteen [characteristics of self-actualization](#) he observed in individuals with positive mental health. They are the markers of those walking the path to self-mastery. As Maslow noted, self-actualizing individuals are a "different breed." Familiarize yourself with these characteristics so you can self-assess if you're on the right track today.

No matter what you're going to learn, there are [four stages of learning](#) in any area of development. When you don't know what these stages are, at least two of them hijack your development. If you know what to expect, however, you will reach the final stage of personal mastery.

4 Common Ways Resistance Expresses Itself

The path toward self-mastery would be straight and narrow if it wasn't for resistance. Resistance takes various forms. When you understand the source of your resistance, you can navigate around and through it.

Now, let's examine four ways internal resistance expresses itself.

1) Seeking Passion and Excitement

Those who achieve personal mastery learn how to avoid extremes. They don't seek passion and excitement regarding their development, living in moderation and making steady progress each day.

The quiet power of the Middle Way is not known by many—especially in a culture obsessed with distractions, constant stimulation, and going to extremes. Arriving on the [path of the Middle Way](#) is a vital key for anyone interested in personal mastery.

2) Succumbing to a Fixed Mindset

Only with an interest in learning and internal resilience can we actualize our potential. We truly must believe—with a deep conviction—that we can achieve greatness within ourselves.

We must know in our hearts that we have the potential to actualize and the will and grace to make it so. To have this resolve, we must first [change our fixed mindset](#) and understand that growth is our birthright.

3) Getting Tricked by the "I Know That Already" Pattern

Another thing that blocks the process of learning and development is the mind's belief, "I know." The mind often seeks novelty. It confuses theoretical or conceptual knowledge with applied knowledge (lived experience).

Oftentimes, the internal voice that says "I already know that," is a trickster avoiding the real work. This "I know that already" pattern stops learning, destroys creativity, and inhibits personal mastery. What's the alternative? [Adopt a beginner's mind](#) to improve learning and creativity.

4) Listening to the "Lazy Part"

Laziness is something every person wrestles with to varying degrees. When you understand the "voices" behind laziness, you become more adept at navigating through it. However, if you repress your laziness by trying to deny it and push through it, in the end, your laziness will hijack your personal development.

Harmonizing the [inner achiever and the lazy part](#) is a challenge we must each face on the road to personal mastery.

12 Self-Mastery "Secrets"

Now that we have a better sense of how resistance manifests itself, let's look at ten ways we can navigate through resistance and build momentum on our path to self-actualization.

1) Accept Your Resistance

Accept the fact that you have a resistance to positive change. It's easy to beat ourselves up when we see that we're standing in our own way. Feelings of shame and guilt, however, only delay our progress because when we feel bad, we tend to reinforce bad habits.

In contrast, self-acceptance and self-compassion allow us to take note of our resistance without judging or criticizing ourselves. You're going to need to find ways to negotiate with your resistance to change if you want to stay on the path to self-mastery.

2) Create a Compelling Vision

A [clear, compelling personal vision](#) will serve you in whatever areas you're seeking growth and development. Without vision, your efforts will be aimless and you'll tend to meander. Distraction is the enemy of mastery and a personal vision is a powerful external tool to help you stay focused.

Compelling is the operative word; make the vision something you *want* to move toward, something that inspires *you* (and not something you just *think you should* move toward).

3) Commit to Long-Term Practice

Understand that lasting transformation doesn't happen right away; it requires consistent practice. No matter whether you're learning a new instrument, practicing [communication skills](#), or [meditating](#), every new skill requires your brain to make new connections and enforce those connections through conscious repetition.

The brain is like a muscle, but as we age, it takes longer and longer to make lasting changes. Repetition through daily practice yields results.

4) Expect Backsliding

Even when you know about the process of homeostasis, it will still influence you. Backsliding is inevitable on the path to growth and self-mastery. If you know this, you'll be less discouraged when you observe it in yourself.

Here again, self-kindness, self-acceptance, and self-compassion will serve your efforts; getting down on yourself can hinder your progress.

5) Live by the Principle of Moderation

We often demonstrate lots of enthusiasm and excitement when we begin on our growth path. We see a world of possibilities and positive change at our doorstep. In these moments of excitement, we often push things too hard, triggering a homeostatic response on a high alert.

Self-mastery is not a sprint; it's a long-distance run. In Qigong, they teach you to practice with 70% of your capacity. When you push or strain yourself, you induce involuntary tension in your nervous system. Operating at 70% helps you stay relaxed and engaged while avoiding injury. This same principle will serve you in most areas of your development.

6) Lighten Up

If you take yourself (or the process of growth) too seriously, you'll invariably derail your efforts. Your inner animal, or the primitive parts of your brain, will eventually revolt against you, sabotaging your efforts.

So take a light-hearted approach. Be willing to laugh at yourself. Be playful and find ways to make your practice something you enjoy doing (while still accepting the fact that it will bring discomfort at times).

7) Set Mini-Goals

In any path to mastery, you learn to practice for practice's sake, not to achieve any particular objective. But while a compelling vision keeps you focused and inspired, mini goals can help you measure your progress.

Your attention shouldn't be on just achieving these aims; setting mini goals can help you stay engaged in your practice.

8) Cultivate Physical & Mental Energy

No matter what path you walk, you need a healthy reserve of physical and mental energy to help manage stress, overcome resistance, and follow through. Our willpower has a kind of fuel tank. It gets depleted when our energy supply runs low.

If you commit to daily practice in the morning, you'll be more likely to follow through because you have more energy after a good night's sleep. After a long day of work, however, our egos get depleted of their mental energy. Practice becomes more challenging.

Conscious effort in cultivating physical energy through proper diet, [sleep](#), exercise, [correct posture](#), breathing, and stretching will greatly serve you on your path to self-mastery.

9) Be Honest With Yourself

Accurate self-assessment is essential for anyone on this path. Our egos often like to invest a tremendous amount of energy lying to others and ourselves. [Self-deception](#) is the enemy of internal progress. It's easy to fall prey to ego inflation (seeing ourselves as bigger than we are) and ego deflation (seeing ourselves as less than we are).

Self-honesty frees up all the energy our egos expend keeping up our house of lies. Start by honing in on your true attitudes and feelings. Try keeping a private journal where you can express your hopes, dreams, fears, insecurities, and other emotions you may not feel comfortable sharing.

See: [How to Get to Know Your Shadow](#)

10) Establish Empowering Rituals

All great athletes have rituals for getting into a peak state to perform at their best. [Establishing rituals](#) that you perform at the beginning of your practice sessions can be helpful. Developing a daily practice is perhaps the most powerful ritual in itself.

11) Consistently Establish Good Habits

The tension between one's animal self (lower soul) and their inner self (higher soul) is experienced by all. Many mistakenly believe that all you need to do is make a decision *once* about starting a new habit—and expect it to stick.

The truth is that establishing and maintaining life-supporting habits requires daily decisions. We master ourselves in small, daily increments—not giant leaps.

See: [How to Establish Good Habits](#)

12) Craft Your Plan for Self-Mastery

One reason many of us fail to actualize more of our potential is that we lack a clear plan of action. This plan can be simple. It can fit on a single page. Or, it can be more elaborate and robust, addressing a diverse range of categories and lines of human potential.

See: [How to Create a Personal Development Plan](#)

A Final Word for Self-Actualizers

The path of self-mastery and self-development can be a lonely one. Discovering a great talent within yourself that demands nurturance can be exhilarating, but it can also bring feelings of danger and responsibility.

It may require you to stand alone, cultivating inner strength instead of seeking support from your environment. (Although you can find those that will support your efforts, too, especially if they are on their path to self-mastery as well.) Standing strong can feel like a heavy burden, an endeavor some might consider avoiding at all costs.

The path to self-mastery is invariably difficult at times. It's uncomfortable moving out of the known into the unknown. Even if the known is not ideal or even desirable, it's familiar to us. And since all humans require safety—and have a drive for comfort—there will always be an attraction to staying within the familiar.

Since homeostasis is a biological reality, make peace with it. But at the same time, continually challenge yourself to establish higher homeostatic set points without going to extremes. Honoring your need for safety, courageously guide yourself into the great unknown. Come to enjoy practice for practice's sake. Transform yourself slowly, steadily, and daily.

Book Recommendations for Self-Mastery

Here are recommended books to support your path toward self-mastery:

Mastery by George Leonard

The Talent Code by Daniel Coyle

The Little Book of Talent by Daniel Coyle

The Willpower Instinct by Kelly McGonigal

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success by Carol Dweck