



# Life Skills

for teenagers

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# MAGMILLAN LIFE SKILLS



## LIFE SKILLS: SETTING THE CONTEXT

All of us experience life events differently; we all have phases where we are happy, sad, angry, frustrated, scared or confident. For some, scoring bad marks in an exam is unacceptable and leads to severe stress and feeling hopeless, while for someone losing a best friend leads to a feeling of isolation and being unwanted. For some of us, being thin or muscular is the ideal, and if we are unable to achieve it we feel ugly and ignored.

In a world where everything from family dynamics to media, peers and the school environment impact how we think and what we feel, it is very important to be equipped with the skills to deal with our day to day struggles. Research shows that some of these factors lead to an upsurge of behavioral problems and risk taking behaviors among students. This chapter helps us look at the skills needed to negotiate challenges in life and how to translate them into action. Therefore, how I would look at a situation where I am being bullied, how I can protect myself better and what I can do to change my negative attitude towards myself, is the focus and not just the impact that an event can have on our life. Can I learn to say “No” effectively and be assertive? How do I communicate better with others so I don’t make them feel hurt, unwanted, or isolated? These and other such questions are answered with a focus on the “How to” across the chapter.

Before we look at how to acquire Life Skills it is important to know which are these skills that are important. UNICEF and WHO have outlined the following as being the areas which all individuals must look at in order to enhance the quality of their life:-



- Self-awareness – It is the ability to understand oneself, and know our strengths, weaknesses, fears, interests, what gives us happiness, how we think of different situations and what we think of our own self. This is perhaps the most important skill as it lays the foundation for everything else that we engage in.
- Empathy- It is the ability to think and feel from the perspective of the other person and then carry forward our communication.
- Effective communication – It is the ability to speak clearly, directly and assertively without hurting the other, and making sure we are listening to one another. This helps reduce miscommunication and frustration and helps strengthen interpersonal relationships.
- Creative thinking – It is the ability to look at situations creatively and think of new solutions to problems as well as to tackle day to day tasks more effectively.
- Critical thinking – It is the ability to look at all aspects of a problem and evaluating them before making a decision.
- Decision-making – It involves building our thinking skills, and our self awareness skills to reach a point where we are able to effectively make decisions without depending on others to make them for us.
- Problem-solving- It is our ability to identify, evaluate and look for solutions to a problem instead of feeling sad, or stuck with the same.

No life skill is independent of one another. For example to take an effective decision, we need to know what we want (self awareness) look at the problem critically (problem solving, critical thinking) and then take a decision. Putting together these skills helps us build our self confidence, esteem and our ability to communicate with others to both give and get support. They give us the strength to look at the positive and practical side of situations, and work towards a solution instead of just feeling bad about one self or for one self.





## SELF-AWARENESS

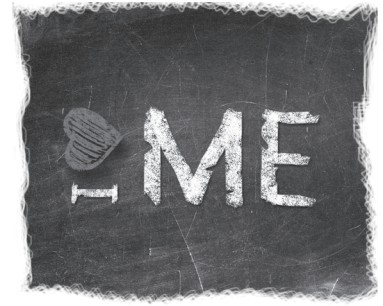
We all believe that we know everything about ourselves and that we know who we are and we label that as being self-aware. Self-awareness is in fact our capacity to come in touch with our strengths, weaknesses, values, ideas, our fears and anxieties, hopes and ambitions. It is about knowing what motivates us, what makes us happy and what makes us hurt, angry and resentful. It allows us to look at ourselves objectively and then move towards making changes in how we think, what we feel and how we can better ourselves to reach our goals.

Not knowing yourself well enough can lead you to getting swayed by what others think. Being aware of yourself helps you to prioritize better, focus on your ambitions, achieve your goals and live a more fulfilling life. It helps you anchor your decision particularly when you face a difficult situation. Sometimes in life we don't have the time to stop, think and evaluate; and being clear about what we want helps us better navigate through our life choices.

As easy and natural as it may sound, becoming self-aware is perhaps the most difficult thing to do. It is a never-ending journey and is the bedrock of all other skills that we pick up in life. We are often in denial about certain parts of us which are either difficult to deal with, or that we think others will not approve of. It is important to understand that one trait or characteristic does not define us. For example if I am good at academia that is only one part of who I am. I might also be aggressive, excited about video games and traveling, irritated with my siblings, fearful of dark places, secretly excited about romantic comedies, and good at sports. There are multiple parts to all of us and we are not defined by just one value, profession, idea or interest.



To become self-aware, requires being open to feedback, and to other individuals' understanding of the world. If we do not push ourselves out of our comfort zone we will never reach our fullest potential. It is sometimes scary to deal with parts of us, which seem unacceptable but until we face them we risk not reaching where we ideally can. It is, however, also important to understand our restrictions and limitations, because unnecessary pressure leads to stress, and unattainable standards always lead to disappointment.



The key is to realize that no human being is all black or white; we are all many shades of red, white, blue, grey and every other color in between. The goal is to accept ourselves for who we are and also set achievable goals that help us head towards who we want to become.

### Activity

#### Instructions:

Complete the following sentences, giving the first answer that comes to your mind. Try not to repeat your answers.

- I like \_\_\_\_\_
- I trust \_\_\_\_\_
- I am \_\_\_\_\_
- I want to be \_\_\_\_\_
- I can \_\_\_\_\_
- I might be able to \_\_\_\_\_
- I can't \_\_\_\_\_
- I will never \_\_\_\_\_
- I will \_\_\_\_\_
- I'm scared when \_\_\_\_\_
- I remember \_\_\_\_\_
- I'm scared of \_\_\_\_\_
- I'm angry when \_\_\_\_\_
- I'm excited when \_\_\_\_\_



- I am beautiful because \_\_\_\_\_
- I am smart because \_\_\_\_\_
- I am embarrassed because \_\_\_\_\_
- I hate \_\_\_\_\_
- I love \_\_\_\_\_
- I crave \_\_\_\_\_
- I run when \_\_\_\_\_
- I hide when \_\_\_\_\_
- I scream when \_\_\_\_\_
- I don't want to \_\_\_\_\_
- I wish \_\_\_\_\_
- I hope \_\_\_\_\_
- I dream \_\_\_\_\_
- I'm proud of \_\_\_\_\_
- I..... \_\_\_\_\_

**Activity**

**Instructions:**

Imagine that your house is burning down. You have time to take only 5 objects.

What will you pick and why?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions for Reflection:** Discuss your selection with your classmates. How do you think what you picked was different from what the others did? What does it tell you about yourself?



## Activity

### Instructions:

In Table 1, fill out what you think the people mentioned think of you. For example, what do you think your best friend thinks about you – do they think you're funny, foolish, mean, lots of fun, intelligent, supportive?

<b>Table 1: What I think they think</b>	
Mother/Father	
Brothers/Sisters	
Best Friends	
Classmates	
Teachers	
Teammates	
Enemies	

In Table 2, fill out what the following people actually think about you. In order to complete this table, talk to each of these people and ask them to describe you in a word or a phrase

<b>Table 2: What they think</b>	
Mother/Father	
Brothers/Sisters	
Best Friends	
Classmates	
Teachers	
Teammates	
Enemies	

In Table 3, list out what are the qualities or traits that you want people to know about you, but they probably don't.

<b>Table 3: What I want them to know about me</b>	
Mother/Father	
Brothers/Sisters	
Best Friends	
Classmates	
Teachers	
Teammates	
Enemies	



**1) Can team sports help build self-awareness?**

To know yourself better, it's a good idea to expose yourself to various situations and groups. Just confining yourself to your books or music, or hanging around with the same 2-3 people all the time will give you a skewed perspective of what you are. Engaging in group activities and pushing yourself to reach your potential can be very useful in understanding various facets of yourself. Any team sport or activity can therefore be helpful.

**2) Does journal writing help us become more aware?**

A journal can help you understand, and more importantly accept yourself better. Writing a journal helps you express yourself without fear of what others would think, helping you become as honest and open with yourself as you allow. There is no one right or wrong approach to self-awareness. Use any approach that you are comfortable with. The key is to open up, look within and accept what you find.

**3) What if I feel worse as I try to explore who I am and find no strengths at all?**

The search for who you really are can be an anxiety ridden process; there are many aspects of ourselves that we aren't proud of, and that we try to deny even to ourselves. That being said, it is not possible to not find anything that you like about yourself. Strengths aren't necessarily defined in terms of being good at studies or sports; our strengths can also be the values and beliefs that we hold.

**4) Do I have to tell others about myself to be aware?**

While it's not necessary to tell others about yourself to be aware, being able to disclose your thoughts and feelings to others are an equally important aspect. Doing so gives us an objective perspective, such that we can understand and improve on ourselves with time. At the same time, it also improves relationships with our close friends and families if they understand us better.

**5) Can I have different ways of dealing in different situations, does that make me fake?**

Not at all, we all have different ways of dealing with different situations. After all, how you behave with your teacher and your best friend are bound to be different. There are many different facets to each of our personalities and how and where we use them is up to us. While adapting to different situations is natural and even healthy, always remember to be true to who you are and what you believe; don't do things or behave in certain ways simply because others want you to.



## **6) Can I use art to express my self as it is easier than talking?**

Art is an extremely effective way of expressing yourself, and if that's what makes you comfortable, then that's ok. You don't have to be a great artist to use art as an +expression; what matters is the process of you putting your thoughts and feelings on the paper, not about the end product. However, while art is an effective tool to express, talking about what's going on in your mind is also important at times, and shouldn't be avoided altogether.

## **7) Is awareness of others also important?**

Knowing others and how they respond to situations can be a kind of a mirror that can help us understand our own selves better. We do not live in isolation, and as important as it is to know our own values and inclinations, it's also important to become aware of, and respect the feelings of others.

## **8) If I accept my flaws, then won't I stop working towards improving myself?**

Acceptance doesn't mean that you do nothing to change the situation. It simply means that you accept the situation that you've been placed in. Till you're always trying to hide from or deny your situation, you won't find the courage to face it. The first step is accept what you can and cannot change, and then work towards improving what you can.





## THINKING SKILLS

In our growing years, significant emphasis is placed on how we perform academically. What most individuals forget is the more important role our ability to challenge assumptions, ask questions, think of new ways of looking at situations, solve problems in innovative ways and make effective decisions and life choices play in our life. It is about thinking on your feet, coming up with a range of alternatives and having the courage to test them which counts in the long run. The goal is to push our minds beyond what we are told, to explore possibilities, and to look at how we can make the best of what we have.

### Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is our ability to think clearly and arrive at a reasoning driven by logic. It is our ability to challenge assumptions and use focussed questioning to draw connections between concepts to get to the crux of the matter. In thinking critically, the focus is not on our emotions, but rather the problem at hand. The idea is to filter all the unnecessary information and look at a situation with a lens that keeps “zooming in” and is directed at solving a problem or reaching a more comprehensive understanding of a situation.

So critical thinking focuses on the “why” – a series of questions to find the right answer, rather than taking what we see or hear at face value.



**Instructions:**

Take any advertisement that interests you. Answer the following questions about the ad.

1. Who produced and/or paid for the message? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the purpose of the message? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Who is the 'target audience'? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What is left out? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What techniques have been used to make it more appealing? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What lifestyles are promoted and why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Does the message contain bias? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Does the message project any stereotypes? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What do you like about this ad? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What do you dislike about this ad? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Decision Making

Arriving at the best decision is the natural outcome of critical thinking. All of us constantly struggle with decisions on a day to day basis, from deciding what to eat, which movie to go for, whether or not to end a relationship, to study or to chat with a friend, to the career we choose. These decisions are influenced by our moods, feelings, larger goals and aspirations, parents' hopes, friends' opinions, teachers' expectations and our own fears.

At the end of the day, we must learn to take responsibility for the consequences of our choices. We must weigh our options, and maintain a balance between our immediate and long term goals rather than taking impulsive decisions that give us momentary satisfaction.



## Activity

### Instructions:

Think about a decision that you are currently struggling with. It could be anything from choosing subjects or a career, to buying a gadget or any other expensive item, to sustaining or breaking off a relationship.

Step 1: Create a list of pros and cons for the same

Pros	Cons

Step 2: You have 100 points. Distribute these points to each reason based on how important they are to you.

Example: Deciding whether to eat at a particular restaurant:

Pros	Cons
It's close by – 15 points	It's expensive – 25 points

Step 3:

Total Pro Points: \_\_\_\_ (out of 100)

Total Con Points: \_\_\_\_ (out of 100)

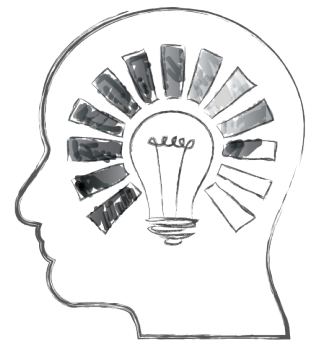
Step 4:

Now make your decision based on whichever has more points.

## Creative Thinking

While critical thinking and decision making require us to move towards one logical conclusion out of many, creative thinking is the act of moving outwards in search of possibility. Rather than always asking 'why', sometimes ask yourself 'why not'.

Creativity, so far, has always been restricted to the art class, and yet, all the greatest inventions have been the result of thinkers who have dared to think outside the box and imagine something that till that point had never existed. There can be no innovation, no progress, without creativity. To be a creative thinker means to not fear what other people will think of your ideas, and have the courage to put them forth anyway. Creative thinking calls for pushing ourselves to try and test new ways of looking at situations, and creating possibilities for ourselves where none existed. To be a creative thinker, you need to be comfortable making mistakes and trying again, realizing that the real learning is in that itself.

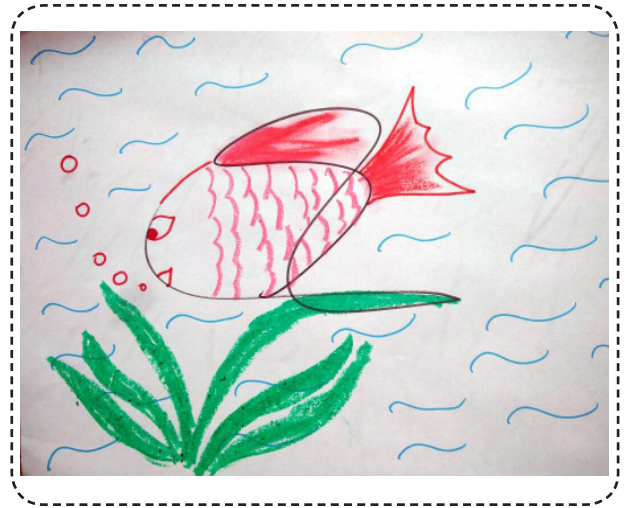
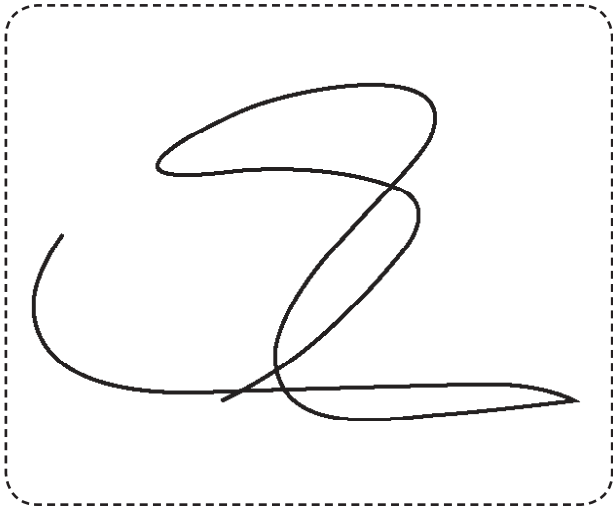


**Instructions:**

1. Find a partner and switch your workbook with them.
2. Put your pen at the centre of the box given on the next page.
3. Close your eyes and in two seconds, without thinking, draw a random abstract squiggle as fast you can.
4. Now take back your own workbook
5. Create an image using the squiggle made by your partner. Add as many lines, shapes and colours as you want to. However, you must remember to incorporate the squiggle lines and make the best drawing you can.



Example:



## Activity

### Instructions:

What do you see in the picture below?



Now think of 10 different, unusual ways of using this object. Make it as exaggerated and funny as you can (e.g. Using a spoon as an oar to row a boat, a shovel to dig, or a mirror)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

## FAQs

### 1. If we think creatively, do we lose our ability to be critical?

Different life situations call for different skills and abilities, and it's possible for a person to be both a critical and a creative thinker. In fact, the ability to do both can often lead to the best results. Thinking critically can help one challenge assumptions and find errors in reasoning, while creative thinking can then be applied so as to come up with innovative solutions for the same.

### 2. Isn't our instinct or gut feeling the best way to make a decision?

When it comes to important decisions, gut feeling isn't the best way to go. You make the best decisions when you're able to keep both immediate and long term perspectives in mind – an overemphasis on either can lead to a bad decision. While instincts can be helpful in certain situations, when it comes to



big decisions that have lasting consequences, it's better to take your time to assimilate all the facts and then take a carefully considered decision.

### **3. Even if we make a wrong decision, can't we fix it later?**

Despite putting in our best efforts, we're all bound to make mistakes sometimes, and being independent means taking responsibility for the choices and decisions we make. While some mistakes can be fixed at a later stage, others can lead to irreparable consequences. While it's not always possible to get it right, using effective decision making strategies, and talking about your dilemmas with your close friends and relatives can increase the odds of making a more sound decision.

### **4. Aren't people born creative?**

Creative thinking is a life skill, and like any other skill, it can be learnt. People are not born creative thinkers, it's about how they approach their lives.

### **5. Is there really one right and one wrong decision?**

Things aren't always so black and white, and there may not always be one right and one wrong decision – after all, every alternative is likely to have some merit. Decision making is a very personal process and depends on our individual values and preferences. At the same time, every decision does carry with it its fair share of consequences. So while a decision may not be easy to arrive at, some decisions are likely to bode us better in the long run as compared to some others.

### **6. Are creative thinkers good at arts and crafts?**

It's possible for creative thinkers to be good at arts and crafts, but not necessarily so. Creative thinking isn't about an art form – it's a way of thinking where you're unafraid to explore possibilities and perceive things in ways that others may not have. It's about trying new alternatives and creating opportunities where none exist.





## **SOCIAL SKILLS**

All of us face challenges; none of those challenges are faced in isolation. Think of any problem you have ever faced, any decision you had to make; was it independent of people? It is important to recognise that a large proportion of our experiences, thoughts and feelings depend both on ourselves and on how we interact with others around us, including their verbal and non-verbal feedback.

From the time that we are born, we come in contact with our parents, caregivers, grandparents and neighbours, friends, peers and teachers. We also observe people around us on the streets, on television and in the movies we watch. There is always a two way relationship that exists where we influence others and others influence us to shape who we become, how we react and what decisions we take. Therefore, it is important to be equipped with basic life skills for effective communication and improving our general patterns of how we interact with others. This portion explores some of the practical ways to enhance our social skills.



## Listening

You may wonder why listening has been listed as a skill. After all, isn't it something that just happens automatically when someone around us talks? Quite the contrary, in fact. There is a significant difference between hearing something and really listening to it. Think of how many times you yourself have drifted off into your own day dreams when a teacher has been talking in class, or you've started thinking of your own personal problems when your friend is talking about theirs.



Listening forms an integral part of our social skills as it impacts the way in which people perceive our involvement in conversations and social situations. If you are distracted and the other person is being able to pick on the fact that you are not really interested in what they are saying, the chances of them communicating with you or sharing things diminishes significantly. What you need is to **listen actively**. By active listening we mean paying attention to what the other says, both their verbal and non-verbal messages, conveying feedback and making the other feel understood.

We often tend to believe that the person talking to us can't really tell whether we're paying attention to them or not. But look at it this way - how would you feel if someone kept looking away, yawning, finishing your sentences, interrupting you or texting on your phone while you were trying to share something with them. Some of the barriers that get in the way of healthy communication include jumping to conclusions, predicting what the person will say next, interrupting or finishing their sentences, getting lost in your own thoughts and inappropriate body language such as not making sufficient contact.

## Assertiveness

Can you think of a time when you ended up doing something you didn't want to, simply because you didn't know how to refuse or felt awkward saying no? We all experience pressures to do things in a certain way from the people around us. This pressure could manifest in terms of our parents telling us what we should study, advertisements telling us what to eat or our friends determining what we should wear or look like.

We often talk about 'peer pressure' being a significant problem amongst teenagers, but many of us fail to recognize how this pressure affects us personally. We look at peer pressure as something that happens to others – where bullies force weaker children to do things they don't want to. In reality, however, almost all of us have been exposed to and even succumbed to peer pressure in some way or the other. We ourselves have also probably pressured our friends into doing something, truly believing that it was for their own good. Our first cigarette is offered to us, not by some senior we don't know, but by our best friend.



It's our friends who convince us to bunk classes, and it's our friends we have a hard time saying no to. How, then, can we find a way to express our own wishes and refuse what we're not comfortable doing without offending those around us?

Each of us can follow any of 4 communication styles to express how we feel and respond to the situation: (1) aggressive, (2) passive, (3) passive-aggressive, (4) assertive.

**Aggressive (I win, you lose):** We are aggressive when we become pushy and try to get our way by use of power, force or threats. It's possible to be aggressive without being physically violent. We are aggressive when we believe that our rights are more important than the rights of others.

**Passive (I lose, You Win):** When we are passive, we put others needs before our own. This could be because we feel inferior, or believe that our thoughts or ideas are less valuable. We find it easier to just go along with others to not create any conflict. We are passive when we believe that our rights are less important than the rights of others.

**Passive-Aggressive (I Lose, You Lose):** We are passive-aggressive when we are not able to stand up for our beliefs and at the same time make the other person feel bad. We find it easier to pass demeaning comments or be sarcastic than actually working towards changing the situation. We are passive-aggressive when we don't believe either of our rights are important.

**Assertive (I Win, You Win):** We are assertive when we stand up for what we want, without offending or insulting the other person. We communicate our thoughts and feelings and also understand the perspective of the other to come to a solution. We are assertive when we give equal importance to our own and the others' rights.

To understand the difference between these 4 patterns, imagine that you complete your homework on time, and have a friend who almost every day asks for your register to copy the assignment. What are the different ways in which you may react to this situation?

- **Aggressive:** You shout at your friend to do their work themselves. You may also bang your notebook on the table or tell them that they are not a good friend.
- **Passive:** You allow your friend to copy your assignment without any problems and feel it's best to not let your friendship get affected over an assignment.
- **Passive-Aggressive:** You give your friend the register to copy the assignment but make a sarcastic comment, like "Oh, why do you want to make the effort of copying my homework, let me write it for you, your highness". Could also involve telling others that she never does her work and keeps copying from me.
- **Assertive:** "I don't like it when you copy my homework, I put in a lot of effort into it. Please do your homework yourself. If you get stuck somewhere, I can help you through it".



Assertiveness is the skill of standing up for your rights and protecting yourself, while at the same time, respecting the other person. It means standing up for yourself, your rights and expressing what you think and feel, while ensuring that you are not infringing upon the rights of others. It's also the ability to say no, without feeling embarrassed or awkward. We often tend to confuse being assertive with being selfish – but the two are poles apart.

Standing up for what you believe in does not make you selfish, if you understand and respect the feelings of the others and don't insult them in the process. It's imperative to give yourself at least as much importance as you give your friends. Being selfish on the other hand is closer to being aggressive, where you are hostile towards others simply to get your own way.

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Be aware of your emotions and thoughts.</li> <li>✓ Look for mutually acceptable alternatives.</li> <li>✓ Be specific and clear.</li> <li>✓ Express your reasons and feelings.</li> <li>✓ Listen to the other.</li> <li>✓ Use "I" statements.</li> <li>✓ Give feedback about behaviour.</li> <li>✓ Accept and apologize when you make a mistake.</li> <li>✓ Include positive messages.</li> <li>✓ Talk one on one.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Make excuses.</li> <li>✓ Apologize for asking.</li> <li>✓ Always give in.</li> <li>✓ Put yourself down.</li> <li>✓ Blame yourself or others.</li> <li>✓ Criticise the person.</li> <li>✓ Interrupt.</li> <li>✓ Be sarcastic.</li> <li>✓ Shout.</li> <li>✓ Use physical force.</li> <li>✓ Use threats.</li> </ul>

**Activity**

**Instructions:**

For each of the situations given below, write an aggressive, passive, passive-aggressive and assertive response alternative.

1. Two people sitting behind you are talking during a movie
  - a. Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Passive \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Passive-Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Assertive \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. You want to study literature, but your parents are telling you to do engineering
  - a. Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Passive \_\_\_\_\_



- c. Passive-Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Assertive \_\_\_\_\_
3. Your friends insist that you smoke but you're not comfortable doing it
- a. Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Passive \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Passive-Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Assertive \_\_\_\_\_
4. Your pen has stopped working and you want one from the person sitting next to you
- a. Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Passive \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Passive-Aggressive \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Assertive \_\_\_\_\_

## Empathy

It's hard for us to imagine that we too make mistakes, or that other people understand things differently from one another. We go about our lives believing that there's only one truth – truth the way we understand it and see things around us. What we forget is that we see things only from one perspective, which is our own, all the while ignoring how others are feeling or what they are really going through. Empathy, then, is simply the ability to put yourself in the shoes of the other and understanding their experiences. It becomes an essential in social situations as it helps to.

Think of it this way – if your best friend walks past you in school, ignoring you entirely, how would you feel? Chances are you would feel hurt, rejected or angry. You would think your friend ignored you on purpose, had some problem with you or you simply weren't important enough to them anymore. Switch sides and imagine that you walk past your friend without acknowledging their presence, lost in your thoughts. What would your reasons be then? Perhaps you were running late for class, had been called to the principal's office or were maybe preoccupied by some problems going on at home. You wouldn't even stop to think for a moment how your friend might have perceived the situation in this case.



The problem is that we all pass judgments very quickly, and don't really stop to think about the reasons why another might have behaved in a certain manner. In our own case, we never try to hurt somebody on purpose; it's always circumstances that lead to someone being inadvertently offended. In the case of others, they do it on purpose – it is a part of their personality, not the situation that is to blame. If, rather than engaging in who is to blame, you can make a habit of looking at things from the perspective of the other, most conflicts that occur can actually be averted.

## Story

Aimlessly Karan walked around in the playground with his head low, dragging his feet on the dusty ground, he felt miserable about his life in school. As he looked up he saw Ahir, one of the most popular kids of the school. Karan looked at him in awe. He thought to himself "how I wish I was him".

Yes Ahir was one of the most popular seniors of the school. He was living the dream life of every student out there. He had the coolest shoes, latest mobile, and the most beautiful girlfriend. He was on the basketball team, had an amazing voice and was already the lead guitarist of the school band. He had it all, or that's what the everyone thought.

No one really understood that Ahir was going through his own troubled life. His parents were not there for him ever. He often used to reach home to empty rooms and an echoing bungalow of silence. His grades were slipping and recently his behavior had become extremely aggressive. No one knew that Abhishek was screaming to live what everyone considered "normal" "boring" life. In fact Abhishek secretly wished that his life was like Amna. He wanted to be as smart as her, wanted all the teachers to respect him like they respected Amna, how he hoped for his assignments to be appreciated by all in the class as Amna's were.

Indeed, there was no doubt about it that Amna was one of the most intelligent student of her class. She was often termed as the nerd but no one ever asked her about how she felt about topping the class every year. Everyone believed that it was effortless for her. Unfortunately it was anything but that. Amna had to each day struggle with her parents' questions regarding "what's your plan for the future" "did you study for 8 hours" "were you the one who got the highest?" The pressure on her was high and so extreme that poor Amna felt that all her life she had only been studying. It seemed to her that her life was dictated by the books and that she had lost her best years of school to just.....studying. Amna was upset and had started detesting school. It was only her favourite teacher, Ms. Sameera's class that was making her stay. "Ms. Sameera's life must be so amazing", Amna often thought to her self. Amazing it did seem, to many. Even in the staff room she was usually the topic of discussion "She is so organized" "All the kids like her" "She has such a nice husband" "She always gets her work done on time" "Her children are so sweet and behave" "Oh! I wish I had a life like her". But this was far from the truth.

Sameera had a perfectly organized school life or so it seemed. Only she knew how many sleepless nights she suffered in order to correct the various papers. She often looked into the mirror and question on how good a mother she was. She had missed so many of her childrens' functions. She also felt that her domestic life was a mess. She wasn't able to take time out for her family and top of all this was, the current head of department had assigned her extra work. She found herself juggling and struggling with the roles of a



teacher, a mother and a wife. How she wished that her job was easier. How she had to only could just sit and delegate work “How I wish I could have an easier life with lots of money and ease”, Sameera thought to herself while listening to principal Chaddha, “Just like the principal”, while walking out of the principal’s office, later.

Mr. Chaddha was the most powerful man of the school. He had everything under control. Under him his school had been able to secure a rank among the top 5 schools of the city. He was the best at everything. Many aspired to be like him. He could brag about his school forever but he wished he could say the same about his home. His house was nothing but a place of loneliness. There was no partner he could go back to and share his sorrows with. His children had all grown up and gone abroad to work and settle down. There was nothing but the walls and some memories hanging as photographs. Who could have imagined that a strong man as he was slowly being consumed by the emptiness and hollowness of his house and the life he was leading. He used to take a walk around the playground and silently watch the children run in groups, chattering away. For those moments Mr. Chaddha’s life did not feel so silent and lonely. He yearned to go back to those golden days where there were no worries, no fear of being alone, where life was being lived to the fullest. He stopped in his track as a student came rushing past him straight to his mother who fussed about his hair and shirt, while at the same time hugged the tiny child. A tear rolled down Mr. Chaddha’s eyes as he saw Karan gently grab onto her mother’s hand and walk away.

**Questions for Reflection:**

- 1. Have you ever felt envious or jealous of someone else? Why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 2. Would you trade lives with them? Why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 3. What do you think their personal struggles might be? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



### **1. Can we learn empathy? Or are we born with it?**

Empathy is a life skill that can be learnt. Empathy is simply the ability to put yourself in the other's shoe to understand their experiences. Nobody is born with empathy, it can be learnt with practice.

### **2. What if we get bored and don't listen to someone effectively? Is it possible to be a good listener all the time?**

It's usually very difficult to be a good listener all the time; chances are your thoughts will drift every now and then. However, if you are listening actively, such that you are an equal participant in the conversation, then it shouldn't be such a struggle. Also remember that you can't always be the person who listens – it's also important for you to vent your own thoughts and feelings as well.

### **3. If we haven't experienced something ourselves, can we still be empathetic?**

Being empathetic doesn't mean having experienced the same situation yourself; it means having the capacity to go beyond your own self and try to imagine what the other person would have gone through. While you may not get it exactly right, just the effort in itself also counts for a lot.

### **4. If I say no, won't my friend feel offended?**

Saying no when you're not comfortable is not about insulting someone else, but rather, about protecting yourself. We often end up doing a lot of things we don't want to simply because we don't want to sound selfish. If, however, that person is your friend, then they should be willing to understand and respect how you feel. Rather than simply saying no, also share your reason, and try to come up with an alternative for the same. If you keep these things in mind and use a polite but firm tone, there's no reason for your friend to feel offended.

### **5. Isn't it necessary to be aggressive, to protect ourselves?**

It's true that there are times when you may feel driven to be physically aggressive, in order to defend yourself. But such instances are relatively rare; we usually end up being aggressive a lot more than we need to be in our everyday interactions in very different ways. Rather than waiting for extreme cases, most of us are aggressive on a day to day basis, wherein rather than helping the situation, we only end up making things worse. Aggression as a response to aggression usually escalates matters and makes things worse. Wherever possible, find an alternative approach. If each of us does our bit and fits a non-aggressive alternative, the larger social environment around us too will change and society as a whole will become more harmonious.





## **COPING SKILLS**

Stress is a normal part of day to day life, be it the stress of exams, having a fight with a friend or preparing for a match. In fact, if you didn't have any stress, you would have no reason to get out of bed, come to school or engage in any other activities. Stress is what motivates us.

We feel a variety of emotions due to stressful circumstances. Frustration and anger, when we feel like we are unable to move forward towards our goal; sadness, when we feel the loss of a best friend or a relationship; a sense of disappointment and feeling like a failure when we don't do well in exams or at extracurricular activities.

Each of us has to face many stressful situations in life, some more than others. The key to dealing with stress is not to make the situation go away all together, but rather, to change how we think about the situation.

Therefore it is important to understand that the "Antecedent" or the situation that occurs does not directly lead to the "Consequence" or our subsequent actions. The key area is the "Belief" or our thoughts about how life should be, what ideally should happen. It is when things do not fall into what is considered the ideal according to the self that it starts creating thoughts which may be considered to be illogical or irrational. Becoming aware of our "B" and coming to terms with the fact that it is not absolute is our first step to dealing with stressful situations.



<b>Antecedent</b>	<b>Belief</b>	<b>Consequence</b>
<p>You are in class 10 and you have just got your board exam results. Your total percentage is 60; even though you did well in 4 subjects in one subject you got a 39% which is what pulled your aggregate down. Your friends have scored between 70% - 80%. Your parents are out of town and have been waiting for you to tell them the results.</p>	<p>Belief - 1: "So much consistent effort MUST lead to a better output."</p> <p>"I should have scored higher than my friends because I gave up so many fun things to focus on tuition."</p>	<p>Consequence - 1: Very Angry! Thinking about how on earth it came to this point after all the tuition. You put your phone off and decide not speak to anyone for a few weeks.</p>
	<p>Belief - 2: "My life is ruined! Because percentage is vital in getting a college and then job, I am pathetic"</p> <p>"Doing badly in exams makes me stupid and there is just no hope anymore"</p> <p>"I should Always do well in exams"</p> <p>"Parents will only be proud if I do well in academia"</p>	<p>Consequence - 2: Disheartened, ashamed and sad, extremely unhappy and completely afraid of telling your parents or friends. You contemplate hurting yourself, and continue to cry hoping your parents take longer to come back than anticipated.</p>
	<p>Belief - 3: "Exams and grades are not everything"</p> <p>"More effort perhaps would lead to a better outcome"</p> <p>"One paper on which I scored less does not define my ability"</p> <p>"I am a lot more than just the result of my exams."</p>	<p>Consequence - 3: You feel slightly disappointed but reassess why it could have happened. You phone your parents after some sulking and let them know. They yell a little but you know they will be alright soon.</p>

## Activity

### Instructions:

Now choose a situation from your own life that you want to evaluate and put down the different consequences you experienced as well as one alternate way you could have looked at the same situation. Then outline the Beliefs that led to the same.

Antecedent	Belief	Consequence

## Self-Defeating Thoughts

**All of** us have some negative ways of looking at situations; these are some of the common mistakes we all make in our day to day lives.

- **Black or White Thinking** – Thinking about a situation in absolute terms like “always”, “never”, “worst”



- **Overgeneralizing** – Making a single failure seem like a consistent pattern like “why does this always happen to me”
- **Mental filtering** – Highlighting negative events and ignoring the positives
- **Mind Reading** – Making assumptions about what the other person is thinking
- **Fortune Telling** – Predicting that something bad will happen without any reason
- **Catastrophizing** – Focusing only on the worst case scenario
- **Should and Must Statements** – Setting a standard that is too high and unrealistic, which can lead to feelings of guilt and disappointment, such as “I must be liked by everyone”
- **Labelling** – Defining self or others based on a single quality or event, like “I did badly in my test, I’m stupid”
- **Personalizing** – Taking the blame for a situation which you are not responsible for, like “my parents are getting divorced, it’s all my fault”
- **Blaming** – Putting the responsibility of your mistake on someone else
- **Fallacy of Fairness** - Believing that your own understanding of what is right is the only one, and not being open to other possibilities

The key to coping with stress effectively is to be able to identify, and become aware of these thoughts and biases. The goal is to focus on “realistic” or “rational” beliefs.

**Activity**

**Instructions:**

Imagine you have experienced the following situations. For each of these situations, give a distorted thought, along with a possible rational alternative.

Situation 1. You have just completed your first exam and not done well, you have 4 more to go.

**Blaming:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_



**Fallacy of fairness:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Labelling:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Shoulds and musts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Overgeneralising:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mental Filtering:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

Situation 2. You're in school and a close friend walks past without saying Hi or even smiling at you.

**Personalising:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Catastrophising:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mind reading:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_



**Black and White Thinking:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Fortune Telling:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Rational Thought:** \_\_\_\_\_

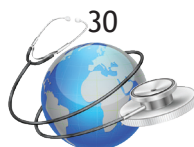
## Lifestyle Choices

### Do's

- ✓ 7 hours of sleep every night
- ✓ At least 30 minutes physical exercise each day
- ✓ Talk about your feelings with a friend or family member
- ✓ Prioritize and manage your time effectively
- ✓ Prepare specific, achievable, short term goals

### Do Not's:

- ✓ Rely on last minute preparation
- ✓ Keep unrealistic expectations
- ✓ Smoke – smoking does not relax you or improve your concentration
- ✓ Drink alcohol or take any substances – these do not provide a solution to the problem
- ✓ Take Caffeine – drink coffees or colas increases your anxiety level and interferes with concentration



### **1. How do I deal with exam anxiety before giving the test?**

The first thing you must remember is that being anxious before an exam is NORMAL, and most of your friends are probably going through it as well. If, however, you feel like anxiety gets the better of you, then it's a good idea to practice self-tests at home, in an exam like situation to get used to the idea. Evaluating yourself will also help you understand where you stand, which can ease the anxiety before an exam. Ensure that you sleep well before the exam and don't load up on caffeine. Avoid reading the entire question paper before you start writing – instead, read only one question at a time and answer it as you go along.

### **2. How can I deal with the stress of getting exam results?**

Being stressed simply means that you care about what's happening, and that's ok. Always keep in mind that it's the effort that matters, not the result. After all, it's our effort that is in our control, and if you have put in the effort then the result will surely show. Also remember that no single exam is the end of the world. Even if you fare poorly, there will be many more opportunities to bounce back and perform well. Approach your exams in the right spirit – failing an exam doesn't mean you're stupid or worthless; all it means is that you're facing a difficulty and need to put more effort into one particular aspect of your studies.

### **3. Does exercise help us cope?**

Yes, exercise can be a great stress buster. Exercise releases endorphins in our body that uplift our mood, calm our nerves and help us better cope with situations. They enhance our confidence, and at the same time can also serve as a distraction from stressful situations. At least 30 minutes of physical activity outdoors on a daily basis is a must, irrespective of whether you have exams or not. Pick any exercise that you enjoy – it could be a sport, a dance form or yoga.

### **4. Does yoga and meditation help in stress release?**

Yoga and meditation are a very effective lifestyle choice, for people across all ages. They improve our physical fitness and can help calm the mind. However, they are not the only way to achieve stress release. Any kind of physical exercise can have a similar effect. At the same time, if you feel like meditation is too difficult or too boring, just try to engage your mind into something that you enjoy and can concentrate on for a significant period of time.



## **5. Do cigarettes help us relax?**

That cigarettes help us relax is a myth. On the contrary, smoking cigarettes leads to withdrawal effects that increase our anxiety till the time we don't smoke the next one. When you do smoke the next one, the withdrawal fades and that is the sensation you may experience as relaxing. This phenomenon, however, is the result of the cigarettes increasing your anxiety in the first place. At the same time, also remember that cigarettes do not help concentrate better either, and causes great damage to our physical health.

## **6. Who do I talk to if everyone else around me is also unable to cope?**

When you are not able to cope with a stressful situation, reaching out to others is the way to go. If you feel like your friends are also in the same boat and don't have the time or patience to listen to you, talking to your parents or teacher is a great idea. You can also approach your school counsellor, who is available to help you deal with whatever situation is bothering you. You can also approach counsellors outside of your school if required. Keep in mind that anything that you share with your counsellor will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone else.

## **7. Does writing and speaking about the problem really help?**

Many problems in life get aggravated when we keep them to ourselves and bottle up our feelings. We then end up resorting to unhealthy means of coping such as smoking, drinking, bunking school or maybe even eating too much. Expressing how you feel in itself can be a very relaxing experience, whether through writing, art, music or dance. At the same time, however, speaking about our problems can be a more effective way of dealing with situations, since it's only by speaking up will you connect with people and realize that you are not alone in your struggles.

## **8. I sometimes ignore the situation and often forget that it even happened?**

Ignoring or forgetting about a situation once in a while is quite natural. However, if that's the only way you deal with difficult situations, then it might be a problem. It's important to learn how to face situations and deal with them head on rather than developing a pattern of avoidance, that will create problems later in life.

## **9. I feel ashamed after failure and it takes me a lot of time to come out and be normal again?**

### **What can I do?**

Nobody can be the best, or even very good at everything. We all have our share of strengths and weaknesses. Failing in a test or a sport doesn't mean you a failure or a bad person. Wins and losses are a part of everyone's life. Learn to take them in your stride and don't question your worth because you fared badly once. At the same time, it's important for you to invest your energy into multiple aspects of life. Just focusing on studies alone or sports alone is not the best way to go about it. Rather, give importance



to all aspects of life, be it studies, sports, extra-curricular activities, friends or family. That way, if you are struggling in any one aspect of life, all the others will give you the strength and ensure that your self-confidence does not plummet.

#### **10. How can I change the way I think! It feels very automatic.**

Understandably, how we think feels very automatic. At the same time, how each of us thinks or reacts to a situation varies – no two people think exactly the same way about the same situation. Changing how you think takes time, effort and practice. The first step is to understand and analyse your patterns and biases in thinking. Once you've done that, you need to make a conscious effort to come up with alternative thought processes. While it won't come naturally at first, it'll soon become a habit. Your way of thinking can change to a more healthy one with consistent awareness and practice.

#### **11. Does watching T.V and eating help cope with stress? It makes me feel better.**

There's nothing wrong with watching television, as long as you're careful of what you watch and moderate your time in front of the television. However, when television watching or eating excessively become your means to avoid situations, it can create a problem. Healthier ways of coping are to stop procrastinating and face whatever it is you're avoiding, watch television in moderation, spend more time outdoors with your friends and get some physical exercise.



## CASE STUDY

Akhil was a class 10 student who was quite popular amongst his peers. He was intelligent, talkative and a part of the school tennis team. For Akhil, his friends were most important – spending time with them and ensuring that they looked up to him, no matter what he did. When it came to choosing their subjects for the 11th, Akhil like many other students, was confused. He had an interest in political science, history and current affairs but his parents suggested that doing science was better as it opened up more opportunities in the future. His friends were all taking science subjects as well. And so, his decision was made.

As the months passed, he started bunking classes and slowly started lagging behind in his work. Physics and math just didn't interest him at all. When he failed his first test, he told himself that it was natural to do poorly in the 11th and that most of his friends had done badly as well. To him, class 11 was about having fun since the board exams were still more than a year away.

Consistently disappointed with his performance, however, Akhil's chemistry teacher called him stupid as the entire class watched on and laughed. Embarrassed and angry, he found it even harder to cope with math. He started staying up late at night to cope with his studies, ended up drinking endless cups of coffee to keep awake and found it hard to go to school in the mornings. Even when he tried to study, thoughts of being a failure clouded his mind.

As the days rolled on, his friends started keeping away from him. Nobody wanted to be seen with a 'failure', afraid that he might impact their studies. Akhil's approached an elder cousin for help. The solution, his cousin suggested, was that he should take to smoking cigarettes – not only would it help him relax, but it would also help him concentrate better, and make him popular in school again. He agreed, partly so that at least his cousin wouldn't turn his back on him as well.

Realizing that none of these solutions were working, Akhil decided to seek help from his class teacher, who had expressed her concern over the last couple of months. Over time, Akhil was able to finally express what was really on his mind – his feelings of loneliness and embarrassment, his disappointment over letting down his parents, and a sense of helplessness. He became increasingly aware of his priorities – he realized that pursuing a field that suited his interest and aptitude was a better option than blindly following what others around him suggested. He decided to approach his parents to talk about how his struggles and how he really felt. Working on his critical thinking and decision making skills, together with his parents, he weighed the pros and cons of different options and career paths. He also realized that smoking actually increased his anxiety, made him feel tired and in no way helped him become popular or study better. He gave up smoking, started focusing in class once again, took time out to play tennis everyday as it helped him de-stress and reconnected with the friends he had lost touch with.



# About Macmillan Life Skills

The Life Skills programme comprises a range of FREE teaching resources that have been mapped to the CEFR (A1 - C1) and created specifically to help language teachers bring life skills into the classroom.

Resources include lesson plans, videos and quizzes and cover key employability topics including:

- Critical Thinking
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Creativity

- Problem-solving
- Social and Cultural Awareness
- Study Skills

- Leadership and Responsibility
- Self-awareness and Initiative
- Organisation Skills
- Time Management

- Workplace Readiness

Visit the Macmillan English website to discover and download our resources:

[macmillanenglish.com/life-skills](https://www.macmillanenglish.com/life-skills)

"The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning."

Jiddu Krishnamurti

# The Importance of Life Skills

**Fact:** Two years ago, if you searched online for “life skills in education” you would find 71 million results. Today, the same search generates over 200 million results.

## Why is there so much interest in life skills?

The rapid changes brought on by technology have had a direct effect on all our lives. However, the workplace has been transformed completely. Today, people expect to have many different jobs and therefore need to build flexible skills and be ready to adapt and learn in a fast-moving world. We all need to be able to use new and everchanging technology, as well as collaborate successfully with people from various backgrounds in person and at a distance.

## Who defines life skills?

There are many different lists of life skills, developed by ministries, international organisations, universities and educational partnerships. Everyone who is interested in the improvement of education has a view on which skills are the ones necessary for success in the 21st century.

## Self-evaluation Quiz

This quiz is adapted from Palgrave, Skills for Success 3rd edition, by Stella Cottrell.

**For each of the following statements, rate your responses as outlined below.**

Rating: 0 = strongly agree 1 = agree 2 = slightly agree 3 = disagree 4 = strongly disagree

1	I am certain that I can keep myself motivated towards achieving my next goal	0 1 2 3 4
2	I am confident that I have planned sufficiently to enable me to achieve my goals	0 1 2 3 4
3	I am very clear how my academic achievements fit into my life plans	0 1 2 3 4
4	I am confident that I can demonstrate the skills, values and behaviours that employers are looking for	0 1 2 3 4
5	I am confident in undertaking structured reflection without guidelines	0 1 2 3 4
6	I am confident that I can develop an effective strategy to meet most circumstances	0 1 2 3 4
7	I have a clear understanding of how to evaluate my own performance	0 1 2 3 4
8	I am confident that I know how to improve my performance in most circumstances	0 1 2 3 4
9	I know how to apply and transfer my expertise from one area to a different field	0 1 2 3 4
10	I am confident that I can see myself as others see me	0 1 2 3 4
11	I am confident that I have effective listening skills	0 1 2 3 4
12	I am an assertive person	0 1 2 3 4
13	I am a good self-starter	0 1 2 3 4
14	I am aware of the best roles for me to fill for team work	0 1 2 3 4
15	I am confident at problem-solving	0 1 2 3 4
16	I am confident that I know how to make best use of my mind	0 1 2 3 4
17	I am confident that I will take a creative approach to most problems	0 1 2 3 4
18	I am always very clear about which skills I am developing	0 1 2 3 4

**Look at your score. How many items did you circle as 0 = strongly agree?**

**Look back over the points you gave a score of 1-4: How can you improve your score over the coming year?**

## About the Author

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