



Power-ups

A Self-help Tool

Introduction

Power-ups are simple ways of giving yourself a mood boost that you can build into an ordinary day. The idea was developed by Jane McGonigal, who is an academic and popular TED Talk presenter. McGonigal developed the approach when recovering from a serious head injury that left her clinically depressed, lacking physical strength or energy, and feeling suicidal at times. She discovered that setting herself simple things to do, like walking to the window to look out into the street, or baking muffins using a ready-made cake mix, helped to give her a sense of positivity and accomplishment.



After a while, she got in the habit of setting herself a number of micro-challenges like this each day, and even asking her family to set some for her. As a self-confessed videogames geek, McGonigal realized that these micro-challenges were like ‘power-ups’ in computer games. In short, she gamified her recovery.

She called these small steps ‘power-ups’, which she defines as: “...any positive action you can take, easily, that creates a quick moment of pleasure, strength, courage, or connection for you” (McGonigal, 2015, p.160). She writes: “Power -ups are essential to most videogames. They’re the bonus items that give you more strength, more power, or extra life. Think of the ... care packages in Call of Duty that restore your soldier’s health, or the super seeds in Angry Birds that supersize the birds in your slingshot...” (p.159).



McGonigal draws on a wide range of research to argue that experiencing a lot of these quick wins on a day-to-day basis can lead to a happier, healthier, and more satisfying life.

Interestingly, it is thought that one way these quick wins work is by improving the strength of the Vagus nerve, which seems to play a key role in healthy mind-body function (p.165). As

Benjamin Franklin once said: “Human felicity is produced not as much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every day” (Goodreads.com).

McGonigal asks: “What if we could collect and activate power-ups in real life? Good news: we can, and it’s easier than you think” (p.159). This Self-help Tool will explain how.

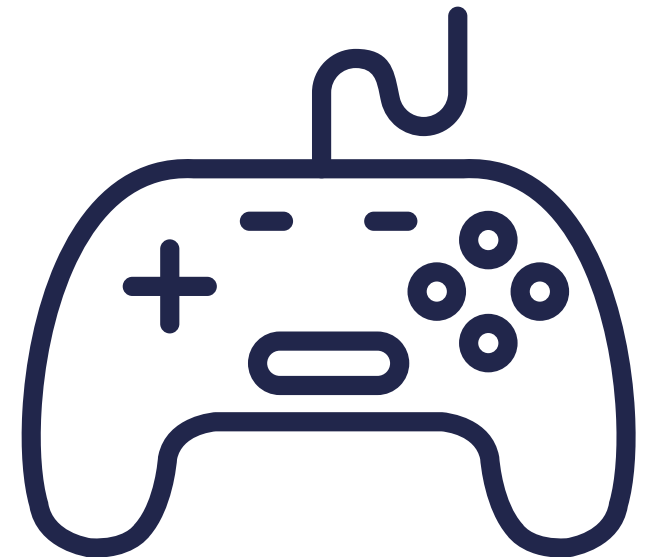


This tool is designed to...

- Give you easy, light-touch ways to boost your mood.
- Enable you to increase your sense of control and agency.
- Discover mood-boosts that fit your personal style.

Consider using this tool if you...

- Want achievable things to increase your positivity.
- Like gamified approaches to personal development.
- Want to find ways to feel more in control of your life.



How to use this tool

1 Collect your power-ups

Here's a list of prompts from McGonigal (p.176):

- “What song makes you feel powerful?”
- What food makes you feel energised?
- Who or what helps you feel calm and relaxed?
- Is there a mantra that makes you feel more motivated?
- What physical activity energises you?
- What reliably inspires you when you read it or watch it?
- What memory brings you great satisfaction when you recall it for 30 seconds?
- Is there something small you like to do for others?
- What photo, video or image always makes you smile?
- Is there a daily habit that makes you feel better when you remember to do it?
- Is there a place or a space that you can get to easily that brings you joy and comfort?
- Who is the best person to call, text, write or visit, to get a quick pick-me-up?”



2 Activate your power-ups

McGonigal suggests aiming to find five reliable power-ups. These might be similar to each other, or quite different. You may find it helpful to use this table to note down your power-ups.

Type	Example	Your power-ups	When, Where, How often?
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Standing in the sun for a few minutes.• Doing a 30-second exercise.		
Mental	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choosing to do a boring but sensible bit of housework, such as tidying your room.• Choosing to make a snack, just that little bit healthier.		
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sending a message of support to a friend.• Chatting to a neighbour at the bus stop.		

Keeping track of when you activate your power-ups can really help maximise their impact. A simple list where you tick things off each day helps make your achievements visible.

3 Enhance your power-ups

Over time, you will get better at noticing which things work for you. Your toolkit will expand, and that will make it easier to adapt flexibly to different situations. You may also want to ask friends and family about their mood-boosts, or even to suggest some ideas for you to think about. All of these sources can expand the list of ideas. If you really like this approach, then you could use the [SuperBetter App](#) (note – there is a charge for this), which you can use to set and record gamified approaches to personal development.



Pause, Reflect, Act

- What do you feel about using power-ups?
- How do you think they could help you?
- Does this sound like it would fit with your personal style?
- How do you feel about gamifying approaches?
- What were the key insights you took from this Self-help Tool?
- What do you need to do next, to move forwards?
- Who could help you with this?
- What other Tools would you like to try now?

NB: Because everyone is different, no one solution is a magic bullet, so please look at our other Self-help Tools as well, and use the ones that work best for you.

References and Resources

McGonagall, J., (2015). Super Better: A Revolutionary Approach to Getting Stronger, Happier, Braver and More Resilient Powered by the Science of Games. Thorsons: London.

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If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our Self-help Tools with your students, we would love to hear from you and share good practice. We would ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy, and acknowledge the other sources we have used. Thank you.