

# **SuperBetter: A Revolutionary Approach to Getting Stronger, Happier, Braver and More Resilient— Powered by the Science of Games**

**by Jane McGonigal  
2015 Penguin Press  
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[This book] is about learning *how to be gameful* in the face of extreme stress and personal challenge. Being gameful means bringing the psychological strengths you naturally display when you play games—such as optimism, creativity, courage, and determination—to your real life. It means having the curiosity and openness to play with different strategies to discover what works best, It means building up the resilience to tackle tougher and tougher challenges with greater and greater success. (p. 80)

*SuperBetter: A Revolutionary Approach to Getting Stronger, Happier, Braver and More Resilient—Powered by the Science of Games* is a guide on how to apply the mindsets, attitudes and skills that people naturally employ when playing games to real-life challenges and goals. Jane McGonigal, the author, “was the first person to earn a Ph.D. studying the psychological strengths of gamers and how those strengths can translate to real-world problem solving” (p. 17). What makes *SuperBetter* so compelling is that the methods she lays out had their origins in McGonigal’s own real-world challenge.

In one sense, this is a story of how McGonigal responded to a head injury. It is the story of how she applied her professional passion, game research, to a most challenging situation in her own life. After a head injury, she was bedridden. She experienced suicidal ideation. She could not do any of the things, it seemed, that made her who she was: she could neither read nor write. Then, she decided to make a change; she applied the distilled essence of what she’d learned about playing games to her own life. She took control of her recovery to the greatest possible extent by viewing her situation through the eyes of a gamer.

In another sense, the book is an instruction manual, based on McGonigal's own experiences, for moving forward using what she calls a *gameful* mindset. If "moving forward" sounds vague, it's because the range of situations to which the gameful mindset applies is simply that vast. Many people have used the SuperBetter method, like McGonigal did, to move forward—to recover or heal—after an injury or illness. Others have used it to move forward toward a goal, such as running a marathon, finding meaningful employment, and being a better parent. McGonigal refers to *post-ecstatic growth*, first identified by Ann Marie Roepke, which occurs when a person chooses to undertake a difficult challenge. This stands in contrast to post-traumatic stress, which occurs when the stress-inducing trauma comes unbidden. That the SuperBetter method is useful in both situations highlights its flexibility.

The fact that much of McGonigal's research is grounded in the world of video games should not dissuade non-gamers from reading this book and considering how the SuperBetter method might be of use. In fact, readers—gamers and non-gamers alike—will likely see games in a new light after encountering some of the studies McGonigal cites. For instance, she points to a study that demonstrates a single ten-minute session playing *Tetris*, the classic video game in which players manipulate falling blocks to form puzzle-like connections, is very effective in helping people recover from PTSD, specifically in that it seems to stop sufferers from reliving traumatic events in the form of flashbacks. What may have once seemed a mindless distraction and waste of time, in light of this study, is now a powerful therapeutic tool.

So what is the SuperBetter method, and how can one put it to use? McGonigal presents the method in the form of "seven rules to live by" (p. 22):

**1. Challenge yourself.** McGonigal refers to the *challenge versus threat* mindset: one person may view a difficult situation as an exciting challenge, while another may view the same as a dangerous threat. Of course, these choices are both possible within the individual. Opting to see challenges rather than threats is at the core of the SuperBetter method. McGonigal writes that "we almost never feel hopeless when we play [games]" (p. 145), which explains how adopting a challenge mindset, and choosing to be gameful can have such a positive impact on, for instance, people suffering from cancer.

**2. Collect and activate power-ups.** Power-ups are “good things that reliably make you feel happier, healthier, or stronger” (p. 173). They are, practices or activities that make a person stronger, that give a person more power to move forward. In video games, a classic power-up would be the red and white Super Mushrooms that turn Mario into a giant and thus more powerful and effective at dealing with the challenges in his world. In McGonigal’s system, power-ups are things we can do in the real world to give ourselves a boost, to make ourselves feel better so that we may continue moving toward our goals. Some of the many examples she cites include drinking a glass of water, viewing online videos of baby animals, and naming things to look forward to in the coming week. She points out that these power-ups can be done anywhere and at no cost.

**3. Find and battle the bad guys.** Bad guys are “anything that blocks your progress or causes you anxiety, pain, or distress” (p. 198). Imagine a video game without bad guys. It wouldn’t be much of a game. In the real world, bad guys are those elements that make life difficult. Would we lose interest in a game that lacked bad guys? Would we prefer to play golf on a course with no trees, water or sand traps? Would we choose a golf course on which we could simply tap the ball into a funnel-shaped green and watch it roll, invariably, into the hole at the bottom? No. Golfers want the challenge. All game players want the challenge. We need the bad guys to make the game interesting—to make it a game.

Real life is just the same. Living gamefully simply means that we view the bad guys from a challenge rather than threat mindset. These are elements that make our game of life worth playing. McGonigal points out that there can be mental, emotional, physical and social bad guys. She offers, as an example of a bad guy, “the Too-Headed Monster,” a habit of thought, such as “I’m too tired to...” or “I’m too stupid to....” This “is usually an excuse to talk yourself out of doing something you really want or need to do” (p. 203). McGonigal points out that giving bad guys a name, as in the example above, can help the process of identifying and confronting them.

**4. Seek out and complete quests.** For McGonigal, quests are “simple, daily actions that help you reach your bigger goals” (p. 224). In this section of the book, she refers to *committed action*, “taking small steps each day in accordance with your goals and values, even when it is difficult for you” (p. 227). She goes on to explain that

research into the SuperBetter method indicates that completing just one quest a day has a positive impact on people—and it’s easy to see why: by definition, if a person undertakes a quest, she must have a bigger goal. And if this person completes one quest during the day, she has made progress toward that goal; the day hasn’t been wasted. McGonigal explains how willpower is like a muscle in that it becomes stronger through use. So what might seem like a small quest can be the beginning of becoming stronger.

McGonigal includes guidelines on designing good quests; one of the most instructive highlights the value of experiencing success. She explains that completing quests give us the chance to be successful, and “that frequency of success matters more than the size of success” (p. 231). Putting the pieces together, we see that success feels good—no matter the size of the task—and that we become stronger and more committed the more we exercise our will power. This creates an “upward spiral” that leads to greater feelings of hope, optimism and self-efficacy.

**5. Recruit your allies.** Allies are “friends and family members who will help you along the way” (p. 251). In the context of SuperBetter, McGonigal explains that an ally is someone who is 1) familiar with your challenge, as well as your 2) bad guys and preferred power-ups. An ally is also available for 3) periodic check-ins (p. 262). The existence of this simple three-part structure makes it easier to find support inside the SuperBetter world. In this section, McGonigal, as she does throughout the book, employs vignettes to demonstrate her points. To illustrate the power of having allies, she describes a man who’d had a bicycle accident. Typically unwilling to ask for help, he used the SuperBetter method and received support and encouragement from many people. According to this man, SuperBetter helped him recover from his injury in spite of his reluctance to call on others for assistance. McGonigal cites compelling research about the benefits of receiving support from an ally—a friend or family member: reduced stress levels, a stronger immune system, and a more efficient cardiovascular system (p. 251). And these are things that occur naturally through the simple presence of allies on one’s life. McGonigal presents numerous ways allies can support one another in more conscious and deliberate ways.

**6. Adopt a secret identity.** McGonigal refers to this component of her system as “the most playful of all the rules for gameful living” (p. 275). This practice of becoming a heroic alternate persona will be very familiar to video game players, who are accustomed to projecting themselves into other worlds by means of an on-screen avatar. Furthermore, gamers and non-gamers alike will be familiar with fictional characters like Batman, Superman or Spider-Man, who are, respectively, the superhero versions of Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent and Peter Parker, all seemingly ordinary people.

McGonigal explains that choosing a secret identity serves as a means of embodying one’s *signature character strengths*, positive qualities that are central to an individual’s being. These strengths can include creativity, bravery, honesty and humor. She includes many examples of secret identities from people who are using the SuperBetter method in their lives. She writes of a man who has chosen “Dunky Dory” as his identity and includes his explanation of the significance and power of this name: “Dunky, because my real name is Duncan. Dory, after Dory from *Finding Nemo*—I love this character because that fish takes everything in stride, doesn’t worry about any personal shortcomings, ‘just keeps swimming’” (p. 276).

McGonigal goes on to explain that creating a secret identity, one that aligns with a person’s goals and highlights his signature character strengths, allows him to tell a heroic story about himself. One this point, she quotes Steve Maraboli, a behavioral scientist: “If you are not the hero of your own story, then you’re missing the whole point of your humanity” (p. 278).

**7. Go for an epic win.** An epic win is “an awe-inspiring outcome that helps you be more motivated and less afraid of failure” (p. 306). McGonigal encourages readers to select goals that are “more like *game* goals than ordinary self-improvement goals” (p. 306), and she provides basic guidelines on how to accomplish this. She writes that goals for epic wins should be realistic, challenging energizing and forgiving. The first three components are fairly straightforward, but the last—*forgiving*—may not be. McGonigal explains that if one does not reach a goal for an epic win on the first attempt, “you’ll learn strategies and ideas for doing better on your next attempt or on your next goal” (p. 307). This calls to mind images and feelings of losing a game—a video game or a game of cards, which may include, more than anything else,

excitement, energy and motivation to try again. And this is the point: when playing games, people tend to be optimistic, and by bringing a gameful mindset to real-life issues, optimism can remain strong, even when winning seems elusive.

These are the seven rules of living gamefully. To see them in action, consider the origin of the rules: McGonigal's concussion and subsequent recovery. After struggling in the aftermath of her injury and experiencing suicidal ideation, McGonigal made a choice, which turned out to be the beginning of SuperBetter. She assumed a superhero identity, "Jane the Concussion Slayer," modeled on the TV character Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and she contacted her sister for help. Here we see the elements of the SuperBetter method coming together: McGonigal created a secret identity and reached out to an ally, who, eager to support her sister, gave her a quest: "I want you to spend some time looking out the window, and tomorrow, tell me if you saw anything interesting. Try to find at least one interesting thing to tell me about" (p. 229). McGonigal would later realize that finding the strength to look out the window, spotting something of interest and reporting this—thereby fulfilling a promise—back to her sister was motivating and gave her greater strength to take on more challenging quests and eventually epic wins.

One of the strengths the book is the way McGonigal supports her assertions. She does this by drawing on a great deal of research. Some terms will likely be familiar to readers, such as *flow*, as identified by Csikszentmihalyi, and *self-efficacy*, as elucidated by Bandura. Other research relates specifically to playing games, such as the study on the impact of playing *Tetris* on PTSD. More specific to SuperBetter are the numerous vignettes from people using the SuperBetter method in all areas of life, including health, relationships and career, among many others, throughout the book. Moreover, the SuperBetter method was the subject of studies conducted at the University of Pennsylvania and Ohio State University. All of this support combines compellingly to provide a foundation for McGonigal's approach. Readers will encounter the phrase "why it works" numerous times throughout the book, and each time, it's employed to explain why a simple tip such as looking at a picture of a baby animal makes us feel better or how looking through a window—either into or out of a building—promotes a positive experience of curiosity.

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For those wishing to put the full SuperBetter method to use, the book will serve as a complete guide. And those curious readers who would simply like to know more will almost certainly pick up some useful tips. I read it primarily through the lens of a language educator and encountered numerous concepts, techniques and research findings that have been useful in my teaching practice.