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Being tough in a mental world

How to build a better you

'Mental toughness' is the quality that enables us to overcome and excel in difficult personal and professional situations. Performance and positive psychologist Jonathan Chan explains how tweaking the way we think and behave can enhance it.

To sustain personal and professional excellence, you need the ability to harness personal assets such as your strengths, self-belief and proactivity.

You must also be able to draw readily on your physical and mental reserves.

Demanding circumstances in which this will be required may include being faced with the stress of a 'critical moment', needing to bounce back from adversity, making and following through with tough decisions, and enduring lengthy physical or mental challenges.

One attribute that consolidates your winning capability is your level of 'mental toughness', which can be described as a reservoir of critical personal assets that enables individuals to maintain excellence and contributes to fortifying their 'psychological armour'.

It is the mental mettle that not only withstands "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"¹, but also provides a psychological safeguard assuring us that we are capable and ready to "take arms against a sea of troubles"².

The scientific exploration of performance domains – such as elite sport, the military, healthcare, emergency services and the corporate boardroom – has allowed us to identify the psychological success factors,

which enable us to sustain personal and professional high performance.

Research in performance psychology, such as that by Dr Daniel Gucciardi,³ identifies the indicators that shine brightest in those who perform to their highest level of physical and mental capacity:

- **Self-belief** – the certainty and confidence in our personal capability to achieve success.
- **Buoyancy** – the ability to effectively manage the ups and downs of everyday life.
- **Optimism** – the tendency to expect positive events in the future, and attribute positive causes and outcomes to different personal events.
- **A success mindset** – the desire to achieve success and the ability to act on this motive.
- **Attention regulation** – the ability to focus on what is relevant while ignoring irrelevant information.
- **Emotional regulation** – an awareness of, and ability to use, emotionally relevant processes to drive optimal performance.
- **Context knowledge** – an awareness and understanding of the performance context, and how to apply this knowledge in achieving success.
- **Resilience** – the ability to bounce back and adjust from setbacks and adversity.

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And the great thing with these indicators is that each attribute can be built up in much the same way as a muscle.

While personalised strength-based coaching or working with a performance psychologist can help build the links, density and flex of your psychological armour, there are a couple of general strategies you can use to begin fortifying your mental toughness:

1. Build a growth mindset

Mentally tough people tend to believe that their capabilities can be strengthened through mindful persistence and strategic hard work.

On the flipside, people who aren't as mentally tough are more likely to adopt a fixed mindset – they often believe that qualities such as their intelligence or abilities are predetermined and cannot be changed much, and that their efforts are not meaningful.

Building a growth mindset requires a mental shift towards accepting and pursuing lifelong learning. Firstly, monitor whether your mental 'chatter' is helpful. If what's going on in your head isn't helpful, practise reframing your thoughts.

By this, I don't recommend using 'quick-fix' affirmation that lacks authenticity. This is like putting a Band-Aid on a broken leg.

Practise adopting genuine hope-oriented thinking that aims to minimise mental distress yet acknowledges realities, while reinforcing your capabilities. It could be as simple as adding one word to the unhelpful mental chatter to tweak your interpretation of a situation.

For example, if you catch yourself thinking "I can't do this", try adding the word "yet" to the end of that sentence to alter your perception of the circumstances.

"I can't do this" maximises permanency, while the mere inclusion of "yet" dilutes the inability to the present and temporary moment. Also, during this reframing process, try integrating realistic action-planning steps linked with what you are capable of accomplishing.

For example: "I can't do this yet because this is new for me. However, by scheduling time to learn more about the topic and by seeking feedback from experts, I will be able to build greater capacity to deal with this challenge."

This type of reframing not only alters how you perceive and interpret roadblocks, but also legitimises your capability to deal with existing and future challenges.

Alternatively, try minimising the fusion you have with unhelpful or critical thoughts by 'stepping back' from your mental chatter and not getting caught up with it.

Try 'distancing' yourself from your inner critic by purposefully replaying that unhelpful

thought with the phrase "I'm having the thought that ..." beforehand.

Try imagining your mental chatter as words on a karaoke screen and watch that bouncing ball move from word to word. Your unhelpful thoughts might now seem trivial.

There are many other defusion strategies you can try. Ultimately, now that you see these thoughts differently, you are no longer 'fighting' with these thoughts and have more mental energy to direct towards what needs to be done. That is, taking that next step forward!

Taking the time to engage in reflective practice supports a mindset for growth. There are several approaches for generating your own feedback to fuel personal success.

For example, after completing a task or challenge, review what went well to foster an increased likelihood of repeating successful behaviours. When faced with either favourable or undesirable outcomes, try to identify what might be improved.

Also consider what you have learned from your experience, and how that knowledge may be usefully applied in other circumstances. Finally, seek feedback from others if appropriate.

2. Spot strengths and acknowledge your capability

Mentally tough people actively identify their strengths and capabilities, and leverage these areas of excellence to build momentum and fuel success.

They also recognise and actively appreciate their personal accomplishments and take time to spotlight how and what they did to specifically contribute to their success.

For example, they may acknowledge the consistency of their effort, their persistence, or a critical learning moment that enabled them to develop the skills and know-how for rising to a challenge.

Amid all this positivity, don't turn a blind eye to skills that may require further development. Weaknesses should be actively addressed, but remember that when a weakness becomes the centre of your attention, it draws heavily on your physical and mental reserves, and fuels pessimism. You soon become blind to your capabilities. In turn, this makes problems seem bigger and minimises your solution-focused thinking.

Nonetheless, sometimes you have to zero in on a problem so that you know how to adequately address it. Make sure you consider the cost and the benefits of looking at a problem through a microscope. The last thing you want is to be paralysed by analysis, indecision and not having the time to identify a solution or take action.

Identifying your capabilities reinforces your competence. Take a moment to revisit your career timeline or even your CV. Consider your accomplishments and how you achieved them. Identify the specific skills or personal attributes that you believe contributed to each accomplishment. By reminding yourself what you are capable of, you reinforce your belief in your abilities.

Finally, mentally tough people have a greater tendency to think about what they can do in comparison to what they can't do. This ranges from situational instances, such as facing an immediate challenge and actively identifying what's within their control and what they can influence, to envisioning possibilities such as when brainstorming and painting a picture of 'their best future self' and the pathways for moving toward this future ideal.

Conclusion

The secret to building mental toughness is to get started and be proactive rather than reactive. Consistently take action, and actively learn from your experiences, regardless of outcome.

Audit your capabilities and strengths, and leverage your personal assets for enhancing your personal and professional effectiveness. Collaborate with expert coaches and/or performance psychologists to establish relevant and challenging action-learning opportunities in which your capabilities and mental resolve are appropriately stretched so you can create more room for growth.

However, remember that balance is critical as there is a potential dark side to mental toughness. Just as an injured athlete pushing boundaries can cause lifelong problems, trying too hard for short-term toughness can lead to long-term brittleness.

Managing this balance requires perspective and the capacity to refuel your physical and mental bank account. Make sizeable (that is, high quality) and frequent deposits in your account, because when the time comes that you are under siege, you will have the reserves to persevere not only through the battle, but also through the war.

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Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3 scene 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ Dr Daniel Gucciardi is an internationally renowned authority on mental toughness. He has personally shared his scientific psychological profiling and developmental expertise with the Assure Programs organisational development team.