



From marshmallows to mental toughness

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A preschool child walks into a room and sits at a table. Placed on the table is a single marshmallow on a plate. An adult tells the child that they can eat the marshmallow right now if they want – but if they wait a while then they will be brought more marshmallows and they can eat all of them. The adult then leaves the child in the room alone with the solitary sweet. BY TONY WILSON



If you believe the research, what happens next will determine this child's success in school, health, relationships and financial wealth for the rest of their life.⁽⁵⁾

DECIDING FACTOR

Of all the elements of athleticism, nothing separates competitors more than mental toughness. The road to athletic success is littered with promising potential, outstanding talent and childhood prodigies who were left by the wayside, having achieved a mere fraction of what they were capable of.

A few years ago some researchers set out to define mental toughness. They confirmed what you and I already know, giving the term concreteness through the following traits of mentally tough athletes. These traits are generally summarised into three areas.^(3,4)

1. **Self-belief,**
2. **The ability to stay fully focused despite pressure, pain, failure and temptation, and**
3. **Thriving on pressure.**

Or put even more simply: *the ability to 'stick with it' and come out on top, regardless of what happens.*

STICK WITH IT

Do I eat the chocolate at 3pm when I'm feeling flat or am I committed to losing weight? Do I get home in time to watch my favourite TV show or do I do the final set on my training program? Do I take the one marshmallow right now or do I control the urge and get more marshmallows?

Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow experiments gave us an insight into the importance of mental toughness, or what Mischel and many psychologists term 'self-regulation'.⁽⁵⁾

After tracking the 'marshmallow kids' for almost 30 years after the initial experiment, it was clear that children who gave in to the immediate temptation performed worse as adults in most areas of their lives. Those children who could hold out for the bigger reward (more marshmallows) were more successful in school, relationships, wealth, health and general life satisfaction.⁽⁶⁾

HARDEN UP

It's all well and good to understand what mental toughness is and the enormous effect it has on our ability to succeed, but how do we develop it?

Dr Carol Dweck, a Stanford University professor and leader in mindset research, explains two different ways that people approach challenge, adversity and success. And they directly influence the extent to which people will 'stick with it'.

The first is what she calls 'fixed mindset'. This is the belief that we have a fixed, predetermined set of abilities such as intelligence, strength, speed or even our ability to save money.

On the other hand, Dr Dweck proposes that some people have a 'growth mindset'. And these people believe that we can get smarter, faster, stronger and learn to save more if we just practice and apply ourselves.⁽¹⁾

As straightforward as this sounds, there appear to be some seemingly innocuous nuances that can make or break your ability to develop mental toughness or help others develop their own.

Let's take a look at some of these nuances and break down what some of the previously mentioned definitions and traits actually mean when we apply some of the latest research.

“OF ALL THE ELEMENTS OF ATHLETICISM, NOTHING SEPARATES COMPETITORS MORE THAN MENTAL TOUGHNESS.”



“TO STAY FOCUSED WE NEED GOALS THAT INTRINSICALLY MOTIVATE US.”

SELF-BELIEF

This area is terribly misunderstood. Mental toughness isn't reflected in your belief that your abilities are exceptional. In fact, this mindset might actually work against you when you are confronted with the biggest challenges.^(1,2)

Applying Dr Dweck's research, there are two types of 'belief'. There is a fixed belief: "I am smarter/stronger/faster than other people." Or there is a growth belief: "I can get better if I practice and put in the effort."

In her experiments Dr Dweck has shown time and time again that those people who think they have superior ability quickly give up when they face a challenge that is bigger than that ability. Their fixed mindset essentially says "this challenge is above my ability". But the people who have a growth mindset are more likely to keep trying after failure. They essentially say, "I might have failed this time, but I will get closer if I keep trying."

In this way, mentally tough people don't necessarily think they will be good at something straight away. On the contrary, they might think they will be terrible at their first go, but they believe they will get better if they apply themselves.^(1,2)

So self-belief focused on ability can be dangerous, whereas self-belief based on your ability to adapt, learn and work hard is the greatest belief you can have.

STAYING FOCUSED

There is a big difference between goals that keep us focused and those that lose their motivational power over time. To stay focused we need goals that intrinsically motivate us.

The latest findings show that 'development' goals trump 'performance' goals in motivating us over the long term and pushing us to deal with hardship.^(1,2)

Performance goals involve set times, outcomes or rankings, such as: "I want to run 10km in 45 minutes." Whereas development goals point at mastery and improvement, such as: "I want to run 10km faster next month than this month."

These development goals give shorter-term focus and also hint at small improvements through hard work.

The way we explain goal achievement is also important. Saying "I achieved the goal because I am smart" is not nearly as effective as saying, "I achieved the goal because I worked hard." Again, the first hints that your ability is fixed, whereas the latter shows that your ability is boundless and can be extended through hard work. So the next time you face a seemingly insurmountable challenge, you'll be inspired to work through it.

THRIVING ON PRESSURE

Mentally tough people don't just thrive on pressure and discomfort. They love it.^(3,4)

But they don't love it because they want to show how good they are or simply beat a competitor – this would play right into the hands of the fixed mindset problem. The research shows that people who fail in this situation often have a fear of trying again.^(1,2)

Mentally tough people love the challenge because they know they will develop from it. The pain, pressure, emotion and discomfort of it all are signs that their abilities need to adapt; they need to get better.^(1,2)

And in stretching themselves, they are stretching their ability.

GIVE UP OR TOUGH IT OUT?

Having worked with elite athletes for a good portion of my career, my own observation has been that the most talented athletes rarely end up being the star performers. The people who are most successful are those who didn't quite have the natural ability, but learnt early on that the harder they worked, the closer they got to the top. They thrived under pressure and stuck with it. By contrast, the athletes with the greatest talent in the world often crumbled the minute they realised their natural ability wasn't enough to overcome the odds.

It's not as simple as blocking out the pain or telling yourself to harden up. But the path to building mental toughness is revealed through the internal language we use and our explanation of why we will be successful.

To build mental toughness, we need to believe we will get better the more effort we put in, focus on continual development instead of outcomes, and embrace pain, pressure and challenge as a means to make this happen. **UFM**

References

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