

What is Mental Toughness and how to Develop It?

David Yukelson, Ph.D., Coordinator of Sport Psychology Services
Morgan Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes, Penn State University

What is Mental Toughness? Quotes from Penn State Student-Athletes:

“Mental toughness is doing whatever is necessary to get the job done including handling the demands of a tough workout, withstanding pain, or touching an opponent out at the end of a race.”

– *Jennifer Eberst, Women’s Swimming & Diving*

"You can't be a good swimmer without being mentally tough. You wouldn't make it through a single workout if you weren't. Swimmers must have the mental ability to let go of what their body feels and focus on the race, their stroke, or anything else that helps them finish the race."

– *Sally Anderson, Women's Swimming & Diving*

"Mental toughness is not letting anyone break you." – *Jimi Mitchell, Football*

“Mental toughness is not being affected by anything but what’s going on in the game or competition no matter what coaches, other players, or refs are doing. It’s being able to block out what’s not important.”

– *Jenny Brenden, Women’s Basketball*

Definition: Mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to:

- Generally cope better than your opponents with the many demands (e.g., competition, training, lifestyle) that are placed on you as a performer
- Specifically, to be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, resilient, and in control under pressure (Jones et al, 2002)

Key psychological characteristics associated with mentally tough elite athletes Jones et al (2002):

- Self-Belief:
 - Having an *unshakable belief* in your ability to achieve competition goals
 - Unique qualities that make you better than your opponents.
- Motivation:
 - Having an *insatiable desire* and *internalized motivation to succeed* (you really got to want it)
 - Ability to bounce back from performance setbacks with increased determination to succeed.
- Focus:
 - Remain *fully focused on the task at hand* in the face of competition-specific distractions
 - Able to switch focus on and off as required
 - Not being adversely affected by others performance or your own internal distractions (worry, negative mind chatter)
- Composure/Handling Pressure:
 - Able to regain psychological control following unexpected events or distractions
 - *Thriving on the pressure* of competition (embracing pressure, stepping into the moment)
 - Accept that anxiety is inevitable in competition and know you can cope with it

Key component of mental toughness is learning how to condition your mind to think confidently and be able to overcome frustration/self-critical negativity (reframe self-talk into what it is you want to occur)

- Yukelson Nugget: Don’t allow frustration to undermine your confidence or focus

Importance of Being Positive:

“You can program yourself to be positive. Being Positive is a discipline ... and the more adversity you face, the more positive you have to be. Being positive helps build confidence and self-esteem”

Rick Pitino, University of Louisville Head Basketball Coach

Developing Mental Toughness

1. Starts with the right attitude and state of mind (know what your core confidence is all about):
 - Confidence comes in knowing you are prepared and having an unshakable belief in your abilities to reach intended goals
 - Also linked to mentality of being a “Competitive Warrior”
 - Jerry Lynch (2002): “Confidence is about who puts it on the line, who has the courage to compete like a warrior without fear of failure”
 - Courage to leave it all out on the athletic field, play with heart, determination, and full focus
2. Program your mind for success ahead of time with positive affirmations and expectations
 - Expect the best from yourself; affirm what it is you are going to do to be successful
 - Confident goal oriented statements starting with “I will, I can, I am going to...”
 - Focus on those things you want to occur, rather than things you’re afraid might go wrong
 - Script Success: Visualize yourself performing the way you want (confident, energized, full focus)
3. Routinize Your Behaviors: Develop a systematic pre-performance routine that clicks on desired mental-emotional state of mind (practice, pre-game, competition)
 - Practice (once you walk through the gate, you commit yourself to giving it everything you have the entire practice – this includes making a commitment to listening, learning, executing skills/drills with precision and full focus)
 - Pre-game competition – develop a systematic routine for engineering the environment and getting yourself ready
 - During Competition (once you walk b/w the lines, you are committing yourself to being mentally tough and a great competitor throughout the entire game).
4. Poise and Composure: learn how to let go of mistakes quickly if things do not go the way you want
 - Key part of mental training is about compensating, adjusting, and trusting
 - If plan A does not work, go to plan B or C
 - Use of “Focal Points” are effective to help focus attention back onto task at hand
 - Be persistent and mentally tough, don’t allow frustration to undermine your confidence/focus
5. Take control of Negative Self-Talk: Reframe “stinking thinking” into positive task oriented suggestions
 - Starts with awareness of situations that cause you to get frustrated, rushed, intimidated, lose focus – then reframe the negativity into positive, mentally tough self-suggestions:
 - Basketball: Instead of “I can’t hit that shot if my life depended on it”, let go, reframe it back into something more positive and task oriented “get a good look at the basket, see it, feel it, trust it”
 - Baseball pitcher pressing, “I can’t get my change up working today”, reframe it, step off the rubber, breathe, refocus, visualize the feel of good release point and follow through, say to yourself “this one is going to drop off the shelf”
 - Field Hockey player consumed w/negative thoughts, worried about messing up “This girl is so quick, I can’t shake her”, reframe -“win the tackle, aggressive to the ball, do the simple”
 - Ineffective outside hitter in volleyball – “keep bringing it, aggressive swings, read and react, fly to the ball”
6. Look at failure as a stepping stone for future achievement:
 - Champions approach to overcoming adversity: Play to win as opposed to fear making mistakes
 - He missed 9000 shots, missed 26 game winning shots, lost 300 games - Michael Jordan, NBA 6 time World Champion “*I failed over and over, that is why I succeed*”
 - Focus on the process of competing well, winning will take care of itself
7. Be a difference maker, step up and have a peak performance when it matters the most

Self-Reflective Assignment: Sustaining Self-Belief – Preparing for Future Events:

In the foreseeable future, what things are likely to affect your confidence and self-belief?
What will you do about it?