

# How (and Why) to Develop Your Mental Toughness



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Developing your mental toughness can help you be more emotionally resilient, push you to go further and harder, and build armor to persevere against the bullets that life fires your way. It's not as easy to just "be tougher," though. Here are some tactics to toughen up your mind for life's hard knocks.

## What is Mental Toughness?



"Mental toughness" is keeping strong in the face of adversity. It's the ability to keep your focus and determination despite the difficulties you encounter. Events in our life rarely go the way we'd like them to, but that doesn't mean you have to let it throw you off your game. Mental toughness gives you the tenacity to learn from your mistakes without the devastating blow failure can sometimes deal. This resilience and fortitude also gives you the strength to keep emotions in check when something in your life seems overwhelming and you need to be strong. Essentially, mental toughness is the voice in the back of your head that tells you to keep going, keep pushing, and keep trying, even when the going gets tough. They say "life's tough, get a helmet." These tactics can help you create the helmet you need.



#### **How to Move Past Failure**

Failure is the most important step to reaching success, but it can still feel like it's...

### **Manage Your Expectations**



The best offense is a good defense. One of the biggest ways you can build resilience to the things that come your way is to manage your expectations. If you have poorly managed expectations, you'll run into more surprises, which can make you feel out of control. Lack of control can lower your morale and weaken your mental fortitude. Flexibility and the ability to adapt to situations are key components to laying the groundwork for strong mental resolve. Christine M. Riordan at Forbes explains how a leader with flexibility can stay mentally strong, but the same can be said for anyone:

*Game-ready leaders have the ability to absorb the unexpected and remain supple and non-defensive. They maintain humor even when the situation becomes tough. If something isn't going well or doesn't turn out as expected, they remain flexible in their approach and look for new ways to solve the problem. Just like a quarterback faced with a broken play, a leader may have to decide quickly on a different way to get the ball down the field.*

You should not only roll with the punches, but think about how you can take a swing. **You cannot control everything that comes your way, but you are in absolute control of how you react to it.** Take a look at situations from the outside and try to see a different perspective. It's hard to see the true causes of events when your vision is clouded with immediate emotional responses. Wait five minutes to respond to something when you have the time. Or pretend like you're giving advice to yourself when searching for a solution. We tend to immediately overreact to



something, even if we don't completely understand it yet. Comprehend and understand the pieces first, then put things together and react. Doing this over time will help you adjust your expectations to a realistic level.

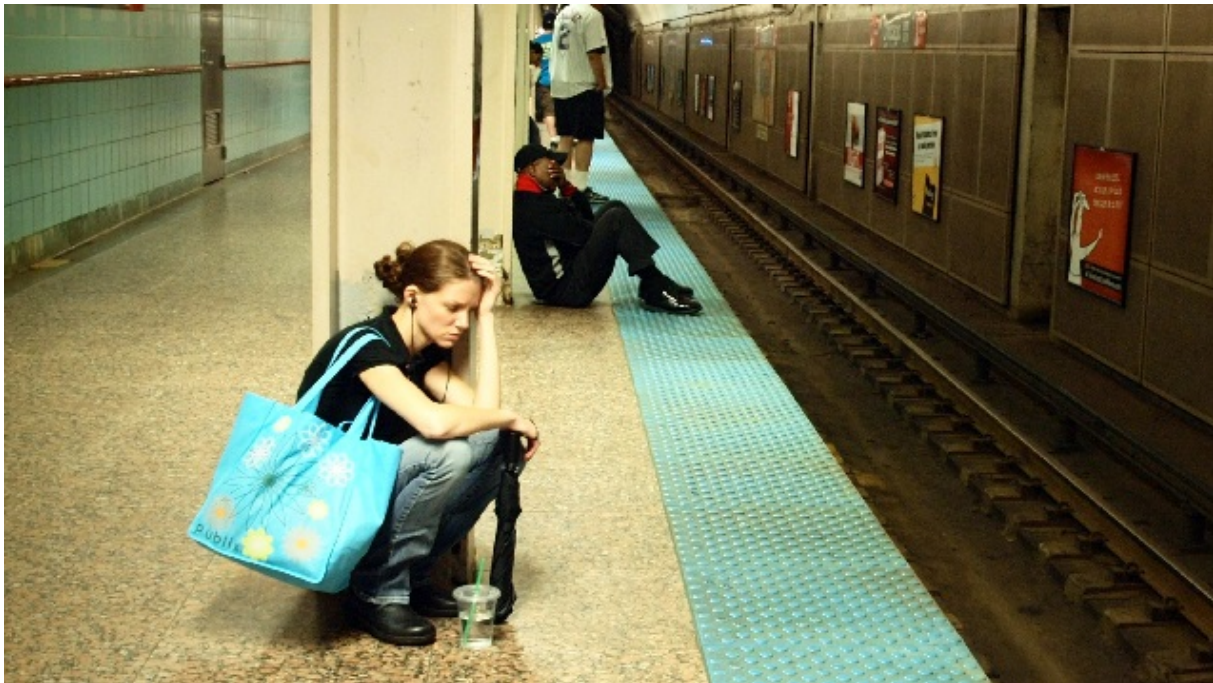


### Recalibrate Your Reality

Wish you were better/smarter/stronger/faster? Sure, hard work helps, but the truth is, your self...

You can also keep realistic expectations by defining them. Surprises may come more often than we like, but you can be better prepared for them by articulating what you specifically think might happen. Getting your hopes up or banking on mere possibilities in a situation puts holes in your armor right from the get-go. When a problem arises, take some time to ask yourself what outcomes you think are truly possible. Do this even before you look for solutions, and write them down if you'd like. **If you can see the possible realities and accept them before you even react to it, you'll be better prepared for whatever comes your way.** Eventually, you'll start to do this automatically and you'll be able to approach situations calmly and with a clear head.

### Prevent Emotions from Getting the Best of You



Being in touch with your emotions is a good thing, but they can also cloud your judgment in the moment. Mentally tough people know how to keep cool in heated situations. Emotions can get the best of us when we're between a rock and a hard

place, but having some emotional resilience can increase your ability to handle heavy situations.

One way to build emotional resilience is by owning what's happening to you instead of running away to seek comfort. The Navy SEALs have a saying: "Get comfortable being uncomfortable." **You can't get stronger if you stay in your comfort zone at all times.** Learning to be comfortable with uncomfortable situations will force you to learn from the situation instead of escape from it. Maria Bogdanos at PsychCentral explains the positive things you can do when you put yourself in those uncomfortable situations:

*Use critical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving techniques on your own so you will trust your instincts more. Resist the urge to blame others. Also resist the urge to expect too much from them. We often give too much credence to "experts" (they need help, too) when each of us knows our own motivations better than anyone else. You are creative and resourceful enough to find ways that work best for how you are wired, so try to go at it alone...*

No one knows you more than you, but when you run from difficult circumstances or uncomfortable situations, you don't even give yourself the chance to prove that you can overcome. It's all about environment. If you want to get better at dealing with heat, then you go to the desert. If you want to get better at dealing with cold, then you go up to the mountains. If you want to get better at dealing with stressful situations, then you go to the stressful situations.



### The Science of Breaking Out of Your Comfort Zone (and Why You Should)

You've seen inspirational quotes that encourage you to get out and do something...

Sticking through tough times can give you the confidence you need to keep your composure when stuff hits the fan. It's okay to be in touch with emotions, but having some control over them is beneficial. Instead of emitting an emotional response that stems from your discomfort and fear of the situation, you'll be capable of checking emotions at the door and taking care of business in a calm and efficient way.

## Find Your Source of Motivation



Even if you maintain realistic expectations, and you're capable of keeping emotions in check, you still need some motivation from inside of you to keep on keepin' on. Whether you're tackling a problem, handling a difficult life event, or looking for a way to push yourself harder during your next workout, you need to stay motivated. So where do you find motivation? The simple answer is that you have to ask yourself, "why?"

- Why do I need to solve this problem?
- Why do I need to get through this?
- Why do I need to get stronger, faster, healthier?

Asking yourself these types of questions helps identify the true reason you need or want to accomplish something. Answers like "because I have to" don't help you. When something difficult comes your way in life, you don't always have a choice on whether you want to get through it or not, but **there is always a better reason than "I have to."** Have a specific goal in mind, and look at the possible reactions to your actions. Think of something or someone that depends on you, and imagine you're a soldier with a sense of duty to yourself and others. Your reasons to act might be something like:

- Because I want to be better at what I do.
- Because this person needs me.
- Because I want to live longer / look a certain way / feel a certain way.

When you know why you need to get through something it makes it easier to suck it up and carry on, but you also need the willpower to break through the barriers you might come across. Building up willpower takes time, but you can do so by developing simple, unrelated habits. For example, if you're bad at flossing, push yourself to floss when you shower. You'll forget some days, and other days you might lazily avoid it, but if you keep at it, eventually you'll maintain your simple habit without thinking about it.

Little boosts in willpower increase your confidence, and when you accomplish little things, you begin to see that you really do have control of yourself. You might think of willpower as a finite resource, but you have as much willpower as you believe you have. Challenge yourself and you'll find that motivation is easy to come by when you actually believe you're capable of overcoming things.



### Your Willpower Is Only a Finite Resource if You Believe It Is

We've often noted that willpower is a finite resource, but it seems that's only the case...

## Learn to Delay Gratification and Let Things Go

We've talked a lot about failure and how it can be beneficial for you, but learning to take failure in stride is an important factor of being mentally strong. Dr. Sean Richardson spoke about failure and its relation to mental toughness in a November, 2011 TEDx talk. In the talk, Richardson explains that the development of mental toughness can stem from looking at failure as a delay of gratification:

*...accepting failure, being okay with not getting what you want **right now**, is one of the best, best success strategies, but it takes mental toughness...*

Being capable of delaying your own gratification—or saying no to easy, instant gratification—is really what being mentally tough is all about. Great things are never easy to do, and if you can make yourself work hard and wait patiently, you will understand what it means to have mental toughness. You need to let go of mistakes quickly if things don't go your way, and understand the time and patience it takes to accomplish things. Mental toughness is as much about telling yourself no, as it is about telling yourself that you can persevere.



Some things aren't always worth your time, though. You are a capable person, and you can get through whatever comes your way, but you can't impact every single thing out there. **You have to accept that you can only control so much.** Jeff Haden at Inc. suggests putting aside things you can't control to save energy for the things you can:

*Mental strength is like muscle strength—no one has an unlimited supply. So why waste your power on things you can't control? For some people, it's politics. For others, it's family. For others, it's global warming. Whatever it is, you care, and you want others to care. Fine. Do what you can do: Vote. Lend a listening ear. Recycle, and reduce your carbon footprint. Do what you can do. Be your own change—but don't try to make everyone else change.*

Remember, mental toughness is about building the strength and resilience to do the things you need to do and the things you want to do. Don't make it harder on yourself by trying to keep strong for something that doesn't benefit you or your goal. Some things you just have to completely let go.

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Developing mental toughness is a process and it's not something you can conjure overnight. It takes a lot of patience and a conscious effort to become more resilient. Some things are bigger than all of us, but mental toughness can be your armor that glances the smaller blows away. If you have reasonable expectations, control over your emotions, strong motivation, and the patience to see things all the way through, you won't ever sweat the small stuff and you'll be better equipped to handle the big things in your life.

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