

## What Is Mental Toughness?

By Richard Ferguson PhD/Running Journal/June 2009

I often hear runners talking about mental toughness and the need to become more mentally tough. Coaches often stress mental toughness and how their athletes need to become more mentally tough. However, very few people can actually define what mental toughness is and very few coaches can tell their athletes just how they can improve their mental toughness.

Mental toughness is hard to define and it does mean different things to different people. I like to think of mental toughness as the ability to persevere in the face of challenge and disappointment. It is about being able to perform to your potential in the face of both pressure from others and the pressure from yourself. It's about controlling your emotions so your level of emotional arousal is where it needs to be to perform your best. With this being said, how can you get tougher mentally in your running?

Mental toughness incorporates so many aspects that there are many points for runners to work to improve upon. While all aspects of mental toughness can't be covered in a short article, I will try to address those aspects that I consider to be of critical importance for optimal running performance. Let's begin by addressing the issue of learning from failure. Many races will not go as you would like. Bad races and poor performances will occur and to think otherwise is simply unrealistic. Mental toughness really means getting through the tough times. Remember that every failure or setback is an opportunity to learn and improve. If you can openly look at setbacks and learn from them you will be better able to handle the disappointment of not running as you would like, plus you will be less likely to make the same mistake twice. Fearing failure only creates anxiety and lowers motivation. Don't fear failure; just be sure you learn from it. Dealing with adversity can only make you a more mentally tough runner.

The way you think can have a great impact on the way you feel physically. Negative thinking will bring anxiety and feelings of doubt and inferiority. A key strategy to improve mental toughness is to begin to recognize negative thinking patterns and then replace these negative thinking patterns with positive, realistic thoughts. Try to become aware of situations when you think negatively, like warming up for a race or thinking about a race as you try to fall asleep. If you can identify specific times that you think negatively you can then be ready to dispute the negative thoughts and replace them with positive thoughts. If you recognize any thought where you say, "can't" to yourself, immediately replace the thought with an "I can!" If you learn to constantly practice positive, self-enhancing thinking you will be less anxious and have more energy. Negative thinking is just a habit. Make positive thinking a habit and then even in the tough times you will still think positively! Practice positive thinking so it becomes an automatic habit. Positive thoughts help you develop positive energy.

Thinking about you too much can undermine mental toughness as well. Anytime you begin to over analyze how you feel physically and emotionally, anxiety tends to increase. Try to put all of your concentration into the task at hand, that being running. Even focusing on one aspect of your running, like your foot strike or a repeated word like "smooth," can keep your concentration narrowed in on what you're doing and not on how you feel. I recently read that Paula Radcliff actually counts during marathons to keep her focus.

Another key to mental toughness is thinking in the present. If you're running a race and thinking about what happened in the last mile or how you might feel on that big hill at mile 18, then you aren't thinking in the present. In other words, learn to concentrate on the now. During competition thinking about the past often leads to frustration and self-pity, while thinking about the future can result in debilitating anxiety.

The images you form from your thoughts also play a major part in mental toughness. Negative images usually lead to negative emotions. See yourself failing or being embarrassed and you become anxious, fearful and/or depressed. To be mentally tough you need to work on producing positive images in which you see yourself running strong, having

success, coming back in a race and just plain having a wonderful time. Mentally tough runners use positive images to help them develop positive emotions. Work on erasing those negative images and replace them with positive ones.

Mental toughness also means being dedicated to what you do. Without being dedicated to your running you probably won't train as hard as you can and you won't put forth the effort to reach your running potential. If you're really dedicated to what you do then you will tend not to give up when times get tough, like late in a race. When you're truly dedicated you have too much personally invested to give anything less than 100 percent effort! Approach your running with gusto and excitement with a mindset that guarantees that no matter what, you will give your absolute best effort on any given day.

Mental toughness is just like physical fitness -- it must be developed. No one is born mentally tough or not mentally tough. Mental toughness develops through experiences. Some people seem to develop it quickly, while others develop faulty thinking habits that undermine their mental toughness. While not totally inclusive, if you work on the points presented in this article daily in a diligent manner, your mental toughness will improve. Invest a few minutes of your time every day in developing mental toughness and you may find that in time your mental skills have become a strong, not weak, point in your running.