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Staying in the Fight

Former SEAL Mark Divine shares the secrets of true mental toughness.

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What separates survivors from quitters in extreme challenges? When you look at the tactics used by successful SEALs, SEALFIT graduates, ultra-endurance athletes and survivors of natural disasters, they are surprisingly similar.

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In the case of BUD/s selection or SEALFIT Kokoro Camp, quitting means you get a blanket and a cup of coffee. However, you must then deal with the long-term pain of regret. In the event of a firefight, accident or natural disaster, the stakes are much higher: life or death. Quitting is simply not an option.

So how can you learn to treat every worthy obstacle with the same hair-on-fire intensity as the life-and-death ones? The answer to this question is the Holy Grail of mental-toughness research. How can we train ourselves to make both minor and serious decisions with clarity and strength during our weakest moments? A single bad decision, made in a moment of weakness, can have disastrous consequences.

What follows are some tactics we teach at SEALFIT to help stay motivated, clear-headed and in control of our decisions so we can stay in the fight when it gets really shitty.



A former SEAL, Mark Divine is an expert on mental toughness.

Never Give Up on Yourself: Quitting Is Simply Not an Option

Pain is temporary; quitting is forever.

Whether it's the pain of seeing a long, complex project through to fruition or the pain of getting through 50-plus hours of hardcore physical training, simply removing the quit option is the first step to ensuring victory.

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Ultra runner and SEALFIT coach Scott Morgan encourages us to endure through our darkest moments and hold off on making serious decisions at night, when things can be at their most difficult in a race. Wait until the warming rays of sunlight peek above the horizon. Never giving up means you permanently remove "quit" from your vocabulary and do what is necessary (morally speaking) to survive (or accomplish a really difficult task).

Examples of those who did what was necessary to get the job done include the following:

- Marcus Luttrell, a SEAL, was the lone survivor of the incident that claimed the lives of his teammates, including Lt. Michael Murphy, for whom the Hero WOD Murph is named. Luttrell fought his way out of what most would consider a no-win situation, outnumbered and outgunned 100 to one. He beat the odds through sheer tenacity and mental toughness and by not ever quitting.
- In 2003, Aron Ralston sawed his arm off to survive after he got it trapped beneath a boulder in a remote Utah Canyon. Would you?
- The Apollo 13 crew never gave up, even when everyone was gearing up to receive the news that the moon mission was lost in space. Through intense focus, creativity and never giving up in the bleakest of circumstances, the astronauts were able to navigate their tin can of a spaceship back to Earth. Amazing!



Toughness is an attitude. Get yours right.

On the other end of the spectrum is a peer of mine at Officer Candidate School named Bush. He was as gung-ho a SEAL candidate as any, and he could “out-PT” me on any day. To my amazement, Bush quit during our very first PT of BUD/s! I could not believe my eyes.

“I just can’t do it,” he said.

“What do you mean? We have been doing this every day for the last four months!”

Still he quit. He left a back door open, which he literally ran through at the first sign of serious hardship.

You must be like Luttrell, Ralston and the Apollo 13 crew, not like Bush. Close all doors to quitting. Remove it as an option. Never give up until you succeed—or die trying.

20x Factor: You Are Capable of 20 Times More Than You Think

During Hell Week I heard that line from an instructor. It stuck, and sure enough, by Thursday of Hell Week I was

actually getting stronger and having fun. Most of my class had quit. What was going on? Once the mind accepted the new circumstances, it adapted and started to work with them. I found myself enjoying the humor of the crazy instructor staff, and I was astounded how my body, despite 100 hours of no sleep and non-stop training, was getting stronger (though I admit there were moments of delirium as my mind struggled to deal with the lack of sleep).

Bottom line, this is the same experience ultra-endurance athletes have: a breakdown, then a building back up as the body and mind adapt to the new, harsh reality of the circumstances. Through such experiences, you learn that you are truly capable of at least 20 times more than you previously thought. You undergo a psychological and physiological paradigm shift.

After this experience, anything less than Hell Week looked easy. Our SEALFIT Kokoro Camp is built upon this same concept. Don’t accept your self-imposed limitations. Dare to discover what you can truly accomplish.

During a recent talk about mental toughness to some top real-estate professionals coached by SEALFIT trainee Joe Stumpf, I was informed research shows that 12 percent of our brainpower is handled by our conscious mind while 88 percent is handled by our subconscious mind. I want to know how to tap into that 88 percent, don't you? (I call the conscious or "thinking mind" our "monkey mind" because it's always grabbing for the next thought or stimulus and doesn't take time to pause or digest what it's already chewing on.)

Fortunately for us, what we seek to accomplish with our SEALFIT awareness training is to tame the monkey mind and develop mental toughness.

Set Goals the Right Way

Yes, I know. Goal setting is mundane, but have you reviewed your goals today? Have you worked on the No. 1 thing today that is going to move you closer to your major goal tomorrow? What happens when your goals fail to be realistic? Do you have a method for checking them against reality? Are you tracking them?

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Goal setting is a very powerful tool, but it is useless when done willy-nilly. Goal setting helps us to maintain positive and forward momentum, it is a way to track our progress, and it is a way to focus our efforts on the important rather than just the urgent.

Proper goals are stated in precise and positive terms. They are measurable and have a modest time frame associated with them. If the time frame is too short, then either the goals are not meaty enough or you are setting yourself up for failure. Too long a time frame and you lose the urgency and let your goals fall off the radar.

Goals must be achievable in that you have the potential to accomplish them with the skills and resources available. If achievable, they must also be realistic. I may be able to achieve a 400-lb. deadlift someday, but it is not a realistic goal for me at my age to spend the time and weather the injuries to achieve it.



Strong in mind, strong in body.

When the going gets tough, goals take on a whole new level of importance. In Hell Week, we were not setting our sights on "being a Navy SEAL" or even "getting that trident." Though worthy goals while preparing for BUD/s, they were too far into the future to be effective goals during Hell Week or any arduous situation.

In the tough spots, I recommend you collapse your goal setting to the very near term. I call these "micro-goals." The great thing about micro-goals is that they lead to "micro-victories." You stack up enough micro-victories, and pretty soon you have achieved a huge milestone.

Back to the Hell Week example. A terrible goal would be "make it to Friday." When you are in the depths of despair on Monday morning at 4 a.m., colder than a surfer in Anchorage, sleep deprived and depressed, Friday seems a very, very long way away. A better goal would be to make it to sunrise. The sun has a remarkable ability to both warm you and cheer you up. Things suddenly don't look as bad at 7 a.m. as they did at 4 a.m. Micro-goal. Micro-victory. Next.

The hidden secret with micro goal setting is that it forces our monkey mind to focus on what's happening right now rather than what may happen in the future, where it wishes to be. Focus on the next meal, the next event or even the next footstep. These short and achievable goals help enlist our monkey mind to be an ally rather than an enemy in our fight.



Staying positive is one of the most powerful things you can do.

The hidden secret with micro goal setting is that it forces us into the present and forces our monkey mind to pay attention to what is happening right now, rather than what it hopes will happen in the future or what happened in the past. Collapse your focus to the “near present,” where you can set goals such as making it to the next yummy MRE meal or through that miserable evolution. By doing so, you achieve victory where it is at: right here, right now!

The wandering mind is the devil’s playground. The nature of the outer, conscious mind (the 12 percent brain) is to dwell on the negative and obsess about it. Often that which is the obsession becomes the reality. Once you begin to focus on the present, the requirement then is to keep your mind in a positive state. We call this “positivity.”

Positivity

Positivity can be likened to an electrical charge. Are you positively charged or negatively charged? How big a difference would it make in your life if you learned how to keep your mind and body positively charged all the time? My guess is it would make a big difference.

Back to basics: ensure the mind is focused on the present and propelling you forward with positive self-talk. Positive self-talk is akin to a battery that positively charges your energy, emotions and the very air around you so that you attract the positive success you seek. At the basic level, it keeps you feeling good, strong and able to set a “positive example” for your teammates (who draw strength from you, and vice versa). There are some nuances:

1. Pay Attention

Learn to pay attention to your energy, whether it is positive or negative. At SEALFIT, we use a simple question to draw focus to this: “What dog you are feeding?” This question refers to the two dogs in our outer mind that vie for feeding: the dog of fear and the dog of courage. Our minds are energized with either courage (positive) or fear (negative), which manifest their influence in our lives in different ways. Our basic emotional feeling states can be generalized into these two broad categories. We could actually replace “courage” with “love,” but for this discussion courage is a more powerful descriptor.

Fear is the dominant energy in most because the outer monkey mind is generally negative in nature. It is constantly filled with negative programming from numerous sources—friends, family, news, TV and our own self-talk. By paying attention to what dog you are feeding, you will start to notice the patterns.

2. Interrupt Negative Patterns

As soon as you notice negative patterns, you must use a pattern interrupt to immediately stop and redirect them. At SEALFIT, we use power statements as pattern interrupts for this purpose. Some power statements we use include “hooyah,” “easy day,” “get some” and “ain’t nothin but a thing.” These power statements interdict negative thinking and replace it with a powerful and positive mood.

3. Stand Tall

Power statements are not enough to do the job alone. Our bodies must also get in the game. A power posture reinforces the power statement. Saying “I am going to crush this” while slouched in a defeated, fetal position just doesn’t work. Your subconscious mind will call bull and continue to feed the negative pattern. You need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and mirror the power statement with a power posture.



A powerful posture complements a positive mind.

Often in the middle of a grueling workout, I or one of my coaches will shout a power statement coupled with powerful gestures when we notice the fear dog nipping at the trainees. Everyone's mental attitude and body responds immediately as if jolted by a bolt of positively charged electricity. It's great to watch and be part of. Soon we are all laughing and cranking away at the workout, having left the worst behind us. We have learned to allow positive self-talk and powerful body postures to condition our minds for positive outcomes.

One final comment about positivity: the mind will easily slip in and out of negative situations based upon external stimuli. You must trick your conscious mind to remain positive by reciting powerful mantras. A mantra is simply a short statement that has positive meaning to you. When I was in BUD/s, on long runs I would recite this over and over: "Feeling good, looking good, ought to be in Hollywood!" Corny as heck but it worked ... though the Hollywood part remains elusive.

**The power of positivity
cannot be underestimated.**

The power of positivity cannot be underestimated, and I highly recommend you start practicing these techniques now if you are not already.

Visualize Success

Visualization is the creation or re-creation of an external experience in the mind's eye. Sports psychologists and top coaches have used visualization to enhance performance for some time. It is estimated that 90 percent of Olympic athletes use some form of visualization, and 97 percent say it helps (1). Most Olympic coaches include it in their training arsenal. So should we.

Why does visualization work? A properly visualized event is treated as if it happened for real on the "screen of life." Thus, you are seeing and doing the event a second time when you do it in the flesh. Also, during a visualization event your muscles are stimulated as if during a real event, thereby greasing the groove of the repetitive motion. The best part of visualization is that you choose the outcome and the quality of the performance. Why not start with a winning outcome and stellar performance in your mind first!

We perform two types of visualization during our SEALFIT Academies and Awareness Seminar:

1. Practice visualization—This is rehearsing an event in the mind before attempting it. Visualizing a performance on a benchmark workout, PST, swim, run and the like can have a positive impact on the results, especially if done well and repeatedly over time.
2. Future-me visualization—This form of visualization is where we create a powerful image of a future event that is a major goal. A good example would be earning the trident or launching a business. You create the event in your mind, replete with emotions, color, sounds, smells and tastes, all as vividly as possible. Then you cement and reinforce this scene through repeated internal visits. Doing so plants a powerful seed in the subconscious mind, which then goes to work to recruit the resources necessary to nurture the event to fruition through proper thought and action.

Proper visualization helps to reduce fear of the unknown and control emotional responses because you have "been there before." It builds confidence and helps you concentrate on the important tasks required to achieve the future state, allowing you to avoid wasting energy on non-productive states of mind stemming from uncertainty.



Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right.

When you begin the practice of visualization, you will likely start with second-person, or external, visualization. This is where you are viewing yourself from the perspective of another person. As you gain experience you will shift to first-person, or internal, visualization. This is where your imagined event is happening from your perspective, as if you were wearing a helmet cam.

Visualization is a valuable tool in the development of any sport or skill (shooting, jumping, diving, public speaking, etc.). Furthermore, it can help hone and test a strategy. An example of this is the SEAL "dirt dive" whereby we walk through a dive profile on dry land while visualizing all the details. We do the dive before we ever hit the water. Doing so implants the route in our conscious and subconscious, provides a muscle-memory aide, and identifies any potential challenges before hitting the reality of the deep. The power of a solid visualization practice cannot be underestimated.

Be Decisive!

Staying in the fight when you are cold, tired, beaten, tormented and physically defeated is a defining attribute of all amazing stories of survival. Laura Hillenbrand's book, *Unbroken*, is about the amazing life and survival story of Louie Zamperini.

Louie was a young hellraiser who ended up being one of America's top runners in the '30s, culminating in a stunning performance at the 1936 Olympics and a stunt where he actually stole a German flag right off the Reich Chancellery

(my kind of guy). He joined the Army Air Corp when war broke out and became a bombardier on a B-24 crew. After his plane crashed in the Pacific, he survived 47 days at sea while being pursued relentlessly by sharks, only to be captured by the Japanese. Louie was severely tortured in a prisoner-of-war camp until the camp was liberated at the end of the war. Louie's is an incredible story of mental toughness and never giving in, and it's a great example from our grandfathers' generation.

Our everyday life may not quite require fending off sharks and POW guards, but the concepts of mental toughness that Louie exemplified can help us immensely in our efforts to perform at our best during challenging circumstances.

We examined various tactics used to develop mental toughness at SEALFIT. Tactics such as near-term micro-goals, visualization, programming your subconscious mind to never quit, and the 20x factor help us expand our horizon of "can do." Breath control and positivity allow us to manage the stressors we meet on the way to "doing."

Decisiveness

Being decisive is about timely and good decision-making, especially in the midst of chaos when you are exhausted or rattled. Decisiveness is a hallmark of good leadership. Whether you are leading your family through a natural disaster or leading a SEAL team into a mansion outside Islamabad while looking for Public Enemy No. 1, you must be decisive. Sounds good—but how?

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1. Analyze and Plan

Get yourself organized. Even if the situation is forced upon you as an unwilling leader, take a moment to assess the reality of the situation, determine available resources, delegate tasks, set routine and establish discipline. Taking positive action even if you are unsure of exactly what to do will surface ideas and flush out supporters and detractors.

2. Develop Reliable Decision Models

We all have mental models that shortcut the analytical process. We are not even aware of many of these mental models, some of which can lead to faulty thinking. They are part of our “background of obviousness,” developed from early childhood influences such as family, community and culture. I recommend you closely examine your underlying thought patterns and learn a few powerful mental models that can support good decisions.

Two such models we rely on at SEALFIT are the Mission Plan and Col. Boyd’s OODA Loop.

The Mission Plan begins with understanding in vivid detail the situation you face. Next, develop a clear concept of your mission statement, which will encapsulate and state your goals vis-à-vis the situation. Then we craft our execution plan based on best courses of action, standard operating procedures and contingency plans. Then we look at our administrative and logistical requirements and the communications and control systems necessary to accomplish the task/mission. I have used this process to plan SEAL ops, new business ventures and complex projects that have many moving parts. Once you master the model, you can use it with very little effort to make better decisions.

The OODA (observe, orient, decide, act) Loop is a simple model that has us constantly evaluating our relationship to the “enemy” (marketplace, competitor) by observing it closely. What is our relative position to the enemy, and how is its behavior going to impact us? Then we orient ourselves to that reality, decide on a course of action and act on it. After our action, we immediately observe the impact of our action and orient to it, and the cycle continues. Our goal is to decrease the time it takes for us to perform this analytical loop while increasing or destroying our enemy’s cycle. These are just two examples of valuable mental decision-support models drawn from the SEALFIT playbook.

3. Perfect Plans?

There is no such thing as a perfect plan or perfect execution. It may be a great plan, but no plan survives contact with the enemy. This is reality. Seek first to make a good plan, and then execute it. Even an average plan executed well is better than a perfect plan not executed at all.

In this scenario, the average plan will meet with resistance, from which you will learn and be forced to modify your approach, thereby allowing forward movement toward your goal. The more momentum you have toward your goal, the more confident and clear your decision-making will be.

4. Stay Single

Don’t get married to your decision or your plan. Perceive your situation accurately and without denial if things are falling apart. Set your ego aside and be willing to take counsel from all corners. In the SEAL teams, some of the best ideas come from the most junior guys. These guys are not crusted over with the “been there, done that” syndrome, which can work against you just as hard as it works for you.

5. Remain Calm

Maintain a calm mind. Use deep, rhythmic and controlled breathing to manage your mental, emotional and physical stress. Breath control is an extremely valuable practice that can have an immediate and dramatic impact on multiple aspects of your experience. Breath control will help normalize and control your arousal response (fight-or-flight syndrome). It centers your mind by bringing attention to a key body function rather than allowing it to be overwhelmed by the external stressor. As the body and mind come back into balance, breath control allows you more clarity of thought, which leads to better decisions!



Remain calm at all times, even when faced with Murph in a weighted vest.

Be a Team Player

Take your eyes off yourself and put them on your teammates. Don't spend too much time looking in the mirror. Put your teammates' needs before yours. Imagine if everyone did this. Everyone on the team would be watching your back and supporting you, while you were focused on supporting them.

Do this and you will witness something magical. Why?

1. Shared risk—When you share risk equally with teammates, your credibility and trust among teammates goes through the roof. The accountability that comes with shared risk ensures that you act at your best at all times. You don't want to let your teammates down. You don't want them to let you down. You support each other and grow together as peers.
2. Responsibility—The responsibility of having to take care of your team is enormous, but you are not alone. Because of this, you will step up your level of commitment and focus on the mission. The stakes are much higher now than just the potential for letting yourself down.

Finally, consider an esoteric concept called "the law of attraction." We attract that which we focus on—subconsciously. We have discussed this at length in the section on positivity. If we take this to the team level, then we note that a positive focus on the welfare and success of our team has the energetic effect of transforming not just the team but also ourselves. What you give out, you will get back at least 10 times. In turn, be an island and fly solo and you will decrease your return by 10 times. It is much easier to be mentally tough when you have a bunch of other tough people watching your back!

Embrace the Suck!

During a tough evolution, whether a workout, mission, project or crisis, everyone is experiencing the same pain. It doesn't help you or the team to whine about it. "Embrace the suck" means to learn to handle abnormal levels of pain and discomfort. You don't have to like it; you just need to learn to deal with it. Embrace it and find a way to create a positive emotional association with it. Refer to the discussion on positivity for ideas. Remember, the best things in life come with pain attached to them. The more pain, the more valuable it is.

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"Fake it till you make it" will plant seeds of positive energy and perhaps even humor. Finding humor and grace in painful situations is a powerful skill. Often there is much humor and beauty in sublime and challenging circumstances. Surrender to the reality of the situation. Don't fight it—flow with it.

- Find humor where others can't.
- Find beauty in misery.
- Don't fight; flow!
- Enjoy the journey despite the hardships.

It's All on You

A "staying in the fight" mentality is crucial for success in any endeavor. Whether you are an MMA fighter, business executive or CrossFit athlete, staying in the fight is about properly orienting your inner self at critical moments. Every race, fight, mission, business venture or crisis has critical "inflection points" where the outcome can swing one way or the other based upon the actions (or lack thereof) of the key player.

You are that key player.

Someone wise once told me that our lives are defined by millions of tiny decisions and only a few big ones. We tend to focus on the big ones, but it is the tiny decisions that stack up over time and define who we are.

**When strong values are
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right action results.**

Consider the following:

Do you occasionally dilly-dally too long on an unimportant project so you have an excuse to miss that ugly-looking workout? Or do you embrace the suck and lean into the tough ones, knowing that each decision to do so makes you stronger over the long haul?

If you value discipline but don't practice discipline, then it is not your value. It is just a trait you appreciate in others. Practicing a value re-enforces it until it becomes a virtue. Virtues are deeply ingrained value-based habits that require no conscious thought. When strong values are habituated into virtues, right action results in the form of good tiny decisions made throughout the day.

Bottom line: you should train daily to be mentally tough, physically prepared, emotionally deep and intuitive. Train your indomitable never-quit spirit. Don't wait for some miracle or distant future date to start. Make it part of every tiny decision you make here and now.

The world is a dangerous and chaotic place. Destiny favors the prepared. Living with your head buried in the sand of ignorance, denial or non-presence is a recipe for disaster. We have all heard people complain about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This can't happen. Wherever you are, there you are. You are either at the right place at the right time (you are present) or at the right place at the wrong time (your head is in the past or future). In either case, the decisions you make at that moment will determine whether you are a loser or a hero. It simply boils down to having the mental toughness and clarity for right thought, which will lead to right action.

Don't wish for things that are critical to living a good life. Work on making them part of you. Starting now.



Reference

1. Murphy S. *The Sport Psych Handbook*. Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 2004. p. 127.



About the Author

Mark Divine is founder of SEALFIT and also runs the CrossFit affiliate USCrossFit. He started his athletic career as a swimmer and rower in college then became a competitive triathlete and martial artist before joining the Navy in 1990 as a SEAL officer. He graduated as honor-man of his SEAL training class and served on active duty for nine years. Mark retired as a commander from the Navy Reserves in 2011. At SEALFIT, CDR Divine has trained and mentored thousands of Navy SEAL and other special-ops candidates to succeed in the most demanding military training programs in the world. His success rate with SEALFIT in preparing candidates is unrivaled.