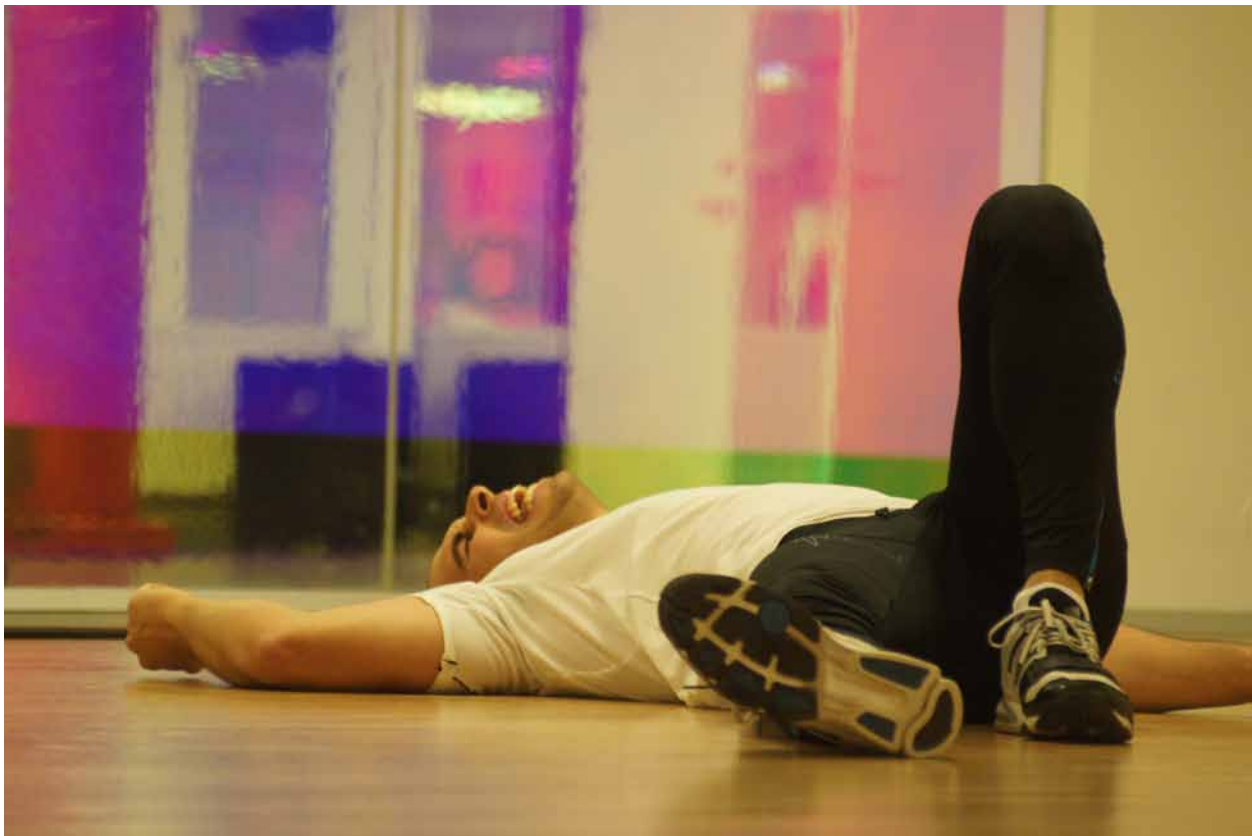

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Building Mental Toughness

Swedish CrossFit trainer John Hermiz says to get mentally tougher, you have to stick to your plan—in or out of the gym.

By John Hermiz

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All images: Karin Reimondos

My first encounter with CrossFit was about two years ago. It was dramatic and ugly, and it changed my naive self-image of being in shape.

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I had just gotten off work and was on my way to the gym for yet another one of my slow-pace, lifting-heavy workout sessions. In the staff area, one of my colleagues was preparing a workout he called "300":

25 burpees

50 kettlebell front squats

50 kettlebell sumo deadlift high pulls

50 push-ups

50 American sit-ups

50 kettlebell clean and jerks

25 burpees

Most of it meant nothing to me at the time, but I knew what a push-up was and that I easily could do 50 of them in less than a minute. So I decided to tag along for what I considered a light workout that would give me a chance to regain my strength for my next gym session.

Thirteen burpees later, I was in complete shock.

Thirteen burpees later, I was in complete shock. My heart was racing, my lactic-acid levels were off the charts, my tongue was hanging out of my mouth, and I felt like throwing up. I thought, "What the hell is happening?" "I can't finish this workout," and "I'm going to throw up and pass out." I believed all these thoughts; subsequently my emotional state was affected.

I was terrified, stressed and anxious. Of course, that didn't help much. Because I was in a group, quitting wasn't an option; had I been by myself, I instantly would have quit and comforted myself with a high-sugar protein drink and a call to my girlfriend. But I saw the damn thing through in a near-death experience of 18:40. Then I crawled into the fetal position, where I stayed for another 10 minutes.

My ego was bruised. How could I consider myself fit when I couldn't handle a workout like that? I decided to change my ways and have since followed a CrossFit regimen that has done wonders for my physique. Interestingly enough, there has been a side effect to my changed exercise routine, as well. CrossFit—in combination with techniques I learned while studying to become a psychologist at Stockholm University—has developed mental toughness.

Solving Problems

What do I mean by the term "mental toughness"?

I consider mental toughness to be the ability to continue according to plan in a way that is in line with your values even though negative thoughts and emotions are pulling you in another direction. Or, in layman's terms: The ability to get present and move forward in a stressful situation.

So how can CrossFit help a person develop mental toughness?

To explain, I'll first have to explain the medical model of solving problems.



Mental toughness means fighting against negative thoughts and emotions in order to finish according to plan.



Feelings of fear and anxiety are inevitable. The key is how you handle these feelings.

In medicine, the way to solve a problem is to find it and remove it. Say you had high blood pressure. Your doctor would prescribe medicine to lower the pressure. Or if you had a tumor, a proper way to treat it would be to find it and surgically remove it. Problem solved.

Even in daily life, if you have a problem, this is a good approach to handle it: isolate it and remove it. Small apartment? Find a larger one. Don't like your job? Find another one. This model is frequently used in mental health care as well. Depression? Take antidepressants. Anxiety? Try a sedative. Disturbing thoughts? Replace them with "better" ones.

Traditional cognitive therapy focuses on identifying maladaptive thought patterns and replacing them with more adaptive ways of thinking. In mental health care, this model works off the idea that negative thoughts and emotions aren't normal and healthy. Therefore—in accordance with the medical model of solving problems—they need to be isolated and removed. The problem with

this idea is that it can create a vicious cycle. If anxiety isn't considered normal, a person could get anxious from feeling anxious and start to avoid situations causing feelings and thoughts associated with anxiousness.

In the inner world of feelings and thoughts, evidence points to a paradox: If you're not willing to have it, you've got it!

Let me give you an example. Let's say you were to give a presentation. On your way to the venue you feel your heart beating faster and sweat in your palms. Thoughts and images of failure and the embarrassing consequences of failing start popping into your mind. If these feelings and thoughts were viewed as a problem, they would certainly lead to a reaction like, "Oh, no! Why is this happening to me now? I can't feel this way and give my presentation! Now I will fail for sure!" Thoughts like that would then cause more anxiety and more negative thoughts, and, worst-case scenario, you would call in sick, go home and go back to bed.

There seems to be a difference between the inner and the outer world in terms of how problems are best solved. In the outer world, problems often can be successfully handled by removal. But in the inner world of feelings and thoughts, evidence points to a paradox: if you're not willing to have it, you've got it! Unwillingness to experience certain feelings can lead to an increased frequency of those same feelings and also can cause avoidance behaviors that limit life.

Choosing Behaviors

A modern approach called the "third wave of cognitive behavioral therapy"—the most renowned therapy form in third-wave CBT is acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT (1)—has a different belief about negative thoughts and emotions. Those thoughts and emotions are considered a normal part of life and a natural consequence of a person's experience. In these therapy forms, the goal isn't to get rid of disturbing thoughts and emotions, it's the opposite: to increase tolerance for them.

Through a process called “cognitive defusion,” patients learn to separate themselves from their thoughts and feelings to allow them to look at their thoughts and feelings from a different perspective—as having them rather than being them. This skill gives patients more flexibility to choose their behavior in stressful situations. In the best cases, when you get negative thoughts and emotions, you recognize them and continue in a way that is in line with your values.

What's important is being able to do what you're supposed to do, even if you're feeling bad.

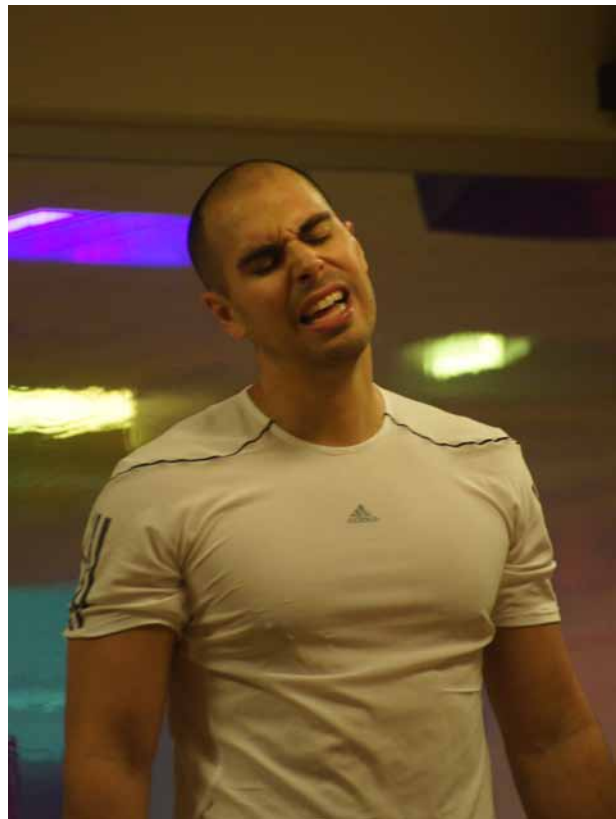
Say you have a value to lead a healthy lifestyle. A behavior associated with that value is exercising, perhaps four times a week. You decided your workout days are Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. On Monday, after work, you feel tired and hungry and the last thing you want to do is head off to the gym. In your mind, you're now entertaining thoughts like: “I'm too tired today,” “I really don't want to exercise,” “I can exercise tomorrow instead,” “It won't be a good workout anyway if I'm this tired.” This is the time to stop and observe your thoughts and recognize they are a natural consequence of working all day and missing your afternoon snack. And, most important, this is the time for committed action. Now more than ever it's important to act according to your value of being healthy and get your ass to the gym.

During your workout, you might start feeling differently, or not. That's not important. What's important is being able to do what you're supposed to do, even if you're feeling bad. To constantly act according to plan will build tolerance and toughness. A common misconception is people think they need to “feel” like doing an activity in order to start doing it. Often, thoughts and feelings change when you start a behavior. This is called “acting from outside and in.” A depressed person often wants to stay at home and watch TV with the curtains down. He or she doesn't feel like doing anything and least of all meeting other people. Staying at home actually contributes to feelings of depression. One of the most powerful therapeutic methods for treating depression is activity. Patients are coached to resume behaviors that gave their lives joy and meaning before the depression, even though they don't feel like it.

Connecting the Dots

So what's the connection to CrossFit and mental toughness?

Research and experience show that when levels of exertion rise to a level where the anaerobic energy system is providing most of the energy, affective responses tend to be less positive and more negative (2). Basically when levels of exertion rise, so do levels of fear, stress and anxiety. During physical exercise, pain is triggered when work surpasses the lactic-acid threshold (3). Byproducts from the anaerobic process—lactic-acid, carbon dioxide, etc.—cause pain receptors in the tissue to fire; the athlete experiences the signals as pain and discomfort, which cause a negative affective response. At some point, thought processes will be affected. Depending on the athlete's previous experience of similar situations, thoughts of hopelessness, giving up and/or changing the workout—lowering reps, sets, load, etc.—might appear in the athlete's mind.



As levels of exertion rise, it is normal to feel anxiety, stress and fear. Acknowledge these feelings and keep moving.



Try applying the mental toughness you've developed in CrossFit to other areas of your life.

CrossFit workouts are known for their high intensity, which means an athlete training according to the methodology will get ample opportunity for exposure to negative thoughts and emotions. And, if coached correctly, athletes will be trained to push through and continue work regardless of these negative thoughts and emotions in line with the never-quit spirit of CrossFit. When a person experiences tough situations and gets through them, some sort of cognitive restructuring takes place. A rule forms in the athlete's mind: "A situation might seem hopeless

and overwhelming, but if I keep going, I'll get through it." Overcoming tough situations builds confidence in the ability to handle similar situations.

How does this transfer to life outside of the gym?

We all run into stressful and challenging situations in life. Say you came home late from work, it was raining outside, and all you wanted to do was kick off your shoes, lie down on the couch and order pizza. However, in accordance with your value of eating healthy and home-cooked food, you had planned to go grocery shopping and cook dinner. At this point, it would be easy to change your plans.

A person with the experience of overcoming difficulty and sticking to a plan can acknowledge thoughts of changing plans and perhaps draw a parallel to how he or she handles a challenging workout: "A situation might seem hopeless and overwhelming, but if I keep going I'll get through it." Best-case scenario: you'd put on your raincoat, hop on your bike and head off to the supermarket. And by doing so, you'd get a little bit mentally tougher!

**Overcoming tough situations
builds confidence in the ability
to handle similar situations.**

Make Your Own Rules

A few rules I have found useful in helping athletes and myself develop toughness and confidence are:

1. Start off at the right level. A beginner needs to experience success, not failure. Therefore, use proper scaling. Set up yourself and others for success. No one gets better by constantly failing. It won't help to get injured either. Don't try to run a marathon without proper preparations. It will be a horrible experience, and if you manage to push yourself through, there's a real risk of injury.
2. Push the limit. Always try to better yourself by setting realistic challenges.
3. Commit to your workout. Plan your workout, prepare and then do it. Quitting is not an option unless there's a risk of injury. Every time you succeed to follow your plans, you'll get tougher. Every time you quit or change your plans, you'll get mentally weaker and more prone to quitting and changing plans.
4. Train yourself at observing thoughts and feelings. Learn to recognize your normal thought patterns during strenuous exercise. If you normally get thoughts trying to negotiate a change in your workouts—"Maybe three laps is enough today, I have to save some energy for tomorrow"—try to recognize those thoughts, but don't buy into them. Thoughts are just thoughts—no more, no less.



About the Author

John Hermiz is a personal trainer of nine years at Balance Training in Stockholm, Sweden. He is a Level 1 CrossFit trainer and a Poliquin International Certification Program level 2 strength coach. Hermiz is also a psychologist specializing in behavior change. He teaches applied psychology to students pursuing careers in the health industry at Sverigehälsan in Stockholm.

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