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## CrossFit Lessons Outside the Box

Former rollergirl Melissa Joulwan learns CrossFit's lessons can be applied long after the WOD is over.

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By Melissa Joulwan

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David Humphreys

I recently endured a personal crisis that brought me down like a 20-lb. medicine ball slammed into my solar plexus. For a while, my days felt like this:

All-day AMRAP of:

Feel despair

Cry intermittently

Embrace anger

Smash something

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While med-ball slams performed with a stereo as stand-in for the ball were wildly satisfying in the moment, they didn't provide lasting relief. I needed a more productive solution.

One of the many valuable lessons I've learned through CrossFit is that the stories I tell myself during a workout affect not only the success of that particular workout but also how I feel about myself after the last barbell has dropped to the floor. Throughout grueling workouts, I've picked up valuable tips for how to endure, even when I think I can't possibly muscle through another rep.

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After this recent, nasty one-two punch from the universe knocked me on my keister, I realized that if I used the same tricks in life that I learned in the gym, I just might sucker-punch the universe right back.

Here are a few of my favorite personal mind games that help me power through my workouts, along with the explanation of how I extend them outside the gym to call "time" on personal challenges, too.

### 3-2-1... Go!

I was introduced to CrossFit after I retired from the Texas Rollergirls Flat Track Roller Derby. Hanging up my skates left a void in my physical training, and years of being bashed around on the track left me feeling like I needed something beyond a regular workout class.

But I wasn't always like that.

I spent my childhood parked under a tree with a book, and my record for demolishing bags of Doritos as I turned the pages was well documented. After college,



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**Melissa tries to teach the med-ball who's boss during Fight Gone Bad.**

I learned enough about basic nutrition and exercise to teach aerobics classes and participate in a few triathlons and endurance bike rides. Then I discovered Roller Derby and became a badass on wheels.

None of that prepared me for the rigor of CrossFit.

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*The author is almost brought to tears by floor wipers in Spartan 300.*

I fell in love with bootcamp—the buckets of sweat, the intimidating workouts, the camaraderie, and the ritual of our coach holding up her stopwatch and shouting, “3-2-1... Go!” at the start of every WOD. Soon I was entertaining the idea of picking up barbells and learning to do kipping pull-ups. When our gym announced a Spartan 300 challenge, I signed up with dorky enthusiasm for my first workout *inside* CrossFit Central.

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I reported to the gym at 7:30 a.m. for weigh-in, fat pinching and photos, trying to play it cool as I took my place in line. I was surrounded by CrossFit veterans

talking smack and psyching each other up for the challenge to come. All men. All ignoring me. All ratcheting up my anxiety, reminding me I had absolutely no business being there.

I quivered and tried to visualize the workout to calm my nerves. Robotically, I went through the motions of the warm-up and almost before I knew it, I was standing on a wooden box, hands on the pull-up bar, desperately wanting to get started so I could be finished. My palms were sweaty. My heart raced. And then a coach yelled, “3-2-1... Go!” and I was off—jumping, lifting, sweating, and grunting. What I was not doing was stressing. As soon as I heard those magic words—3-2-1... Go!—the anxiety disappeared as I focused on the tasks at hand.

So what needs to be done for “3-2-1... Go!” to work as a trigger for smoothing frazzled nerves?

Usually before we start a CrossFit WOD, we prepare our space: set out weights and other equipment, clear away anything extraneous, maybe even formulate a strategy for how to get through the reps most efficiently. We’ve defined a beginning and an end so we know when we’ve reached our goal. And we’ve surrounded ourselves—either physically or virtually—with other people who share our philosophy.

As it turns out, that's basically the best way to deal with a life crisis, too. When my life imploded, I decided to look ahead only three days at a time, and for each of those days I made a detailed plan: waking time, workout schedule, meals, day-job tasks and social activities. I included friends and family in my schemes, and when the alarm sounded each morning at the appointed time, I literally said, "3-2-1... Go!" and started my Life WOD.

Some days, it worked brilliantly. Other days, I faltered midway through the day, just like some days my plan to do 10 thrusters in a row devolves into cranking them out only two or three at a time. But just as each WOD makes us stronger for the next, each day I persevered made me better prepared for the next.

### Use a Spotter

One of my defining characteristics can be called, at its best, "relentlessness" or "commitment," but that gift can also be transformed into its evil twin: pure bullheadedness. I often believe I don't need help and have been known to declare as much, usually in a bratty voice accompanied by a pout to drive the point home.

My first attempt at a 1RM back squat schooled me on the value of help in the form of a spotter.

I don't recall how much weight was on the bar. It was enough to make me pay attention, but not enough to really hurt me, or anyone around me. That morning, I was a dangerous combination of fear and bravado, and I didn't communicate clearly enough to my spotter about my intentions.

Somewhere in that dark place at the bottom of the squat where I always feel simultaneously weightless and weighted down, I lost focus. My core dissolved. I yelped like a little girl, and the bar see-sawed off one shoulder and onto a combination of my head and the rack. It was not the proud addition to my training log that I had hoped for, but it did teach me a valuable lesson: look my spotter in the eye, come to agreement, then trust my spotter to support me.

We CrossFit types tend to pride ourselves on self-reliance. We're renegades. We swim upstream. But in workouts and in life, insisting on rugged individualism at all times is not always the best strategy. The surest way to stand strong on one's own feet is to have supporters standing strong on their feet, too—in their own orbit, but close enough to lend a hand when needed.



David Humphreys

*CrossFitter Blake Howard and the author at Fight Gone Bad 2009.*



David Humphreys

*Friends, spotters, zombie killers ... just before the Zombie Attack Preparedness Workout.*



It's true in workouts; it's true in life.

I've learned through my personal crisis that a sincere request for help—not a self-indulgent, woe-is-me whine, but a true, sincere request for help—is an indicator of self-awareness and strength. That kind of honest vulnerability is almost always met with an equally sincere extended hand.

From the practical (my car battery needs a jump-start) to the emotional (“I can't bear to be home alone right now. Will you go to a movie with me?”), my requests were met with kindness and understanding—because even though we might feel alone in crisis, we're not. Everyone has struggles—an illness, an injury, a broken heart, an absent loved one. Everyone needs a spotter at one time or another. All we need to do to find our life spotters is look them in the eye, come to agreement and trust them to support us—then return the favor when they need us.

### **You Can Cry, Just Don't Be a Baby**

I distinctly remember the first time a CrossFit workout brought me to tears. Our bootcamp had been moved to a rooftop parking garage, and the workout was a devastating combination of wall-balls and sprints up the garage ramps. Just as I thought the torture was winding down, our coach yelled out that we were doing one ... more ... round.

My inner 12-year-old roared up in fury at the outrage of this unfair and unexpected continuation. My eyes stung with tears of frustration while my cheeks burned with

shame at the waterworks. I obstinately slogged through the remaining reps, feeling put-upon and embarrassed the entire time. “This is so unfair,” I raged in my head.

As we packed up our gear, I realized I had time-traveled back to junior high, to the time of splitting my shorts in front of the cheerleaders and being the fattest, slowest girl in our co-ed gym class. The tears dried up, but the embarrassment—from decades ago and that morning—remained.

My coach checked in with me to see if I was OK. Working around the lump in my throat, I explained my horror at crying during a workout. She shrugged, “You finished the workout, right?”

Since then, I've cried at the cold-heartedness of the pull-up bar, the viciousness of the wall-ball line, and—to my chagrin—the taunts of the mat that dared me to try somersaults and handstands. But each time the tears abated, I continued to slog away at whatever it was that brought on the crying.

My ability to do that goes beyond personal fortitude; it's physical. Tears produced in response to sadness, joy or physical pain contain more manganese (Mn) than our everyday “basal” tears. Manganese affects our moods, so crying out excess Mn reduces tension by helping our bodies' stress levels ease back into balance.

That return to balance is crucially important when dealing with stress in our lives outside the gym. When I feel sorrow or fear bearing down on me at unexpected moments, I let the tears flow. And when they stop, I continue with my plan for the day, just like I learned to do in my workout—crying, but not a baby.

### **Get Comfortable With Being Uncomfortable**

About a year ago, I watched an online video tutorial about the front squat. Throughout the video, the narrator explained that the reason the front squat can be difficult is because it's so uncomfortable. He repeated that idea many times—so often that I totally bought into the message. By the time I loaded a bar to find my 5RM, I was 100 percent ready for the front squat to be really uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and possibly scary, and for that to be 100 percent OK with me.

I'd built it up so much in my mind, and when I actually did a few practice sets with the empty 45-lb. bar, I was able to acknowledge that it was, indeed, uncomfortable, that I didn't much care for it, and that if I was going to be



*A CrossFit crew at the 2009 Bataan Memorial Death March in Las Cruces, N.M.*

successful, I was going to have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

I've learned this lesson before: on a 580-mile bike ride in California, when a run feels overly long, on Round 3 of a 5-round met-con, anytime a workout pushes me beyond where I want to go. Fighting against that discomfort gives it power. It's distracting and turns my focus on all the wrong things.

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But I've learned during workouts that if I give myself over to the discomfort, if I accept it as my current state of being, then poof!—the uncomfortable feelings begin to diminish and are replaced with a glimmer of confidence. Discomfort is no longer a distraction or an impediment to what I really want.

Emotional pain is like that, too. Fight against feeling unpleasant emotions and they might just take a runner for now, only to come roaring back later when they're even less welcome. It can be very tough to do, but I've found if I accept the discomfort of emotional pain, sadness, doubt—really allow myself to feel those feelings for a time—they, too, diminish. They lose their power the moment I accept them as a state of being that's temporary and under my control.

Just as the feeling of the bar across my throat during a front squat eventually became familiar and, therefore, less uncomfortable, so too have my intense emotions. I recognize them, grant them a not-so-fond hello, allow them to run their course, and then move on, feeling more confident for having breathed through them.

Since starting this CrossFit adventure almost three years ago, I've learned that no matter how many times I do them, I hate thrusters. I've wondered why I can never

seem to master the technique for the power clean. I've cursed (and cursed and cursed) the pull-up bar and my annoying inability to kip properly. And yes, sometimes I've even thrown a hissy fit when the time limit ticked out before I completed the WOD.

But I've also celebrated the strength and beauty, inside and out, of the warriors who train at my side. And I've learned that if I put my heart into my workout *inside* the box, the rewards I reap and lessons I learn help me be stronger *outside* the box, too.



#### About the Author

*Melissa (Melicious) Joulwan is a foodie who eats Paleo-Zone (most of the time) and loves met-cons but lifts heavy things, too. Her blog [The Clothes Make the Girl](#) is all about her Paleo-Zone recipes and her mission to become a super-fit, well-fed, dressed-to-kill, glossy-haired, rock-n-roll, tart-tongued detective. She's retired as a blocker from the Texas Roller girls Flat Track Roller Derby, but if you ask really nicely, she might knock you down anyway ... just for fun.*