

MENTAL TOUGHNESS

Are You Mentally Tough?

Train your brain to think like a champ.



by Alex Jakobson

REMEMBER THE GATORADE commercial from the 1990s, *Be Like Mike*? Of course, 99.99 percent of us can't dunk or dribble like NBA superstar *Michael Jordan*—no matter how hard we try or how much we practice—yet you and I can and should learn to *Be Like Mike*.

To become a world-class athlete like Michael Jordan, you need to possess more than physical prowess. These elite champions have developed a *mental toughness*. This enables them to persevere when faced with adversity or challenge. In work and life, mental strength helps you cope with pressure, competition, obstacles, set-backs, and other challenges. It enables you to muster the courage to focus on the tasks at hand so that you perform at or near your best—even when success seems far away and the pressure seems overwhelming.

You surely know people who are mentally tough. They tend to be optimists who rise to the challenge instead of crumbling under pressure. These people seem to be born with an innate belief in their own capabilities.

Optimism and *pessimism* are not traits you are born with, but rather patterns of thinking that are learned over time. Your parents, family and culture help shape the way you look at the world. If you've learned to be a pessimist, you can just as easily re-train yourself to think in new, more productive ways.

So, how tough are you? The *Fortius-Mindset™ Assessment Tool*, developed by rogenSi's Dr. Cory Middleton, tests mental toughness in four core areas. Cory developed this tool after spending several years researching world-class athletes and other professionals who face grueling challenges daily—soldiers, firefighters, and business executives. He found that these elite performers have a strong awareness of *four mental characteristics*: self-belief, motivation, coping, and focus. Self-belief and motivation provide an overall drive and determination to keep going; whereas focus and coping are essential mechanisms you can use to get through the heat of battle.

To test your own mental toughness, rate these five statements on a scale of 1 to 4 (with 4 being the lowest level of

agreement, 1 the highest): 1) The quality of my thinking is significantly impacted by outside influences; 2) I start to doubt myself under pressure; 3) I have the tendency to blow things out of proportion; 4) My drive for results is at a level where I put a lot of pressure on myself; and 5) I can be sensitive to the approval of others. Now, add your points.

Use these four categories to score your test and gauge your mental toughness:

- **Mentally fit** (17 to 20): Your mindset is strong and consistent. You're self-driven in your determination and commitment to deliver quality performances. You handle pressure very well and cut out distractions and focus on the right thing at the right time. You have a positive and enduring mindset that enables you to consistently perform toward the upper end of your potential.



- **Proficient** (13 to 16): Your mindset is reliable, resilient, and often keeps you in the game. However, you're likely affected by higher stress and pressure. You bounce back quickly, but in the moment, pressure can have a negative impact on the quality of your work. You are a little tough on yourself with regards to the how you judge your work.

- **Opportunity to improve** (9 to 12): Your mindset can be fairly inconsistent, going up or down based on your environment. Your mindset rises and falls based on various factors. For some, it's related to creating a pressure-cooker-type drive toward achieving your goals. For others, it may be related to a lack of drive or perhaps self-doubt under pressure. You are likely to blow things out of proportion and react negatively to others' expectations and pressures.

- **Needs major improvement** (5 to 8): You feel the effects of stress on a regular basis and may struggle to maintain your drive and confidence under pressure. Lower levels of performance ener-

gy make it hard for you to stay committed to your goals in the face of challenge and distraction. You tend to blow situations out of proportion and may find it difficult to remain positive from time to time. The state of your mindset greatly affects the quality of your performance.

Once you know how you measure up, work to strengthen your mindset. If your score indicates there is room for improvement, try these strategies.

- To gain higher *motivation*, focus on process as a means to outcome, set aspiring goals and assign meaning and purpose to tasks.
- Boost *self-confidence* through practice and specificity. Practice self-control to cultivate belief in your potential and listen to feedback from yourself and others. Whenever possible, step outside your comfort zone to draw strength from experiences.
- To cope with *difficult situations*, ask yourself questions to gain a realistic perspective and greater emotional control; choose to learn rather than dwell on failures; tackle challenges step-by-step and engage in learned optimism.
- To improve *focus*, assess your knowledge and skills and develop a learning journey; exercise emotional control and selective attention to achieve heightened concentration; and use a *look-aim-fire* strategy to create focus/follow-through.

The *Global Financial Crisis* has created a tough test for millions of Americans faced with loss of jobs, homes and financial livelihoods. As with any tough situation, those who rise to the challenge will not only survive; they will thrive.

Our greatest presidents faced the gravest challenges: George Washington was tasked with leading a fledgling nation and setting important new precedents; Abraham Lincoln saved the union and united a divided nation; Franklin D. Roosevelt guided the nation through World War II and brought an end to the Great Depression. Were it not for these unprecedented tests of leadership, these presidents would not be near universally regarded as our nation's greatest.

Think about these lessons when you practice these strength-building exercises. Whether managing a bigger workload, parlaying your skills to take the business in a new direction, or starting out in a completely new career path, leaders who maintain a positive mindset will, in the end, be better off for having mastered the challenge. PE

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ACTION: Train to become mentally tough.