

# What is mental toughness? Do I have it, and if not, how can I get it?



## SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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It's an age-old human question: why do some people do well, even thrive, under stressful conditions? And why do others self-destruct? Why do some hockey players thrive on pressure, and others consistently 'choke' under pressure?

Psychology researchers in all fields of human performance make it their job to study and apply the lessons learned through human behaviour. There are critical moments in every human performance, moments that we call "make or break" moments. These moments could be a brain surgeon performing his most difficult operation, a race car driver on a tight turn in a car worth millions, or a pro athlete in a final competition with his or her reputation and job on the line.

These are moments when not just physical skill, but "mental toughness" kicks in.

What do we mean by mental toughness in an athlete? Probably the best way to look at it is in terms of how our attitude affects our behaviour and performance.

For example, mentally tough athletes are more likely to:

- tolerate pain, discomfort and boredom;
- achieve relatively consistent performances regardless of the situation;
- control distractions and stay focused in critical moments of competition;
- sustain a positive and optimistic outlook, including when the situation is very challenging and the odds are stacked against them;
- maintain motivation and come back from significant disappointments or poor results;
- persevere when the 'going gets tough' even when others around them have given up.

Every season I work with players from all levels, recreational or early competitive hockey, through junior ranks, to national and professional. Each player comes with his or her own unique physical and technical strengths. And each player comes with his or her unique mental strengths. When all physical and tactical/technical elements are created equal, one quality will set athletes apart from the others – their mental toughness level.

Sometimes I see a young athlete who has been identified by a coach or parent as being extremely talented, but who is also very nervous or tight and seems to under-perform in big games. Other athletes are doing well, and simply want to stay consistent and work on aspects of their mental toughness to keep the season on an even keel.

And still others come in on their own, to look for ways that they can work on things like setting realistic goals for themselves, dealing with competitive pressure, or managing a hot temper that has kept them in the penalty box all season.

We work with their strengths and work on their challenges. When the will is there, it's amazing how far players can go if they set their mind to it – literally. Support and education for parents and coaches is also very important when reinforcing these kinds of positive changes as well.

So what is this elusive 'mental toughness'? How is it obtained, and how can I get it, if I don't have it already?

We are who we are through a unique blend of genetics and predetermined traits and the way we interpret and adapt to our environments. Early childhood experiences play a huge part in our personalities and our reactions to things like stress, but so do genetics and our predisposition from mom and dad.

Personality studies have often been met with controversy because the academic world can't seem to decide on the best way to study personality. One thing seems certain in most personality or 'mental resilience' literature: it's tough to do a complete overhaul on your personality, but you can influence and change your mental 'resilience' or toughness

level. One way to do this is through education and using such things as cognitive behavioural techniques, CBT for short.

There are many great books in the field of sport and performance psychology, for athletes of all ages (from children, to pre-teens and up), as well as for parents and coaches. A Google search on the web leads to other topics of interest to your particular needs, like dealing with competitive pressure, coping with failure or loss, or managing a temper in and out of hockey.

Some of my favourites include *The Complete Player: The Psychology of Winning Hockey* and *Hockey Tough*, both by Saul Miller; *Mental Toughness Training*, by James Loehr and *In Pursuit of Excellence* (the most recent edition) by Terry Orlick.

All are excellent resources, written in common language for players who want to work on anything from competitive anxiety, anger control, or focusing and controlling for distractions.

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