Understanding Mental Toughness



The first thing to understand is that Mental Toughness is invisible, it can't be seen.

When you hear someone saying that a certain person "showed great Mental Toughness to overcome a challenge"; it's not Mental Toughness that was shown, but the result of Mental Toughness.

Mental Toughness is hidden in the 80% of the personality iceberg that is below the waterline; it's down there with our values, our beliefs, our experiences, our impulses, our pulsion's and whole lot of other stuff.

Mental Toughness is invisible, but its impact is highly visible!

Its impact is seen in the emerged 20% of the personality; in our words and deeds, what we say and do.

Mental Toughness is considered by psychologists to be an attitude; created through a combination of our beliefs and experiences.

If you are told, for example, by your teachers, friends and family that you are useless at maths, there is a good chance that you will come to believe that you are, indeed, useless at maths.

However, this belief and attitude can change, as was shown by

both Albert Einstein and John Gurdon; the first was described by a teacher as someone who, “would never get anywhere in life” and the second was told by a teacher that his work was “far from satisfactory” and that his dreams of becoming a scientist were “quite ridiculous” – both went on to become winners of the Nobel Prize.

Mental Toughness is the attitude that gives us the confidence to take on a challenge and the control to see our commitments through.

Mental Toughness has nothing to do with biceps, triceps, testosterone and the like and it applies in all walks of life; great musicians, great dancers, great scientists, great public speakers, great athletes and, in fact, anyone who has stayed the distance to become very good at what they do, have high Mental Toughness.

Mental Toughness is built on four pillars, each with two foundations.

The four pillars are often referred to a the 4C’s; Challenge, Commitment, Control and Confidence; however, it is the foundations that give each pillar its strength and stability.

The foundations of Challenge, sometimes called the “Have a go” attitude, are a willingness to step out of one’s comfort zone, or comfort zones, and take on something challenging & the willingness to take time to learn from the experience, both from success and failure.

Commitment, or “Stickability”, is built on defining clear objectives with regards to the challenge undertaken & staying focussed and determined to achieve them.

Challenge and Commitment are “outward” focussed and it is here that lies one of the differences between Resilience and Mental Toughness.

Both Resilience and Mental Toughness are about being able to cope mentally and emotionally with a crisis; Resilience is more a reaction to a challenge when it arises, whereas Mental Toughness is more proactive and is about seeking out a challenge.

The “Can do” or Control pillar sits upon the control we have of our lives and our self-control in difficult (challenging) situations. Life Control is about the degree to which we make our major life decisions based on our own values, objectives, dreams, hopes and desires whereas our self-control, or Emotional Control, is about our ability to channel the emotional energy created, when challenged, into something positive.

The Confidence pillar, our Self-belief pillar, has its roots in Interpersonal Confidence; our ability to remain assertive and be able to interact with a wide range of different people, be they more qualified, better paid, more experienced, etc.

The second foundation of the Confidence pillar is Confidence in our capacities, not just “knowing our stuff” but knowing that we know our stuff; knowing what we are good at and being confident in what we are dealing with.

To summarise

Mentally tough people are resilient whereas resilient people are not necessarily mentally tough.

Challenge is about being optimistic & curious; it is not about being reckless & closed.

Commitment is about being focussed & determined; it is not about being blinkered & stubborn.

Control is about being decisive & calm; it is not about being dogmatic & cold.

Confidence is about being assertive & grounded; it is not

about being aggressive & arrogant.

Mental Toughness, until quite recently, has been quite an intangible concept and difficult to measure. Today, we know what it is and we have reliable methods for determining levels of Mental Toughness and yes, we all have a certain amount of Mental Toughness, some people may have more, and some people may have less but we all have a degree of Mental Toughness, we all have varying levels of “Can do”, “Stickability”, “Have a go” and “Self-belief”.

Studies have shown that Mental Toughness follows a normal distribution curve, some people have very low amounts, some people have very high amounts, and most people have an “average” amount of Mental Toughness. In fact, most of us have the level of Mental Toughness that we need to get through the majority of our daily storms.

The starting point to developing Mental Toughness is in exploring the foundations and identify our weak link or links.

A good example of someone with (or who had) a weak link is Novak Djokovic. Djokovic clearly has high Mental Toughness, you don’t get to be considered a contender for the GOAT in your discipline without it; however, after several emotional outbursts during important matches, he admitted that he was letting his own, negative, emotions get in the way of his performance and he began working on techniques & methods that allowed him to be aware of his emotions and manage them better during matches.

There are two ways of exploring the solidity of our foundations, the first is simply by asking oneself some questions and answering them honestly; Am I really in charge of my life? Do I challenge myself regularly? Do I stay calm in difficult situation, etc.

The second, and more reliable way, is to use a recognised & validated psychometric questionnaire such as the MTQPlus; a

questionnaire that not only explores the foundations but also provides concrete developmental suggestion aligned to your results.

Once you know where your strengths and weaknesses lie, you can start building on your strengths and overcoming your weaknesses.

Mental Toughness can clearly be developed, but it doesn't happen "overnight"; it is often an aggregation of small changes that must be maintained, consciously, until they become second nature.

Attitudinal change comes from experience, experiencing success where there was once only failure; this leads to a mind shift from "can't do" to "can do".

To quote Heny Ford, "*Whether you think that you can, or that you can't, you are usually right*"

If you would like to explore the foundations of your Mental Toughness, you can contact me at boblarcher@boblarcher.com; I have been helping individuals and teams develop their Mental Toughness for almost 40 years now.