

Mental Toughness Session

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Session notes below and PowerPoint available [online](#). (note ppt. takes a minute to load)

4 Main Questions about Mental Toughness:

1. Does Mental Toughness really exist?

- Not a lot of research on this topic is done in Canada
 - A lot of the research is done with respect to the military and sports (primarily from the UK and in relation to Rugby)
 - Looking into what makes individuals mentally tough and how to improve on that
- Mental Toughness and Resilience:
- Mental Toughness addresses the concept of resilience but it is different. Resilience encompasses the capacity to deal with challenging situations and how we *respond* to those situations: Mental Toughness includes how we *approach* these situations.

2. Can it be measured?

Yes, it can be measured through a mental toughness questionnaire (and other psychometric measures) which helps people consider how they approach challenging situations.

3. Is it Useful

Yes.

4. Can Mental Toughness be Developed

Yes, it is not innate: it is something that can be coached and improved upon.

Self-Care

As educators Self-Care is an **Ethical Imperative** – it is a professional expectation and a social and moral responsibility. We have an obligation to those with whom we work, and to ourselves and our personal connections: if we are not taking care of ourselves everyone around us is going to suffer.

This tends to be one of the last things that educators focus on when they spend all of their time and energies on taking care of so many other things and individuals.

Airplane oxygen mask analogy:

- Need to take care of ourselves before we can take care of other people
- There was an open discussion on this where attendees recognized the truth of the analogy but indicated that they still were not doing it

Problem with the Airplane analogy:

- Why don't we just create a scenario in which we are developing a structure for ourselves where we have a safe flight plan and we do not need to don the oxygen mask in the first place?

Benefits of Self-Care

- Self-Care prevents and reduces the negative impacts of trauma
- Self-Care promotes positive responses to challenging situations (leads to enhanced mental toughness)
- Self-Care leads to optimal professional functioning
- Self-Care leads to enhanced well being
- Teachers are models – we need to demonstrate the importance and impact of self-care.

One of our guiding principles should be self-care

How would this change what we do?

- This would make a big impact on our performance.
- We could have more reasonable expectations of ourselves
- People would not go to work sick. (From an ethical perspective coming to work sick is an ethical problem)

Faculty can make self-care their own ethical imperative.

- Faculty do not need to wait for the University to direct this
- Faculty need to be role models. Faculty coming to work sick is presenting modeling not appropriate for those around us.
- This is harder to do than it is to talk about.
- Balancing time and setting boundaries is hugely important: educators tend to be not very good at this. In teaching and educating we put others first and we are people oriented professionals; as such, it is difficult to say no and to establish boundaries which would benefit our wellbeing. However, this is a requirement as a professional to set these boundaries. (i.e. do you need to check your emails after hours or on weekends? Set expectations for 24 hour turn around on emails during weekdays and a clear indication that responses will not be provided on weekends).
- Keep in mind, be aware that, a lot of pressures you feel are self-imposed – you have control to regulate your priorities in a way that promotes your wellbeing.

Work Life Balance

This is not a balance - these are competing factors wherein one is put ahead of the other at various points in the day and in life. A better way to consider it is *Work/Life Priorities*

Professional Perfectionism does not match well with self-care. If we can accept that professional perfectionism is not a possible or even realistic goal then we can shift into a bigger focus on self-care.

The priority is life – not work. Work is not the priority - everything else is.

“If you don’t choose to take time for wellness, you will likely be forced to take time for illness”

- We have a choice to take care of our wellness or not. If we make the choice for wellness then we will have less time for illness.

- Focus on mental health right now in society is primarily reactive. We need to shift into proactive ways to manage our wellbeing.

Homework - To consider – what is a calming experience for you – what is a wellness place for you?

- Consider how you can get to that place and find calmness from it (e.g. water, outdoors, books, music, gardening, painting etc.)
- Take some time to find your place of relaxation, that place of peace, and really focus on it. Do this as a prescriptive thing and do it on a regular and consistent basis.

Professional Wellness Audit – Exercise

- Take 2 minutes to make a list of all the challenges you face at work: use the full amount of time.
- Now repeat the same exercise but this time write down all the things that work well at work. Again use the full time
 - Which list is longer
 - Which was easier to write
 - What does this tell you about where your focus is?

Discussion:

- Challenges are often related to things that are outside of our control and the things that work well are often the things we have control over.
- Some of the items we perceive as challenges are also things arising from our own self-image.

What is Mental Toughness

Mental toughness is “A personality trait which determines in large part how people deal with challenge, stressors, opportunity and pressure...irrespective of prevailing circumstances”

When things are working against us how do we respond? Do we run or do we engage? Or, where do we fall in between those lines? We all have various things we will engage in or avoid and mental toughness. If we can assess our mental toughness in various challenging scenarios then we can focus in on where we need to consider how to make improvements and move forward.



Research shows a correlation with mental toughness and performance. Up to 25% of variation in performance is related to mental toughness. People who are more mentally tough are more positive and often better at managing stress.

Mental “Toughness” is the word used in the research but the underlying tones relate to certain negative stereotypes. However, the opposite of toughness in this concept is not “weakness”, the opposite of toughness is sensitivity, and sensitivity is a very key part of our human experience. We need mentally tough, mentally flexible and mentally sensitive people in our society. “Mental toughness” is not meant to be tough as a macho domineering or aggressive trait – it is about being the best you can be and being comfortable in your own skin.

The Four C's of Mental Toughness

Control

Life control – how much you have control you have over your own life or does life just happen to you – are you a 'victim' of life. If you have a high degree of mental toughness in relation to control, you feel you have a high degree of control and the decisions you make matter. If you are more mentally sensitive, you experience the circumstances of life but do not have much control over what happens. People like this experience a state of learned helplessness. Most people are in the middle on this and flexible and understand there are things in life that we do or do not control.

- People who are perfectionists feel that they have a high degree of control.
- In this regard you do not want to be at either extreme
- How we view things when we cannot control them – do we perceive this as a frustration or as an opportunity to try something different or to learn a new approach.
 - Consider encouraging mantras such as “I never Lose: I win or I learn”

Emotional Control – some people are so highly emotionally controlled that you never really know where they stand on a matter: this has both positive and negative implications. There are people with low emotional control where they are more sensitive emotionally and you always know how they feel.

- In this regard you want a balance between this – you want to be a genuine person but not likely to have emotional outbursts.
- Individuals use camouflage to make emotions less apparent – to express our emotions less or in a less obvious way. Some people are very expressive of their emotions or they may not understand why you are not more expressive of your emotions.

Discussion:

- What is the difference between perception and reality – what we think we can control and what we actually have control over? In regards to mental toughness it is a matter of perception.
- You do not want to have too much control – people like this are so protected in their persona that it is always a performance. Being so control of life makes others think that they need to live up to that level of performance as well. People who are too controlled need to work on lowering their level of control to more acceptable levels

Commitment

Goal Setting

- Are you good at setting goals and meeting those goals?
 - Some people do not set goals because they do not want to fail in meeting the goal.
 - The upside of goal setting is that it gives us something to work towards and gives us a sense of accomplishment
- It is very difficult when people set goals for us and this happens in the workplace and we are obligated to meet these goals.
- We need to be flexible with goals and goal setting. We need to try to set goals and try to meet them but not set ourselves up for failure or be hard on ourselves for failing to set the goal.

Achievement

- Some people do not set goals but may reach toward meeting others' goals
- Some people do not have the wherewithal to do what it takes to meet goals

Challenge

Most people are flexible in terms of risk taking and being risk averse. There are people at both extremes who do not take any risk and those who take a lot of risk.

Educators tend to be fairly risk avoidant – their scores on risk orientation tends to be more sensitive. This is also a function of age and seniority – the older and longer you have been in a position you become more risk averse. The educational environment is very risk averse.

People who are comfortable are not likely to take risks – they need to be encouraged to take these risks.

The problem though with a risk not going well can lead to further risk aversion. This can then lead to flight responses being more common to approaching risk.

Homework – take a risk – do something that pushes you outside of your boundaries and comfort zone.

Confidence

Confidence in Abilities

- Confidence in ability is our confidence – not our actual ability.
- Our confidence is what carries us.
- There are people who are highly confident in their abilities but not with the matching level of abilities. There are others with the reverse – people who have exceptional abilities but low confidence in their abilities.
- People who are confident in their abilities should perhaps be quiet occasionally in order to give others the space and time to speak up if they are perhaps lacking that confidence. This also provides a space for individuals who are slow processors and need some extra time to consider matters.

Interpersonal Confidence

Some people may be highly confident in their working environment but much less so in social situations. It is important to gauge how mentally tough you are in various settings to determine what areas you need to work on to make improvements and to develop different ways by which you can be more effective in scenarios where you may have less confidence.

These all combine into an overall measure of mental toughness and this connects other ideas of a positive growth mindset and grit.

Summary Comments:

To be mentally tough – we approach challenging situations as learning opportunities

Mentally sensitive sometimes gets a bad reputation – sometimes high levels of sensitivity can be beneficial – we need mentally sensitive people. Mentally sensitive people are those who focus on empathy and compassion and ensure the overall wellness of the team.

Homework – when you next meet with your classes – run through the mental toughness model in terms of your own persona. Are you tough, sensitive or flexible in each of the categories? Reflect also about your students and where they sit. Think of this also in terms of the teams you work with and how to can manage varying levels of toughness.

Refer to the slide deck available online for more information about Mental Toughness and the various benefits and drawbacks of the various levels of mental toughness/sensitivity.

Reiterating the importance of self-care

- Part of wellness involves setting effective boundaries. Say no when you need to and say yes when you can to open up new opportunities and challenges.
- We need to make our wellness our priority – this should not be the last thing we do in our day as an afterthought (or if it is even done at all).
- Mental wellness needs to be out top ethical imperative above all.
- Our bodies are our barometer on this and they will indicate when we have gone too far.
- **Homework – reflect on what you do and what you need to do to improve your mental wellness. If you do not know what this is then take serious time to consider what this is.**

Mental toughness questionnaire

There is a free online version or you can contact Brent Macdonald for a copy of this.