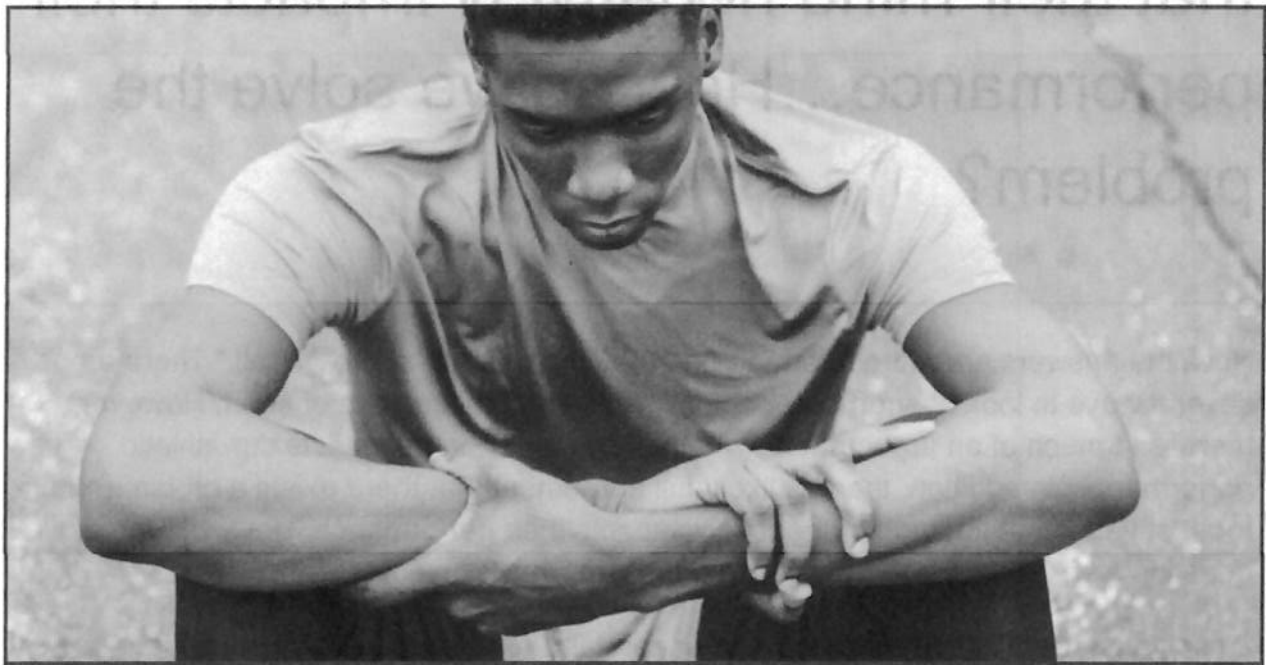


How to Support Mental Toughness and Resilience in Athletes

BLOG | BY TOBY SCHWARZ



I was raised with three older brothers who were all athletes by parents who were highly educated and loved us very much. My parents taught and modeled for us that “Emotions negatively impact your life, so avoid being emotional. Think rationally.” As I grew older and experienced more of life—and after coaching and teaching thousands of athletes over a 30-year period—I realized that my well-meaning parents had it wrong. Humans are NOT *rational beings who allow their emotions to occasionally get in the way*. Instead, I have firmly come to conclude that humans ARE *completely emotional beings who occasionally have rational thoughts*.

As a tenured professor in the kinesiology department at Whitworth University for the past 25 years, I have taught sports psychology courses to a wide variety of college students and student-athletes. In addition to that academic background and experience, I have served as the head track and field and cross-country coach for 25 years, with approximately 100 men and women on the rosters each season. Fifty years ago, if you

asked an athlete, student, or coach how much of an impact they thought someone's mind had on their performance, you would have gotten an answer ranging from "none" to "some."

There is likely full agreement that a problem exists within most athletes that their mind negatively impacts their performance...How do we solve the problem?

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

Now, the answers are more informed and may range from "some" to "all." There are several ways to look at sports psychology, or the mental aspects of sport. However, there isn't much of an argument on whether or not our brain impacts our athletic performance; in addition, there is likely full agreement that there exists a problem within most athletes that their mind *negatively* impacts their performance. However, the big question also exists: ***How do we solve the problem?***

To solve any problem, we need to first understand exactly what the problem is.

If you are a coach who looks at your athlete as a collection of mechanical movements that you are attempting to maximize efficiently, you will struggle with the mental aspects of coaching. However, if you view your athletes as breathing humans who are full of all kinds of competing emotions, thoughts, and feelings, then you will be in a better position to help your athletes manage their emotions.

I used to think that the only option I had to help some of my athletes to resolve their mental barriers was to cut their heads off. That excessive detachment would allow them to reach their full athletic potential. They were fast and strong and prepared, but their brains got in the way of all of their athletic potential and training. Now I see my athletes as flawed humans with hormones, doubts, fears, low self-confidence, and a myriad of other **psychological complexities**, and they require tools to help manage their emotions.

From Problem Recognition to Problem Solving

Once we have properly identified *who* we are working with, we must take the next step to properly define the issues that athletes are dealing with. How often do you hear an athlete say “I am stressed out” when they walk in the door? The answer is *quite often*. How many times have you responded, “That is great!” The answer is *never*.

Our society views stress as bad or negative. However, we all know that stress is neither bad nor good: Stress is defined as “a demand placed on something.” We lift weights (a demand) to get stronger. We put demands on our muscles in a variety of ways when we train. We don’t see that demand as negative or bad—it may hurt, but it has benefits, and that is why we subject ourselves to it. We run to put demands on our heart and lungs for conditioning. Athletes see it as negative, but the truth is that we all agree it is beneficial, and that is why we do it.

Stress is not inherently bad. Stress is...stress. Therefore, when an athlete says that they are “stressed out,” we know what they mean; unfortunately, they don’t. And because they don’t properly identify what is going on, they can’t efficiently find a solution. The question to ask them is “What is the demand on you?” It is usually something that is overwhelming them.

Distress is defined as “a demand that causes harm.” Too much of a demand (being overwhelmed) can cause mental harm. School is difficult. Life challenges. Change. Relationship issues. Financial problems. Unmet expectations. One or two or three of those things can give an athlete a sense of harmful stress.

Throughout the season, I witness athletes struggling in practice. The struggle is not simply fatigue or physical distress. When I ask the athlete “How are you doing?,” responses may range from a shrug to a laundry list of issues that they feel are out of their control (two common examples are a relationship that is coming to an end and/or a set of academic classes that are beyond the student-athlete’s perceived capabilities). Most of the time, simply verbalizing the issues will help the athlete recognize that life isn’t as out of control as they may imagine it is. A coach may be the only person to whom an athlete feels they can safely vent their fears and anxieties, and hopefully the coach is empathetic enough to **listen and provide support**.

Coaches need to point out to athletes that fears and anxieties are demands, just like weight training is a demand, and we can use them to make us better or allow them to damage us.

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

As coaches, we need to point out that these things are demands, just like weight training is a demand, which we can use to make us better or we can allow to damage us. Framing our problems accurately will help us correct or manage them. When we have a slow athlete, we shouldn't label them as "slow" and move on. Capable coaches figure out why the athlete is slow (lack of strength, poor fitness, improper mechanics, lack of confidence, etc.) and then implement a plan to fix those issues. The same should be true for mental barriers to success. Coaches need to help athletes identify the areas in their life that cause stress or other mental barriers and then equip them with the tools to manage or overcome them.

Addressing Distress

Distress can cause anxiety. Fear—which is different than distress—can also cause anxiety. Fear refers to how we perceive the possibility of something happening to us instead of the probability. When we look at the logical probability of something happening to us, it is typically low, but the possibility of it happening, no matter how small, results in fear. The "fight or flight" response is a *physiological* reaction to a perceived harmful event.

In other words, our *body* gets full of adrenaline so it can either run away from the charging saber-tooth tiger or stand and fight the big kitty. Our body has been conditioned to react to fear. Fear, however, is an emotional response to a *perceived* danger or harm. **That emotional response exists because of the lack of trust.** When we trust ourselves or others, we don't perceive events as being harmful to us. Few people fear sitting in a chair, as they trust the chair will hold them. Many people fear

public speaking because they don't trust how the audience will respond to what they say, and/or they don't trust their own ability to deliver a coherent message.

We need to identify our fears and learn to control them by understanding what it is that we don't trust in the situation. When we can understand the psychological response to fear and control it, we can then allow the physiological response to help us to *fight* and not engage in *flight*. **Allow fears to be a fire that fuels you and propels you forward and upward**, but don't allow fear to be a fuel that burns you up.

Mental Toughness and Resilience

Defining the problem accurately helps us find a solution. What is mental toughness? Is it being focused? Is it being angry? Is it being strong or intense?

Mental toughness is not accurately described by any of those, as they are all different areas that must be addressed separately. Mental toughness is most accurately described as the "ability to overcome an adverse situation in an expedient manner." Mentally tough people aren't better than anyone else. Mentally tough people are simply better at rebounding from challenges and rebounding in a shorter period of time than those who are not mentally tough.

Mentally tough people are simply better at rebounding from challenges and rebounding in a shorter period of time than those who are not mentally tough.

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

We all have heard the line "time heals all wounds." Give us enough time and we will "get over it." A mentally tough person "gets over it" and "gets over it" fast. The mentally tough person isn't flawless or perfect—a mentally tough person makes a lot of mistakes. The difference is that when a mentally tough person makes an error, the next time a ground

ball is hit to them they make a great play. Air ball? They drain a three. Mentally tough people respond to adversity and respond quickly. How does that happen?

Resilience, which is “the ability to rebound, recover, or bounce back to the original form,” is a skill. We are not born resilient. We learn resilience over time. But how do we learn resilience? Like any skill, we **learn it with practice.**

Sports have historically been an effective environment to help teach resilience. Failure is inevitable in sport, and when there is failure, there is an opportunity to practice resilience. No athlete bats 1.000 for very long, nor do they make every shot in every game. Getting a hit one out of three at bats in a game is seen as successful. Two out of three made field goals will get you a lot of praise in basketball.

Most athletes understand those statistics and realize that failure is part of sport and is something to overcome. However, not all athletes handle failure equally—often because some never learned to be resilient in the first place. Sport alone does not teach athletes character or skills, including resilience; sports are merely a tool that a coach can use to teach character and skills.

All athletes are not created equal—they come from various family environments and have various levels of support. Bobby Knight, the Hall of Fame college basketball coach, once stated in an interview: “Athletes today are not any different than athletes 30 or 40 years ago. What is different is the parents who raise them.” He went on to elaborate how parents (and coaches and teachers) tend to overly protect children, and that protection prevents the natural exposure to failure and thus the opportunity to learn resilience. When an athlete fails and a coach is present to help them cope with that failure, they acquire resilience. When an athlete fails and allows their emotions to take over, they may quit the sport or pout until they are “over it,” or simply blame the failure on others (e.g., *Coach isn't any good*).

Many athletes—but not all—come from homes that include loving parents who go to great lengths to take care of their children and protect them from harm. A kid falls off a bike and the parent runs over and picks them up. Or even “worse,” the parent doesn’t let the kid have a bike until they are confident that the kid won’t fall off while riding. Similarly, athletes often have great teachers and coaches who want the best for them, and that “best” may include keeping them from pain or disappointment (insert rant about “participation trophies,” “everyone plays equal time” rules, or “ties are okay” that often come up when talking about our “entitled children” and lack of resilience).

I love my kids, so I try to provide for them and help them avoid the pain and struggles that I unfortunately went through. However, by attempting to protect them, I may be keeping them from the opportunities that I had as a kid to learn resilience. My attempt to

help them may prevent them from developing the skill of resilience, which will be beneficial in their future challenges. In my 30 years of college coaching, there hasn't been a blueprint for athletes who have resilience and those who don't. In my experience, though, the athletes who have had more struggles in life tend to handle struggle easier than those who have had a smoother path.

I often work with Paralympic athletes. These athletes are not all the same, but one common characteristic that I have found is they tend to "grind" more and shrug off failure much more quickly than able-bodied athletes. I believe this is correlated to the fact that much of their life has revolved around overcoming adversity. The necessity to drag a competitive wheelchair around whenever you want to work out requires more resilience than simply throwing a pair of shoes in your backpack.

Coping, along with resilience, is a skill... Coping is not a passive activity—the skill of coping must be learned, and thus coaches must teach it.

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

Coping is the manner in which we "deal with problems." Coping, along with resilience, is a skill. We all have different ways to cope. Ignoring is a common "coping mechanism." However, ignoring is not actually a **successful coping strategy**—it will not allow us to deal with a problem for the long term. Ignoring simply delays the requirement to cope until later. Successful coping requires four steps:

1. **Control our emotions.** Emotions cause us to think less rationally and allow feelings to direct thoughts and behavior. Take a big deep breath and calm yourself.
2. **Organize the inputs.** In other words, what is happening. This is like the "data collection" step in the scientific method.
3. **Plan a strategy.** Once we have all of the data, we can plan a strategy.
4. **Execute that strategy.** This may seem like a simple step, but it is often the most difficult.

We are often capable of planning, but actually executing a plan requires a risk that many of us are unwilling to take. Control, Organize, Plan, and Execute. C-O-P-E. It is easy to remember the steps of coping. It is much more difficult to actually cope with our problems.

Coping with Loss

Loss is the most common area in our lives that requires coping. Loss of any kind will cause anxiety, distress, depression, and a lack of self-confidence, all of which can benefit from coping. Whenever we lose something, our emotions get the best of us. Lose a game. Lose a loved one. Lose a relationship. Lose our car keys. Obviously, we react to some losses more than others, but all losses require some form of coping.

Controlling our emotions requires patience and trust. Organizing the input requires focus and awareness. Planning a strategy requires critical thinking and problem-solving. Execution requires risk-taking and motivation. Coping is not a passive activity—the skill of coping must be learned, and thus coaches must teach it.

When an athlete has a poor performance or fails, they may act out or shut down—their emotions take over. In order to control emotions, a great first step is to take a deep breath. That simple action causes the athlete to pause. Sometimes, controlling emotions requires a coach to “talk the athlete down off the ledge.” Giving your perspective and listening to the athlete’s emotions will help them control their emotional state. Once those emotions are less overwhelming, you can address rational thought. “Why are you so upset?” “Was the performance as bad as you thought it was?” “What variables did you have control over that you didn’t control and what variables were out of your control?” (e.g., the opponent was much better, the referee made an untimely call, etc.).

**Athletes need to understand that
flawlessness is rare in sport.
Improvement is more likely.**

Once the facts are laid out, the coach can help the athlete strategize how to move forward. “What can we do at practice next week to improve and raise the probability of a better performance?” Words are key. *Probability* is different than *guarantee*. *Better* is different than *perfect*. Athletes need to understand that flawlessness is rare in sport. *Improvement* is more likely. Set process goals and not outcome goals, and then communicate with the athlete during the week to check how the process is going.

Coping leads us to being content—but not satisfied—with our current situation. *Contentment* and *satisfaction* are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. *Satisfied* refers to being “pleased or full.” When we are satisfied, we no longer want or feel the need for more. As an athlete (and as a human who desires to reach their full potential), satisfaction prevents us from pushing forward—when we determine something is full, there is no need to do more. More tends to cause us to overflow, which becomes a waste. If we are satisfied, we lack motivation to get better.

If an athlete beats an inferior opponent, they can feel satisfied with the victory, and that may lull them into a false sense of confidence and prevent them from putting forth the effort to improve. After beating an inferior opponent, the athlete should feel good about their win, but realize that the next competition may bring a greater challenge. In addition, if an athlete fails to reach their goal, they don’t need to be happy about their performance, but they can be at peace with how they executed the game plan. They should realize that with more effort, they will perform better next time and possibly come out on top.

On the other hand, contentment refers to peace in our current situation. Peace allows us to see the good in what we have accomplished but doesn’t limit our desire to achieve more. **We should be content (have peace), but we should never be satisfied unless we are finished with the process of getting better.** Whether we win or lose, post a personal best, or perform poorly, we must be grateful for where we are and what we have been able to accomplish (contentment). Yet, we also must allow the win or loss, success or failure, to fuel us to become even better and to not settle (satisfied) for where we are.

Mental Skills on the Field of Play

Many of the suggestions thus far may seem easier said than done. Changing someone’s mindset is similar to changing someone’s mind: It takes a lot of time and a lot of energy. One thing that doesn’t take much time and energy is the concept of

breathing. Breathing is simple. We all do it, or we wouldn't stay alive. Unfortunately, we all don't breathe well enough.

Breathing is important. Routinely taking a BIG, DEEP BREATH is essential. Breathing detoxifies and releases toxins. Breathing releases tension. Breathing relaxes the mind and brings clarity. Breathing relieves emotional problems. Breathing relieves pain. Breathing strengthens our immune system. Breathing improves posture. Breathing improves the quality of our blood. Breathing increases digestion and assimilation of food. Breathing improves our nervous system. Breathing strengthens our lungs. Breathing boosts our overall energy levels. Breathing improves cellular generation (which helps us heal). Breathing elevates our mood. Breathing forces us to pause and be patient. Breathing keeps us alive.

So, stop and take a DEEP breath! Stopping thoughts and taking a deep breath now puts us in the position to think more clearly and rationally. This allows our emotions to be less in control, and we can **tap into our brain**, which contains the tools we need to make a plan on future thoughts and actions.

We should not avoid or ignore the mental struggles of our athletes.

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

Coaches play a huge role in helping athletes to be aware of their emotions and training them to manage those emotions. We should not avoid or ignore emotions. We should not avoid or ignore the mental struggle of our athletes. As coaches, we must help athletes understand their emotions and how they can manage and control them, so that they can reach their full athletic potential.

Since you're here...

...we have a small favor to ask. More people are reading SimpliFaster than ever, and each week we bring you compelling content from coaches, sport scientists, and physiotherapists who are devoted to building better athletes. Please take a moment to share the articles on social media, engage the authors with questions and comments below, and link to articles when appropriate if you have a blog or participate on forums of related topics. — S



Toby Schwarz

Now in his 25th season as the Head Track & Field and Cross Country Coach at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, Dr. Toby Schwarz has transformed the teams into one of the top programs in the nation. Since the 1996 season, more than 100 student-athletes have earned All-America (Top 8) performances in cross country, indoor track and field, or outdoor track and field. Schwarz has coached Pirate athletes to 11 individual national titles over the same period (10 outdoor and one indoor). Several Whitworth teams have finished among the top 20 teams in the nation, including a third-place finish at the 2008 NCAA Division III Outdoor Championships, a third-place finish at the 2009 NCAA Division III Indoor Championships, and a sixth-place finish at the 2009 NCAA Women's Cross Country Championships. Schwarz has earned 45 Coach of the Year awards, including 24 NCAA West Region and 20 Northwest Conference honors. In 2009, Schwarz was selected as the NCAA Division III Men's Coach of the Year.

Dr. Schwarz is a professor in the kinesiology department at Whitworth, where he teaches sports psychology and other courses. He is a sought-after speaker on a variety of topics, including motivation and sports psychology.

