

Tough it out

How mentally resilient are you?
Here's why you need to know...

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We can define mental toughness as “a personality trait that explains in large part how individuals respond differently to the same or similar stressors, pressures, opportunities and challenges, irrespective of prevailing circumstances”.

Mental toughness is a universal quality. It is present, to some extent, in everyone and is a factor in determining how we respond to events and situations – whether that is at work, at rest, at play or at home.

As a personality trait, it explains how we think when confronted by events. This differentiates it

from other aspects of personality, which look at how we act (behaviours) and how we feel (emotional responses). It is important in its own right, but it is also a significant factor in understanding why we behave and why we respond emotionally the way we do. The opposite of mental toughness is mental sensitivity, not mental weakness.

The mentally tough are not tough in the ‘macho’ sense of toughness. They are accurately described as being comfortable in their own skin, and can deal, or cope better, with whatever life throws at them. They tend to make the most of their abilities and are open to learning through reflecting on their experiences – good and bad.

Given that a determination to deliver is central to effective leadership and management,  mental toughness is relevant here.

Resilient mindset

More than 80 research papers show that the mental toughness of an individual is strongly correlated with:

- **Attainment or performance.** The mentally tough adopt a ‘can do’ approach to most activities; they appear to work harder, be more focused and achieve more.
- **Wellbeing.** They deal more effectively with setbacks and challenges, and are better at dealing with anxiety. They are also more content.
- **Agility and positive thinking.** The mentally tough have a more positive outlook on life and tend to see opportunity where others see threats, especially in the so-called VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. They respond more readily when events require change. They can thrive in changing and challenging situations.

THE MENTALLY TOUGH HAVE A MORE POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON LIFE

- **Aspirations.** The mentally tough are more predisposed to self-improvement and development.
- **Development of peer relationships.** The mentally tough form relationships with peers more quickly, and more effectively. While mentally sensitive individuals are more sensitive to differences, mentally tough individuals appear to take these in their stride.

All these factors combine to describe aspects of what is commonly called ‘mindset’. Work on mental toughness has been extended to look at groups, teams and whole organisations. Similarly, the concept of mental toughness, and the attributes associated with it, has provided insight into the capability of organisations to perform under pressure, to be positive and responsive to challenges, and to develop an ethos where wellbeing is protected. Mental toughness is an important element of the culture of an organisation or the environment in which the individual operates.

A closer look

In 2002, Professor Peter Clough published his work on mental toughness. He identified that it was a concept that embraced four independent elements (‘the 4Cs’). I did further work in 2017 with Clough and Dr John Perry, which found that each of the elements consisted of two independent factors. These provide a deep understanding into how an individual mentally approaches events. The 4Cs and the eight factors can be summarised in the table opposite, which illustrates the concept in terms of a mentally tough individual.

The benefits of leaders and managers having this kind of mindset are fairly obvious. The mentally sensitive will generally think in an opposite way. Yet there is nothing wrong with being mentally sensitive. Those who are can still achieve, but their journey through life is often more difficult.

Indeed, there are potential strengths and weakness associated with both camps. The mentally sensitive can detect stressors long before the mentally tough person will do and they are often creative in a different way. The mentally tough can overcommit, be overconfident and try too many things.

So it is absolutely key that everyone practises self-awareness and reflection:

- **Self-awareness** – know yourself, your strengths and your weaknesses.
- **Reflection** – consider what does this mean for my performance and wellbeing, and my relationship with others?

CAN WE DEVELOP MENTAL TOUGHNESS?

Yes, we can. We can either help people to change their mental toughness or show them how to adopt the behaviours that a mentally tough person would adopt. Either way, many of the benefits of developing mental toughness can be achieved.

There appear to be six major groupings of effective interventions, all of which are developed through experiential learning:

- **Positive thinking** – developing thinking processes to focus on opportunity and not threat.
- **Anxiety control** – dealing with emotional responses to situations (widely used in stress management).
- **Attentional control** – enabling individuals to focus and concentrate better, for longer.
- **Visualisation** – often related to positive thinking, this intervention shows individuals how to use their heads so that they learn to deal with challenging events.
- **Goal setting** – learning how to set and achieve goals, predominantly through setting milestones.
- **Self-awareness supported by the use of psychometrics** – many people will know that they have an issue with a situation, but they may not always understand why that is.

There are many tools and techniques that can be used to develop mental toughness. Most work, but they don’t necessarily work for everyone. Two of the most effective are:

- **Self talk.** This technique is widely used in sports. Take time to reflect on the language used inside your head. If you use words such as ‘can’t’, ‘might’, ‘if’ and ‘but’, they will often lead to you perceiving events in a negative way. So stop using them and replace them with words and phrases such as ‘can’ and ‘I will’ instead. As a result, your perception of events will change and this can translate into positive behaviour.
- **Think three positives.** At the end of each day, write down three things that you have done well. The act of writing them down supports reflection. After a week or so, look back at what you’ve written and see how positive it has been.

THE MENTAL TOUGHNESS SCALE

Eight factors (think of these as thoughts, running inside your head)

CONTROL

Life control – I really believe I can do it, and I can shape much of what I need to do.

Emotional control – I can manage my emotions and the emotions of others.

COMMITMENT

Goal orientation – I set goals and I like the idea of working towards them.

Achievement orientation – I will do what it takes to achieve my targets.

CHALLENGE

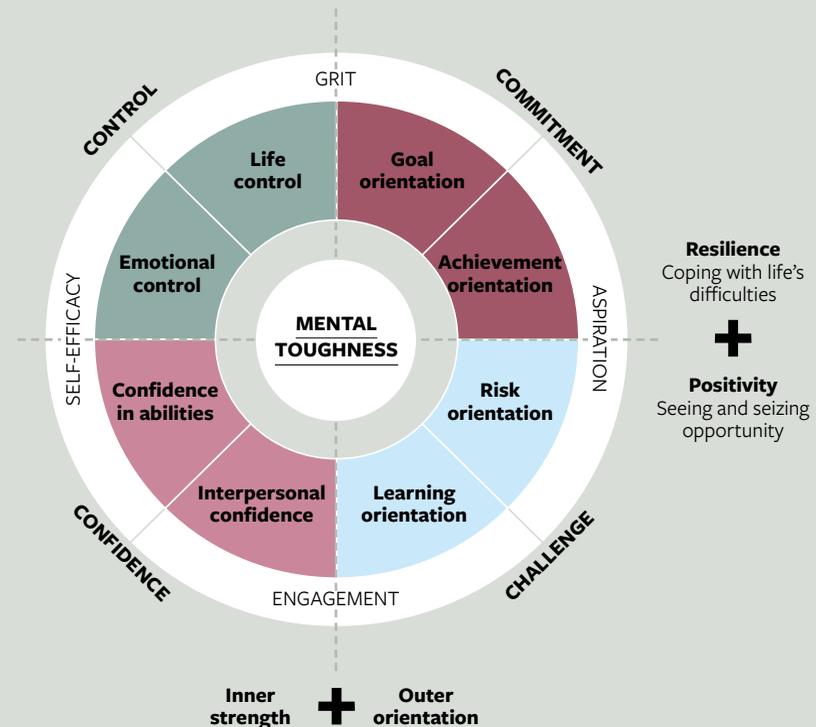
Risk orientation – I welcome new and different experiences, and I stretch myself.

Learning orientation – I learn from what happens, including setbacks, and I improve myself.

CONFIDENCE

In abilities – I believe in my ability to do it, or I can acquire that ability.

Interpersonal confidence – I can influence others and I can stand my ground if needed.



Once these questions are answered, it is possible to direct development activity more effectively. Reflection gives us an insight into how important development might be, and influences our motivation to do something.

Implications for leaders and managers

If you are a leader or manager, it is fundamentally important that you are aware of your own level of mental toughness. One important piece of research shows a strong correlation between mental toughness and the level that an individual is able to reach within an organisation. There are three key areas for consideration, among others.

- Mental toughness is a significant factor in one's own performance, alongside ability, knowledge and skills. It helps to optimise their application.
- It enables leaders and managers to better comprehend the people around them – to understand their 'attitude' and to appreciate how and why they might be different.
- Possibly most importantly, mental toughness has implications for relationships with others. We can see that a mentally tough leader is likely to be personally effective. If they have high levels of

A MENTALLY TOUGH LEADER IS LIKELY TO BE PERSONALLY EFFECTIVE

mental toughness and behave in accordance with this, they may demonstrate behaviours that switch off the people around them. Look at the descriptors in the table above and ask yourself: "What are the implications for others if I do this a lot?" Once again, self-awareness and reflection are key.

Assessing mental toughness

We can evaluate mental toughness in terms of the extent to which the 4Cs exist in individuals and groups through two available psychometric assessments: MTQPlus and MTQ48. They are normative assessments that enable users to assess their mental toughness before and after an event, such as a training and development exercise or coaching programme. They can also be applied to large groups as a way to identify the patterns and level of mental toughness within those groups.

It is difficult to assess mental toughness without the use of a measure. Unlike behaviour, which is often apparent, we can't see into people's heads. **E** Doug Strycharczyk is CEO of AQR International, a psychometric test publisher that operates in 80 countries. With Professor Peter Clough, he is co-author of 'Developing Mental Toughness'. He is the lead developer of the ILM72, an assessment for measuring leadership style and effectiveness. Contact him at doug@aqr.co.uk