

EAST SUSSEX - COMMANDO KRAV MAGA

Mental Toughness - How Do You Get It? Are You Born With It? Or Does LIFE Give it to you?

After the [National Geographic Channel's Fight Science television show](#) on Special Ops, a majority of the emails received this week discussed mental toughness, as if I had some magic solution for people to acquire it. The truth is the human body is built for survival and will adapt to better handle cold, heat, stress, pain and just about anything you can throw at it. After years of training in cold water before, during and after my seven years in the SEAL Teams, I got used to colder water as seen in the Fight Science TV show. However, if you take a look online, you will see that we all have something in life, sports, environment, or attitude that makes us a little bit tougher. There are thousands of ways to get "mentally tough" and physical fitness is just one of many ways.

Mental Toughness has many definitions and is not limited to athletic performance and pain tolerance. I have known many men and women throughout my life who I would define as "mentally tough". From an 85 year old gardener to a high school wrestling friend, who it seemed neither ever had a bad day. Much of mental toughness is simply attitude and self esteem. If you do a search online on the subject, you will see a variety of mental toughness techniques, articles, stories of remarkable physical performances to brave acts of heroism overcoming insurmountable odds and fear.

Personally, my philosophy has always been quite simple when it comes to mental toughness as well as increasing your body's ability to withstand pain. Though like I stated, my way is NOT the only way, just the catalyst I have used in the past to develop what I call mental and physical toughness that enabled me to graduate SEAL training more than fifteen years ago. It works for me and many others who have attended physically challenging events / training programs.

I believe that in athletics especially, that through tough workouts you will build mental toughness. Physiologically your body will start to buffer lactate better IF given the stimulus to do so - meaning we will physically adapt to get in better shape and our muscles will fail later and later and later until you can surpass perceived limitations. In a military environment, this method has been known to work, BUT adding training under stress, hunger, and fatigue will only enhance performance on the battlefield. I guess the only saying; "The more you bleed in training, the less you bleed in war" applies to this philosophy.

Mental Toughness requires tough conditioning, but there is a fine line between pain and injury, of course. This takes hundreds of reps of exercises (both physical and military ops), or for example minutes of non-stop punching in a boxer's case. In my case, enormously high reps of pus-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, dips, running for miles and swimming for miles will create increased energy levels, increased ability to buffer lactate, and an increased pain tolerance through training in the pain zone. You really have to get the body to know what pain is before you can endure it longer. BUT once again PAIN is not injury, but if you push too hard through pain you will be setting up for injury, so knowing your training limits is necessary as well.

And then the next day when you feel like crap and you have to WILL yourself to work out again. THAT too is mental toughness. Persistence and determination are all factors as well. Other terms used to describe mental toughness is inspiration, self-motivation and confidence.

I guess in the end to define such an intangible quality is almost impossible. There have been many people who do not exercise at all who bring themselves out of horrible childhoods of poverty, neglect, and illness to become heroes, mentors, millionaires, and presidents. That takes mental toughness in MY book.

One thing I do know though is that physical training programs will help your self-esteem and confidence, which is perhaps the first step to gaining mental toughness for some. But, **Mental Toughness!** How do you get it? Are you born with it? Can you acquire it? Arguments to this question have occurred long before there was Navy SEAL training. I am of the personal belief that through tough physical training, proper mindset, and a high level of maturity that mental toughness is born. This toughness is what propels you through several long days of no sleep, days of ruck marches without food, and when the pain of a nagging injury can be ignored. How do you get that?

Take for example, the five time Tour de France winner, Lance Armstrong who endured one of the toughest diseases by beating cancer. After his battle with cancer, he came back mentally tougher and has been at the top of his game ever since. Maybe he had it all along, who knows? Mental toughness is not measurable and is completely internal. But I believe hard work will get you there. When Lance Armstrong was asked recently by reporters "What are you on?" referring to performance enhancing drugs. Lance stated, "I am on my BIKE - busting my ass for 6-8 hours a day!!"

So the question is do you get mental toughness by attending Special Operations training schools, such as Ranger School, BUDS, PJ Indoc, and the Q Course, or by the training done before hand. The answer is a combination of both. I feel I was mentally tough due to my training prior to attending SEAL Training, but further developed my mental toughness to emerge truly feeling I was capable of anything and would not quit – EVER.

I have seen *many* great athletes not graduate BUD/S and a *few* men not in that great of shape graduate through sheer determination and daily gut checks. The few who graduate had a common trait of being able to "play with pain" and a mental determination never to quit on themselves or most importantly their BUD/S classmates. Team sports in high school probably helped with that a bit and men who played sports that require playing with pain such as wrestling, football, lacrosse and others usually did quite well.

The key is to - **Arrive ready to compete** not to merely survive. This is the biggest difference in those who graduate any special forces training and those who do not. You should be in the type of shape that will allow you to win or be in the top 10% of the class in every event. If you can easily surpass the minimum standards (if not double them in pull-ups, push-ups, and sit-ups) on the respective PFTs – you will be in the top ten percent of your class and surprised when you get there to how many students can barely pass the PFT. These are proven standards of a majority of the graduates when they arrive at any SF school. It does not mean you will graduate if you can ace the standards, in fact, many Navy SEAL students with maximum scores have quit. Whether you physically ace the PFT or barely pass it, it ALL depends on your mental toughness that will help you graduate. How much pain can you play with? That is an un-measurable element of the Navy SEAL student. However, one common denominator between most of the graduates who have this mental toughness is they were also in great shape and did not mind being yelled at by the instructors. IN fact, finding humour in what happens to you daily is one of the best ways to get through the daily grind.

Everyone at Navy SEAL training will have their nemesis or weakness. For those who are great swimmers – they are usually poor runners. For those with great upper-body strength they are usually not so great at running. Big guys over 200 pounds usually have a difficult time with running and the obstacle course, whereas little guys who wrestled in the past do not, but they typically are not great swimmers with fins or carry heavy rucksacks easily. Every now and then you will find one person who is great at all the events, but usually even he has to suck one of the events and push himself harder to win.

In your journey to find mental toughness remember to train smart and not push yourself to injury that will require medical attention. Rehab is a long and slow process that will delay your efforts significantly. Check out Stew Smith's Grinder PT – The Key to Mental Toughness Workout on the [StewSmith.com eBook Fitness Store](http://StewSmith.com).