



## COMMENTARY

# ‘I didn’t train for this’: Take cues from elite athletes to maintain stamina during the COVID-19 crisis

We can train ourselves to develop mental toughness to get us through challenging times



### Mary K. McCarthy, MD

Director  
Faculty/Trainee Mental Health Program  
Brigham and Women’s Hospital  
Boston, Massachusetts  
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry  
Harvard Medical School

I am not an elite athlete. Never have been, never will be. But as I contemplated how to support my colleagues at my hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic—knowing that we face more weeks of social distancing, probable virus outbreaks as business opens up, and myriad changes in how we will practice medicine—I wondered how Olympic athletes focus their mental and physical stamina to respond to the challenges of competition.

In this article, I offer some pointers, gleaned from techniques used by exceptional athletes, on how we can maintain our stamina during the COVID-19 marathon.

### Train your mind

Elite athletes understand that what will take them to the top of their sport is less about their physical gifts (all elite athletes have superior athletic talent) and more about how they

train their minds to achieve their goals. As basketball great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar said, “Your mind is what makes everything else work.” Not surprisingly, athletes who train to be mentally “tough” have a better chance to reach the podium.

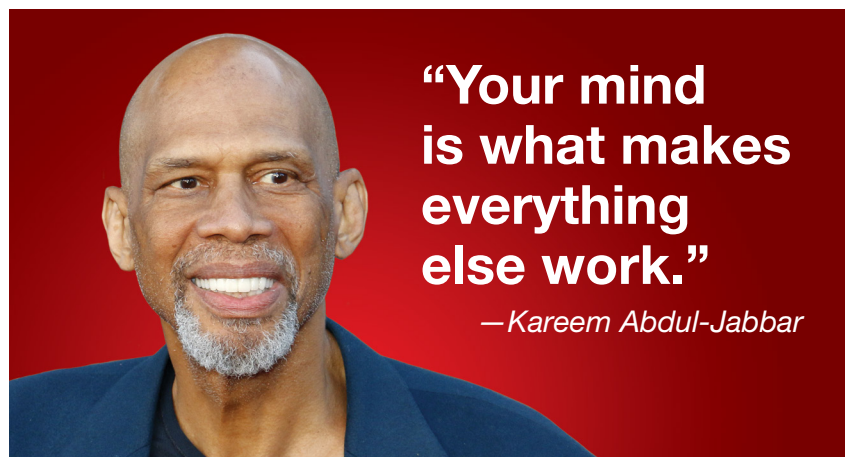
One definition of mental toughness is the “ability to perform toward the upper range of your talent and skill” regardless of external circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Mental toughness involves an unshakable self-belief, resilience, motivation, focus, and ability to

perform under pressure and manage physical and emotional pain.

Like me, most of you probably are not elite athletes, but you can train your mind to be tougher and increase your stamina using some of the following techniques.

### Think positively

Do you find yourself dealing with an inner monologue of fear, self-doubt, and feelings of worthlessness? That is the Obnoxious Roommate in your head as described in a HuffPost



*The author reports no financial relationships relevant to this article.*

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

article and based on the pioneering work of psychiatrist Aaron Beck, MD, the father of cognitive-behavioral therapy.<sup>2,3</sup> Such thoughts negatively affect one's sense of self-efficacy, which is the mental state of believing that you can meet the challenges you face. Elite athletes pay particular attention to their self-talk and replace negative thoughts with positive ones. These may include affirmations of your strengths or cue words that pump you up or help you manage your nerves.

To begin this practice, first observe what you are telling yourself. You may be saying, "I can't do this. This is too hard." This is an important step because you may have lived with the Obnoxious Roommate for so long that these thoughts are automatic and seem like a part of you. If, however, you first observe the thought and acknowledge it, you can begin to replace negative thoughts with supportive ones: "This is hard, but I can do this. I am intelligent, strong, capable, and ready." While practice and repetition are required, thinking positively eventually will become a habit of self-support. Elite athletes know that to reach the top, they need to become their own best friend.<sup>4</sup>

### Use visualization

Elite athletes visualize their events in such meticulous detail that they can actually *feel* their feet on the track, their muscles tensing, the starter pistol going off, the roar of the crowd. Research shows that the part of the brain that is activated in a race is also activated when one *visualizes* the race. It is as though the race is happening in real time.<sup>5</sup> Physicians could use this approach to visualize the day ahead, picturing the procedures in detail and the clinical encounters going well.

In the current crisis, we

frequently need a way to calm down quickly. One suggestion is to find a quiet space and sit for a few minutes, allowing the chair to support you. Then imagine a beautiful, calm, soothing place. Relax there and take in that feeling. Or, imagine a past achievement when you felt good about yourself. See yourself in that moment, remember how you felt, and take it in.

### Plan for setbacks

All elite athletes have setbacks: Marathon runners hit a wall, golfers hit into the rough. But they don't spin out of control at setbacks. They expect them, and they have practiced skills to restore their confidence and re-center themselves.<sup>6</sup> For example, some athletes calm themselves by performing a ritualized series of movements. Others use a specific phrase (that positive self-talk again!) that reminds them of their goals or skills, while others play specific songs on their media player, or in their head, to return to their center.

Another technique is to use deep, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing for about 30 seconds to bring yourself back to your body.

The point is to have a plan in place to respond to setbacks in a positive manner and get back on track. Don't waste time on self-criticism.

### Manage stress

Not all stress is negative. Everyone has a "sweet spot," a level of activation from which we operate best.<sup>1</sup> If we go too far over that level, though, we can panic. If we aren't stressed enough, it is hard to get going at all.

If you need to be pumped up to function at your best, try playing music that energizes you. If you work best when you are calm, take deep breaths and attend to the exhalation while you engage in positive self-talk.

Another way to manage stress levels during the COVID-19 pandemic is to employ the ESCAPE mnemonic:

- **E**xercise. Research shows that regular aerobic exercise is a potent stress reliever; it raises endorphin levels, provides a general sense of well-being, and improves immune function.<sup>7</sup> If you exercise regularly, do everything possible to keep doing so. If you do not have an exercise routine, try taking walks. Get out into the fresh air, pay attention to your surroundings, and work to be present in your body as you move.
- **S**leep. Getting adequate sleep, 7 to 9 hours a night for most people, is important for maintaining physical and emotional health.<sup>8</sup> Elite athletes pay particular attention to sleep because they know that their bodies need to recharge. The COVID-19 crisis has affected sleep for many, and we need to consciously attend to sleep hygiene. This includes limiting use of screen time to no more than 2 hours before bed. As well, limit your intake of the news and definitely avoid it right before bedtime. Take a warm shower, drink a cup of herbal tea, or read a less-than-stimulating journal article. Make sure your bedroom is cool and dark. Keep a regular bedtime and wake up at a regular time.
- **C**onnect. Despite the current need for physical distancing, do not neglect your need to connect to those you love and care about. Whatever modality works for you—telephone, e-mail, video conferencing—if you feel lonely, reach out. Friends and families are concerned about us, and it makes them feel useful to support us. Allow that.
- **A**ppreciate/cultivate gratitude. Look for causes for celebration in your life, whether that is your family, friends, or that you have a job and a

home. Perhaps it is the cleaner air or the beauty of nature. Whatever you are grateful for, acknowledge it, perhaps by writing it down in a journal. Remembering these things can serve as an antidote to the stress created by the COVID-19 crisis.

- **Play.** Seek out things that make you laugh.<sup>9</sup> Find your inner goofiness. Get creative and paint, sing, garden, golf, play an instrument, dance, do puzzles, or play games. We need to remember the

pleasures in life when times are dark. Find whatever feels like joy.

- **Exhale.** If you have a meditation practice continue to do it. If not, consider starting. Try yoga as a way to center yourself in your body. Elite athletes use meditation and yoga to harness their minds and bodies to feel more in control.<sup>10</sup> When so many things feel out of our control and unpredictable, it can be immensely soothing to connect to yourself in this way and realize you can reliably relax.

## Self-care is a necessity

While we are in a marathon not of our choosing, we can use the techniques of elite athletes to think positively, visualize scenarios to achieve our goals or to simply relax, plan for setbacks so that we can bounce back, and manage stress productively. Self-care is paramount as we continue to care for others. Let's not neglect ourselves, and we will cross the finish line together. ●

---

### References

1. Jones G. What is this thing called mental toughness? An investigation of elite sport performers. *J Applied Sport Psych.* 2002;14:205-218.
2. Gregoire C. The brain-training secrets of Olympic athletes. *HuffPost.* February 11, 2014. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mind-hacks-from-olympic-a\\_n\\_4747755](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mind-hacks-from-olympic-a_n_4747755). Accessed May 27, 2020.
3. Beck AT. A 60-year evolution of cognitive theory and therapy. *Perspect Psychol Sci.* 2019;14:16-20.
4. Afremow J. *The Champion's Mind: How Great Athletes Think, Train, and Thrive.* New York, NY: Rodale Inc; 2014.
5. Ranganathan VK, Siemionow V, Liu JZ, et al. From mental power to muscle power—gaining strength by using the mind. *Neuropsychologia.* 2004;42:944-956.
6. Morgan Griffin R. 5 tips for building mental stamina. July 8, 2013. *WebMD.* <https://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/features/mental-stamina#1>. Accessed May 27, 2020.
7. Hackney AC. Stress and the neuroendocrine system: the role of exercise as a stressor and modifier of stress. *Expert Rev Endocrinol Metab.* 2006;1:783-792.
8. Hirschowitz M, Whiton K, Albert SM, et al. National Sleep Foundation's sleep time duration recommendations: methodology and results summary. *Sleep Health.* 2015;1:40-43.
9. Saper B. The therapeutic use of humor for psychiatric disturbances of adolescents and adults. *Psychiatr Q.* 1990;61:261-272.
10. Zeidan F, Johnson SK, Diamond BJ, et al. Mindfulness meditation improves cognition: evidence of brief mental training. *Conscious Cogn.* 2012;19:597-605.