

PANDEMIC MOJO

THIS ERA OF LOCKDOWNS AND QUARANTINES IS ENOUGH TO MAKE JUST GETTING OUT OF BED A CHALLENGE, LET ALONE FINDING THE ENERGY TO EXCEL. BUT TAKE HEART, PERFORMANCE EXPERTS SAY THERE ARE EVERYDAY RITUALS THAT CAN HELP YOU STAY NEAR YOUR PEAK IN THIS TIME OF CRISIS, WRITES HELEN HAWKES.

AS A LOCKDOWN culture breeds lassitude, the idea of building a resilience that will steel us from the vagaries of the future seems increasingly appealing.

What if we could maintain an excitement about life, or a passion for performance, that was impervious to external challenges?

Could we become as bulletproof as centenarians, mountain climbers, concentration camp survivors or even 113-year-old Maria Branyas, Spain's oldest living person and a survivor of COVID-19, the 1918 flu pandemic and two world wars?

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Resilience and peak performance do depend to an extent on genes, including those that affect maintenance of cells responsible for DNA repair, lipid levels, inflammation and immune response.

However, experts agree we can toughen up mentally and physically to operate as our best selves, no matter our ticket in the genetic lottery. The key is mental toughness, which is something we all possess to some extent. It helps determine how we respond mentally to stressors, pressure, opportunity and challenge.

"Generally, there is a strong correlation with performance; mentally tough individuals will often have a 'can do' mindset and get satisfaction, even a buzz, from achieving their goals," say AQR International chief executive Doug Strycharczyk and technical director and psychologist professor Peter Clough.

The company makes evidence-based psychometric tools and assessments that allow organisations to measure resilience and tailor interventions to improve it. These are now used in 80 countries,

including Australia, through The Positivity Institute and Mental Toughness Partners.

Strycharczyk says peer-reviewed studies show that mental toughness is determined by four constructs: control, commitment, challenge, and confidence.

Within these are factors such as emotional control, confidence in our abilities, and whether we are goal or learning oriented. (See chart on this page.)

To develop mental toughness, we need to understand which factors are holding us back, Strycharczyk says.

While AQR has its own training programs around mindset, attributes and behaviours, its CEO says the tools and techniques are mostly drawn from positive psychology, cognitive behavioural therapy and sports coaching.

“The issue is that no one thing works for everyone,” he explains. “So there is a degree of experimentation required, with self-awareness the key. Even practices such as meditation, reflection and mindfulness, which feature in many religions, can be useful.”

Yogi Rob Lyon, founder of Lyon Health, says: “Meditation teaches you to remain within yourself amid the everyday chaos. It quiets the mind and gives the ‘flight or fight’ part of your nervous system a much-needed break.

“Striving towards a sense of nothingness and emptiness during a meditative practice allows you to think clearly and definitively when times get tough.”

Lyon believes including mindfulness practices in your routine, for about 30 minutes a day, can help unlock peak performance and build mental resilience.

“This could be a combination of breath work, meditation and stretching, ideally after exercise and before bed.”

BODY AND MIND

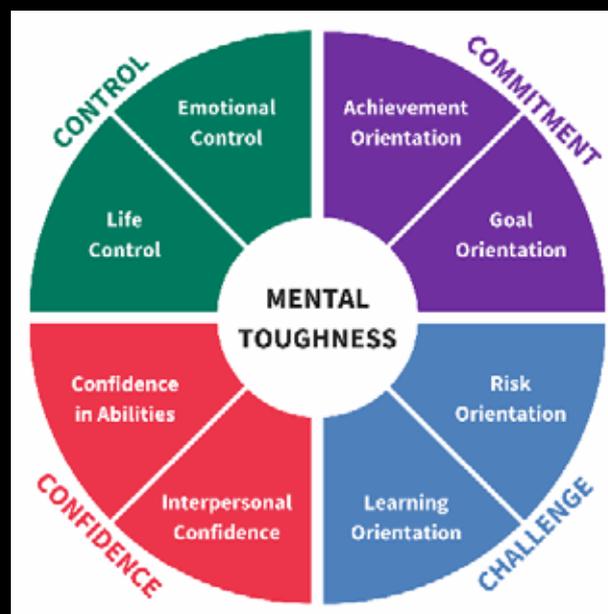
In order to be a peak performer, it is necessary to adopt rituals that integrate and optimise body and mind, says exercise physiologist, nutritionist and neuroscientist Paul Taylor, director of The Mind-Body-Brain Performance Institute.

A former airborne anti-submarine warfare officer and helicopter search-and-rescue crew member with the British Royal Navy, today Taylor delivers performance workshops to organisations including NAB, Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Medibank and the Australian military.

Taylor has also been a professional boxer and has undergone rigorous military training for combat survival and even resistance to interrogation.

“The brain controls everything the body does but it is absolutely dependent on the health of the body for optimal functioning,” says Taylor, who has developed an app called Resilient Mind.

PERFORMANCE WHEEL



PEAK PERFORMERS VIEW EVERY CHALLENGE NOT AS AN INSURMOUNTABLE OBSTACLE BUT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN AND GROW.



For those looking to toughen up or excel, the former elite soldier has identified seven rituals to enhance mental vitality and what he terms “psychological capital”. (See box, this page.)

In testing times, he adds, researchers have found optimism regardless of difficulties prevails, alongside a staunch acceptance of reality and a determination to face it.

“You can have all the money in the world but if you’re not in a positive mindset, what does it mean?” Taylor asks.

Organisational psychologist and psycho-therapist Rachel Setti also champions positive thinking.

“The barrier to peak performance is about an individual’s self-talk and the narrative they use to explain the situation they find themselves in,” Setti explains. “Optimists tend to believe that problems aren’t permanent or pervasive. They take responsibility but they also have the ability to show a vulnerability that allows others to support them.”

That’s not about having a meltdown in front of stakeholders, she reassures. It simply means sharing a little about the challenges you’re grappling with to climb that metaphorical – or perhaps literal – mountain.

What’s more, peak performers view every challenge not as an insurmountable obstacle but as an opportunity to learn and grow, she explains.

But what else fuels the people who, right now, are adapting to the pandemic and even managing to be more successful than before the current global crisis?

Kerryn Fewster, managing director of organisational change consultants Change 2020, names flexibility during change or uncertainty, along with learning to let go and move on, as two crucial qualities for resilience.

The missing ingredient, the one even the most elite need to thrive, is an ability to find light and humour in the darkest days. Psychotherapist Shirley Hughes says laughter is the music of the soul that allows peak performers to bounce back from adversity and travel up the hill to success again. •



PAUL TAYLOR'S SEVEN STEPS TO PEAK PERFORMANCE

1. EXERCISE

If you do not currently engage in regular, vigorous activity two to three times a week and do a minimum of 10,000 steps a day, you have a snowball’s chance in hell your brain is operating at full functionality. Exercise, including cardiovascular activity and heavy lifting, produces important neurotransmitters and, after a certain age, prevents mental and physical decline.

2. COLD SHOWERS

What’s missing today is willingness to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Have a deliberate profile around discomfort. Thirty seconds of cold water, minimum, at the end of a shower will help condition you to deal with stress and improve immune function.

3. MENTAL SCULPTING

Imagine two different characters. One is your inner gremlin – full of self-doubt and victim mentality. The other is your inner warrior or sage. Pay attention to the latter. Using visualisation to see yourself at your best, as elite athletes do, will also pay dividends.

4. GRATITUDE

Train your brain to look for the positive subconsciously.

5. BREATH WORK

Taylor recommends the box breathing that US Special Forces soldiers use. Breathe in for four seconds, hold for four, breathe out for four, hold for four, repeat. Box breathing works on the vagus and phrenic nerves to bring the brain down from over-arousal.

6. DIGITAL SUNSET

Turn off devices at night and give your brain time to decompress and recover. You’ll also reduce blue light, which interferes with your circadian rhythm.

7. CONNECTING TO OTHERS

In the Hanoi Hilton, some prisoners spent four years in solitary confinement. They had a tap code to communicate. That’s the only way they got through. Everyone needs a tap code, particularly in times of trouble. Identify your tap-code gang and use them.