

# Boost your mental toughness

Need some motivation to help you run that little bit further, complete a fitness goal or just get off the couch? An ultrarunner and a Paralympian share their secrets for pushing through mental roadblocks.



**POW!**

**E**ven on their worst days, elite athletes seem superhuman. How else could someone run 200km with a smile on their face or get up at 4am to train every day? Yes, they have perfected their athletic skill, but they also owe their successes to an unwavering drive and determination to succeed. Two accomplished athletes share their top mental toughness tips to help you commit to a healthy lifestyle, stick to it through rough patches and reach your fitness goals. >

**FAST FACTS**

**LISA TAMATI**

AGE: 48

CITY: New Plymouth, NZ

SPORT: Ultrarunning

Tamati has run about 140 ultramarathons and has clocked more than 70,000km in training and events. Her career highlights include an expedition across the Libyan Desert through a military-barred zone with no outside support; running 222km non-stop in the La Ultra - The High race in the Himalayas; and running 217km in the Badwater Ultramarathon, which takes place in one of the hottest deserts, California's Death Valley.

**ALEXANDRA LISNEY**

AGE: 29

CITY: Sydney

SPORTS: Rowing and cycling

Lisney, who has cerebral palsy, took up rowing in 2008 and competed in the 2009 Rowing World Championships before making the switch to cycling in 2010. As a cyclist, she won a bronze medal at the 2012 Paralympic Games in London as well as one gold, two silver and two bronze medals at five different World Championships.

**1 Pinpoint your motivations**

Write down the top five reasons you want to achieve your goal. "Whether it's to prove something to someone or it's for your children or someone you love, those external motivating factors can fuel you through the really difficult times," says ultrarunner and running coach Lisa Tamati. "When the devil is on your shoulder saying, 'You can't do this, just give up', thinking about those motivations will keep you going."

**2 Set achievable goals**

If you've ever undertaken a fitness program and gone hard for two weeks before giving up because you were exhausted and weren't seeing results, you're not alone. "This is a common scenario and it leaves you feeling like a failure," says Tamati.

However, in order to break the cycle, you need to develop a realistic game plan. "On a piece of paper, write down your major goal," says Tamati. "Maybe you want to run a marathon in a year's time. Then set some sub-goals, such as running a 10km race in three months and a half-marathon in six months. Breaking down your major goal into smaller steps will make it seem much more achievable."

But don't forget to plan for setbacks, advises exercise physiologist Neil Russell. "Too often, people quit the second things aren't going perfectly to plan," he says. "Being mentally tough is recognising that it's okay to have lapses and to push forward and learn from them."

Need help mapping out your action plan? Consider seeking advice from a mentor, coach, friend or family member. "Having someone tell you exactly what you need to do day by day to reach your goal is so helpful," says Tamati. "They can pull you back if you're getting carried away and push you if you're getting a bit lazy."

**3 Change your perspective**

Another mental roadblock many of us need to overcome is the idea that we're not 'real' athletes or that we're not as good as everyone else.

According to Tamati, it takes about 90 days for fitness to start becoming a habit and part of your identity. "You have to keep repeating to yourself, 'I am a runner' or 'I am a fit person' until it finally sinks in," she says.

Paralympic cyclist Alexandra Lisney, who was born with cerebral palsy, knew she needed to stop comparing herself to others in order to succeed. "If my competitors were faster than me, I'd get disheartened that my training wasn't right," she says. "When you constantly compare your results to others, you lose perspective. I've learned to focus on my own accomplishments instead."

Russell suggests a simple perspective-shifting exercise. Start by writing down your top two fitness strengths and weaknesses, then turn them into four positive affirmations. The strengths you already know and probably tend to favour, however shifting the weaknesses to strengths flips your mindset. "If your weaknesses are training consistency and not pushing yourself when it gets hard, then you could take on the mindset 'I never miss a training session and when training gets hard, I'm unstoppable!' The mind is very powerful and you'll start to believe it. Elite athletes use this technique all the time."

**4 Focus on the positive**

Staying on track to reach your goals requires a good dose of positive thinking - but this takes practice. "You have to pull yourself up during the day and ask, 'What was I thinking about then?' If your thoughts are negative, divert your attention," says Tamati. "Put on some music, read a positive affirmation, go for a walk or call a friend. It takes willpower to break negative thought patterns, but you're in charge of where your brain is going. Controlling your focus is really important in reaching your goals."

Lisney now zeroes in on a positive aspect of each training session and how it ticked a short-term goal. "Maybe I managed to get out of bed when I really wanted to sleep in, or maybe I really pushed myself in my efforts, or maybe I just ate and drank at the right times through a training ride," she says. "There's always something positive."



**MENTAL TOUGHNESS KIT**

**LISA I VISUALISE SAVING MY MOTHER'S LIFE**

"When I'm in a tough space in a race, I ask myself, 'If I was in a plane crash in the middle of the Amazon jungle and my mother's life depended on me running 200km to save her, would I keep going?' Of course I would."

**I MAKE LIKE ROCKY**

"Before a race, I go into the toilets and do some deep breathing exercises for five minutes. Then I put my hands in the air and visualise Rocky while I pump my fists and puff my chest out. Even if I'm not feeling strong, this power posing tells my brain that I am. It's like I put on a suit of armour and go into battle feeling empowered."

**I focused on what I could do instead of what I struggled with**

When the going gets tough during a workout or a race, Russell recommends thinking about how good you'll feel afterwards and how lucky you are to be there. "Focus on the non-permanency of your discomfort and pain," he says. "Think to yourself, 'It hurts while I'm doing it, but afterwards I'll feel great. Some people would do anything to be in my shoes. Here I am doing it and I'm really lucky.'"

## 5 Use visualisation

"Visualise someone whose technique inspires you," says Russell. "If you are struggling to find motivation to push yourself, then picture someone who inspires you, something that creates an emotive response, think of a Rocky montage or your favourite Olympian finding that extra effort to win gold, something that gives you goosebumps. The more you practise this the better you get." ■



### MENTAL TOUGHNESS KIT

#### ALEXANDRA I ENLIST A TRAINING BUDDY

"I often schedule training with a friend so they make me push myself more with some friendly competition."

#### I BRIBE MYSELF

"The other day, I told myself that if I held a certain power for my hill repeats, I could have a glass of wine with dinner that evening! Other times, you just have to put your head down and push through. You have to be tough on yourself because no-one else will."



## What are three obstacles you've had to overcome?

### LISA TANATI

#### BREAKING TWO VERTEBRAE

"I broke them in an accident when I was 21 and I now have four discs that are nearly gone. I've managed to keep running by building a super-strong core, hips and glutes. Many back problems can be helped tremendously with the right exercises."

#### AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

"I was young and it destroyed my self-esteem and confidence. Once I got out, I used it as my motivation to prove I was strong and to fire up my passion to overcome."

#### SEVERE ASTHMA AS A CHILD

"It left me with below-average lung capacity and a VO2 max, which means I can't go very fast. But overall, my asthma has improved through exercise. I know my triggers and work around them."

### ALEXANDRA LISNEY

#### TRAINING AS A BALLERINA

Before she became a Paralympic rower and cyclist, Alexandra trained as a ballerina for 18 years. "I always focused on what I could do instead of what I struggled with. I kept my goals positive and achievable."

#### FITNESS LULLS

"Sometimes my training plateaus and I struggle to get fitter, faster or stronger. When that happens, I grab my friends and go for a fun training session where we push each other. It makes me disengage from training and keeps things interesting."

#### FINANCIAL STRESS OF TRYING TO BE A FULL-TIME ATHELETE

"I focused on things that were free or didn't cost much. I did body-weight exercises outside instead of going to the gym and I rode my bike instead of driving. When it got close to [Paralympic] Games time, I was lucky to align myself with sponsors."

**Yours** talks  
to me  
like no other  
magazine!



**On Sale Thursday - Every two weeks!**