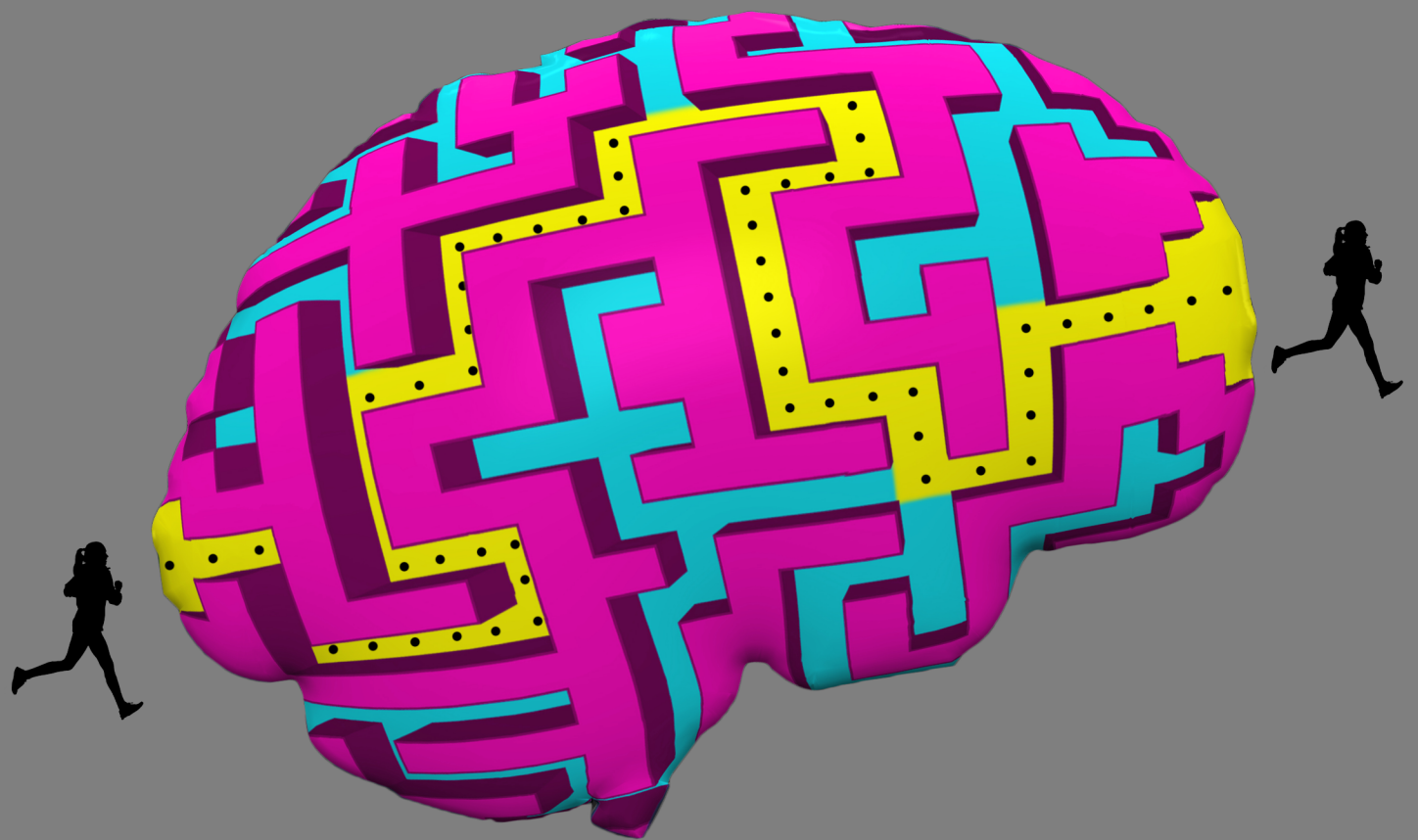


# BRAVE ACTION

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY FOR LIFE



**DR. OLIVIA A. HURLEY**

For Mum, Dad, Trish, Dave and Lee

*My Top-Team*

**In Memory of 'Prof' – Professor Aidan Moran (1957 - 2020)**

For me, you made it all possible and I will miss you forever,

my dear Academic-Dad

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## **Preface**

The primary goal of this e-book, Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life, is to provide readers with a basic understanding of some of the principles of sport psychology, in today's cyber dominated world, while also suggesting some practical, simple and hopefully memorable tips that people can use to enhance their performances in life, while also prioritising their well-being during that process.

The book is written in an informal, conversational style that should appeal to many age groups and populations. It is as much a resource for individuals generally interested in topics such as bravery, being action-focused and resilient, as it is for 'athletes and performers'. It covers five popular 'Brave Action' topics. It also has a companion You-Tube Channel, where some of my athlete and performer friends share their Brave Action life stories with me - do check that out too as their stories are all truly inspirational.

Finally, I hope you find the information presented in this e-book helpful in your own lives and enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

My very best wishes to you all and thank you for your support – it is very much appreciated.

Olivia

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sean Cahill for his wonderful design work for this e-book and to my long-time friend, James Norton (The Punnet Health Store and The Collective Fitness), for his 'awesome' support of this project also.

I would also like to thank all of my extended family, as well as my many dear friends, work colleagues and students, for their continued encouragement and very kind support of all of my fun 'work' projects. A special 'thank you' goes to my Brother-In-Law, Paul Cronin, for his super ideas regarding how to 'spread the word' of 'Brave Action', including suggesting that I record some of my awesome 'buddies' telling me all about their Brave Action stories (See the Appendices for details). To Stefan Paz Barrios, my dear technology-guru-genius, who brought all of my 'Brave Action' videos 'to life' on YouTube, you are the very definition of #AwesomeInAction

To my many dear athlete-pals, some of whom feature in the various images throughout this e-book, I am very privileged to work along-side you all. Your brave actions inspire me every day. I am so grateful for your support of this project and for your trust in me to advise you in your brave actions, both in the past and, hopefully, well into all of our very bright futures #AwesomeInAction #TheBackPack!

Finally, to my fab-five, Mum, Dad, Trish, Dave and Lee - Your unending love and support of my work is unparalleled. You are all truly exceptional in everything you do and you are always there for me - my heart belongs to you. I love you, my top-brave-action-awesome-in-action-back pack-team.

## About the Author



Dr Olivia A. Hurley is Assistant Professor of Psychology and Sport Psychology at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT, Dun Laoghaire). She is also a guest lecturer in UCD and RCSI. Olivia holds a BSc (Hons) in Psychology, an MSc and a PhD in Sport Psychology from University College Dublin (UCD). She is a Chartered Psychologist with the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI: Council Member 2019 to present). She is also one of Sport Ireland's Approved Sport Psychology Consultants. In that applied role, Olivia works with top athletes and performers to help them to enhance their performances, while prioritising their well-being in those endeavours also. Olivia has published numerous academic papers, book chapters and blogs, as well as speaking at many national and international conferences. She is also a frequent guest on various media outlets and podcasts. Her first solo book, 'Sport Cyberpsychology', was published by Routledge (March 2018). A former international sprinter and a holder of one of the longest standing juvenile Irish sprint records (60m indoor sprint event), Olivia is passionate about all things sport and psychology related.

## Table of Contents

Dedication		i
Preface		iii
Acknowledgements		iv
About the Author		v
Brave Action #1	Introducing Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life	1
Brave Action #2	Being Brave	26
Brave Action #3	Being Awesome-In-Action	57
Brave Action #4	Developing Resilience	78
Brave Action #5	Problem Solving: Solution-Focused-Actions for Sport and Life	104
Appendices		121

# **BRAVE ACTION**

# **#1**

**INTRODUCING BRAVE ACTION:  
SPORT PSYCHOLOGY FOR LIFE**



## Introduction

When I was encouraged by one of my long-time athlete friends, James Norton, to write this e-book over a coffee back in 2019, I decided to 'be brave' and say 'Yes!'. Writing a 'different', short, accessible e-book on sport psychology, for a general, rather than an academic audience is something I have always wanted to do, especially since completing my first, more academic, solo book, 'Sport Cyberpsychology' (published by Routledge, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. I also wanted this e-book to be affordable for as many people as possible, as well as wanting every reader to understand the content and be able to relate to it. Then, in some ways, they could use the material shared, to enhance their own sport performances as well as their every-day lives. Two years ago, when I published 'Sport Cyberpsychology', never did I think that the national and international landscape of 2020 would change so much that applying many sport psychology principles for sport and life would become, in essence, all sport cyberpsychology based either.

Thus, a primary goal of this e-book, Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life, is now to provide readers with a basic understanding of the principles of sport psychology, in today's cyber dominated world, while also suggesting some practical, simple and, hopefully, memorable tips that anyone competing in any sport or performance arena can use to enhance their performances, as well as prioritising their well-being during that process. Sport psychology may often be viewed as something only elite athletes use or need. This is absolutely not the case. The modern world, both inside and outside of sport, is exciting and fast-paced, providing lots of opportunities for us all, in so many areas and in so ways. However, it can also be difficult to navigate and live in that modern-day world, for many of those same reasons.

I frequently hear the students and athletes I am privileged to teach and work with, many of whom have gone on to become good friends and colleagues of mine, say they can more often now than in the past perhaps, feel overwhelmed by the way people live and manage their lives both online and offline. Indeed, many of us accredited sport psychologists supporting those athletes to the best of our abilities can also experience those same emotions<sup>2</sup>. Technology and a more online, social media influenced world had been negatively linked to such changes in how we felt and lived our lives in recent years. However, in 2020 that has all been turned upside down, with these same technologies and online communication tools becoming our go-to modes of communication. They have made it possible for our work to continue in some accessible format for many of us, when we cannot physically be present. How we use all of our now-vital technology resources and skills, as well as the new experiences and perspectives we have gained recently about our sport, our lives and our health, will shape the narrative or 'story' of this e-book, especially the suggested exercises and activities I propose you could try out for yourself, at the end of each chapter.

Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life has five chapters, in total. The goal of chapter 1 is to 'set-the-stage', to explain the aims and some basic concepts of Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life, before moving on to the remaining four chapters. Chapter 2 will cover a popular concept in life and in sport in recent times, that of how to 'be brave' under the most challenging of adverse circumstances.

Chapter 3 will focus on the concept that, as people, we can often over-think many of the experiences we have in our lives. We can sometimes become 'paralysed' by such situations and forget that as human beings we are 'doers'. So, how can we more effectively 'do'? How can we be more #AwesomeInAction, as many of my athlete-friends, students, family members and colleagues will tell you I often say in my classes and chats with them. Having a strong sense of

self-belief is an important component of that 'doing' concept, I believe. How that is the case will be explained more in that chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, mental fortitude training, a more-recently popularised concept by colleagues working within sport and performance based settings (such as Mustafa Sarkar), will be detailed as an effective way to help people cope with the many challenges and adversities their lives often present to them, including throughout 2020. The final section of Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life,

Chapter 5, will be a summary chapter, consisting of a number of Solution-Focused-Brave-Actions. This final chapter will present common scenarios that many athletes, and people in general, frequently face in their lives and how such situations may be dealt with, to improve performances and to improve that sense of well-being in life in general too.



## Learning Objectives of Chapter 1

1. To introduce the aims of 'Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life'
2. To explain the discipline of modern-day sport psychology
3. To identify key terms that relate to modern-day sport psychology
4. To highlight some of the main changes / developments in the applications of the sport psychology principles in recent years that have influenced my thinking and decision making regarding the content of this e-book, Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life.



## 1. Aims of 'Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life'

In sport, the phrase 'Control the Controllables' is often said<sup>3</sup> and the message behind this phrase is a valuable one. We often, in error, think that we can control so many things in our lives, that are actually not within our control. Our experiences throughout 2020, perhaps, taught many of us that lesson very acutely. We can become very stressed and upset when the things we all thought we were in control of do not turn out to be that way. This brings me to some key points I hope Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life will communicate to you:

1: I aim to help you, the reader, understand what applying sport psychology in the 'present day' is primarily about. In essence, I hope to help people to understand what is and is not inside their control and how to adjust their thinking and actions in life accordingly, when faced with that reality.

2: I hope to help readers to reach a point of acceptance about those things they cannot control (which can be a real challenge for many people), while having the courage to control the things that they can influence in their lives, such as their responses to their thoughts, their own daily efforts and attitudes, as well as their own actions.

3. I hope to enable readers to use the information provided in each chapter to train themselves how to determine, more often, the difference between what is and is not inside their control. Once you can reach a point of accepting that principle you are likely to benefit from it, in managing your life better, by being braver in some ways, by aiming more for those awesome-in-action challenges and seeing life through a different 'lens' or perspective. Hopefully this will enable you to perform in your sport and in your life in a more content, positive, healthy and

productive way. It is also important to remember, however, that being 'productive' is not of great value to you or your overall health if you are not enjoying the journey of being productive. I hope this e-book will enable many people to discover how to find joy in what they are doing in their lives, as they navigate their way through their own journeys in their sport, studies, relationships and careers. So, to begin then, what is modern-day sport psychology all about?

## 2. Modern-day sport psychology

Here is a question for you to pause and think about for a moment:

*What do you, at this time, consider to be the basic principles of modern-day sport psychology?*

As a scientist, I believe, first and foremost, that psychology and its sub-discipline, sport psychology, is, and should be, research and evidence-based. This evidence-based approach is what should guide all of us qualified and practicing sport psychologists, to devise useful and potentially effective strategies for many people. Both inside and outside of sport settings it is important that people know how to use these strategies to enhance their performances, as well as their lives in general. I say 'potentially effective strategies' because just like many things in life, there are no certainties regarding the application of any psychological principles or 'tools' for enhancing performance. Therefore, any book or person claiming to be able to teach 'proven' strategies to achieve such sport, performance or life targets should be viewed with much scepticism. Applying sport psychology in sport and life involves the use of psychological principles in sport settings. Those basic principles are based upon the view that psychology is about trying to understand, explain, predict and then have the techniques to control your own behaviours, your own actions<sup>4</sup>. Sport psychology can also be considered the study of the brain and mental processes in sport settings<sup>5</sup>. Our mental processes include skills we all apply on a daily basis.

Consider this - How do we memorise information, imagine things, make decisions and problem solve? These are all very important cognitive skills that enable us to live our lives, again both inside and outside of the world of sport. Inside that world of sport, such cognitive skills are so important when individuals attempt to perform common 'motor skills', well-known sport skills, such as kicking, passing, tackling, running and jumping, to the best of their ability, especially when placed in high-challenge, pressurised situations (e.g., at an Olympic Games or a World Cup competition, for example). Therefore, that is the 'language' or terminology you should aim to understand in order to grasp how sport psychology can really be 'applied'. Let us take a look next then at some key terms related to such content, which will form the basis of the material discussed in upcoming chapters in this e-book.

### 3. Key terms related to the modern-day discipline of sport psychology

#### Mental skills

Two of the main mental skills<sup>6</sup> beneficially employed by many successful people in sport settings are **concentration skills** and **coping skills**. Other concepts, such as confidence, are also considered 'skills' by some people. I much prefer to view confidence as a changeable 'mood', similar to anger, happiness or sadness. I work with many individuals on their self-belief - whether that work is with athletes, students or performers of any kind - rather than focusing on actively aiming to alter any individual's sense of self-confidence. I consider **self-belief** to be associated more with what comes from 'within' the individual. It can be thought of as a type of 'bed-rock', the 'foundations' within an individual on which good performances can be 'built'. Confidence is indeed a related term<sup>7</sup>, however, it is linked more to what other people may say about a person and his or her performance - the judgements and comments those 'others' make which, if not

pleasant, can 'damage' an individual's sense of self-confidence. Self-belief could be considered a more 'unshakable' concept, that an individual has more control over in many ways and that is why I like to focus on it as something to work on instead. I strive to help athletes to develop their sense of self-belief, both for their sport and also for their every-day-lives.

## Concentration

Above, you will have seen that I also consider concentration to be one of the most important mental skills we all possess to varying degrees. But what is this skill of concentration? Concentration, as my wonderful mentor, Professor Aidan Moran always said is 'the ability to focus on the task at-hand, while ignoring distractions'<sup>8</sup>. This is, in many ways, a seemingly obvious and important skill to constantly work on, in order to be able to apply it well both in sport and in life situations. For example, the skill of concentration is just as important when driving a car, when sitting an examination, or indeed when reading an e-book (!) – every-day tasks we all may do at some point in our lives – as it is for taking a penalty kick, learning a new dance step or playing a golf shot in sport and performance-specific settings. Also, just like the motor, or physical-movement, skills involved in completing tasks with the body change (the quality of a kick, pass or jump), concentration, that mental skill, fluctuates all the time, depending on the ever-changing life situations presented to us at any given time. This is the reason why, some days, we can focus on that 'task-at-hand' very well while on other days our attention seems to drift off constantly onto other, completely irrelevant thoughts and actions as we attempt to complete the desired skill, that 'task-at-hand'. Later chapters in this e-book will present strategies that can be very useful, when practiced and applied effectively, in helping that concentration skill of ours to be 'fine-tuned' and improved upon - in other words, made 'more controllable' and less likely to 'drift-off'.



But what about those often irritating distractions that can move our attention / focus away from that task-at-hand? Why are they so troublesome?

## Distractions

The most detrimental things to impact negatively on concentration, as referred to above, are distractions. What, then, are those most common 'distractions' that can negatively impact our concentration? What causes our 'focus', our attention, to drift off on to other irrelevant things at any point in time? Well, in general, distractions can be divided into two kinds, those that originate internally (in our 'minds' / inside of our brains) and / or externally, in the outer environment<sup>10</sup>. Internal distractions often include a person's own thoughts and emotions. External distractions are those that come from outside of the person, such as environmental stimuli – noises, smells, lights and just 'other people' being around us doing things that often 'grab' our attention away from our own tasks. Ironically, the more you might try to redirect your attention back onto the 'task at hand', to attempt to force the 'stopping' of that 'irrelevant' thought or feeling, the more the distracting thought often seems to intrude and dominate your thinking. Such intrusive thinking can then often impede a 'good performance' of the tasks we are trying to perform at that time. The question you now are probably asking is: How can this situation be overcome? The good news is that a number of strategies or 'tools' are, based upon some good scientific research evidence, available to us all to help us combat such scenarios. The most commonly used, research-supported, strategies or 'tools' that can help to improve your concentration include: specific and targeted task-setting, self-talk management, mental imagery, various relaxation strategies, pre performance routines and simulation training<sup>11</sup>. These terms will now be briefly explained. They will then be discussed in more depth in the content presented in chapters two, three and four of Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life.

### Specific, targeted task-setting

For many people, having tasks to focus on helps them to maintain a sense of productivity, while managing their own thought processes. Often it is helpful when feeling overwhelmed by life's uncertainties to set targets for yourself to achieve, specific activities to be completed, within a specific time frame. The sense of accomplishment often derived from completing such tasks can be very rewarding and can have a very positive impact on general well-being also. This target-setting strategy provides people with real evidence that there are indeed some things inside of their control, even in the most uncertain times in their lives. In sport, and in life, it can be helpful for a person's well-being to have them consider 'acting' their way into a feeling, rather than waiting to 'feel' their way into a desired action. Many activities can sometimes appear daunting and scary at the start because they seem to require of a lot of physical and mental effort, as well as a lot of time. That is a normal response to have to new situations. Target setting, breaking things down into manageable tasks, helps to make the task seem more 'doable'. This process can involve making use of the 'SMART' principle<sup>12</sup>. Many of you may have already heard of this 'SMART' strategy, which can help people to practically set SMART targets for themselves to achieve in their lives. This concept will be explained and discussed in more detail in later chapters of Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life.

### Self-talk management

For many individuals, a very beneficial aspect of applying sport psychology principles is learning how to manage their self-talk. Our self-talk refers to the inner dialogue or 'chat' we have with ourselves every day<sup>13</sup>. It is often described as that 'little voice in our heads'. Given that we have

thousands of thoughts each day, it should come as no surprise to then learn that some of those thoughts will be 'positive' and helpful to us in living our lives well, again inside and outside of any sport or performance settings. Other thoughts will, however, also be negative, unhelpful and often self-chastising. Such thoughts, in contrast to the positive type, can be detrimental to daily living. Learning tools to practically control, or more accurately, manage, such unhelpful thoughts can be very important, for every one of us. These tools for managing self-talk will be explained in detail in later chapters, including an explanation of the different types of self-talk (and yes, more than just 'self-motivating' phrases do actually exist!), as well as an illustration of the often helpful park-and-replace<sup>14</sup> principle for self-talk management, which many athletes and performers use to good effect in their sport and every-day- life-settings.

## Mental Imagery

Mental practice involves the mental rehearsal of actions before they are actually, physically, completed. Such rehearsal often involves mental imagery, which can have auditory, visual and kinaesthetic ('feel') elements to it<sup>15</sup>. Mental imagery is a strategy often typically used to help mentally 'rehearse' many tasks before we actually carry them out. This is often described as 'seeing with your mind's eye'<sup>16</sup>. However, the related term 'visualisation', which many people often use to describe this strategy, is actually somewhat misleading as it implies that only a 'seeing' or 'vision' element is involved when we engage in mental imagery. This is not the case. Using our imagination to rehearse a skill in our 'mind's eye', before we actually do it, often involves a lot more than just 'seeing' ourselves doing the skill. For example, have you ever had a song 'stuck' in your head? This is sometimes referred to as an 'ear-worm'<sup>17</sup>. It is a very good example of auditory imagery taking place in your brain, where you are 'hearing' a tune and singing the song 'in your head' as if it is being played aloud for all to hear. Another 'feel' element exists for many of the things we imagine.

Kinaesthetic, or motor, imagery are the terms related to this 'feel' element of an imagined action<sup>18</sup>. Examples of this are the 'feelings' you might have of 'holding a golf club' in your hands, as you mentally rehearse a golf shot in your mind before ever playing it, or the feeling of 'striking the ball against your foot' as you imagine kicking it. A number of other important aspects of imagery are explained later in Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life, such as the importance of: (i) the vividness of your images, (ii) the practicing of imagery and (iii) some acceptance of the uncertainty surrounding the controllability of your images (\*Note: engaging in negative imagery can often be more detrimental to the performance of various skills than not engaging in any mental imagery for those skills; See Appendix A for more specific details on mental imagery).

### **Relaxation Strategies**

Many individuals find the use of relaxation strategies important for managing the uncertainty and 'busyness' of daily life. Strategies such as progressive muscular relaxation<sup>19</sup> and mindfulness<sup>20</sup> are currently popular approaches many people use, athletes or not, to help them cope with the pressures and stresses of their lives, especially in times of adversity. These strategies will be detailed more in later sections of this e-book (see Appendix B).

### **Pre-Performance Routines (PPRs)**

Routines are something that many individuals engage in on a daily basis. They are thought to be effective for well-being and productivity because they help to occupy both the actions and thoughts of individuals as they prepare to perform a skill or task<sup>21</sup>. Aspects of many pre-performance routines can be both physical and mental, such as how a tennis player often bounces a tennis ball a number of times while making the decision about where to aim to serve

the ball into an opponent's court, before actually hitting the shot. Another example of such PPRs include rugby place kickers going through a routine of placing a rugby ball on the kicking tee, before then taking a number of steps back and to the side from that positioned ball and 'picturing' in their minds where they 'see' the ball going, before they actually take the penalty kick. Golfers often engage in such routines before taking a golf shot as well. The effective use of such routines will be discussed later in Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life also.

### **Simulation training**

This training involves the creation of a situation in a performance setting that mimics the competition or real-life performance setting for the individual, a kind-of 'dress-rehearsal'<sup>22</sup>. It is often difficult to 'exactly' recreate the competition or performance setting itself. However, enabling individuals to get a 'feel' for the environment in which they will perform can help them to devise strategies to cope with that likely setting, in advance of it being experienced in real-time, especially if they are going to be performing in a new setting where they have not performed before. Specific uses for such simulation training will be elaborated upon in later sections of this e-book.

### **Sport Cyberpsychology**

Finally, I wish to draw your attention to this new term, 'sport cyberpsychology' that I referred to at the beginning of this chapter. I introduced and defined this term in 2018<sup>23</sup>, in the first

text written in this area. I described it as all of the ways individuals interact with various pieces of technology, including the internet, computers, social media, virtual reality and games consoles, to enhance their performances, while also using them to protect their well-being. This term has never become more relevant in my field, based upon the way 2020 has evolved for us all. Therefore, I will next outline some of those changes and developments in sport psychology, based upon this, our modern-day reality.



Source: Courtesy of Inpho Photography (Bryan Keane), with thanks to Chloe Watkins and Hockey Ireland.

#### 4. Some changes and developments in the application of sport psychology principles in recent years (that have influenced the content of this e-book).

A number of key changes in the approach to applying sport psychology principles have emerged in recent years. Three of these changes have been: (i) increased emphasis being placed upon the overall well-being of individuals, ahead of the past priority of performance enhancement<sup>24</sup>, (ii) attention being specifically placed upon helping individuals to realise the importance of resilience and developing related mental fortitude training strategies<sup>25</sup> - to help them to develop such resilience - so that they can really 'use' these training methods effectively to protect their mental health from the adversities they will constantly face in life, in general, as well as in their sport or performance settings and (iii) increased interest in sport cyberpsychology, as individuals consider the growing uses of technology within sport settings for training and logistical purposes. Let's look at each of these key developments in applying sport psychology in a little more detail now.

- i. The focus of much of the work sport psychologists complete now with the athletes and performers they advise and support has, thankfully, moved away from the very limited performance enhancement focus of past support. In using sport psychology now, the priority is and should be the physical and mental health and well-being of individuals<sup>26</sup>. This principle should be placed at the centre of the work done with all of these individuals. Why? Well, the prompt for this change happened, thankfully, in response to some elite athletes commenting publicly about those times in their careers when, to the outside world, they may have been 'performing' very well - indeed at world-class, 'top-shape', level - and yet their social and emotional health was suffering greatly<sup>27</sup>. It is always good to see positive changes in our work practices arising from feedback received directly from such athletes and performers, especially when the response to such changes is very much welcomed by the individuals concerned

too. This move away from 'performance-enhancement', to emphasis being placed first upon the overall well-being of the individuals, can be thought of as a 'Person-Athlete-Life' (P.A.L) approach, a person-centred approach, where the athletes and their overall lives are given the highest consideration. This can have the knock-on, positive, effect of helping such individuals to perform at their best performance-level, while being physically, and mentally, well at the same time. This can only be a very positive situation for all concerned.

- ii. In light of the above situation, what are the main sport psychology changes that have been devised to help individuals' overall well-being be prioritised? What specific changes have occurred in the information being shared, that is research, evidence-based as well? To answer, more emphasis is being placed upon the development of resilience in such individuals to help them, as athletes second and as people first, to cope with the adversities they will (not may) experience during their lifetimes (experiences such as injury, illness, loss and disappointments)<sup>28</sup>. This can be achieved using the concept of mental fortitude training. The details of this specific training, as used in sport and performance settings with many individuals, including the support staff - coaches and referees, as well as with the athletes - will be the focus of some of the upcoming content in later chapters of this e-book.
- iii. Finally, let's look at this topic close to my heart, that of sport cyberpsychology, which has also been placed very much 'in the spotlight' in recent times. When I decided to write my first solo book and chose that title, introducing the term into the sport psychology narrative, little did I really know, as I already said, how much the online world would impact all of our lives in 2020/2021. Consulting and communicating with our athletes, performers, family and friends, using platforms such as Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams has become more



normal<sup>29</sup>. Keeping in contact socially, using social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn), texting, phone calling, whatsapp direct messaging and emailing have also never been more important, and popular, when using physical contact and communication has not been possible. The challenges that all of these modes of sometimes necessary communication, that we have been forced in many cases to use in some situations recently, have also presented us with great opportunities, opportunities to 'up-skill', to 'be brave', to trial such technologies. These new skills and modes of communication many of us have acquired in recent times, will remain possibilities for us to use, in part, as a hybrid form of communicating when working, when engaging in sport and in everyday life.



Source: Courtesy of The Holly & Kavanagh Dance Academy, with thanks to the Lubbers Family and Niall Holly; In memory of Ian Lubbers (World Senior Men's Irish Dance Champion 2018).



### Self-Reflection

Now it is 'Your Turn'. I would like you to think back over this material on sport psychology that you have just read in this chapter 1 of Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life and ask yourself:

1. What has been the most memorable lesson(s) or piece of information I have learned from reading this chapter?
2. What information provided surprised me the most?
3. What take-away-points (TAPs) have I obtained?
4. What have I read that really interests me and that would encourage me to want to learn more, by reading the remaining chapters of Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life?



### Take-Action-Activity

In advance of reading the remaining chapters in this e-book, perhaps you might like to complete this short exercise now? Complete the table below, citing two specific things you would like to achieve in your sport / life in the next three to six months. Ask yourself what you might need to do to enable you to achieve these targets? What training / up-skilling might you need to consider / complete to enable you to achieve these targets? Who could help you with this journey of self-development? Who could you contact to ask for advice regarding your targets? You could also ask one of those people you really trust and respect, who knows you very well / is close to you, to also complete this table about you, based upon what that person thinks you might be good at or capable of? Sometimes the people around us see potential and abilities in / opportunities for us that we do not see or recognise for ourselves. Reading that feedback could help you to decide upon the content of the table, of your own future achievement targets, to aim at over the next few months of your life.

<b>TARGETS FOR 2020 / 2021</b>
 
<b>SKILLS AVAILABLE TO ME TO ENABLE THIS TO HAPPEN</b>
 
<b>SKILLS NEEDED TO ENABLE THIS TO HAPPEN</b>
 
<b>PEOPLE TO CONTACT WHO CAN ADVISE ME AND SUPPORT ME WITH THIS PROCESS</b>
 

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**BRAVE**  
**ACTION**  
**#2**

**BEING BRAVE**

## Introduction

This chapter 2 will explore a popular concept in life and in sport, that of 'being brave', especially when individuals are placed under challenging circumstances. The use of the word 'brave' has long been associated with sport performances when we watch athletes frequently 'push' their bodies to what seem like extreme levels of exertion in order to achieve amazing feats of performance. Their displays of brilliant skill execution are often described as 'brave', 'courageous', 'gutsy', 'fearless', 'bold', or 'daring'. Their actions can also inspire many of us to be braver in our own lives and that may be part of the reason why we love to watch such performances. Seeing other people being brave can be positively infectious. As human beings, we are also visually dominant, with approximately forty percent of our sensory functions in the brain being biased toward our visual senses. Therefore, we often model (copy/mimic) the actions of those we see doing great things around us.

However, despite its historically recognised value, it is surprising to know that only in the past 20 years have scientists really begun to study bravery objectively in an attempt to accurately define what it is, where it originates in the body / how it is 'produced' and if it can be learned, that is, can we train our brains to 'be brave'? As a scientist first and foremost, before being a psychologist, I love researching such interesting, yet every-day concepts in the pursuit of knowledge and 'the truth' behind them, so I really did want to include some of the research material on bravery specifically, when deciding upon the content for this e-book on sport psychology for life. I especially wanted to devote some of that topic content to the biology of bravery, along with an explanation for how and why being brave is important in sport and indeed in daily life. I also wanted to be able to use that knowledge to advise others more effectively in the future on how to 'be braver' in their lives, using evidence-based, specific sport psychology strategies. This chapter will, hopefully, achieve all of these aims and assist you in your attempts to 'be brave' in your actions also.



## Learning Objectives of Chapter 2

1. To explain the concept of bravery in easy-to-understand language.
2. To highlight what is good about 'being brave' in sport and in life.
3. To provide some practical advice on how to 'be brave'



## What is bravery?

It is important to understand any concept properly if you are going to try to apply it in some positive way in your life, so let's start by attempting to define the term bravery, before we then determine how helpful it could be to purposefully apply it in performance-based settings. When researching this 'brave' concept, one of the first things I quickly discovered was that there is no one 'agreed' definition of the term bravery and it probably means slightly different things to different people. Words such as courage and valour are also used interchangeably with the word 'bravery'. In many dictionaries the word 'bravery' is described as variations of the following statements: **Being ready to face and endure danger or pain; showing courage; the ability to confront danger, even pain, in the face of pressure without the feeling of fear; a strength of character the allows people to seem fearless in the face of danger**<sup>2,3</sup>. It is interesting to see words such as danger, pain and fear repeatedly stated in these above definitions (as underlined) and I will discuss each of these related terms later in this chapter. A first, interesting observation to make regarding the term bravery is that it is often thought of as a condition of 'fearlessness', when dangerous situations are presented to us. Yet frequently individuals report being really quite terrified before doing, and even during, many activities that we would describe as 'brave', both inside and outside of performance domains. 'Being brave', it appears then, is not 'being fearless' in many cases. If there was no degree of fear felt in the first instance, then bravery or courage would not really be required, right?

A second, interesting, observation when considering some of the terms associated with the word bravery is that the term courage is often described as: **the ability to take on difficult tasks and cope with pain despite being afraid or experiencing fear**<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps viewing bravery as 'being courageous' might then be a better way to help us understand, more accurately, our attempts

to 'be brave', by helping us to accept that the emotion of fear is part of that experience and that we can use that fear we often feel to our advantage, when doing activities that really 'test' us. Perhaps it is helpful to view fear and bravery as 'going hand-in-hand' then?



**Source: Courtesy of the Claffey Family, with thanks to the star-athlete, Mark Claffey (Special Olympics World Golf Champion)**

A third point that is also good to note is that different kinds of courage apparently exist. Courage is not just about physical acts of bravery. Moral, intellectual, social, financial, emotional or psychological and political courage have also been recognised by many writers and researchers, as other, real, forms of courage<sup>5</sup>. In the context of sport and performance settings, physical actions of bravery are, however, the most predominant ones we are often aware of, given the very nature of sport, where physical skill execution is frequently the most obvious thing we 'see' and focus on during a performance. However, speaking out about injustices within society and deviating from commonly accepted 'social norms' can be other ways bravery is displayed, both psychologically and socially, that could then lead to a 'knock-on effect' of a person being physically braver too, especially in sport contexts. After all, the phrase "practice makes progress" (not perfect!) is used within many performance settings<sup>6</sup>, therefore, practicing 'being brave' across different facets of your life could allow your bravery levels to rise in general and to infiltrate more of the things you do, say and think in many areas across your life, despite fear also being felt at those varying times. So, with that in mind, let us take a look at that often dreaded human 'fear' response.

## Understanding Fear

Fear can be describe as a negative sensation in the body, that we often do not know what to do to alleviate it. Other words associated with fear<sup>7</sup> are: dread (worried about something that could happen: “I’m dreading it”), terror (the fear sensation as the experience is happening; “I was terrified”) and horror (the ‘that was a horrible experience’ statement we often make when replaying a scary experience over in our minds after it has happened). So fear, and its related three terms as cited above (dread, terror and horror), seem to be associated with a negative state of bodily arousal that we often do not want to experience because it makes us feel very uncomfortable.

However, we should also remember that experiencing the fear emotion has many benefits and praising ‘fearlessness’ could actually be a negative thing in the content of many ‘actions’ in life and in sport. Being rash, that is, approaching dangerous situations in a careless or foolish way is not advised. When we experience fear, our amygdala in the brain processes that information in such a way that it disrupts our ability to think reasonably and clearly about the situation in question (such ‘rational thinking’ brain activity is typically carried out in our pre-frontal cortex – see Figure 1 later in this chapter)<sup>1</sup>. The amygdala-dominant, emotion-focused and more ‘primitive’ brain response is seen in that dominant urge we often feel at those ‘fear’ times to get ‘out/away’ from the situation because it is uncomfortable for us and is being perceived as dangerous to us. This process can be so intense that we may actually feel ‘paralysed’ or ‘frozen to the spot’ in such situations. Indeed, fear induces a ‘freeze or flee’ response in most animals. During acts of bravery, often carried out by athletes, pilots, fire-fighters, defence and medical personnel, for example, their behaviours, where they do not ‘freeze’ or run away, are often the result of intense training (therefore, it is not rash behaviour)<sup>10</sup>. Their training specifically helps them to manage and

problem solve with clarity during such dangerous situations. They are trained to master or 'override' their more innate urge to 'flee or freeze' in simulated 'dangerous' sessions. Interestingly, some studies have involved testing these individuals' stress hormone, known as cortisol, during such times of adversity. Researchers have discovered that simulation training of such individuals appears to lead to a reduction in their cortisol production levels, when compared to non-trained individuals presented with the same dangerous situations. These trained individuals also produce more of a compound called neuropeptide Y, which may counteracts the effects of cortisol in the human body<sup>11</sup>. While cortisol typically receives much 'negative press coverage'<sup>12</sup>, it is important to note that the acute release of cortisol is actually a good thing in the human body. It helps us, in the short term, to control our blood sugar levels and blood pressure, it regulates our metabolism, reduces inflammation and can assist with various cognitive functions, such as our memory, all of which make cortisol a crucial hormone to protect our overall health and well-being in the short-term<sup>13</sup>. However, the long-term effects of persistent, high, cortisol release, as happens in chronic stress response states in our bodies, tends to lead to a wear-and-tear effect and can induce conditions such as: anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, heart disease, digestive problems, weight gain and cognitive disturbances, such as difficulty concentrating and information recall<sup>8</sup>. So, now that you are aware of this information on the function of fear and the fear response in your body, you might ask yourself these two questions: Why does being brave make us feel good; and are there such things as 'good-brave' and 'bad-brave' actions<sup>31</sup>?

First, doing brave things typically involves controlling our emotions, especially that fear response, as highlighted above. This is thought to be why fear inducing actions make us feel good when we have completed them because we have shown that we can overcome some of the obstacles

placed in our lives<sup>1</sup>. The ability to successfully complete many of life's tasks require levels of bravery on our part because those tasks are often difficult. They require energy or effort and a number of the mental skills I introduced to you in chapter 1, such as our concentration and coping skills.

Second, a rare condition, where the amygdala in the brain is damaged, can result in a person experiencing no fear emotion at all<sup>9</sup>. However, as highlighted above, fear is functional. We should not forget that. The development of a 'bravery-pill', that could remove our fear response from our lives might initially appear appealing, however, it would not be a good thing in reality. Fear can, yes, sometimes stop us from attempting tasks we might wish we could do without hesitation, but it can also trigger that 'pause for thought' moment when we are in danger<sup>1</sup>. The 'trick' in performance settings is to not let that 'pause' moment take such a hold over us that we cannot overcome any degree of fear in order to attempt the skills we rationally know, when we are in 'normal', non-pressurised situations, we are capable of doing. This implies that bravery requires self-belief, a term I also defined in chapter 1 (that belief in our ability to carry out skills competently). Brave people tend to believe in themselves, in their skill execution abilities (see Chapter 3 for more details on how to potentially develop your self-belief). They recognize that their capabilities are present within them because they have trained themselves in them, a lot! They believe then that they can meet the challenges presented to them, even in intense, high-pressure situations. They are typically very passionate about what they do too<sup>14</sup>. They are often described as 'purposeful' people. They frequently say things like 'feel-the-fear-and-do-it-anyway' when trying to do difficult tasks. Thus, the target for us is not to wish to eliminate the feelings of fear we may have about doing certain tasks, but rather to manage that fear feeling in times of pressure, challenge or adversity.



What specific conditions may trigger acts of bravery in these individuals we admire then, these passionate folk we see doing amazing things around us every day, inside and outside of sport? The philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, considered courage to be a virtue, one of the greatest qualities of the mind<sup>15</sup>. We often act in brave ways when we care about someone or something, when we have something or someone to protect or to honour. It is thought that we need to care in order to risk potential 'life and limb' in the quest to do something many other people would consider difficult. The phrase, '**Follow-your-Heart**' is often used to advise young athletes and children about their life choices. Many of us acknowledge that what we are passionate about, what we love doing, helps us to overcome the fears we may have about taking risks in our lives, in our relationships, in our career choices and indeed in sport also.

While passion is important, so too is compassion. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tuz said: ***being loved gives you strength, but loving deeply makes you brave; from caring comes courage***<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, it appears the kind of bravery the world of sport and beyond needs is one of positive, 'good', bravery. It is not negative bravery that is macho or violent in nature. It is the form of bravery that is driven by empathy and community, with emphasis being placed on limiting any harming to others during the execution of the activity. So, with all of this in mind regarding 'good and bad bravery', let us now consider why some experiences terrify us, even when we are not being placed in any real life or death 'danger' when we are attempting to do them. Perhaps before you read the next section, take a moment to pause and ask yourself: what are you most afraid of doing or feeling, in sport and/or in life at this point in time?

Today, thankfully, many of the predators or dangers our ancestors faced in order to survive in their environments generally do not apply in our modern-day lives (i.e., being eaten by a lion or a bear!). However, it seems we have replaced these real 'tissue damage' dangers for others that are 'non-tissue damage' dangers, namely, those of vulnerability, failure, rejection and uncertainty. One of the top five most commonly listed 'fears' for many people today is that of public speaking<sup>17</sup> (was it one of the things you thought of during your 'pause' moment above?). It would appear that a significant number of individuals have learned to label such situations as something to be afraid of because they are the times when 'all eyes are on them'. The opinions and evaluations of these 'others watching' us are something we have learned to attach a great amount of social value to. As people, we do care about others and we are afraid of what they will do or think of us if we say the wrong thing, if we offend them. We are typically most afraid of hurting others close to us, especially our family, friends, teammates and work colleagues. Why all of this is the case may be due to our self-worth being in some ways dependent upon those other people's evaluations of us. Being brave, ironically, often requires us to 'let go' of the importance of such evaluations, to not place as much 'social value' upon them. Attempting any task or skill for the first, second, third, even multiple times, requires an acceptance of not expecting those attempts to be our 'personal bests' each time we do them. Reaching many personal best performances requires hundreds, if not thousands, of attempts at a task. So perhaps that is a first, good, take-away-point (TAP) from this chapter 2, when next time you are attempting to 'be brave' **(Remember: Every act of bravery starts with a willingness to 'try', to 'give it a go', even when there is a high likelihood of initial failure and not the most positive of evaluations from those 'significant others')**.

That word, failure, is one we also seem to have learned to think about in a very negative way. It is the word we use to describe 'not being successful' at something<sup>18</sup>. Remember that it really should only describe an activity completed by a person, it should not be used to describe 'the person'. Success is also a very subjective word, meaning that what is 'success' for one person may be regarded as failure by another individual<sup>18</sup>. Setting clear and objective measurements of what you deem to be a 'successful' effort or attempt at a task or skill, at a specific point in time, is maybe a good and more positive way to start being braver in your life. This, I refer to as target-setting, using the SMART principle<sup>19</sup> that I introduced to you in chapter 1 also (See the 'tips section' later in this chapter for a more detailed description of how to apply this principle in your life, in your attempts to 'be brave').



Source: Courtesy of Inpho Photography (Laszlo Geczo), with thanks to Sene Naoupu and the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU).



**Mid-Chapter Question Time:**

Pause again now to ask yourself these two questions now:

1. When in your life and sport, do you think you were your most brave?
2. What things / people encouraged you to act in that way?



## Bravery / Courage quotations

I personally love to read bravery quotations, especially those made by well-known figures who really seemed to understand and display publicly what many of us regard as 'bravery-in-action'. Such quotes have helped me to gain an insight into what we, as human beings, regard words such as bravery and courage to really mean. Take a look at these quotes in the table below and after that we will consider, more specifically, *the biology of bravery*.

Table 1: Some of my favourite brave/courage related quotations:

I LEARNED THAT COURAGE WAS NOT THE ABSENCE OF FEAR, BUT THE TRIUMPH OVER IT. THE BRAVE MAN IS NOT HE WHO DOES NOT FEEL FEAR, BUT HE WHO CONQUERS THAT FEAR.	NELSON MANDELA
COURAGE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL THE VIRTUES BECAUSE WITHOUT COURAGE YOU CAN'T PRACTICE ANY OTHER VIRTUE CONSISTENTLY.	MAYA ANGELOU
ANY FOOL CAN MAKE THINGS BIGGER, MORE COMPLEX AND MORE VIOLENT. IT TAKES A TOUCH OF GENIUS - AND A LOT OF COURAGE - TO MOVE IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION.	ALBERT EINSTEIN
COURAGE IS RESISTANCE TO FEAR, MASTERY OF FEAR, NOT ABSENCE OF FEAR.	MARK TWAIN
IT TAKES A GREAT DEAL OF BRAVERY TO STAND UP TO YOUR ENEMIES, BUT A GREAT DEAL MORE TO STAND UP TO YOUR FRIENDS.	'HARRY POTTER'
COURAGE IS BEING SCARED TO DEATH, BUT SADDLING UP ANYWAY.	JOHN WAYNE
I BELIEVE IN BEING STRONG WHEN EVERYTHING IS GOING WRONG.	AUDREY HEPBURN
COURAGE DOESN'T ALWAYS ROAR. SOMETIMES COURAGE IS LIKE THE LITTLE VOICE AT THE END OF THE DAY THAT SAYS, I'LL TRY AGAIN TOMORROW.	MARY ANNE RADMACHER
THE COURAGE OF LIFE IS OFTEN A LESS DRAMATIC SPECTACLE THAN THE COURAGE OF A FINAL MOMENT, BUT IT IS NO LESS THAN A MAGNIFICENT MIXTURE OF TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY. PEOPLE DO WHAT THEY MUST—IN SPITE OF PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES, IN SPITE OF OBSTACLES AND DANGERS AND PRESSURES—AND THAT IS THE BASIS OF ALL HUMAN MORALITY.	JOHN F KENNEDY
HE (OR SHE!) WHO IS NOT EVERY DAY CONQUERING SOME FEAR, HAS NOT LEARNED THE SECRET OF LIFE.	RALPH WALDO EMERSON

See: [Goalcast.com](http://Goalcast.com); [Goodreads.com](http://Goodreads.com); [Pinterest.ie](http://Pinterest.ie); [Quotefancy.com](http://Quotefancy.com) for quote source

## The Biology of Bravery

As I mentioned earlier, when researching this area of bravery, I quickly became fascinated by the biology of bravery, in other words, what actually happens **in** our bodies when we act in a brave way. When individuals engage in brave acts, they really do experience changes within their body's chemistry and functioning<sup>1</sup>. They secrete hormones in the brain and in other parts of the body as well. Certain areas of the brain are highly active during such times, along with the rest of the nervous system. An area in the brain located between the amygdala and hypothalamus, called the subgenual anterior cingulate cortex (sgACC; responsible for things like fear, emotion, stress and perception), has been found to be significantly active in times of fear, but when a person continues on with an action of bravery despite that fear<sup>1</sup> (See Figure 1 below).

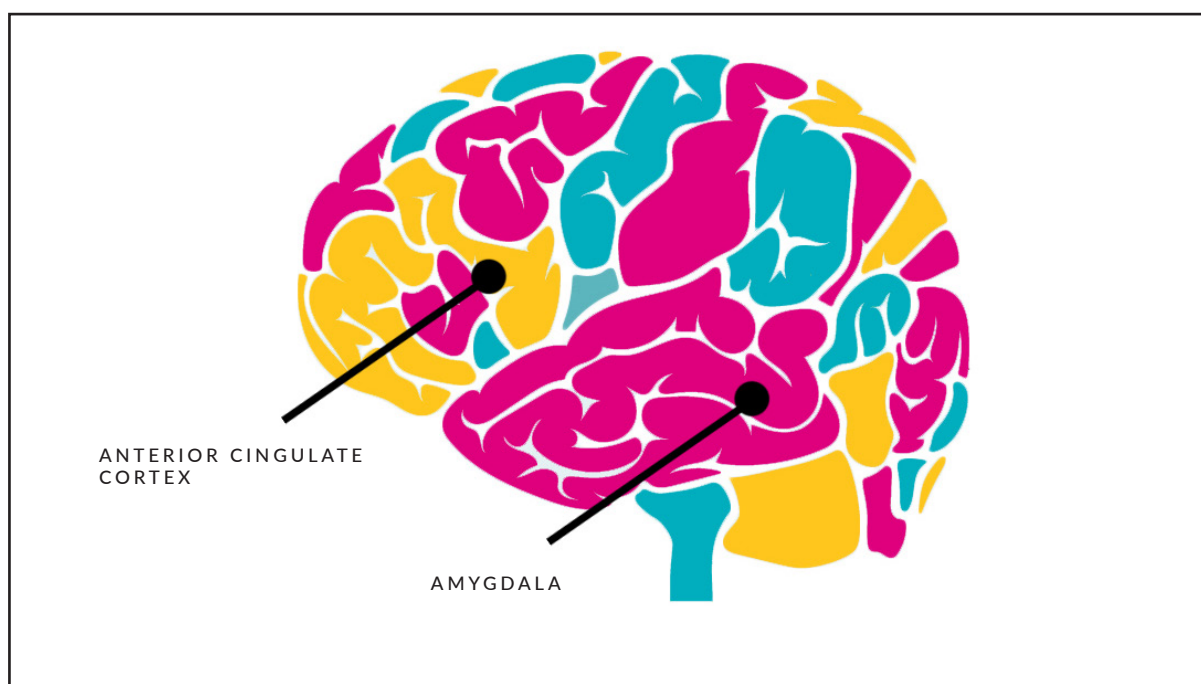


Figure 1: Brain structures associated with fear and bravery responses.

This structure, the sgACC, is located in the front part of the brain and is thought to help us 'negotiate' between our emotions and our thoughts or cognitions, between what we impulsively

are propelled to do and that 'pause for thought' moment, when we have the opportunity to make a calculated decision regarding our actions, to effectively over-ride our emotionally-driven responses<sup>1</sup> (which is what that simulation training I mentioned above really focuses on).

Research on other creatures has also helped us to understand better the brain-brave-biology. For example, an area of the brain in mice, called the ventral midline thalamus (vMT), has been associated with their acts of bravery<sup>21</sup>. Information comes into that area of their brains from other areas of their brains that register internal brain states, such as their arousal levels (Zifoid nucleus). However, this 'broad' incoming information then leads to very narrow outputs to two main locations – 1. The basolateral amygdala (emotion) and 2. The medial prefrontal cortex (thinking) - linked to the reward-centres of their brains too.

By stimulating the vMT areas of mice repeatedly, scientists have discovered that the arousal levels of the mice exposed to a threat that signalled a fight, flight or freezing response was reduced. The mice became desensitised to the threat and their arousal response diminished when their vMT brain area was repeatedly stimulated. It is possible that in the human brain, people who experience constant anxiety, phobias or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may have some altered brain circuitry in their equivalent brain area as the vMT in the mice, or that a traumatic experience may have triggered their brain responses in a way that then prevents repeated stimulation of their equivalent vMT area from resulting in a 'dropping-off' in their stress response<sup>1</sup>. Instead, their response may actually intensify over time, when repeatedly stimulated. Researchers are continuing to devise studies to see if relaxation techniques such as deep and purposeful breathing, as well as mindfulness practices are effective ways to reduce the stimulation of the vMT equivalent brain area in humans<sup>1</sup> (see Appendix B for more details on these techniques and practices). If so, this could enable these individuals to have a more flexible

and functional coping response to their stress inducing life situations in the future<sup>24,25</sup>.

So, based on this brain activity knowledge we now have, what do we know about our level of risk tolerance? Fear, as described above, is a state experienced throughout the whole body, including the brain and it is not just the stimulation of one area of the brain either. The 'fight' response is also now considered to be separate to the 'flight or freeze' response (as seen in the studies of the mice referred to above). Interestingly, in studies where human brain areas have been self-stimulated, one area some studies' participants, given this ability to 'self-stimulate' their own brains have activated most frequently is the area of the human brain that triggers a sense or feeling of 'mild frustration and effort'<sup>1</sup>.

It is possible then that there might actually be something innately 'rewarding' about us wanting to challenge or confront our fears, in order to achieve certain difficult tasks. Confronting a level of fear that we can process and cope with may actually be desirable, and rewarding, for us human beings. The 'just right' or 'Goldilocks', concept may be in play here. For example, just like lifting a gym weight - if the weight is too heavy it will lead to tissue damage and injury, rather than muscle building or muscle generation and if too light it will, similarly, not have the desired muscle growth and strengthening effect. So the 'amount' of stress placed on the body matters and trying to reach that 'just-right' level is desirable.

Achieving a task often results in a release of dopamine in the brain as well, one of our human, 'reward-feel-good', chemicals (neurotransmitters). So it seems there may really be a positive psychological reward for us when we confront our fears. The interesting questions then are: what puts us under just that 'just-right' amount of discomfort or stress? Can we maintain clear



cognitions or thinking under heightened 'state' (stress) arousal? Can we train our forebrain to be the more dominant 'voice' in our brains, rather than our primitive amygdala response, that often 'hijacks' the situation and takes over our fear response)? If the answer to these questions are 'yes', then how might we help ourselves to enable this more desirable brain activation to happen? Being adaptive when faced with uncertain situations in our lives and then reviewing these situations after they have happened is perhaps a positive practice to engage in, to perhaps help us to activate such responses in our human body, it seems. As people, thinking more like scientists and statisticians can help us do this 'post-event processing'. Remember, events are often independent of each other. Weighing up the probability of things happening, that risk-assessment, is very beneficial. If you have a rational way to process information, it helps. Consider the things that made an experience 'scary' yesterday. They won't necessarily make that same situation scary today. Adjusting our response to an event, our thinking about and assessment of it, can help us to adjust our response to it. Being able to assess risk reasonably under high stress is important, as is being adaptive to changes in our lives. This skill of adaption can be of great value to us<sup>20,22</sup>. It is never recommended that we 'over-ride' our fear response for irrational reasons (that is 'being rash'), rather that we assess the risks we are being presented with properly, that we do 'realistic assessments' and try not to misinterpret the real sources of our fears.

Unfortunately, the source of our fear response is something we do often misinterpret. Let me repeat, fear is, from an evolutionary perspective, very useful because it helps to keep us safe from things that are really harmful, that can cause that real tissue damage and even death. We are programmed to want to avoid pain, physical and psychological pain. However, we often get the causation of that 'pain' we experience when we do a task we find scary wrong. For example, if you have a fear of taking a penalty kick, or making a speech, it is often because you may have

had a similar, often emotionally painful experience of doing those activities in the past and wish to avoid that 'pain feeling' in the future. However, what made those past experiences 'painful'? Assess the situation; be a scientist to yourself (that is, assess the situation more scientifically). Often we disliked those experiences, as cited earlier, because we wondered what everyone else watching was thinking about our performance and perhaps that we 'weren't good enough'....but ask yourself this, by who's standards are you comparing yourself to? Are those realistic standards for you now? Remember the advice above - becoming braver often means attaching less value to the evaluations of others and setting our own standards for ourselves, being accountable to ourselves. In traumatic experiences we often become confused about who is responsible or what is responsible for our painful experiences. We may rationally know we are not to blame for something that has happened. However, at an emotional level we may 'feel' we were to blame for it. We can also over-generalise 'good' and 'bad' experiences. Ask yourself, have you ever thought: It was 'bad' once so it will always 'be bad'. How can we learn to 'dump' those past experiences that are restricting our current activities, while taking on new experiences that may 'open up' our lives in positive, new and exciting ways? That is a very interesting target for us all potentially to aim to set for ourselves, in my opinion.

In trying to understand the role our emotions play, including fear, in our lives it is also perhaps useful to think about them like the weather, they come and they go. Feelings are important, for sure, they provide the colour to our lives, but they can also get in the way of making moment-to-moment decisions, when trying to achieve a lot of tasks in our lives. Athletes often set targets, just like a ship sets its destinations. Those targets are very helpful to have when the 'weather' (emotions) changes. So taking advantage of our emotions when they are 'taking us toward our

destination' is a good thing to do and to think rationally about them when they are not is also a productive activity to engage in. Undergoing some of your own stress-testing or a mini version of that simulation training I mentioned earlier can also be useful, to see how you may respond under different forms of stress. When you are feeling highly emotional, you can still make rational decisions about the tasks you are doing at that time? Can you trust yourself to navigate a situation well when under some form of stress? As explained above, the emotion of fear is perhaps the greatest barrier to bravery. Can you learn to act, to attempt difficult tasks, even when you feel afraid? How can you respond more positively to fear and become better at confronting your fears, in order to be braver, while knowing that your fear response is a combination of your biology and the processing of your past experiences? Let's consider some of the things I have already suggested above in the form of specific, clear, strategies you could consider applying to help you to 'be braver'.

## Practical strategies to enhance bravery

### 1: Aim to build up your 'track-record'

You could try to 'build up' your courage levels by building up a track-record of situations that challenge you and that provide you with the evidence to know that you can survive such situations, over and over again, creating what is called body memory, a type of 'cellular memory'. Practicing going slightly outside of or to the very edge of your comfort zone, by consciously and consistently practicing small acts of courage, can have a cumulative effect. For example, try to find ways to 'speak-up' when you believe something is not right in your everyday life. Taking 'a stand' on seemingly little things can strengthen the habit of making truly difficult and courageous decisions in other areas of your life at other times. Taking the time to accurately review these situation outcomes where you were brave enables you to do this more too. Things that are unfamiliar to us stimulate new circuits in our bodies and brains to activate and the uncertainty of how this feels can be labelled in a number of ways. Indeed, the experience of just doing something can have more value than the actual outcome of the action, especially when building up your 'track-record'. The outcome of any situation cannot be guaranteed. Extracting what you have learned from any experience is often a better thing to focus on. What 'nuggets' of wisdom have you learned from that experience? When an outcome is not what you had hoped for (i.e., a 'success'), this can be a valuable 'result' as well, because it can help you to clarify what you could change or what you would like to have happen differently in the future. Such lesson-learning – that 'seeing every opportunity as one to learn from', as productive, not as simply a 'good' or 'bad' opportunity, is perhaps a better perspective to take. Imagine both the worst and best outcomes for you if you were to take similar actions in the future and also if you don't. By identifying the risks being taking by your actions, you can build up some immunity to your fears. Also, be aware of your negativity

bias in your assessments of your actions<sup>23,32</sup>. Many people are prone to attend to, or recall, more negative than positive outcomes in their lives. By being aware of this bias we humans all possess, you can perhaps correct this bias in yourself too. Spend equal time considering the positive, as well as the negative past experiences when you acted in a particular way. Learning from all such situations is a productive thing to do.

## 2: 'Talk out' your fears

People who are afraid to act often do not believe in their ability to do certain tasks and this lack of self-belief can manifest itself in many ways, from procrastination, to perfectionism, to experiencing the 'imposter syndrome'<sup>27</sup> (see Chapter 3 where self-belief is discussed). Talk about your fears with another trusted person in your life; expose your vulnerabilities, as this can have a positive and empowering effect on you. By identifying what we are truly afraid of, we can actually reduce our fears of the situation, which can then help to give us that courage to act in the future. We can also benefit from hearing the experiences of others who have conquered their similar fears. Having people with whom you have freely shared your fears - and who often then shared their fears with you also - can be a very valuable social support network exchange. It is a resource for you to develop for when you are faced with a challenge in your life ('tend and befriend' as the saying goes<sup>26</sup>). Those network-people also don't always have to be people you know very well. For example, some of my students have told me years after being in my classes that they drew strength from their classmates' comments, and actions, in some of our classroom discussions, that helped them to overcome many of their fears to do certain things in their later lives.

### 3: Manage your body

Fear is physically draining and these physical effects can also make the mental impact worse. Anyone having to take action in stressful times, to 'be brave', should aim to navigate those challenges by taking the time to exercise, eat well, get adequate rest/sleep and have some fun! Various relaxation techniques, such as meditation, yoga as well as mindfulness practices, can be helpful in creating that clarity of mind that is required for courageous actions<sup>20</sup>, so try out some of those options for yourself, to see which ones work best for you and incorporate them into your daily routines (see Appendix B for more information on applying these options).

### 4: Work on your self-talk

Taking control of that little inner-voice can be a very helpful way to act braver. Having some pro-active, positive, inner dialogue practiced and ready to apply when stressors and nerves present themselves can be really helpful in times requiring bravery. Those little 'go-to' phrases can really help to coax you, to keep you going when you might feel like giving up or running away from a scary challenge. There are also a number of different types of self-talk. Table 2 below describes some of these types of self-talk. See if you can apply the 'KISS' principle when devising your self-talk go-to phrases (Keep-It-Simple-Superstar!).

Table 2: Some self-talk types<sup>28</sup> and samples phrases.

TYPE	EXAMPLE
Choice	Fear is a reaction, courage is a decision
Self-directed questions to encourage some self-reflection	Why worry about what others think, when my belief in myself is more important?
Cause and effect	We build up our self-belief by stepping outside out comfort zone in small increments.
Command	Feel the fear and do it anyway!
Instructional	Next shot / Next kick
Encouraging	You can do this!
Reality Check	No one has it all and no one lacks it all!

### 5: Relabel your fear response ['Cognitive re-framing']

Physiological sensations experienced in challenging situations can be re-labelled<sup>29</sup>. The body's nervous system response to challenges (increased heartrate, rapid breathing, sweating, butterflies-in-the-tummy feeling) can be viewed as helpful, as a sign the body is energised and ready for action, it is excitement, in the way it feels when you are doing things you are not scared of. This relabelling can help you to manage your fear-response and fool your body into acting despite the fear being felt. When you relabel the experience in this way your body does actually believe you, you release the hormone called oxytocin<sup>25</sup>. This hormone has received a lot of scientific attention in recent years because it is released during times of intimacy, when we hug another person, for example, and when we help other people (known as engaging in altruistic behaviour – such as volunteering at a charity event). It is another one of those feel-good hormones we naturally produce and 'being brave' actually stimulates the body to release it!

## 6: Have a reward and 'calm-down' plan for after the brave experience.

Having a plan for what you are going to do after the challenging / brave experience can be very helpful for your own well-being. Giving yourself a treat (for example: a nice meal, a movie night etc.), after you have 'survive' doing something brave is a positive thing to do because the emotion centres of your brain like to anticipate a positive outcome reward for you pushing the boundaries of that comfort zone. Have a place ready in which you can calm down after the experience too and find time to review the experience soon afterward as well, as this can really help you to be more proactive in managing your fear response to uncertain, challenging situations in the future.

## Conclusion

You may have thought at the start of this chapter that it would be a nice idea to find out how to live your life without feeling fear and then not have to 'be brave' at all. However, having read this chapter you have hopefully accepted that that is not possible, nor should you want it to be the case. Stressors in life will present themselves to you both inside and outside of sport settings all the time. These stressors, along with your emotional responses to them, really do provide that 'colour' to your life, so we all could probably benefit from having a higher capacity for stress tolerance in order to manage our daily stress-inducing feared experiences. No one, in my opinion, really wants to 'not feel' in their lives, like the 'Tin-Man' in the famous movie, *The Wizard of Oz* - he wanted a 'heart' so that he could 'feel' and 'love' (experience all human emotions)<sup>30</sup>. The above chapter, with the final six practical strategies, will hopefully assist you as you strive to increase your own tolerance levels for your fears, to enhance those coping (mental) skills I introduced you to in chapter 1 also, so that you can endeavour to 'be braver' into the future. My very best wishes with that and do let me know how you get on!





### Self-Reflection Exercise

I would like you to think back over the material on 'bravery' that you have just read in this chapter 2 of Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What has been the most memorable lesson(s) or piece of information you have learned about being brave?
2. The next time you are scared to do something, what are you going to try to do, think and feel?



## Take-Action Activity

WHAT ARE THE MOST FEAR INDUCING TASKS FOR ME RIGHT NOW?



WHAT SKILLS ARE AVAILABLE TO ME TO ENABLE THIS FEAR TO BE OVERCOME?



WHAT SKILLS COULD I ACQUIRE TO ENABLE THIS FEAR TO BE MANAGED?



WHO COULD I CONTACT TO ADVISE AND SUPPORT ME WITH THIS PROCESS?



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**BRAVE  
ACTION**

**#3**

**BEING  
AWESOME-IN-ACTION**



## Introduction

What does it mean to say 'Awesome-In-Action'? In this chapter 3 I will explore this concept. As people, before being described as athletes or performers of any kind, we can over-think many of the experiences we have in our lives, as introduced in chapter 1 of this e-book. We can sometimes become 'paralysed' by these situations, as was explained in chapter 2. We can often forget that as human beings we are 'doers'. So, how can we more effectively 'do'? How can we be more **'Awesome-In-Action'**, as many of my athlete-friends, students, family members and colleagues will tell you I frequently say in my classes and during my chats with them. Having a strong sense of self-belief is an important component of that 'doing' concept. I have already explained this term in the last two chapters also. So, the main aims of this chapter are: (i) to explain the importance of 'doing', (ii) to discuss the reasons why 'doing various activities' often makes us feel better, physically and mentally, and (iii) to suggest ways for how we can become more structured in our doing-habits, so that when we are challenged or feeling over-whelmed in our everyday lives, we can move forward by 'doing', by engaging in various activities, rather than becoming 'paralysed' and in essence, inactive, by our fears, doubts and worries - after all practicing 'taking-action' is important. Action is like a muscle and it needs to be 'exercised' in order for it to get 'stronger and better'.



Source: Courtesy of Inpho Photography (Dan Sheridan), with thanks to Jordan Larmour, Josh van der Flier and Adam Byrne, and Leinster Rugby.



### Learning Objectives of Chapter 3

1. To explain the importance of being 'action focused' in easy-to-understand language.
2. To highlight what is so good about being 'awesome-in-action' in sport and in life.
3. To provide some practical advice on how to be 'awesome-in-action'.



## Defining 'action'

Let's begin by explaining the meaning of the word 'action'. In human activity terms, this word simply describes a person 'doing a task or activity'. Within psychology, actions are perhaps the best indicators of what a person is thinking, given that we can never really be completely sure what thoughts are going through a person's mind. After all, we cannot put a recorder into the human brain to get a reading from or print out of peoples' actual thoughts. We rely upon their actions and their reporting of their thoughts and actions, for example, to gain such insights and, of course, people are not always truthful about what they are actually thinking at any given point in time. A school of psychology is devoted to this view of observable behaviours. It is called **behaviourism** (based upon the works of well-known historical individuals such as B.F. Skinner, Ivan Pavlov and John Watson – individuals that psychology students typically learn about in their first year of study on most psychology undergraduate accredited programs. Other schools of thought within psychology include: (i) **cognitive psychology** (mentioned in earlier chapters of this e-book and generally agreed to be the study of mental processes); (ii) **gestalt psychology** – the study of the mind (thoughts) and behaviours 'as a whole' or as a 'gestalt', rather than trying to break them down into separate entities<sup>1</sup>); (iii) **psychoanalysis** – the study of the unconscious mind (made famous by the well-known psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud<sup>1</sup>) and (iv) **humanistic psychology**, which focuses on individual free will, personal growth and self-actualisation<sup>2</sup> (a phrase perhaps made most famous by the researcher, Abraham Maslow, in his 'Hierarchy of Needs'). All of the above psychology schools of thought have something to contribute to our understanding of the complexities of the human brain and its vast array of abilities that enable us to live our complex lives in today's fast paced and technology influenced society.

Given that our focus in this chapter is on 'actions', that could suggest that behaviourism is the most applicable and relevant school of thought to consider here. However, if we wish to

understand our actions and influence them in a more positive, productive way, we should also consider the influence of cognitive or Gestalt psychology. We all may initially think too, that in order to act in any particular way, we must first think and feel a certain way before we engage in the action, especially if we wish to act in a skilful, 'successful' way. In reality, creating habits of 'doing' activities or tasks, in the knowledge that we will likely feel better **after** having completed them is perhaps a better way to approach such situations, by understanding that the nice/good 'feeling' will come after the action and accepting that it is not often in place before the task has actually been started. So while how you think, can affect how you feel, and affects what you do, so too is the reverse-scenario, that is, what you do, affects how you feel and then can affect what you think, as the famous psychologist, William James, alluded to in his quote: ***"Actions seems to follow feeling, but really actions and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not. Thus, the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there"***<sup>3</sup> (see Table 1 below for some more relevant William James' quotes). This quote is also linked to that commonly-stated phrase of 'fake it 'till you make it'. We often wait to 'feel' like doing something, before we actually attempt it. However, the difficulty with that is that in many cases, we often do not 'feel' like doing many tasks because they take a lot of effort. By anticipating the way we typically feel once we have completed the task can be a more positive way to urge ourselves into taking the appropriate action to begin with and protect us from our procrastinating tendencies.

Other action-encouraging quotations credited to William James<sup>3</sup> include:

*“Action may not always bring happiness, but there is no happiness without action”*

*“Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does”*

*“To change one’s life: 1. Start immediately; 2. Do it flamboyantly; 3. No exceptions”*

*“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another”*

*“Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task”*

*“We don’t laugh because we’re happy, we’re happy because we laugh.”*

*“...do every day or two something for no other reason than you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test”*

*“A sense of humour is just common sense dancing.”*

## Procrastination

Procrastination is the term used to define the delaying or postponing of an action<sup>4,14</sup>, such as going to training, going to the gym, making a difficult decision in work, completing a work or college project, cleaning out a room etc.). Procrastinating behaviour happens a lot, to many of us, regarding many activities, and for many reasons including the feeling of fear (or dread; see Chapter 2). Procrastinating individuals are often frightened about: the outcome of their efforts to complete a task - how that outcome will be 'judged' by others and the feeling of discomfort and 'pain' they will likely experience when doing the task, such as muscle cramping, lactic acid build-up and breathlessness (if the task is physically exerting). Many of us would probably admit that one of the main reasons we delay doing some of the tasks from the list above is because we are most afraid that we will not be 'good enough' or successful at the tasks we attempt (as alluded to in Chapter 2 also, when we were discussing the concept of 'being brave' and how we might attempt to overcome the fears we all experience at times in our lives). However, the irony is, again, that completing the most difficult of tasks often gives us that most intense 'buzz', that feel-great-factor, at having completed something challenging, as often the best activities in life to attempt are the ones that make our 'hearts race' before and while we are completing them. One of the best ways to help us complete such challenging tasks and be 'awesome-in-action' can include understanding more about the targets of our actions, such as understanding the differences between outcome, performance and process targets we can set for ourselves.

## Distinguishing between Outcome, Performance and Process Targets

Outcome targets describe the success / failure elements of goals. For example, in sport, an outcome goal describes the winning or losing of a game or competition. However, the problem with focusing solely on outcome goals as the 'bench-mark' to determine if we have been 'successful' at any task is that such targets do not help us to actually 'do' the tasks that enable us to get to that outcome point. In contrast, our performance and process goals do that for us. Performance goals are the performance targets we can set for ourselves when we perform (for example, the number of points you might like to successfully score in a sport related game you play, the time you would like to run for a certain distance, the number of steps you would like to walk in one day or week, or the number of repetitions of a circuit you would like to complete in a training session). Process goals are the actual actions needed to reach those performance goals (for example, the technical training involved in being able to kick a ball successfully into a goal or over a bar – the arm and leg movement, the head positioning, the place to look at just before the skill is attempted<sup>5</sup>). Based on the above descriptions, you can perhaps now realise that a good place to start is at the 'process' stage, in order to achieve any performance, that will then, hopefully, allow the outcome to be achieved. In sport, many athletes set such performance targets for themselves so that regardless of any other individual's performance that they may be competing against, they can be satisfied with their own effort, if they achieve their own personal target. That is why you may often hear athletes stating in pre and post-performance interviews about 'focusing on the performance', and on the 'processes' to help them achieve that performance which then allow the outcome to potentially 'look after itself'.

Another way to help overcome inaction phases (procrastination behaviours), is to set specific times when you will do the tasks that you know you do not especially look forward to doing (often because, as stated above, they require intense effort on your part). This is called action-planning<sup>5</sup> and is described below. It can also be very helpful to establish some kind of positive reward system for yourself, for when you have completed those challenging tasks<sup>4,5</sup>. Often, the 'buzz' we experience from completing such difficult actions can be reward enough (that intense good feeling after the action). Also giving yourself treats such as relaxing on the sofa watching that movie you've wanted to see, or meeting that friend for a coffee is a very good idea, so that you can share your 'awesome' experiences. But why describe those experiences as awesome?

### **Defining 'being awesome'**

In most dictionary definitions, the word awesome in relation to an action typically refers to a person being extremely good, excellent or very impressive at doing an activity<sup>6</sup>. My combination of this word, along with the 'action' term in order to create the phrase 'Awesome-In-Action', has developed a somewhat special meaning for me in recent years. I consider it to refer to 'doing' something that is very impressive or 'excellent'. However, I use the word 'awesome' (rather than excellent or excellence), as it tends to appeal to people of all ages more, in my opinion. It is viewed by many individuals, they say, in a more fun way. It has a child-like, less serious, less pressurised element to it, compared to the term 'excellence' it seems. Excellence implies someone or something being 'outstanding' also, but with that can come a perception of the task as somewhat unrealistically achievable by many people. It can also be more readily mistaken for aiming to be perfect at a task. That term, perfection, is not used in my classes and in discussions I have with any athletes, performers or students because it implies, indeed the term is often



defined as, a level of performance that is flawless<sup>7</sup>. Doing any task flawlessly is not realistically achievable. No performance is ever really without some flaws. It can, in some ways, be improved upon in the future. That is the reason why I advise athletes, students and performers of any kind not to aim for perfection, but rather that they set standards of performance for themselves that are challenging, yet attainable, with some degree of effort. Perfection is so subjective in any action. In sport (i.e., gymnastics and boxing) judges evaluate the performances of the athletes and while they may be very knowledgeable in their areas, they can differ in their ratings of such performances. They frequently display individual differences in their scores and as such we should remember that the most important evaluations of any performance starts with our own targets that we set for ourselves and our objective evaluations of those performances after the actions have been attempted.

You may have also noticed earlier in this chapter that I placed terms such as success in inverted commas. Why? Well, think for a moment how you define terms such as 'success' and also 'failure'? These are words that often influence our views of terms such as 'perfection' as well. However, these words are all very subjective. They mean different things to different people<sup>5</sup>. They are not concrete states (a concrete state is one that is unchanging and is, in general, agreed upon in some way by all who use it in a particular context). Success and failure on any task are, therefore, should be based upon our own evaluations of how well we have achieved the targets we have set for ourselves.

In sport and performance settings, we also often hear terms such as task orientation and ego orientation being used to explain the types of targets people set for themselves<sup>5</sup>. While many individuals might think it is more helpful for performance to be completely task focused in

sport and performance settings, many athletes would agree that they use their ego orientation (wanting to defeat an opponent, rather than just wanting to master a task or execute it well), to complement their task orientation, when striving to complete a task<sup>5,8</sup>. As with most things in psychology, it is never really a one or other orientation solely that 'works best'. Often what reaps the most benefits is some form of combination of the two approaches, as research in this area also supports to varying degrees.

It is also important to be aware that when completing tasks, we can have approach or avoidance motives<sup>9</sup>. 'Approach' motives typically lead to doing behaviours that result in an individual becoming competent at a task, a skill, by persisting with the effort necessary to complete that task. 'Avoidance' motives, in contrast, typically result in behaviours that lead to an inability to remain committed to the task. Often, an underlying fear of being seen to fail at the attempted skill is experienced in these cases<sup>9</sup>. Avoidance behaviour is, therefore, often a barrier to being 'awesome-in-action' in sport and performance settings. However, it is also important not to label all avoidance behaviours as ineffective or maladaptive coping strategies. For example, if you find driving in heavy traffic distressing and a waste of your time, avoiding driving at busy rush-hour times by travelling to and from your workplace before and after many other commuters are also travelling on the roads can actually be a very effective coping strategy for managing your daily stress levels.

Another comparison to make in relation to your behaviour is to understand when it is action or state oriented, in other words, do you most often 'take action' or are you more likely to 'think a lot' about something first, before taking any action? In sport and performance settings it is beneficial to be action-oriented. Individuals who are action-oriented tend to seek out, quickly, ways to

problem-solve when placed in adverse situations, without excessively thinking about them first. In contrast, state oriented individuals have a tendency to engage in excessive thinking about how they are feeling and thinking in such challenging situations<sup>10</sup>. This can prevent them from taking any action - in other words, they become paralysed by their 'state'. They also may over-think any goals they do set for themselves and are often more adversely impacted upon by failures to achieve those same goals<sup>10</sup>. Thus, helping such individuals to change their orientation, to become more action-focused, can be an effective strategy to help them refocus and perform better when they become distracted by their emotional state<sup>15,16</sup>.



Source: Courtesy of Sportsfile (David Fitzgerald), with thanks also to Robbie Power (aboard Magic of Light).



### Mid-Chapter Question Time:

Pause to ask yourself these two questions now:

1. When in your life and sport, do you think you achieved your most awesome actions?
2. What things / people encouraged you to act in those really rewarding ways?



## Suggested strategies for becoming more 'action' focused

So, now that you understand a little more about your actions, including what may help and hinder them, let's have a look now at some specific strategies you could consider applying, based on the material cited above, and in past chapters, that could help you to become more 'action-focused'.

### 1: Action-planning

There is a phrase used within psychology to describe the difference between the actions people intent to do versus what they actually do. This is called the 'intention-action' gap<sup>11</sup>. Researchers have looked at this concept and have concluded that people who engage in action-planning tend to 'match' their intended actions with their actual actions more than individuals who do not engage in this action-planning<sup>5,11</sup>. An example of action-planning (in-action, pardon the pun!) could involve a novice athlete who wishes to be able to run a better time for a race distance, such as a 5K run, devising a plan to go out for a training run of 2K/3K/4K on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday each week in the 4 to 6 weeks leading up to a race, or a person wishing to complete a 3,000 word assignment devising a plan to write 300 words per day over a 10-day period prior to the assignment submission date. The reason why such action planning is effective is because it removes indecisiveness in the planning process. Action-plans help us to put in place automatic responses that we, as individuals, make on certain days and at certain times in our weekly schedules. They can lead to better outcomes for the tasks being attempted then too. They can help us to combat the practical barriers that sometimes derail our best intentions to act in certain ways, such as a perceived lack of time or social distractions that can appear more appealing than engaging in the more challenging actions (that ultimately a person knows would be 'better' for him or her to engage in at that time for longer-term-benefits).

## 2: Use the SMART target-setting principle, effectively

While many of you may have heard of the SMART principle of target setting<sup>12</sup>, lots of people often require advice on how best to apply it, so that it is helpful to their performances. What are the best steps to enable you to set SMART targets? 1. Be specific (S) about your targets, such as setting a target 'to run a 5k' (not 'to get fit' or 'to run more'); 2. Make the target measurable (M), so that you will objectively know if you have achieved your target or not; 3. Make the target action-based (A), requiring you to 'do' something; 4. Set a realistic (R) target for yourself, one that is challenging, but also one that you really do believe that, with some effort, you can achieve; and 5. Make the target time-phased (T), in other words, have a deadline for when you wish to have achieved the task by (i.e., by the end of that training session, the end of that day, that week, that month etc.).

## 3: Establish a Reward-Wheel and a Tick-the-Box list

As mentioned above, giving yourself rewards for having completed challenging tasks and displaying 'awesomeness-in-action' can be a very positive action-strategy for many people, to help coax them into doing challenging things in the knowledge that a form of gratification will result from having engaged in that action. One way to do this is perhaps to note seven things you really enjoy doing and establish a **7-day reward wheel** for yourself for when you achieve those tasks. For example, a Monday might have a reward of 'watching your favourite TV show' at the end of that day if certain tasks are completed; Tuesday might be 'having a favourite coffee in a favourite café with a good friend and so on. Factoring in challenges and follow-up treats into our daily or weekly schedules can really help us to maintain our focus on the targets we have set for ourselves. They can be very

effective in helping us to maintain our productivity from day to day and week to week. It can also be very satisfying to 'tick-off' the things we have accomplished in any given day. Such actions can enable us to look forward to working on future challenging projects and to enjoy the anticipated rewards for achieving those tasks afterward also.

#### **4. Evaluate your post-action-feelings by doing a 'hot' debrief**

Achieving something does result in a multitude of post-action emotions. Most people often comment on that feeling of satisfaction at having completed the task. They may also say they experienced a 'buzz' as referred to earlier in this chapter. This 'buzz' is actually the biological response of our bodies to our actions. So, why do we experience that 'buzz'? The body has a very effective built-in mechanism for pumping some super substances around our bodies when we engage in activities we find challenging. Some of these substances include oxytocin (discussed in Chapter 2), adrenaline, serotonin, dopamine, endorphins and cortisol (discussed in Chapter 2). All of these substances help to provide us with that 'hit', that 'buzz' we feel, the 'feel-good factor' that many of us describe after we do something we consider brave or awesome or satisfying. In order to try to 'hold-on' to this feeling and experience it again, it can be helpful to do a 'hot-debrief' very soon after you have completed the task. This involves taking a brief moment (typically just a few seconds to 2 minutes) as immediately as possible after having completed the task to enable you to mentally note how you are feeling, what you like about that feeling and what you would do in the future to replicate that good feeling. Such 'hot-debriefs' are powerful in helping to keep you 'focused' and 'on-track', when distractions or competing potential barriers present themselves in the future for when you had set an action-plan in place to do a challenging task again, yet you are

engaging in that inner-battle with yourself, that ‘will-I-or-won’t-I’ do the challenging task today scenario discussion. Hot-debriefs keep the memory of the ‘buzz’ more alive within our memories and help us to ‘override’ the competing voice that may be saying “I don’t feel like doing this”, “I’m too tired”, “It’ll be too difficult now” or “I don’t have time to do that today” (Remember, act your way into the feeling, rather than waiting to feel your way into the action! Know and remember that you will likely feel great after you have completed the task, but not always before you have completed it).

### **Conclusion**

You may have thought at the start of this chapter that displays of ‘awesome-in-action’ are reserved for the ‘elite’ athletes and performers - that it is only those individuals who complete such feats. This is far from the truth. We all engage in actions on a daily basis that to someone else appear in many ways to be ‘awesome’. It is important to recognise this in our own actions and to give ourselves credit for those achievements. Completing any task is a ‘success’, from making your bed to completing a work project, to calling up a friend to ask his/her advice about something or just to ‘catch-up’. We all have the ability to be awesome-in-action, indeed we, in many ways display this on a daily basis. Understanding that what we think effects what we feel and do, but also that what we do effects how we think and feel is so important. Also, remember the point made at the end of the introduction to this chapter: Action is like a muscle and it needs to be ‘exercised’ in order for it to get ‘stronger and better’. I wish you well in your efforts to be ‘awesome-in-action’ on a frequent basis and please do let me know how you get on when you implement the suggested strategies above as well!



**Take-Action Activity****MOST DESIRED ACTION FOR ME AT PRESENT?****SKILLS AVAILABLE TO ME TO ENABLE THIS ACTION TO BE COMPLETED?****SKILLS NEEDED TO ENABLE THIS ACTION TO HAPPEN?****WHO COULD I CONTACT THAT COULD ADVISE ME AND SUPPORT ME WITH THIS ACTION-COMPLETION-PROCESS**



### Self-Reflection Exercise

I would like you to think back over this chapter's material on striving to be 'awesome-in-action'.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What has been the most memorable lesson(s) or piece of information you have read about being action-focused in this chapter?
2. The next time you realise you are procrastinating about doing some activity, what are you going to try to do, think and feel in that incidence, to help you to be more 'awesome' in your actions'?



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# **BRAVE ACTION**

# **#4**

## **DEVELOPING RESILIENCE**

## Introduction

What do the terms resilience, grit and mental fortitude training mean and why are they something you could benefit from understanding more about? Here, in chapter 4, I will explore these concepts popularised by some of my talented colleagues (see the references at the end of this chapter). They tirelessly work in our field of sport psychology to provide us all with sound, research / evidence-based information to explain what these terms really mean and how we can apply practical strategies, such as mental fortitude training, effectively in order to manage the stressors and challenges we often face in our day-to-day lives.



### Learning Objectives of Chapter 4

1. To explain the terms resilience, grit and mental fortitude training in easy-to-understand language.
2. To highlight what is so good about using mental fortitude training strategies in order to develop your resilience abilities.
3. To provide some practical tips on how you can successfully apply such training for your sport, performance and everyday life situations.



## What is resilience?

Many of you will probably have heard the term resilience being used a lot in recent years. It typically describes our effective behavioural responses to the challenges life 'throws' at us. The term, resilience, may have been explained to you in simple terms in the past as your 'bounce-back-ability', your ability to be able to 'rise again after you have fallen down'<sup>1</sup>. In other words, it is your ability to cope well when faced with some form of challenge, disappointment or perceived 'failure' in your life. However, an important point to make is that you only have a finite amount of energy at your disposal on any given day and it needs to be replenished frequently. Therefore, it is also vital that you take some rest in between your efforts to 'rise again'. If you do not, burnout and exhaustion will be the likely result of your continuous attempts to just keep 'getting up' after each of your life 'falls'.

Resilience is typically referred to in many dictionaries as some form of variation of the following definitions: the ability to overcome setbacks and challenges experienced in life / the ability to use personal qualities to cope with pressure (stressors)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, in order to be able to say that different people have displayed some form of resilience in both their mental processes and subsequent behaviours, some form of adversity must typically have been experienced first. Adversity is usually seen then as a 'must-be-present' in such situations and some form of positive adaptation to that adversity must also be evident. In sport and performance settings this is often regarded as a 'good outcome', or 'good result'. However, in 2012, Mustafa Sarkar and David Fletcher proposed a slightly different way to view psychological resilience. They stated that it could be more accurately viewed as: "the role of mental processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of **stressors**"<sup>3</sup>. They avoided using the word **adversity** (what they regarded as a usually negatively viewed term) in their



definition. They replaced adversity with the term 'stressor' (considered to be, perhaps, a more 'neutral' term, that is, it may be viewed by individuals in a positive or a negative way, depending on their choice and perspective).

Many people may also think that resilience is a type of static trait that individuals either possess or not. However, recent research findings by many individuals working in this area would refute that view<sup>4</sup>. It seems, like many other psychological concepts already discussed in chapters 1, 2 and 3 (such as fear, stress and bravery), resilience is a more transient state that fluctuates depending on an individual's internal (personal) and external (environmental) situations. So it would seem your resilience is actually your ability to manage your life stressors and that this ability fluctuates, therefore, it can be developed and improved upon over time also. How this may happen seems to be a feature of the interactions between your personal and situational factors – that is, it depends on the vast array of experiences you are exposed to in your life, many of which may be negative in some way (such as illness, injury, loss etc.) in order for your resilience to emerge.



Source: Courtesy of Tracy Sheridan Art

This apparent necessity for some traumatic experience to be endured in order for a person's potential resilience to emerge has raised some controversial suggestions regarding the potential benefits of purposefully exposing individuals to traumatic experiences in their lives in order to help their resilience skills to develop. To be very clear here, I consider it wrong morally, professionally and ethically to purposefully aim to traumatise any individuals in any way, by willingly and 'on-purpose' exposing them to avoidable significant stressors in their lives, using the excuse that it helps them to develop their resilience, grit and 'mental toughness'. However, we know that in life we are all going to face stressors and challenges at certain points in time. Using such situations that naturally and often unavoidably arise, for example and as stated above, illness, injury, loss and disappointments, as opportunities to develop our resilience skills, can be a positive and worthwhile way to rethink these situations when they arise. However, how transferable our abilities are to automatically view, and manage well, challenging situations across different areas of our lives has also been questioned (for example, in our sport versus our academic or study settings, or in our work versus our home / personal relationship settings).

Recent research on mental resilience has uncovered that our ability to display effective coping skills in times of crisis may be more domain specific than has previously been thought<sup>6</sup>. This means that just because you display resilient behaviour in one context or setting that does not mean you will automatically display the same level or degree of resilience when placed into another setting or situation outside of that 'successful' domain. For example, a person may successfully display resilient behaviour in his / her sport setting, but then moving from that sport setting into, say, an academic or work setting does not mean the person will necessarily display the same levels of resilience in that new or different setting. The ability to manage the challenges that may arise in this new or different setting often depend upon the specific experiences the individual has had in that different setting, such as his/her perceived level of expertise in that

area. Similarly, a person perceived to be resilient in his / her work setting who then moves into a home setting may also not display the same degree of resilience within that specific home context).

So, it appears then that resilience is not the 'personality' trait some have been led to believe it to be<sup>4</sup> - that certain individuals are resilient and others are not and never will be, or that it automatically transfers to the same degree from one setting to another, without some form of specific training and focused application in that new setting. These are very positive points to learn about how your resilience 'works' because it means your resilience can benefit from some forms of specific training, to help you to cope with the challenges you may face in life across different settings<sup>2,4</sup>. For the athletes and performers among you, this means that you can improve your resilience within your sport and performance arenas, and that this can help you in other areas of your life to some degree, but that you also should not take the immediate and automatic transferability of your resilience levels in one context as a 'given' when you move settings<sup>6</sup>. Specific training in resilience should also be aimed at enhancing your general well-being, before the focus is placed on performance enhancement. The aim, from my practical sport psychology standpoint, is that we, as sport psychologists, should always aim to help 'the person' first and 'the performer', second. A win-at-all-costs view is not healthy for any person, regardless of their profession, nor should it be advertised as desirable across any setting. This means that within high performance elite settings (including business settings, for example), where challenges occur frequently for employers and employees, high degrees of support should be purposefully in place and very evident for all to see<sup>4</sup>. That means that, yes, we can challenge individuals to aim to perform at the very top of their ability, but we should also be fully prepared to support those individuals in every way possible in order to help them to reach their personal best standards.

## Time for some 'Fun stuff' (who doesn't love a good quote?!)

To really start to understand the everyday application of resilience in real-life contexts, here are some of my favourite resilience quotes from some well-known individuals<sup>8</sup>:

SUCCESS IS NOT FINAL, FAILURE IS NOT FATAL; IT IS THE COURAGE TO CONTINUE THAT COUNTS.	WINSTON CHURCHILL
RESILIENCE IS ACCEPTING YOUR NEW REALITY, EVEN IF IT'S LESS GOOD THAN THE ONE YOU HAD BEFORE. YOU CAN FIGHT IT, YOU CAN DO NOTHING BUT SCREAM ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE LOST OR YOU CAN ACCEPT THAT AND TRY TO PUT TOGETHER SOMETHING THAT'S GOOD.	ELIZABETH EDWARDS
THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR BURDEN IS LIKE BAMBOO - FAR MORE FLEXIBLE THAN YOU'D EVER BELIEVE AT FIRST GLANCE.	JODI PICOULT
RESILIENCE IS ALL ABOUT BEING ABLE TO OVERCOME THE UNEXPECTED.	JAMAIS CASCIO
ALTHOUGH THE WORLD IS FULL OF SUFFERING, IT IS ALSO FULL OF THE OVERCOMING OF IT.	HELEN KELLER
RESILIENCE IS THE CAPACITY OF A SYSTEM, ENTERPRISE OR PERSON TO MAINTAIN ITS CORE PURPOSE AND INTEGRITY IN THE FACE OF DRAMATICALLY CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES.	ANDREW ZOLLI
IT'S ONLY WHEN WE GET KICKED DOWN THAT WE SEE WHAT WE ARE MADE OF. IT'S EASY TO BE POSITIVE WHEN EVERYTHING IS GOING WELL, BUT THE HEART OF ALL GREAT ENDEAVOURS IS THE ABILITY TO STAGGER BACK TO OUR FEET AND KEEP MOVING FORWARD, HOWEVER GRIM IT GETS.	BEAR GRYLLS
LIKE TINY SEEDS WITH POTENT POWER TO PUSH THROUGH TOUGH GROUND AND BECOME MIGHTY TREES, WE HOLD INNATE RESERVES OF UNIMAGINABLE STRENGTH. WE ARE RESILIENT.	CATHERINE DEVRYE
THE GREATEST GLORY IN LIVING LIES NOT IN NEVER FALLING, BUT IN RISING EVERY TIME WE FALL.	NELSON MANDELA
RESILIENCE IS KNOWING THAT YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WITH THE POWER AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PICK YOURSELF UP.	MARY HOLLOWAY
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MY WORLD RECORD AND MANY OTHER WORLD CLASS RUNNERS IS MENTAL FORTITUDE. I RAN BELIEVING IN MIND OVER MATTER.	DEREK CLAYTON
I SURVIVED BECAUSE THE FIRE INSIDE ME BURNED BRIGHTER THAN THE FIRE AROUND ME	JOSHUA GRAHAM
BE THE KIND OF PERSON WHO DARES TO FACE LIFE'S CHALLENGES AND OVERCOME THEM, RATHER THAN DODGING THEM.	RORY T BENNET
SPORT IS AS MUCH ABOUT MENTAL STRENGTH AS IT IS PHYSICAL STRENGTH; AND SPORTING SUCCESS RESTS ON HAVING THE MENTAL FORTITUDE TO OVERCOME FEARS, HURT, DISCOMFORT, SELF-DOUBT AND MORE.	CHRISSIE WELLINGTON

(See also: [Goalcast.com](http://Goalcast.com); [Goodreads.com](http://Goodreads.com); [Pinterest.ie](http://Pinterest.ie); [Quotefancy.com](http://Quotefancy.com))

Now that you, hopefully, know a little bit more about resilience as a concept, that it can be developed, your next questions might be: how can it specifically be improved using various psychological training principles? How can it also be assisted to move across different settings while acknowledging that this may not happen automatically? What do related terms such as grit and mental fortitude training imply in relation to resilience?

Let's start with the last question above first. The term 'grit' - what does it mean in relation to resilience and mental fortitude training? Grit is often used to describe the levels of passion and determination that individuals can sustain in order to achieve, often long-term, goals despite the challenges they may face in attempting to achieve those life targets<sup>9,10</sup>. Grit is closely linked to one of the characteristics Fletcher and Sarkar, in 2012, identified in the group of successful athletes they interviewed in one of their first studies on resilience in sport<sup>3</sup>. They identified resilience as being more prevalent in individuals who displayed a **growth mind-set**. These successful athletes believed that, with effort, they could change their performance outcomes. Such athletes do not typically believe that an unsuccessful attempt at a task or skill will affect all other areas of their lives nor do they typically believe that the disappointment from such events will be permanent. Such individuals typically accept that attempting to learn something new comes with a degree of risk, a high degree of potential failure, but they 'have a go' anyway (see Chapter 2 on 'being brave'). They choose to focus on the new information they may gain from such attempts, whether they result in 'success or failure'.

In contrast, individuals classified as displaying a **fixed mind-set** usually approach life events believing they have a finite amount of, say, intelligence, concentration and resilience, and that no amount of added effort on their part will change that 'fact' or their performance outcomes<sup>11</sup>. As

a sport psychologist, I aim to help lots of athletes, performers, students, even family members and friends to see that so many of the abilities we think are ‘fixed’ in our lives are, in reality, a lot more malleable or changeable than we think. Most abilities at anything can typically be improved upon and performance can be enhanced when practiced. A change in thinking, attitude and effort tolerance on the part of the individual is what is often required. Targeted programs, such as those using specific mental fortitude training strategies, can help these individuals to change their views on their own life situations. So, what then is mental fortitude training and why can it be effective for enhancing performances and for managing general-life challenges too? First though, let’s pause for a little ‘mental break’.



Source: Courtesy of Inpho Photography (Laszlo Geczo), with thanks to Kellie Harrington and Boxing Ireland.



### Mid-Chapter Question Time:

Pause now to ask yourself these questions:

1. How can you influence your own life events in a more positive way based upon the information presented already in this chapter?
2. When faced with stressful, adversity type situations in your life, can you seek out lessons from such experiences, just as you often do from some of your most positive life experiences?
3. When, in your life and sport, do you think you displayed resilience?
4. Who were the people who encouraged and supported you in these situations / who enabled these outcomes to happen and how might they continue to help you in the future?



## Mental fortitude training

So, having taken a little 'mental break', now let's look at what mental fortitude training is and why it can be effective for enhancing performances and general-life challenges also. Mental fortitude training describes the ability to focus on and develop effective solutions to challenging situations<sup>2,4</sup>. It is often considered an ingredient for successful outcomes in many sport and performance-based settings. Why? By developing our mental fortitude, we can reduce the level of fear we experience in high-challenge situations when they are presented to us. We know from the knowledge we acquire during such training that when challenged we have the concentration (or focus abilities) and coping skills required to handle and 'survive' those situations. Mental fortitude training (MFT) programmes have been designed in an effort to develop mental resilience among many different groups and across many different settings<sup>2,4</sup>. Such training programs typically consider and focus on three main elements: (i) the **personal qualities** of the individual, (ii) the development of a **challenge mind-set** and (iii) the creation of a **facilitative environment** (alluded to above, as it refers to an environment that encourages and fosters, not hinders, mental resilience, by providing high challenge opportunities to individuals, with high amounts of support provided too<sup>4</sup> - see below for a more detailed explanation of this type of desirable, performance-based, environment).

So, with the three elements of MFT in mind, as listed above, what personal qualities might be important for individuals to harness in order to become more mentally resilient more often, and across a wider variety of their life situations or settings? One quality that appears to be helpful is an **optimistic explanatory style** for your successes and failures as experienced in your life. Take a moment to consider the following scenario: You are unsuccessful in a first attempt at passing



'a test' of some kind, for example: an academic exam, your driving test, a penalty kick in a sport game? How do you typically explain this result to yourself, and to other people around you? Do you say things like: 'I lacked the ability to ever do this and I cannot change that - I know that when I try to do the same task, or similar tasks, in the future the same thing will happen'<sup>12</sup>. This type of language illustrates a pessimistic explanatory style and one that is 'stable and global' (e.g., 'when I try to do the same thing again, the same result will occur and across various other similar situations too). Many individuals think about situations in their lives in this pessimistic, consistent, persistent, global way. This often happens even when lots of 'evidence' exists to refute this position.



Source: Courtesy of The Holly & Kavanagh Dance Academy, with thanks to Caoimhe Holly and Niall Holly.

When athletes, students or performers speak with me using such language about their skills and abilities, I request that they **'show me the evidence'**, because when such individuals really think about various situations and outcomes in their lives, they can often quickly realise this way they are explaining many 'failed' situations in their lives do not actually 'stand up' to their own scrutiny. They can often then see that they have been a lot more successful, at many similar or comparable tasks, in the past than they have been giving themselves credit for.

In contrast to a pessimistic explanatory style, an optimistic style is often typified by individuals viewing the failed results of their challenges or 'life tests' as things based upon their own specific personal effort and their preparation in that specific context. Such individuals typically understand that just because an attempt at any skill or test is not successful on one occasion, it does not mean that all other attempts at that skill or similar skills will produce the same outcome. This perspective on their life events can help these individuals to keeping trying to achieve the skill or pass the test - they are, in reality, then displaying **grit**<sup>9,10</sup> (see above definition). They are prepared to try and try again at a task until they achieve it to a standard they are satisfied with. They remain hopeful, rather than experiencing the opposite state of hopeless in that situation and in many other similar situations also. The question you may now be asking yourself is: Can a currently more pessimistic explanatory style that you may have about your life tests be changed into a more optimistic one? The good news is yes. Individuals who have developed (and yes, it is a developed view of the world that you have created based upon your evaluation of your past experiences, so it is not a personality trait, or something more rigid and unchangeable), a pessimistic, fixed view of any skill or abilities can be changed over time, with patience (and that is a skill too) using, for example, some of the evidence-based mental fortitude training that I mentioned above.

Other personal qualities that appear to facilitate effective MFT include the degree of competitiveness and determination a person possess, how much such the individuals enjoy the activities they are engaged in (their 'passions'; all linked to their level of grit as mentioned above too), their self-belief, their work ethic and how much social support they perceive they have around them during their attempts to be successful at the tasks, skills or situations they find themselves in. So the challenge then appears to be trying to identify what you really like to do and surrounding yourself with the right, supportive people who can help you to make your life-targets a reality.

Another feature of MFT is developing a **challenge mind-set**<sup>4</sup>. This refers to a specific way of thinking about your world and your social interactions. It involves an acceptance that you are accountable for your own behaviours, that you take responsibility for your own actions. The word 'challenge' itself also signifies an expectation of high standards of action, as is often the case in performance settings, while not excluding other more 'general' life situations as well.

The third feature of MFT is the development or presence of a facilitative environment<sup>4</sup>. This, as alluded to above already, is an environment in which the individuals value trust and encourage learning. Such supportive environments prioritise the well-being of all of the individuals within that environment. These environments in sport, in business, in higher education settings, even in family homes, are characterised by a 'we're all in this together' type of attitude, and approach, to managing challenging situations<sup>13</sup>. They are not environments in which a 'blame culture' exists. Such negative environments arise in settings where too much challenge is applied by some individuals on others in that setting and not enough support is in place to help the challenged individuals to perform to the best of their ability. The 'leaders' / 'managers' in such settings

often engage in behaviours that promote, encourage and reward unhealthy levels of competition among their athletes or employees, for example<sup>13</sup>. This can either purposefully or unintentionally create significant trauma for these individuals, a type of 'crisis' situation, in order to see how the individuals will cope with such stressors, even if it means the result for the individuals is one of mental distress and, very evident, below par continuous performances by the over-challenged individuals). In these settings, individuals are also often left feeling embarrassed and ridiculed publically<sup>13</sup>. In sport settings this may happen intentionally or inadvertently as part of, say, a video analysis session post-competition, where athletes' errors are presented in a way that may be insensitive and uncaring to the individuals whose performances are being publically evaluated. Such environments often lead to individuals being afraid to perform. They may then exhibit avoidance behaviours in their sport, for fear of being the subject of future ridicule by coaches / employers / the public, at a later date. These settings do not produce the best and healthiest performers as they do not prioritise the well-being of the individuals, they prioritise winning and perfection in performance at all costs (which is not realistic nor attainable in such settings, ironically). This 'sink-or swim, survival of the toughest' attitude is not helpful in any setting and should not be promoted, as it often leads to inner and outer conflict for those attempting to function and perform at their personal bests in those settings. Solution focused, positive and objective feedback, and support, is a much healthier and productive performance stance to take in such situations for all concerned.

## Strategies to help you develop your resilience

Now, considering all of the above information, let's consider some specific strategies you could apply that could, practically, help you to develop a more resilient, 'gritty' way of viewing and managing the stressful, difficult situations you face in your sport and also in your life. You do have the ability to change your thinking and actions into a format that helps you to perform and cope better with these challenging situations.

### 1. Accept that life is not 'awesome' all the time

Resilient people seem to have a key characteristic in common. They 'get' that life is not a 'bed of roses'. They accept that great days happen but also that sad and difficult days are going to happen too<sup>5</sup>. You, perhaps, are one of these people and if so, great! If you are more the type of person to say: 'why me?' when something difficult, sad or frustrating happens to you, try to remember the opposite is also true, 'why not me?'. This perspective is relevant on the good and bad days. You deserve the joy-filled days just as much as any difficult days, so focusing on them when they happen and celebrating them, is important in helping you to remain hopeful when the difficult days present themselves at other times. On those days, remaining focused on some simple tasks such as getting up, having a shower, going for a walk or a swim, calling a friend or treating yourself to a nice cup of coffee can help you to just 'get through those days' until the better days emerge and they do emerge, if you are patient (and patience is another form of skill<sup>14</sup>).

### 2. Take time to acknowledge and process your emotions, and experiences

You are not a robot. Emotions such as disappointment, anger, frustration, sadness and guilt we all experienced from time to time, especially after stressful, unsuccessful attempts at

various tasks or situations in our life. Developing your resilience, using any mental fortitude training principles, involves learning ways to cope with these emotions. It is not an attempt to eliminate them completely from your life as that is not really possible for the vast majority of people. Rather, mental fortitude training involves changing the way you typically think about such situations and seeing if there are more helpful ways for you to use the emotions you feel to help your future attempts at anything, using them to encourage you to 'try again', having learned lessons from past attempts.

### **3. Nominate your own 'social support captains'**

Be aware of the people within your 'social support network' who provide you with good emotional, physical and social support. Seek them out in times of stress to help you navigate the challenges you face. It is important to also know who the 'vampires' are within any of your settings (those people that tend to typically view the world through a 'negative lens')<sup>15,16</sup>. They are often identified as people whose thought processes frequently go first to the flaws of a situation rather than any positive element of what can be learned from the experience. Every experience can provide us with a positive life-lesson as much as it can any negative one. An effective coping strategy to manage the impact of such people on you can be to minimise or eliminate your contact with such individuals, if you cannot help them to change their perspectives on situations to those more closely aligned with your own, more positive, constructive and solution-focused point of view. This can be difficult if they are work colleagues or family members. However, remember, your first commitment should, guilt-free, be to maintain your own well-being. After that, you are then in a better position to provide well-being support yourself to those others in your life who you care about and wish to assist in that way.



Source: Courtesy of Féis Photos, with thanks to Sean Mortalo and the Holly & Kavanagh Dance Academy

#### 4. Make active choices

It is important to engage in actions that are a function of your own choices, rather than viewing them as sacrifices being enforced upon you by others. As above, you can choose who you surround yourself with, who you seek out for social support and what actions you choose to engage in. The only things you can control, after all, are your own actions, your own effort, your own attitude, your own commitment to a task. Even when a task seems to be a necessity and not specifically of your own making, a task that you view as 'having to do' for various reasons, asking yourself what the 'bigger-picture' is in engaging in those actions can help you to accept them more, to perceive yourself to be more in control of those situations and view them differently (as more about a 'short-term' pain, for later long-term gain). Ask yourself, is what you are engaging in helping you in some way for the longer term?

## 5. Make your own personal development a priority

Seeking out ways to 'up-skill' and develop your own skill set is important. Comparing your skills and abilities with others a lot can often be unhelpful, especially if it prevents you from engaging in activities you wish to attempt yourself. That is not to say that you cannot be a supporter of other people's efforts and be inspired yourself by their actions. However, it is unhelpful to constantly make comparisons between your attempts and those of others, who may have very different supports, life experiences and training to yours, at any point in time. Remember, no one's life 'is all roses' all the time, so being grateful for what you can do and have in your life is something you could actively remind yourself of each day, in order to also manage the challenges you face. This action of gratitude can help you to remain focused on your own life targets. It can help you to **'stay in your own lane'**<sup>17</sup>. Focus your attention on what you can control within your own life and setting. As stated above, you can only control your effort, your attitude, your responses to enforced situations, your own actions. You cannot control the actions of others, nor can you predict what will happen in the future. Remaining present-task-focused (focused on what you are doing at that point in time) is an effective concentration technique as it moves 'the odds' of performing a task well much more in your favour.

## 6. Challenge your own thinking by 'talking it out'

Knowing what you would like to achieve and why is another resilient principle<sup>3</sup>. You may be sure of what your life targets are. However, sometimes sharing how we view a situation with our 'trusted' others, our 'social support captains', can help us to determine if there is another way to think about or view a situation we find ourselves in. Are you seeing the whole picture? Another person's perspective on a situation can be very helpful in many life-challenging-



cases. So, again, knowing who you admire, respect and trust and can reach out to in times of stress and disappointment is very important. Building up a good social support network is a very positive, productive activity to engage in. It should be a priority for those reasons for every person.

### **Conclusion**

You may have thought at the start of this chapter that resilience was something you either had or did not have. Hopefully by reading this chapter you have begun to realise that this view of resilience is not accurate nor is it helpful. Everyone can develop their resilience more by seeing it as a transient state that can be manipulated to our advantage in lots of ways in our own lives, depending upon the various situations we find ourselves in. I hope you will be able to apply some of the suggestions above to your own life to develop your levels of resilience. Using some of the suggestions, based upon the principles of mental fortitude training, I hope you will begin to see improvements in your day-to-day management of the challenges you face in your life. Please do let me know how you get on as such feedback is always welcome!



### Self-Reflection Exercise

I would like you to think back over this chapter's material on resilience now.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What has been the most memorable lesson(s) or piece of information you have learned about how to apply some mental fortitude training principles to improve your own life?
2. The next time you feel under stress or pressure, how will you evaluate this challenge and how could you seek out the social support necessary to meet that challenge, to the best of your ability?



## Take-Action Activity

WHEN DID I DISPLAY RESILIENCE IN MY LIFE?



WHAT SKILLS ARE NOW AVAILABLE TO ME TO ENABLE THIS RESPONSE TO OCCUR AGAIN AND ACROSS MORE OF MY LIFE EXPERIENCES?



WHAT SKILLS COULD I WORK ON TO ENHANCE MY RESILIENCE RESPONSE EVEN MORE IN THE FUTURE?



WHO COULD I CONTACT WHO COULD ADVISE ME AND SUPPORT ME WITH MY PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE TRAINING IN THE FUTURE?



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# **BRAVE ACTION**

# **#5**

**PROBLEM SOLVING  
SOLUTION-FOCUSED-ACTIONS  
FOR SPORT AND LIFE**

## Introduction

Chapter 5 consists of twelve scenarios that, in my work as an applied sport and performance psychologist, I often have athletes/students/friends contact me about, for advice or assistance. In each case I have suggested some Solution-Focused-Actions ('SFAs') to the common scenarios these individuals have frequently presented to me. These examples are also some of the most common, challenging scenarios many people from the general population face in their daily lives, they are not unique to athletes or 'performers' as we traditionally define them. Remember, we are all performers, and are 'performing' every day of our lives. The advice I offer to individuals who find themselves in the situations presented below is based upon the material in the four prior chapters of this e-book. However, as already outlined in this e-book, each person has different life experiences and as such, this is not a 'one-shoe-fits-all' set of solutions to any situation you may experience in your life. They are just some possible ways you could use the material in this e-book to find your own solutions to your challenging life scenarios. Being prepared to use lots of 'trial-and-error' to any difficult or challenging situation is a positive and productive way to approach those times in your life. It would also be impossible to provide an exhaustive list of all the possible situations individuals experience in their lives, so it is also important to consider how you could apply and adapt the advice below in order to work out the best approach for your own situations that arise in your unique life. Finally, remember the title and message of this e-book - just aim to 'be brave' and 'take some form of action' that could help you to improve your view and management of your own life situations.



**Example 1**

*"I'm great in training or competitions that are not that important, but I seem to 'fall-apart' when I'm in a competitive situation that really matters".*

This is a common difficulty for many athletes and performers. They often view their training and their competition settings as very different environments. This view can then result in them engaging in very different preparations strategies for these 'different' situations. However, in order to perform well in competitive situations, it is important to view training as more important too, as a type of 'trial-run' for competition, and then competition day often seems 'less different'. The best athletes/performers, who appear to handle 'pressure situations' very well have something in common - they typically view training sessions as opportunities to be competitive with themselves. **They set targets for each training session.** They do not just 'go through the motions' in training. They **apply competition-like self-talk in training** and put themselves under pressure more in training situations they know they are generally more comfortable in, in order to increase their **tolerance** for such situations when they happen in 'more important' settings in their lives. So ask yourself the next time you are completing a skill or task that you find very 'doable', in training for example: How could I make this more challenging for myself so that my skill level / fitness level / technique will improve, to a level that is likely required in competition? Also, **seek out advice and support from your network** of individuals who assist you in your work / training environment to see how you might be able to challenge yourself more in training. Such 'outsider' advice can be very valuable in helping you to devise a training plan solution to manage and improve the above cited difficulty you may be experiencing.

**Example 2**

*"I worry a lot about what my coaches / parents / teammates / friends think about me and my performances. When I perform poorly I feel I'm letting the people I really care about down".*

Many of us worry a lot about letting other people down when we do not perform well in different situations in our lives. The first important thing to remember is that **there is no situation where you will ever perform perfectly, at any task!** Removing that 'perfection' target and replacing it with the aim of **doing your best**, at that task, at that specific point in time in your life can really help to reduce this pressure you may experience 'to be perfect' when you start to do any task. Also remember that most people are in awe of the many actions of the people around them that they care about. They are often far less judgemental about a performance than we give them credit for. They are also often more concerned about their own actions and what others think of them to be that worried or critical of any of your performances! I advise the people I work with to **actively support and applaud the actions of those around them more**, that they consider 'awesome'. You may quickly discover that when you adopt this attitude too, the people you support will return that support and encouragement to you more openly also. If they do not, in order to develop your own mental resilience, remember it is important for us all to consider and really **understand what** we are doing when we engage in any action and **why** we are doing it. It should ultimately be about setting your own targets, to challenge yourself and to have some fun completing that challenge too, even if it is a very difficult one. Remove the emphasis being on seeking the approval of others in anything that you do and focus on what you can control which is realistically only three things: your effort, your attitude and your actions regarding the target you have set for yourself.

**Example 3**

*"I consider myself to have poor concentration. When I make a mistake, I cannot refocus on my performance and things just go from bad to worse".*

First, remember, **concentration is a skill**. As a skill, it is something you can improve, if you **practice** it. Learning how to focus on the task you are doing involves establishing **routines** to get yourself into the correct state, both physically and mentally, to do the task. Prepare your tools, equipment, and clothing. Try to **allocate a time of day** for the task, whether that is for training, daily exercise or online work/study activities, for example. Do your **'warm-up'** by having a coffee, taking a shower, getting dressed in the suitable clothing and then start the task. **Starting** is the most important step. **Set out clear targets** for what you wish to achieve in that certain period of time you have allocated for the task (make it **'SMART' spent time**) and remove potential distractions that may prevent that from happening, such as your mobile phone (if it is not required for you to do the task). Consider the location and people round you when you are doing the task. If they are an unnecessary distraction, move to another place or find effective ways to 'tune them out' (such as using noise-blocking earphones, soothing music etc.). If you do not achieve the whole task target in the allotted time, that is okay too. In that case, assess your progress and then move on from where you left off the next day. **Take breaks!** Good concentration does not operate for very extensive periods of time, so if you find your mind 'wandering off' onto other things when you are trying to do the task that may mean it is time for a break. Be 'okay' with making mistakes during the task also. Everyone makes them because there is no way to learn how to do anything in life without **'trial-and-error'**. Welcome the error-analysis involved in completing any task and also celebrate the successful completion of the task when it happens and it will likely happen, if you apply the above principles and remain patient with yourself.

**Example 4**

*"I am injured and am so frustrated I am missing out on all my training".*

We will all experience injuries and illnesses at various points in our lives, so it is important to learn ways to manage that rehabilitation time. As mentioned in earlier chapters of this e-book, **we are 'active' people** in so many ways, so not being able to do the activities we love to do can be a very frustrating and very challenging time for us, both physically and mentally. Know that those feelings are normal. When you are injured, or similarly ill, focus on getting through each day, one day at a time. Be clear about the things **you can do** each day and then set about doing them, focus on them. Try not to focus on what you cannot do or look too far ahead into the future. No one knows what the future holds. However, your past life experiences will likely tell you that the days when you will feel better and recovered will return, if you take the advice of your medical and rehabilitation experts, as well as listening to your trusted loved ones. Seek out their **guidance for setting realistic targets** for you and again, assess your progress at the end of each day. Then establish your targets for the next day. Often when we are injured we also worry about how unfit we are becoming and how much others may be improving at their skills in our absence. However, many individuals have returned from injury in a better physical and mental state, especially if the injury or illness was as the result of some prior, undetected limitation in technique or in the immune system. Injuries (and illnesses) can often be a sign of an imbalance in the body, in the way a skill is being carried out, for example in the case of injuries, and the rehabilitation of such injuries often identifies those imbalance areas as being in need of change, so that performance can be even more enhanced and better in the future when you return to full activity. So focus on what you may be **gaining** when injured, not on what you may be losing or missing out on. Rehabilitation time can also be **a time to upskill** in other areas. If your physical mobility is impaired, ask yourself if there

is a way you could mobilise your mental skills more, by engaging in some study, reading more or acquiring new technology skills. **Keeping yourself busy in ways that are feasible and possible** for you is a very effective strategy, so be creative in the ways you can pass the time. **Learning a new life skill** such as baking something new or volunteering in some way can also help you to have some fun while you are recovering, so **factor-in-the-fun**, and plan things you are going to do, fun-things, when you have recovered from your injury or illness. Give yourself something to look forward to. Give yourself many reasons to remain hopeful and excited about your future.

#### Example 5

*"I am fully recovered from my injury but I'm afraid I will get injured again so I am only training and performing in a half-committed way".*

As explained in chapter 2, **fear is a commonly experienced** emotion and it is functional too. We often feel fear because the brain is trying to protect us from a potential danger. However, again as cited in chapter 2, this fear can be misplaced. If you play sport, for example, think to yourself how many times you have actually been injured in the past and then realistically 'weigh up the odds' of becoming injured again. You will potentially find that your **'track-record'** shows your risk of injury is low, that you have been injury-free for much more of the time you have spent engaging in your activities than you have been injured. As such, you then can **focus on the tasks you are actually doing in training and competition**, rather than fearing re-injury, by believing in your own 'track-record'. Making small gains each training session, by focusing on specific tasks you are completing, will also help you to convince yourself that you are recovered and fit, ready to perform at a very competent standard again.

**Example 6**

*"I don't get on well with all of my teammates / work colleagues and dread having to talk with some of them at training sessions / in the office".*

This is again a common problem for many athletes / colleagues in different settings. Remember, it is impossible for us all to get along well. We 'connect' differently with different individuals on so many levels. Some people have similar views and values to us and others do not. Gravitate toward and seek out the people who match-up with you best and for those who do not see the world in similar ways to you, learn to manage their presence in a way that is tolerable for your own health and well-being, such as **limiting your contact** with them where possible and when it is not possible, understanding that they often have reasons for being different to you that you can respect and understand, even if you have different values and opinions. Remember again that **you can only control your own effort, attitude and actions**. Focus on them. Things other people do or say to you often are more about them and their effort, attitudes and actions. You cannot control them. So let go of feeling a necessity to try to change them. **'Stay in your own lane' and focus on being the best person you can be**, for yourself first and foremost. Apply and remind yourself of the 'ACT' principle when surrounded by difficult people in your various settings: **'Accept the things you cannot control, have the Courage to Control the things that you can and Train yourself to know the difference'.**

**Example 7**

*“Lots of my friends / teammates / colleagues seem to be doing ‘great things’ all the time and I feel like such a failure when I compare myself to them. I’m not like them, I’m afraid to try out new things, even though I know I may really enjoy them if I was prepared to ‘give it a go!’”*

There is a popular quote that **‘comparison is the thief of joy’** and it is true in so many ways. While looking at others’ accomplishments can inspire us to try out new things for ourselves, it can also impact us in a way that makes us feel as though we are not achieving anything positive in our own lives. This is typically not true. We all have unique and fantastic skills and abilities. At the end of each chapter in this e-book I have challenged you to **seek out the people** (#TheBackPack) you trust who may best be able to advise and guide you in your ‘Brave Action’. **Establishing and nurturing that social support network** is very important. Other people often see the amazing skills and potential abilities in us that we often do not see in ourselves. So be brave and seek out those conversations with family, friends and colleagues to determine what you might be capable of. Also, if a desired ability or life target seems daunting, **break it down** into smaller, more realistically achievable steps that could enable you to make it to that ultimate target. For example, you may wish to run a 5K race, however, you currently consider yourself not to be fit or strong enough to achieve this target. Start by walking or gently jogging one kilometre and build the distance up slowly, over time, over a period of weeks, for example, to reach your ultimate 5K run-target. Signing up to an event, where you actually run the distance can also be a very helpful thing to do, as that gives you a date on which to focus. Perhaps encouraging a family member or friend to join you in your endeavour could also **make the experience more social and fun** for you as well. Remember, very small, manageable improvements help to ‘nudge you’

toward that bigger achievement. Thinking of the big achievement alone, in its entirety, can be like looking up at Mount Everest and saying, 'I'll never climb that!' Then you are 'put off' from ever even trying. So, start somewhere, anywhere, and 'climb any kind of smaller hill'. Remember, every accomplishment begins with having **the courage to try, so just aim to take that 'first step'**.

### Example 7

*I like using my social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp etc.), however, I find myself spending a lot of time mindlessly scrolling through each platform's posts, 'stories' and/or direct messaging features. How can I use my social media better so that I focus on its more beneficial features?*

Social connection is a very important part of being human. Social media platforms have enabled us to form and maintain **valuable social connections** with a much wider network than would have been the case in past decades. Remember, **technology is neutral**, it is how we use it that determines if it is a helpful or harmful feature of our lives. One of the best ways to manage your use of such social media platforms is to set specific times of day when you typically 'check-in' on your social media apps. That might mean setting a maximum time of a few minutes in the morning, before you start your work-day and then maybe again in the evening time or at the end of your day to check-back-in, when you are relaxing and your work-day tasks have been completed (provided your social media use is not a large feature of your actual work-day-tasks). The fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) can be a common reason why many people constantly check their social media apps multiple times each day. However, routines and reminding yourself that



your **social media use is something that you can control** can help you to manage your time better in this regard and the 'breaking news' will still be there if you wait to read about it later in the day! So setting time-slots for your social media activity is something you can put in place for yourself. Another piece of good advice is to only 'follow' social media accounts of people or organisations that you are really interested in and that may be beneficial for you with regard to your well-being, social networking and life targets. There is a tendency for us, especially on the social media platform 'Twitter', which is a more text-based commentary than an image-based platform (which is a more dominant feature of Instagram and Facebook, for example), to view a tweet and to then 'follow' or read down through the thread of comments underneath that post. This can often result in a five-minute Twitter check-in during a break in your day quickly becoming twenty minutes of scrolling through lots of comments by people you do not know and often have no wish to know. As soon as you find yourself engaging in this type of activity, ask yourself: **'Is this helping me or is it harming me?'** If the answer is the latter, due to the sometimes very negative tone of many of the comments in such social media threads, then disengage in the action, close the social media platform and move on immediately to another, more productive action in your day, such as focusing on your work tasks or your training skills. Remember, again, no social media platform controls you, you control it and you can choose how, when, for how long and why you are using it in any given day. If your use of it is to encourage and support your family members, friends and colleagues, to publicise a business, for work purposes or to share some form of positive news that could be of great interest and help to others, then that could be considered a productive use of it and your time. If it is for other purposes, then perhaps ask yourself what you are 'getting out of the action' and adjust your behaviour accordingly. Again, social media, like all technology is neutral. It is how we chose to use it that determines whether it is helpful or harmful to each of us, so choose wisely how, when, and why you use it.

**Example 9**

*I find it difficult to achieve a good balance between my work / sport and home life.*

Finding the 'right' balance between all of the activities we complete in any one day is a constant challenge. Athletes prepare for their actions in the sport arena by creating **pre-performance routines** that help them to stay focused and productive in their day. Routines are very helpful in any person's daily life (as mentioned earlier) and each person's priorities in each day differs. The **use of schedules and writing or typing up 'to-do lists'** can help us to maintain high levels of concentration and coping skills when managing lots of different activities we would like to complete in a day or week. Therefore, setting specific, routine times each day/week for when different activities are completed is one of the most effective ways to keep focused and to 'balance out your time', to find the time for all of the desired activities you wish to do in any one day. People often know when their work hours are, however, it is equally as important to schedule in specific times for when exercise, nutrition and relaxation or fun-time also happens in any one day. **'Factoring in the fun'** and prioritising when you take breaks from your work, training or study activities, every single day, is very important for your well-being. Invariably there will be days when you 'run late' completing a work project with a specific deadline that cannot be moved to the next day, for example. In such cases, review your schedule for the following days and do not be afraid to 'double-up' on your non-work time during the following days in that week or month, so that you are giving yourself enough time to recover from the stress of the additional work activities you have recently completed. **Reward yourself** for completing difficult and long work or training sessions too by, for example, calling a friend for a chat, having your favourite meal, taking a trip to the hairdressers or watching a movie you have been looking forward to

seeing. Your brain likes the anticipation of a well-earned reward and it is an effective strategy to help nudge you toward completing the more difficult, but usually most rewarding tasks too, in your work or training day.

### Example 10

*I feel overwhelmed by all of the challenges I am facing in my life right now.*

Feeling overwhelmed some days by the things we would like to achieve or the things we are experiencing in our daily lives is a normal experience, for us all. At such times, take a moment to first realise **you are not alone** in how you are feeling. Also remember the times in the past when you have also felt that way. Check your **'track-record'**. Remind yourself of the difficult times you have managed to successfully navigate through in the past and the actions you took to help you to come through those times. That may mean knowing how to **distract yourself** from your current feelings by making a start on a task you know will be challenging and may be avoiding, or calling a trusted family member, close friend, colleague or medical professional who may be able to help and advise you. From your past, you will know who the trusted people are that helped and reassure you, who helped you to cope with the challenges you faced, **reach out** to those people. Remember, again, you are not alone in how you are feeling and support is available to you if you have the courage to ask for it from those awesome people we all know and have in our lives.

**Example 11**

*I'm so stupid. I make mistakes all the time. I'm not good at this and I will never be good at it. If I avoid such situations in the future I won't ever have to feel this way again.*

**News Flash! We all make mistakes.** No matter how hard we may try to avoid situations where we may make errors, a life well-lived is a life full of errors, as that is how we best learn! You are not 'protecting yourself' by never attempting any task again when you initially do not complete it as well as you would have wished to the first, second or third time. There is **nothing wrong with you when, not if, you make a mistake** or get something wrong in any situation. It shows that you are human. People very rarely ever get something 'right' the first few times they try to complete anything. We often look at people around us, work colleagues, athletes, performers, for example, and think to ourselves 'I wish I was more like him/her' / 'I do not know how he/she can do that?!'. Each one of us possess skills and abilities that enable us to achieve great things. The people who we see carrying out highly skilled actions have **trained themselves** to be able to carry out those skills. It also means that they have made **active choices** to focus on those skills and have not, perhaps, developed other skills that another individual, like you, may have acquired. No one can do everything and be good at everything, as much as we look around us at other people and convince ourselves that is the case. Remember, the reference to the earlier quote? - **'Comparison is the thief of joy'**. As a talented person in your own right, think about the things you are **passionate** about, that you would like to attempt to do and then **work out how to make a start** to achieve those actions. Don't spend too much time researching though, as that can also mean you may never end up actually taking any action! **Act your way into the feeling, rather than feeling your way into the action.** Don't wait 'to feel completed brilliant and ready' before

you engage in any action, as that time may never come. **Have a go**, take a **calculated risk** and assess how you feel after your attempt. You often feel great after the task has been completed, rather than before it has been started. Then move on, making adjustments as and when you consider it to be necessary. Remember, **you are as good as your personal best**, so aim to work out what that is for you and target that point for you.

### Example 12

*I have retired from my first career and am looking to start a new phase of my life. However, I feel, in some ways now, that I do not know who I am or how to approach this next phase of my life.*

One of the bravest things any person can do is to leave behind a past chapter in life and move on to something new. It can be a very scary time. Individuals in such situations often experience feelings of self-doubt and nervousness. They may question who they really are, what their identity is, for example, if they are no longer 'the professional athlete', 'the practicing lawyer', 'the full-time student'. However, such times can also be viewed as very exciting. Remember, when any of us move on from one life chapter to another we take with us the person we are, with all of the skills we have acquired during those past life chapters. Ask yourself what skills are useful to you as you move forward into this new phase of your life. For the individuals cited above, for example, they often possess valuable skills such as their competitiveness and a willingness to learn. Focusing on what you are passionate about and how your already established skills can be of use to you, to your greatest benefit, can be a good start-point in mapping out your next life chapter. Seek out the advice and support again of your 'back-pack' as well, those people you know can advise

and support you in your new endeavour. Do not be afraid to reach out for help and support from those others you admire and respect, to help you to make progress in your new career. Those people also very likely had advisors and mentors who helped them to get to where they are today. Helping behaviours or altruistic tendencies are common qualities such people often possess so do not be afraid to reach out to them to seek their input. People often surprise us with their kindness in such situations. Ultimately, however, your life is yours to lead and decide upon, so map it out in a way that you think will bring you the most contentment and joy as you move forward. Focusing on yourself first is not selfish, it is self-rewarding and when you are looking after yourself first, you are better positioned to support the people around you then too who you care about when they ask for your assistance.

## Conclusion

You may have thought at the start of this chapter that many of the difficulties you are facing or have faced in your life, or mistakes you have made, are unique to you and that no one else has experienced them or could relate to your experience. The truth is, adversity and challenges are a part of living and they do not discriminate. They are a common feature of all of our careers, our relationships, our lives. I hope the above scenarios and suggested brave-action solutions have helped you, in some way, to consider how best you might now manage the challenges you are facing in your own life.

Having some understanding of how to be brave in your approach to being awesome in your actions has been the main objective of this e-book. I have really enjoyed writing down and

sharing with you some of the messages I use in my applied work that involves supporting many brave-action individuals. I am privileged that they trust me in that support role, as they aim to achieve their personal bests, while also living holistically challenging and yet joy-filled lives. They have been the ones to inspire me to take on this project, to create a place where the information I impart to them is readily available to so many others and can hopefully benefit them too. I hope you have enjoyed reading 'Brave Action: Sport Psychology for Life' and I look forward to receiving any feedback you may wish to share about it. My very best wishes to you in your 'Brave Action' bright futures!

Olivia Xx

## Appendix A

### Mental Imagery

As stated in Chapter 1, mental imagery is a strategy used to help mentally 'rehearse' many tasks before we do them and so it is often described as 'seeing with the mind's eye'. Important elements of imagery to consider, if you are going to attempt to use it to enhance your ability to successfully do certain skills are: (i) the perspective taken (internal or external), (ii) the vividness of the images, (iii) the importance of practicing imagery in order for it to be used successfully when it really matters (i.e., before you attempt to do the skill in a competition or other high-pressure situation, such as a work presentation or job interview) and (iv) some acceptance of uncertainty surrounding the controllability of your images (and as cited in Chapter 1 also, engaging in negative imagery is often more detrimental to the performance of skills than not engaging in any purposeful mental imagery before doing the skill at all, so it is important to know that before you engage in any imagery practices).

#### Imagery Perspective

If you wish to engage in mental imagery, you can choose to take either an internal or an external perspective. If you choose the internal perspective, this means you select to image yourself doing the task as if you are 'seeing it through your own eyes'. Alternatively, you could select to view yourself doing the skill as if watching yourself doing it 'from outside of your body' (like watching yourself 'on-video' doing the skill). Often performers wish to know which perspective is the better one to take for more successful skill outcome. The answer to this question is that it



depends – on the skill and the importance of the ‘feel’ element of the skill for you as you do it. If you wish to experience that kinaesthetic (feel) element of the skill more as you do the skill, then the internal perspective is the more appropriate perspective to take. However, many athletes ‘flip’ from the internal to the external perspective, depending on what tasks they are attempting to do. For example, gymnasts might benefit from using the external perspective to imagine doing complex skills, such as somersaults, because rotating in the air using the external perspective may not help such athletes to ‘see’ their bodies as they execute the skill well, in rotation/in-motion. However, rugby players might take an internal perspective to image ‘feeling’ their foot, in the boot, striking the rugby ball, and ‘seeing’ the ball successfully go through the posts before taking a penalty kick. So, trial-and-error and skill / sport consideration is the best approach to take to imagery, as is the case for many of the other techniques advocated in the specific chapters of ‘Brave Action’. Working out what helps you best, and in what circumstances, is a good approach to take because, as stated earlier also, ‘one shoe does not fit all’ when using any mental strategy in the attempt to enhance your mental and physical skills, as well as your overall well-being.

### **Imagery Vividness**

Imagery vividness can also vary when using mental imagery. The more vivid the image (the clearer and more detailed it is) the better it tends to prepare you for carrying out the task then in real-time / real-life. When practicing imagery then, for various skills, aim to focus on not just the ‘seeing’ element of the image - consider also the ‘feel’ element of the skill – the feeling of a piece of equipment in your hands relevant to your skill, such as the ball / a racket. It is also helpful to attempt to incorporate the typical tastes and smells in the environment as relevant at the time also (based on your past memories and experiences when doing the skill before – such as the

salty taste of sea air around your lips when you do a skill in that environment – or the smell of freshly cut grass as you walk around a field, for example).

### Practicing Imagery

As stated above, if you wish to use imagery effectively, like any physical and mental skill, it requires practice. Imagery use without practice can result in negative images occurring, where you ‘see’ the ball going wide, before you take the penalty kick, for example. Such negative imagery outcomes before doing a skill ‘for-real’ can be very distressing for a person, so having a strategy ready for when this happens is important. Your images, like your thoughts, are not always controllable, so how you respond to a negative image is important. You could attempt to ‘rewind’ the skill in your mind (just like you would do with a real video) and try ‘playing it over again’ in your mind, or you could have a ‘go-to’ self-talk phrase ready if such images happen, to remind yourself that an image does not dictate the actual skill or event outcome, it is just an image, it is not reality. If you are interested in learning more about how to test your imagery ability as well as how to learn the specific skills to improve it, you may find the following resources helpful:

Kremer, J., Moran, A. & Kearney, C. (2019). *Pure Sport: Applied Sport Psychology*.

London: Routledge.

Morris, T., Spittle, M., & Watt, A. (2005). *Imagery in sport*. Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics.

Munroe-Chandler, K., & Guerrero, M. (2019). Imagery in sport, exercise and performance. In

A. Mugford & G. Cremades, *Sport, exercise and performance psychology: theories and applications* (pp. 279-301). London: Routledge.

## Appendix B

Information on some action-based techniques that can stimulate feelings of relaxation and concentration:

Progressive Muscular Relaxation / Breath Control / Mindfulness / Meditation

### Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) refers to the tensing (typically for about 20-30 seconds) and then relaxing of various muscle groups throughout the body with the aim of stimulating a sense of overall calmness and relaxation in those muscles, and throughout the body as a whole. PRM can be used as part of a warm-up routine in sport and performance settings or just to help you to relax during or at the end of a challenging day. It can be carried out while sitting, lying down or standing up, depending on the muscles being tensed and relaxed at the time (see the resources section below in Appendix C if interested in learning more about PMR).

### Breath Control – Deep breathing / Diaphragmatic breathing

Attempting to control your breathing is one of the quickest and easiest techniques to apply when trying to regulate your arousal levels. It also is great because it can be carried out anywhere and at any time! Breathing purposefully increases the oxygen coming into the body, which can then help the muscles and body to function better. Some commonly advocated breathing techniques include: Deep breathing and Diaphragmatic breathing.

Deep breathing involves aiming to take deep breaths, filling up the lungs with each breath, with as much air as is possible, pausing, and then exhaling slowly, attempting to exhale all of the air

from the lungs at the end of each 'breath cycle'. The ratio is typically 1:2 – that is, if inhaling for a count of 4 seconds, after a short pause, you would exhale for a count of 8 seconds. How many breaths are taken to achieve the aim of feeling more relaxed and calm is totally up to you. Counting the breaths is helpful as it focuses thoughts on the count and not on any worries that may be experienced before engaging in the breathing technique.

Diaphragmatic breathing (also known as slow abdominal breathing) differs from deep breathing as the goal is not to inhale in a way that often involves lifting up the shoulders / opening up and out the chest area, rather, the aim of this breathing technique is to fill up the lungs by expanding the abdomen area outward, followed by the exhale breath resulting in the 'tummy' area deflating. Sometimes the instruction for this breathing technique is to aim to 'stick out your tummy'. However, this might seem a contradiction to athletes or performers when many of their skills require their abdomen area to be 'held in', with the muscles tightened. Bearing that in mind, the more helpful instruction for such individuals can be to suggest they aim to open out the 'tummy' area in a 'full' way, side-to-side, while the hands are placed over that area to show the correct technique is being felt. As cited earlier in 'Brave Action' many of these kinds of techniques involve you practicing them and finding out what works best for you. See the resources in Appendix C below for more information.

## **Mindfulness and Meditation**

Mindfulness is considered the practice of bring awareness, in a non-judgmental way, to what is being experienced at any given point in time. Its practice has been shown to have some positive effects on human actions and emotions. It can help us to regulate our responses to

situations we find ourselves in and can help us to remain task-focused (the importance of which has been highlighted in earlier chapters of this e-book). Kabat-Zinn (2013) outlined a number of considerations for individuals to remember when engaging in mindfulness training, including: being non-judgmental and patient with yourself, aiming to accept and 'let go' of the things you cannot control (points also highlighted in earlier chapters of this e-book), 'trusting' yourself and approaching the practice of mindfulness with a 'beginner's outlook', that is, being willing to learn, adapt and grow throughout the practice. These important messages have been referred to throughout 'Brave Action'. Often, individuals engage in meditation to help them develop their mindfulness practice. Meditation involves focusing your attention on a word, thought, object or activity / skill for the purpose of stimulating a feeling of calmness and control over your mental processes (your thoughts, for example). Some people like to focus on their breath, a mantra or a sound when meditating. The resources listed in Appendix C below may be of interest to you if you wish to learn more about any of the topics briefly outlined above.

## Appendix C

### Some Additional Resources (Websites / Podcasts / Readings)

#### Podcasts

Niall Breslin - Where's my Mind: <https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/where-is-my-mind/id1470956619>.

Oxford Mindfulness Centre: <https://www.oxfordmindfulness.org/learn-mindfulness/online-sessions-podcasts/>

#### Websites / Web-links

Delving Within: <https://delvingwithin.com/>

Diaphragmatic Breathing and your Vagus nerve: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/the-athletes-way/201705/diaphragmatic-breathing-exercises-and-your-vagus-nerve>

Dr. Olivia Hurley: <http://droliviahurley.com/>

Headspace: <https://www.headspace.com>

Progressive Muscular Relaxation Script: [https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/Progressive\\_Muscle\\_Relaxation.pdf](https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/Progressive_Muscle_Relaxation.pdf)

The Mindfulness Centre: <https://mindfulness.ie/>

### YouTube Videos

Dublin Talks. (2013, 8th November). **Professor Aidan Moran: Focused: Exploring the concentration skills of expert performers** [Video]. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDFvnaph4\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDFvnaph4_8)

Hurley, O. (2020, 28th October). [Video]. **Brave Action: Isakeli (Isa) Nacewa**. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWH8N-BvhAw>

Hurley, O. (2020, 1st November). [Video]. **Brave Action: Sonia O'Sullivan**. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C81Ah53hr6k&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C81Ah53hr6k&feature=emb_logo)

Hurley, O. (2020, 8th November). [Video]. **Brave Action: Chloe Watkins**. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdOIRV6FpBI&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1o\\_pM1UstGcoC18UJL5eKzsLCtXzgzO\\_axaMmLCSI\\_c8RkOao8BmbiEso](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdOIRV6FpBI&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1o_pM1UstGcoC18UJL5eKzsLCtXzgzO_axaMmLCSI_c8RkOao8BmbiEso)

Hurley, O. (2020, 15th November). [Video]. **Brave Action: Tom Barr**. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1\\_vSF-eURws&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3TywdBHUSd1jXYMIUVy6NI5nu6WQU8QdQzJZb\\_DQhWYXNa1-ovlaxEZlc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_vSF-eURws&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3TywdBHUSd1jXYMIUVy6NI5nu6WQU8QdQzJZb_DQhWYXNa1-ovlaxEZlc)

Hurley, O. (2020, 30th November). [Video]. **Brave Action: Kellie Harrington**. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72S0ZbutSPI&feature=youtu.be&ab\\_channel=Dr.OliviaHurley&fbclid=IwAR3-7sov1-lsLMirztqiCZhg52Knl6aYY9H8tmIL2apHik3hYGgvG2pfrbc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72S0ZbutSPI&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=Dr.OliviaHurley&fbclid=IwAR3-7sov1-lsLMirztqiCZhg52Knl6aYY9H8tmIL2apHik3hYGgvG2pfrbc)

Hurley, O. (2020, 7th December). [Video]. **Brave Action: Bernard Jackman**. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPohxHYUpyc&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3wvlj8nbGCR1KQSN-T047QyGkY7WsmxMpOnjeiRZcJpWktY4VVZUFaZ\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPohxHYUpyc&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3wvlj8nbGCR1KQSN-T047QyGkY7WsmxMpOnjeiRZcJpWktY4VVZUFaZ_8)

Hurley, O. (2020, 22nd December). [Video]. **Brave Action: David Gillick**. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkgRkOXtwac&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkgRkOXtwac&feature=emb_logo)

Hurley, O. (2021, 1st January). [Video]. **Brave Action: Paula Radcliffe**. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W\\_hH5xSH800&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_hH5xSH800&feature=youtu.be)

Hurley, O. (2021, 22nd January). [Video]. **Brave Action: Ian KcKinley**. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWEjbGh4pb0>

Hurley, O. (2021, 15th February). [Video]. **Brave Action: Ryle Nugent**. YouTube.



<https://youtu.be/gO4S36tCOal>

Hone, L. (2019, 25th September). **3 secrets of resilient people** [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWH8N-BvhAw>

### Readings:

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness* (Revised ed.). New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Wadey, R, Evans, L, Hanton, S., Sarkar, M, & Oliver, H. (2019). Can preinjury adversity affect post-injury responses? A 5-year prospective, multi-study analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10: 1411. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01411.

Williams, M., & Penman, D. (2011). *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*. London: Piakus