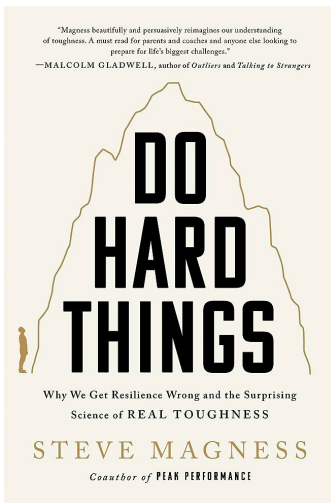


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Steve Magness is a world-renowned performance expert, co-author of Peak Performance and The Passion Paradox, and the author of The Science of Running. He has been featured in The Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and The New Yorker. As a performance coach, Magness works with executives, entrepreneurs, and athletes.

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THE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION:

How We Got Toughness Wrong and Where to Go

Chapter 1: From Tough Coaches, Tough Parents, and Tough Guys to Finding Real Inner Strength.

Hard-Nosed. Gritty. Stoic. Showing no signs of pain or distress. Persevering. When college students were asked to describe what it meant to be tough, these words and phrases came to mind. This definition of toughness is traditional: overcoming obstacles with a combination of perseverance, discipline, and stoicism.

Somewhere along the way, we've become very confused about what toughness is. From coaching to parenting to leading in the workplace, we demand an unrealistic toughness from the people around us. According to studies, one of the four main parenting styles is the authoritarian style. These are the parents who think good parenting is making their kids "tough." They would tell their children to suck it up, not cry, grow up, and never show fear.

For too long, our definition of toughness has revolved around a belief that the toughest individuals are the ones who have thick skin, fear nothing, and hide all signs of vulnerability. This definition of toughness is broken. We've

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got it confused with callousness and machismo, with being manly and stoic. Toughness has been hijacked. We prioritize external displays over true inner strength, and there are consequences.

On May 29, 2018, the University of Maryland football team was told to perform 10, 110-yard sprints. By number seven, 19-year-old Jordan McNair began to show signs of profound fatigue. Not the ordinary fatigue of a player deciding he could no longer go, this was McNair's body protesting at its limit, screaming for help in the form of cramps. But his coaches, instead of pulling him from practice, forced him to finish the workout. Even after the severe cramps, it took the trainers an hour and 28 minutes to get him off the field and into a hospital. McNair died two weeks later.

Increasingly over the past decade, we've seen a rash of player deaths and injuries from this misguided belief in developing toughness. While death may not occur in classrooms or homes from enacting an authoritarian approach to parenting or leading, it still has lasting psychological consequences. Authoritarian parenting leads to lower independence, increased aggression, and a higher chance of substance abuse. Somewhat ironically, teaching, parenting, or coaching for this version of "toughness" creates fragile and dependent individuals.

Real toughness is much harder than the fake kind. It replaces control with autonomy, appearance with substance, rigidly pushing forward with flexibility to adapt, motivation from fear with an inner drive, and insecurity with quiet confidence. It's about providing the toolset to handle adversity.

You too, can learn how to be truly tough. It's not just about helping you deal with pain or perform better; it's about making you a healthier, happier person. By adopting the principles of real toughness, you'll learn how to prepare for, communicate with, respond to, and ultimately transcend discomfort. It'll help you handle your emotions, and wrestle back control of your life when you're on the brink of burnout.

Chapter 2: Sink or Swim, How We Took the Wrong Lesson from the Military

The similarity between our common conception of military-style training and traditional toughness is striking. But it's also wrong. The military doesn't use boot camps or similar exercises to "develop" toughness. In actuality, the military is at the forefront of developing real toughness, just not in the way most of us imagine. The Navy SEALs have their famous "Hell Week" commonly considered to be a method to toughen up and develop soldiers through extremely stressful situations. However, its goal was to separate those who could survive the rigor of war from those who weren't ready. We mistook the sorting portion of the military as development and looked right past how the military develops soldiers to survive extreme situations. The old model of toughness, essentially throwing people into the deep end of the pool, looks over the part where you gradually teach them how to swim.

In 1961, the Air Force opened their first survival school, soon followed by the Navy and the Army. The SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) program was born. It consisted of three critical phases of survival training: classroom, evasion, and detention. The latter two receive most of the attention. Evasion involves getting dropped off in the wilderness with the goal of evading actors dressed as enemies and surviving on their own. Detention, the even harder challenge reportedly includes being locked away in cells and put through periodic physical and psychological beatings, along with interrogation sessions. The process is meant to simulate the conditions a soldier would face if captured by enemy forces. Importantly, both these two phases of training act more as sorting methods rather than simply developing toughness. It's indeed the often overlooked first phase of SERE training that focuses on giving soldiers the skills necessary to survive, evade, and resist. It prepares them for all sorts of different circumstances before even setting foot in the woods. And even the final two phases aren't designed to simply

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push soldiers to failure; they're to prepare them for a potential reality they might be facing. It's based on the concept of stress inoculation. If we "vaccinate" someone to extreme stress, they'll be able to handle it better. But the first step isn't to throw them into the deep end of extreme stress, it's to teach the skills necessary to cope with the situation.

Toughness isn't a sorting exercise. Toughness is teaching the skills to handle adversity. Military training isn't hard for the sake of creating toughness, it's designed to simulate and train for the actual demands soldiers would face on the battlefield. Applying the same formula of training to athletes would only end in disaster. Instead, we need to train them for the specific challenges that they would face on the field.

THE FIRST PILLAR OF TOUGHNESS:

Ditch the Facade, Embrace Reality

Chapter 3: Accept What You Are Capable Of

Toughness is about embracing the reality of where we are and what we have to do. Not deluding ourselves, filling ourselves with false confidence, or living in denial. Let's take running for example. A tough runner is not blind with ambition or confidence, but one who can accurately assess the demands and the situation. When on the track, the human brain is always trying to approximate how hard a race should feel at any given moment. If the pace feels more comfortable than expected, it makes us want to speed up. If it feels more challenging than expected, our feeling of pain and fatigue goes up, and we're more likely to slow down or give up. The magic is in aligning the actual and expected difficulty and demands. When our assessment of our capabilities is out of sync with the demands, it makes us more likely to spiral towards doubt and insecurities. When actual and expected demands align, we're able to pace to perfection and perform up to our current capabilities.

Our interpretation of a certain reality has a lot of influence over our behaviors within it. Whenever we face a new or stressful situation, our body does its best to prepare for what's to come. If the brain perceives the situation as a threat, hormones like adrenaline would surge, preparing us for rapid movement and a fight or flight stance against that situation. However, if we see the stressor as an opportunity for growth or gain, as something that is difficult but we are capable of handling, we're more likely to experience a challenging response. It's not that challenge or threat responses are good or bad; they each have a specific purpose. But we don't want the threat response to trigger when we're trying to perform at our best. We need to see that task simply as a challenge.

If expectations determine what we feel, think, and do, is it best to downplay the difficulty? To tell ourselves a task won't be that hard or painful? Well, not really. If there's a large mismatch between expectations and reality, our brain overcorrects. At the first sign of difficulty, it goes into protective mode and freezes.

So then is it better to prepare for the worst of the worst? Going with the anticipation that this task will be the most demanding one we've ever faced? Again, no. If our expectations swing too far in the other direction our brain goes into a "What's the point?" mode. The task will be so far outside of our capabilities that there's no point in giving it our best performance.

In reality, the best approach is to maintain a clear understanding of the actual difficulty you're about to face. Not overestimating it, and not underestimating it. Acknowledging when something is hard, and knowing what our capabilities and limitations are.

Chapter 4: True Confidence Is Quiet; Insecurity Is Loud

Doubts and insecurities are a part of being human. Whether you're the best in the world or just a beginner, we all struggle with, but want, confidence. That sense of

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assurance that we'll be able to achieve what we've set out to do is very valuable.

Confidence plays a crucial role in toughness, acting as a counterbalance to our natural human insecurities. It appears simple: believe in yourself. You've seen this phrase plastered everywhere. Not surprisingly, having high confidence is indeed helpful in many scenarios. We're able to completely focus on the task at hand and experience positive emotions.

Hence, confidence and toughness go hand in hand. But we've spent a long time developing the wrong kind of confidence. The old model of toughness focused on acting instead of being confident. However, this approach falls flat in a tough situation.

True confidence has to be founded in reality and comes from the inside. It means coming to terms with your doubt and insecurity instead of pretending you don't have any. To create inner confidence, we first need to understand that it simply means knowing and accepting our abilities. It's not in being able to do the impossible.

The first step to developing true inner confidence is to lower the bar and raise the floor. When trying to improve, most of us go for the lift-the-ceiling approach, aiming solely for a new personal best or a massive breakthrough. However, being confident means raising the floor; knowing that whenever you set out to do something, you'll be able to consistently perform at a certain level. This helps us embrace the reality of our performance, and be comfortable with it.

Secondly, we need to shed perfection and embrace who we are. Real confidence lies in being vulnerable. Raising the floor in the first step doesn't mean developing an unrealistic view of yourself. It means being wise enough to acknowledge both your strengths and weaknesses.

The third step is to trust yourself, and your training. And no, this isn't just an Instagram motivational slogan. Trusting yourself means putting in the work in the name of getting better instead of working because you're afraid to lose or fail.

Lastly, it's developing a quiet ego. Our ego makes us walk around with a story in our head where we're the good, competent hero. Whenever evidence appears on the contrary, it goes into overdrive to explain why it must not be true. It does many good things for us, but if it's overactive then it can also be damaging. A quiet ego is about keeping ourselves in balance. It's having the ability to see that evidence, zoom out, and observe it from a growth perspective.

Chapter 5: Know When to Hold 'Em and When to Fold 'Em

Our modern workplaces, sports leagues, and even schools often rely on control and constraint intending to instill toughness. However, research shows that most of the time, taking choices away and trying to motivate through fear and punishment ends up in feelings of helplessness and losing the ability to try. This is because when we lack control, we feel like no matter what we do, it doesn't make any difference.

The level of control we feel in a situation can change how we respond to stress. Control alters our ability to persist.

We need freedom and control to perform at our best and explore our limits. Without it, we lose the ability to respond to even the simplest of challenges. To avoid this, we need to actively train for hopefulness and it doesn't take big heroic efforts.

To develop and maintain this sense of control in your life, follow these 3 practical steps:

Step 1, take a task that brings about discomfort for you. Break it down to the smallest item that you have control over, like sitting down on your desk, preparing for it, collecting the tools you need, etc. Get a deep understanding of what exactly causes the discomfort, and move from small to large, slowly gaining control.

Step 2, give yourself a choice. Consider what it would be like to give up, or to quit. Understand the consequences

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of that. Do you want that for yourself? Will it help you achieve what you want? By considering abandoning your goal, you understand why you want to persist and start seeing certain tasks as a choice instead of something to avoid.

Step 3, flip the script. Notice what nudges you towards fear and avoidance. The triggers are often a signal that we need to flip the script. Take away the power of “that thing” and give yourself the power to do something you think is negative.

Much of this chapter has focused on how to improve our toughness, but when in leadership roles, we also need to make sure we empower control and toughness. Here are some things you can do to develop a sense of control in those you lead or work with:

Learn to let go. In a leadership role, it’s tempting to micromanage your way to success. But know that this occurs because of a fear that other people aren’t good enough and implies distrust. The rule is to “Trust but verify.” Strike a balance between trusting and over-managing.

Next, set constraints and let them go. Giving away control isn’t about letting people run wild. Let them explore while keeping control of some essential areas until they develop the skills to manage them themselves. As a coach, my goal should be to make myself obsolete.

Lastly, allow them to fail, reflect, and improve. Part of giving back control is allowing them to make mistakes. That means giving autonomy in small bites and allowing a process of failure, reflection, and growth. Let them own up to their mistakes, and work on making them right.

THE SECOND PILLAR OF TOUGHNESS:

Listen to your body

Chapter 6: Your Emotions Are Messengers, Not Dictators

Our feelings and emotions provide an overview of the homeostatic function of the entire body, a status update of sorts. They help to alert, advise, and regulate. Yet in the old model of toughness, we’re told that emotions should be suppressed and ignored. However, to navigate discomfort, we need to listen to the message our body is sending.

Feelings and emotions are closely related and often used interchangeably. However, when it comes to toughness, a simple distinction can be made. Feelings are messengers that nudge. Our body senses that something is different and sends a signal to let us know about it. Emotions, on the other hand, are more complex. They require context and meaning. If feelings are meant to inform and nudge, emotions are alarm bells, screaming at you that something’s changed and you need to do something about it. Feelings and emotions are both vital, as they’re the first step to prepare us for action. They help us decide whether to approach or avoid. If we listen, our feelings inform and guide us.

There is, however, a problem. Our feelings are subject to distortion. They depend on context and interpretation. The better we’re able to interpret them, the better our ultimate reaction would be. More importantly, the opposite is also true. This is why it’s extremely important not to ignore our feelings in the name of “being tough,” and invest in understanding them. We don’t want to lose valuable information that could help us make better decisions. The more time we spend understanding ourselves and embracing our feelings, the better we get at interpreting the signals our body sends. And the better the interpretation, the better the decisions that come from them.

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An important thing to know is, most times feelings aren't just communicating; they're nudging us toward a behavior. They make us biased about which path to choose. We need to be able to understand what our feelings are telling us, but we also need to be able to make an unbiased rational decision.

The problem arises when our feelings and emotions start to dictate our behaviors. This can result in extreme circumstances like addictions and eating disorders but also have negative consequences on a smaller scale in our day-to-day life. Toughness means understanding when to take back control and doing what needs to be done. It's not that we need to respond to every signal our body sends us. Some might be wrong. Others may go against what we value (the urge to eat sweets on a diet, etc.). Hence, the goal is to keep feelings and emotions as messengers, and just that, not dictators.

Chapter 7: Own the Voice in Your Head

Under any stressful situation, our mind splits into multiple characters and at some point, we've all experienced the battle waged between these voices. Usually, a negative voice raises doubts and reasons to quit while another part counters with motivational mantras. The old model of toughness expects us to shun the "negative" voice, but the reality is that both voices simply convey information, just like our feelings and emotions. They are simply tools to help us make better decisions when things get hard.

The different versions of our inner voice exist because our brain works as a series of modules. Different parts of the brain might hold contradicting information and might want to push us toward different actions. These "sub-selves" often battle each other, each attempting to hold control of our consciousness. However, by understanding what's going on inside our heads, we can use our inner voices to our advantage. After all, it's simply

a safety mechanism, translating our complex inner world into something we can process and deal with. We have control over how we react to it and engage with it. And we can take deliberate strategies to make sure our inner dialogue is working for us instead of against us.

Firstly, we need to know what voice to listen to: the positive one or the negative one. We might assume that the path to better inner performance is through positivity. If we can overload our inner dialogue with words of affirmation and positive self-talk, then we'll perform to the best of our ability. However, according to research, this only works if the positive self-talk matches with our reality. Otherwise, it will be detrimental. Our brain can't be fooled by false bravado, so we need to decide which voice to listen to in a given moment. Do we need to reassure ourselves or do we need a reality check?

Secondly, switching from "I" to "you" can help unlock another level of self-awareness. Self-distanced self-talk, in which we think of ourselves from a third person's point of view, can be helpful in a variety of stressful situations. I'm sure you've heard the phrase "It's easier to advise a friend than to advise yourself." This largely holds when it comes to self-talk. We're often too close to the issue to have any sort of objectivity and our inner voice offers a mix of justifications and rationalizations. Yet if we see the same situation with a friend, the answer comes nearly instantly. This phenomenon doesn't just hold with giving advice, but also in helping us navigate internal discomfort and it can be easily influenced simply by changing our grammar.

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THE THIRD PILLAR OF TOUGHNESS:

Respond Instead of React

Chapter 8: Keep Your Mind Steady

A big part of being tough is learning to deal with pain. Essentially, pain has a similar function to our emotions, sending a signal that something may be off. And just like emotions, the key to being able to handle pain is to accept it instead of trying to fight it.

Whenever we face discomfort or adversity, we often go straight from feeling pain to freaking out. True toughness is about creating space between the stimulus and response so we can better navigate what's going on. Studies done on the benefits of meditation show that expert meditators have mastered this type of toughness. In an experiment exploring pain handling, researchers discovered that even though both the meditators and normal people experienced the same intensity of pain, they reacted in different ways. Unlike the control group, the meditators didn't try to fight the pain or freak out, but simply accepted it and felt it slowly get "softer." They were responding to the pain, not reacting. Even though you and I aren't "expert meditators," we can learn a lot from their practices.

When faced with pain or any unpleasant sensation, we can deal with it in four ways: ignore, fight, accept, and reappraise. Most of us choose the first two reactions, which causes us to direct our attention to it. This gives our brain the signal that it must be important and ironically, by actively trying to ignore it, we're doubling down. Instead, if we open ourselves up to discomfort, we become better positioned to handle it. Acceptance creates space between fatigue and freak-out. It allows us to quietly and nonjudgmentally work our way through the situation. Taking a pause and listening to ourselves will keep us from spiraling toward a freak-out and allow us to have control of our response.

So how do we develop the skill to create space between the stimulus and our response? The first step is mindfulness; spending time alone in our head. And no this doesn't mean we need to start hardcore meditation practices. It starts from avoiding the temptation to immediately grab our smartphone the moment we're alone. Do not try to distract yourself the moment you're bored and instead get comfortable being aware of your thoughts and controlling them.

Along with being comfortable in our minds, we also need to learn how to respond and not react. The good thing is, that everything that causes slight discomfort and unease is an opportunity to train yourself for this. The goal is simple: use small stressful situations to train yourself to pause, think, and rationally respond. Our brains are pattern-recognition machines. Once we train them to take a moment to think before acting on a stimulus, this practice applies to all stressful situations.

Chapter 9: Turn the Dial So You Don't Spiral

Up until this point, we've discussed how to develop the mindset and skills to navigate adversity. However, we also need to learn what to do when we're at our breaking point. When burnout, blowup, or freak-out seems inevitable. How do we handle that?

The answer lies in learning how to cope. When faced with any form of discomfort, our coping strategy influences our experience and our behavioral approach. One way would be to turn the volume dial up and dive straight into that experience. Engaging in it and getting a deep understanding. Another approach would be to turn the volume down and try to direct our attention away, reminding ourselves that "it isn't real." Neither approach is right or wrong. If we need to understand the situation better to maintain control of ourselves, then we need to choose to do that. Otherwise, if we're afraid we'll be overwhelmed and might spiral out of control, it's best to distract our mind with something else at that moment so that we can survive and simply get through the discomfort.

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Some situations demand us to zoom in on them to sort them out, such as issues within a relationship. In such a case, the best approach is to pay attention and make sure we're fully aware of what's going on before taking action. In other situations, like dealing with the death of a close one, it might be best to quiet our mind and the fear and pain that comes with it. It is up to us to decide which strategy best suits us. The important part is making sure we have control of the situation. That our discomfort and pain don't make us act in ways we don't want to and negatively affect the people around us. Pain is inevitable in life, so having a flexible and adaptive coping ability is essential.

THE FOURTH PILLAR OF TOUGHNESS:

Transcend Discomfort

Chapter 10: Build the Foundation to Do Hard Things

The ability to do hard things, to stay motivated and engaged, to persist, and to keep going is directly tied to toughness. For a long time, people thought it centered around control and being motivated by something external, but as we've discussed, persistence is dependent on perceived control. However, that only tells part of the story. Our "why" tells the rest.

When researchers looked at the ability to persist in various domains, one factor kept popping up. Those who persisted had different goals. They weren't driven by fear, guilt, or pressure, nor even money. They were pursuing a goal because it aligned with who they were and brought them contentment. They were the ones choosing to work, not being forced to. And they had more success as a result. Moreover, when motivation comes from the inside, people are more likely to be able to reframe their goals and adjust things according to the feedback they receive.

To find this inner drive, people need to feel that their basic needs are being fulfilled, so that fear and pressure don't consume them. To be motivated from within, they need to feel like they belong and that even if they fail, they'll still be loved and supported. They need to feel empowered, that they have control and can make an impact. This empowerment can be done by parents, teachers, coaches, bosses, or leaders in any situation. In any such role, it is our responsibility to develop toughness through care and support. Ask yourself, what type of motivation are you ingraining? Is it to be motivated via punishment and/or reward, or is it intrinsic motivation? We also need to create environments that allow people to see a path that leads them to growth and mastery. Being able to see yourself improve and grow is also a fundamental human need.

Another fundamental human need is feeling belonging. Without a sense of belonging, people feel rejected and invisible. Lack of connection leads to the rise of some of the most intense and unpleasant emotions. When we feel connected to those around us, we free ourselves up to perform to the best of our abilities. With a stable platform of support, we function from a place of growth and development instead of fear. This is why it's important to make our subordinates feel seen and heard. Creating a sense of belonging isn't about forced and artificial team bonding activities, it's about creating the space for genuine, real connection.

Chapter 11: Find Meaning in Discomfort

Whether we call it motivation, drive, or purpose, the last component in the ability to do hard things determines our bandwidth for how far into the depth of fatigue we can push. Contrary to common belief, when we're exhausted, we haven't completely depleted our reserves. Our body has safety mechanisms that warn us that we are at zero long before we hit zero. Drive determines how close to zero we can push before our body shuts us down. Having a strong purpose acts like a turbo boost, making us persist for much longer. With a purpose, we're able

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not only to endure and persist but also to have a beacon that reminds us of what's important to us and to make the right choices at the right moment. Because we never truly reach zero in our body's energy reserves (which would result in catastrophic failure), we use the level of importance and the risk versus reward to determine how close to zero we can get. We decide based on the purpose of the action whether it's worth spending that much energy on or not. Having a clear purpose is essentially the fuel that allows us to be tough.

Finding meaning in your circumstance, in your pain, in your suffering, is the key to handling such utter atrocity. It allows us to extend our abilities and explore discomfort, which allows for the highest levels of growth. When we explore instead of avoid, we can integrate the experience into our life story. We're able to make something meaningful out of struggle and suffering. Meaning is the glue that holds our minds together in such situations, allowing us to respond and recover. Meaning provides the freedom for us to choose. Find your meaning and be who you are. That's real toughness.