

Words: Adam Kelly



Do you deserve to achieve success?

Outsider's triathlon editor Adam Kelly looks at the psychology of success and talks to Sarah Bird, a peak performance specialist and a leading practitioner and trainer of energy psychology techniques.

“WHETHER
YOU BELIEVE
YOU CAN DO
A THING OR
NOT, YOU
ARE RIGHT.”

HENRY FORD

Yes you have all heard this quote before, but have you really thought about it and acted upon it?

What drew you to read this article? Is it your endless quest to be faster, higher and stronger?

Let's face facts. Most amazing physical feats are achieved through mental suffering. As Matthew Mohlke wrote in 'The Man Who Swam the Amazon' about Martin Strel's pioneering 3,274-mile swim, "An expedition is 95 per cent misery and 5 per cent ecstasy." Likewise, Dean Karnazes, the Ultra Marathon Man, believes that after the first 26 miles, it is all mental.

As humans, we are drawn to read stories of human suffering in autobiographies, articles and media. It makes us feel good about ourselves and inspires us.

But what sets you apart? Is it:

- 1) Your core beliefs
- 2) Your preparation and practice
- 3) Debriefing

Your core beliefs

Our beliefs about how good or bad we are at something start, in general, when we are children. By the time we are two we have formed many of our beliefs by taking on the beliefs of those around us and depending on how we experience our environment. As children our brains are like sponges and until we are aged about seven we believe everything we are told by adults.

If we're told that we are great, then we believe it. If on the other hand we're told that we're useless and an experience validates that, then we come to believe it. This then becomes a negative belief that can limit us in our lives and how we perform.

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A simple off-the-cuff comment can destroy our confidence in a second as it reactivates that installed belief. And repeated negative comments or thoughts that run through our heads can gradually wear us down and leave us feeling worthless.

Many countries that want to win Olympic medals take children into controlled and protected environments like sports boarding schools at a very young age. This is to train them, give them confidence and shelter them from the big bad, outside world. Countries like China and even Australia are adopting this technique and it wins medals.

When it comes to winning, Sarah Bird, a peak performance specialist and a leading practitioner and trainer of energy psychology techniques says, [These techniques are] "all about the individual's mindset. This does not necessarily mean that you will win every time, but it does mean that you are giving yourself the best possible chance of winning. The key to this is how you approach each performance. The removal of negative energy from your system and challenging your negative beliefs and self-sabotaging thoughts eliminates anxiety. This therefore allows you to focus on your performance.

"Fear freezes the mind and the body. It takes away the ability to keep focused, often resulting in performers lapsing in concentration, making a mistake or tightening your chest so breathing becomes laboured. Fear may even stop

you from competing in the first case; your nerves get the upper hand causing you to be sick, or not being able to get a good night's sleep beforehand so reducing your ability to compete.

"Choking" is a recognised word used in sporting circles, which refers to an inability to manage anxiety or fear at a crucial moment. If you become very tense, your muscles tighten up and you lose the sensitive touch you may need. This also increases the chance of injury."

Preparation and practice

So you have set yourself a goal and now you are going to achieve it.

Without having your preparation and practice in order, you have failed before you have even begun. You can't wake up one morning and go and run a marathon; it takes time and a structured programme to build up fitness and strength.

Remember the first major achievement in your life? Remember how good that felt. Great, now you have a resource to apply to your performance. It's also easy to remember how awful a failure felt so let's learn from it. There are no failures only lessons that we can learn from.

The good times, the wins, the achievements – remember them, celebrate them and most importantly, repeat them.

Winning becomes a habit. Losing can also become one. That is why teams have runs of wins and runs of losses. It's all mental and associated with our belief systems.

Back to basics

Most great achievements come after good planning and practice.

Logistics, equipment and physical conditioning are a given. If these basics are not addressed, you have a high chance of failure. You need to be able to control the controllable in order to be able to have the confidence to deal with the uncontrollable curve balls that will be thrown at you.

In order to deal with these curveballs, you need to work on:

- » Mental conditioning
- » Your support crew

Be prepared to have disruptions to your preparation for an event and then you won't be taken by surprise. For example, if you get injured you need to be ready to take the steps to rectify it by linking up with a suitable therapist in advance, and even using therapy in a preventative way.

Lance Armstrong is an inspiration when it comes to disruptions to training. Would he have won seven Tour de France races if he had not got cancer?

Mental strength

Your training should simulate your event as much as possible, both mentally, physically and environmentally. If you have done your preparation your event should go to plan.

However, the physical preparation is the easy bit. To prepare ourselves for the unforeseen, we need to get as mentally strong as possible.

Looking again at the example of marathon swimmer Strel, when asked the question "What's more important: physical or mental power?" Strel answered: "On my swims I'd say mental power. It is true it does not work without great physical training but I do strongly believe that there are many other good swimmers who could swim as I do, but they do not have their mind ready. And this is mental strength where I am really good. I could not do such great swims 20 years ago when I was much younger, now I can do it. And the reason is I have now mentally matured."

A client of mine Bill Roberts was planning an expedition to walk to the South Pole on skis with sledge in tow containing his supplies. He did all the training and preparation perfectly. He towed his weighted sledge up and down the beach and built up his specific strength. However, I thought it would be wise to prepare him for the unforeseen by sending him for some neuro-linguistic programming. This was a catch-all attempt to prepare him for hard times, whatever they might be.

Roberts attended the sessions and was not hugely impressed by the techniques

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used upon him – that was until he needed them. Yes in the thick of it, in Antarctica, when the chips were down, he really used it. He made it successfully, becoming only the second Irish resident to reach the South Pole on skis.

Support and debrief

It is also a great idea to have a support team, or just people on whom you can rely should you need their help. Although not necessarily on a full-time basis, most successful athletes will surround themselves with a great team. A coach, an injury therapist, a sports psychologist and a personal trainer are all part of the team, as well as your family who need to understand what you are doing and why.

One aspect that is often forgotten is what to do when you cross the line or reach the summit? So many people plan to summit, then celebrate and forget to plan their descent, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Giving some thought to a post-event action plan can keep a great day from going wrong. Who will be there to give you your warm gear or pick you up if you collapse with exhaustion? Who will be there to see you achieve your lifetime mission and to give you a hug or support you if it turns out to be an anticlimax?

Roberts discovered this need for debriefing after his successful expedition. As soon as the team reached the Pole, they were flown out and the team members immediately went their separate ways as they were trying to get home for Christmas day. Therefore, they had no de-brief, which Roberts subsequently found difficult.

From personal experience, I have found that it is great to write an account of what you just did. When I snowboarded off Mt Blanc down the run of a lifetime, I found myself alone in my hotel room in Chamonix when my guide returned to the southern Alps. I had a couple of days to spare before I flew home, so I started writing. It can really

help you fathom what you have just achieved, and put it to rest.

By writing an account of what you have achieved, or by talking it over with somebody objectively, or reviewing your race season, for example, it helps you


learn from your success and from your mistakes. This helps you plan for future events.

Bird says, "If you have encountered difficulties it is really important to release them from your mental game so you do not take them into your next event or expedition. One method that is proving itself in the arena of peak performance is 'energy psychology'.

"Energy Psychology removes the fears or negative beliefs you hold, and identifies the anxieties you have; this could be the fear of failure or being watched by a large crowd that could make you feel embarrassed if you underperformed. Or it may be something that has happened in a previous event where you have not performed well, you take that memory with you and then start with a negative mind set.

"Energy psychology works to remove all these self-limiting thoughts and beliefs, so allowing you to be focused and relaxed. Energy psychology can give you a real edge here as it teaches you methods that you can use while you are performing, enabling you to put the negative behind you and to remain focused on the present.

"If you have a disappointing performance, and it happens to the best, you can easily remove the anger and frustration, or re-channel it to your advantage so it does not sabotage your next performance."

Don't you deserve to have this mindset? 

Sarah Bird

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