

The Mental Toughness Development Toolkit

The Mental Toughness Development Toolkit is an array of experiential exercises which can be run with individuals and/or small and large groups. It also works well in conjunction with outdoor experiential exercises.

What is Mental Toughness – what can we assess and develop?



Mental Toughness is a moderately plastic personality *trait* which determines in large part how individuals respond mentally to stress, pressure, opportunity and challenge. Research shows that Mental Toughness scores correlate closely with Performance; Well-being; Positive Behaviour and Aspirations. It has a significant impact on most key outcomes in the world of education. It applies to leaders, staff as well as to students.

As a concept, Mental Toughness embraces other well-known concepts and ideas such as resilience, grit, mindset, learned optimism and learned pessimism, as well as most definitions of character. Research shows that Mental Toughness has four elements often called the 4 Cs. Each has two sub-scales. This is shown below:

MT Scale	What this means ...
CONTROL	<i>Life Control</i> – I really believe I can do it
	<i>Emotional Control</i> – I can manage my emotions and the emotions of others
COMMITMENT	<i>Goal Setting</i> – I promise to do it – I like working to goals
	<i>Achieving</i> – I'll do what it takes to keep my promises and achieve my goals
CHALLENGE	<i>Risk Taking</i> – I will push myself – I am driven to succeed
	<i>Learning from Experience</i> – even setbacks are opportunities for learning
CONFIDENCE	<i>In Abilities</i> – I believe I have the ability to do it – or can acquire the ability
	<i>Interpersonal Confidence</i> – I can influence others – I can stand my ground if needed.

We are able to assess mental toughness in terms of these components in individuals and groups through a unique 48 item high quality psychometric measure called MTQ48. It is normative which enables users to assess mental toughness before and after a programme of interventions. There is a version of MTQ48 available for use with secondary school students.



Can we develop Mental Toughness in individuals?

Instinctively the answer is “we can”. Sports psychologists and sports coaches would argue that they have been doing this for many years with significant evidence of success. More practically, the answer still appears to be “yes we can”.

One key question is “are we changing someone’s mental toughness or can we simply equip someone with tools and techniques that enable them to behave as a mentally tough person might behave”.

The answer appears to be that, where the individual wants to change or develop it is possible to change one’s core mental toughness. We are not suggesting that anyone must develop their mental toughness. For those who see a benefit in their life or their work, there may be a good reason for developing mental toughness without necessarily becoming very mentally tough. There does seem to be some valuable advantages in life and work for those who are more mentally tough than most.

The value of the model and the MTQ48 measure is that it can help to identify which aspects of one’s mental toughness are preventing or hindering them from attaining, achieving wellbeing or leading a more positive life. Self-awareness is the key here.

How does the toolkit work?

There are two approaches to organising the exercises. One is to focus on the desired outcome – “I wish to improve my Mental Toughness in terms of the 4 Cs”. The others is to approach it from the perspective of “enablers”. These fall into six broad headings:

- Positive Thinking – Affirmations, Thought Stopping, Self Talk, etc.
- Visualisation – Guided Imaging, etc.
- Anxiety Control – Controlled Breathing, Relaxation, Distraction, etc.
- Attentional Control – Dealing with Interruptions, Attention Span, etc.
- Goal Setting – SMART Goals, “Eating the Elephant”, Balancing Goals, etc.
- The MTQ48 test –Good feedback and reflection often provokes a positive response

These all help to develop the capability to deal with stress, pressure and challenge and, where appropriate, to cope with these.

The exercises in this toolkit are organised by the 4 Cs. Many of these can impact on more than one of the 4 Cs.

The tools have been written so that they can be delivered to a group or coaching tools to be used in a one-to-one situation.



Using the Exercises

The start point should be an accurate and realistic assessment of the individual's Mental Toughness and their potential development needs ideally based on the use of the MTQ48 measure. This enables the user to direct interventions appropriately.

One useful indicator to examine is an individual's challenge scores. Individuals who are mentally sensitive on this scale (typically scores of 1 – 3 perhaps 4) are less open to learning than individuals with higher levels of Mental Toughness. They may require more attention.

Mental Toughness is developed as a result of experiential learning

- Mental Toughness is learned – it is not easily taught. It is about developing a mindset. One can't learn this just because you follow a process.
- For the Individual– they may need to be supported to persevere until they “get it”. Practice is important.
- For the Coach/Tutor – facilitation and coaching skills are important. Trialling and practising these skills is important.

There is nevertheless an underlying process:

Stage one - Experience

Introduce the exercise to the individual and explain its purpose

Students carry out the exercise and assesses what difference it made to their thinking

Stage two - Reflection

The absolute key to success. Get individuals to consider:

- What occurred? – What difference was made? – Did they improve performance in some way – was this beneficial?
- How did they feel? Was mood improved, did it boost confidence? Was it enjoyable? Did it make them want to do more? The key is to enable the individual to associate this feeling with their participation in the exercise.
- What did they learn? Can doing things differently be effective? Does approaching things differently work? Does being positive produces surprising results? What could they now do that they didn't think they could before? Where could they now apply this learning to other areas which are important – especially in University!

Stage three - Purposeful Practice



Now the hard bit. Practice what you have learned until it becomes a habit. Then it becomes easier and the benefits will flow.

Tutors Guidance

Prior to running a Mental Toughness Development we suggest that all participants are tested with MTQ48.

Testing or training as MTQ48 practitioners can be arranged through AQR. Ongoing use of the measure is delivered via an online assessment platform with a metering system. Pricing for training and meters are available on request.

There are also curriculum maps available for download with the kit which illustrate how to deliver a whole university approach to Mental Toughness.

As part of the preparation for a Mental Toughness development session the MTQ48 Development Report should be printed in respect of each delegate.

Please examine the results of each student carefully prior to the programme. Students with low scores across each of the scales may need some 1:1 support and including them in a programme of this nature could have a detrimental effect on them. This needs to be considered in the context of the group. For example, for a learner falling in a mentally sensitive band (1-3) where all other learners in that particular cohort are high (7-10s), to work as a whole group would be discouraged.

This is designed to be a flexible toolkit of exercises which can be adapted or applied in a variety of ways. There are two sets of cue cards available in the pack. The coaching cards have been designed for use in one-to-one coaching sessions. The groups cue cards have been designed for use by teaching/support staff when working with classes of students.

Many of the exercises can be run several times in slightly different ways enabling the content to focus on a specific outcome.



Each exercise is supported with a cue card which provides full instructions for use, equipment required and guidance for managing reflection and learning.

Number Grid Concentration Exercise



Running the exercise - Paper and pencil version- run in up to 4 cycles, enabling learning from each cycle to be applied to the next attempt.

1. You need a stopwatch (on your smart phone) and copies of the number grid to enable attendees to complete it 4 times. Students need a pen or pencil.
2. Explain that students will do an exercise which will "test" their ability to focus. They must also follow your instructions closely...and must not cheat.
3. Issue a sheet to each person (say, sheet with Grids A and B). Ask to place the sheet in front of them with Grid B facing upwards.
4. Explain that:

When I say "GO" you can turn the sheet over and work on the Number Grid which is now facing up (Grid A). This avoids people "cheating" by looking ahead.

Turning the sheet over, you need to find 00, cross it off, then 1, cross it off and so on. You must do this strictly in sequence - no cheating - no skipping numbers.

You have 90 seconds. The last number crossed off will obviously be your score.

5. Run one round. Shout "Stop" when time is up. You can use different time intervals - up to 3 minutes works.

Teacher Review

Ask how many scored more than 25 (rare), more than 20, more than 15 and less than 15. Most first time scores are around the 12 - 18 mark.

Ask the students with the highest score how they achieved that. Similarly with the students with the lowest score ask what they found difficult or challenging. Encourage short discussion so that all learn ideas about improving their scores.

6. Re-run the exercise three more times, each time challenge students to improve their scores.

Teacher Review - after each round

Ask how many have improved and how many have worse scores.

Congratulate those who have improved their scores and ask them to share "What did you do this time that you didn't do before". This shows learning. Over time everyone should improve on their original score and will be concentrating like mad.

Encourage students to:

- Reflect on what they have done and what they have learned
- Identify what they can do to improve concentration
- Think how they can apply this to coursework, study, reading, etc.



Number Grid Concentration Exercise



Background

This is an exercise which is engaging and illustrates the value of repeated practice as well as concentration. It involves everyone in debate. It has the advantage that it has a built in scoring mechanism which enables progression to be assessed.

Improving Attention Control i.e. the ability to focus longer and to focus better can produce some of the biggest boost to productivity, learning and wellbeing. Studies show that it is possible to improve attention span from an (UK) average of 8 minutes to 45+ minutes. Not only enabling students to be more productive but it takes the stress out of such activities.

Discussion Guides:

Why do students think their score has changed (hopefully up)? Do people feel more positive and more focused?

What difference does this make for them? E.g. when reading or writing?

Why do they think concentration helps performance, wellbeing and behaviour?

Reflection will usually produce a crop of answers around three themes:

1. Techniques - often to do with organising themselves
2. Setting goals and targets and steadily working towards them.
3. Concentrating and blocking out distractions...By the 4th cycle students will often be so focused on the exercise that they fail to notice what anyone else is doing.

This illustrates that improving focus can be learned and that most can work it out from themselves or by talking to others. This is experiential learning.

Support Materials & Resources

Pre-printed A4 sheets specially designed for this with double sided grids are available in pads of 50 from www.aqr.co.uk

An on-line version is available on <http://www.salticid.com/concentration.htm>

The grid is automatically refreshed randomly each use.

It is impossible to cheat. You can alter the dimensions of the grid to make it more difficult over time.

It assesses time taken to complete a grid, which makes it useful for developing attention span.

It is useful for students who want to practice learning how to focus better and for longer at home.



Support resources and equipment requirements are listed on each cue card.

There is a UCanPass group Power Point presentation to introduce the mental toughness model and a UCanPass workbook that can be given to students as home based learning, included within the resources.

