



Finding your inner athlete

You may never hit a tennis ball like Serena Williams or dominate a basketball court like LeBron James but that shouldn't stop you from being the best athlete you can be regardless of your age or ability.

World class athletes show us that more than talent and training are required to reach the top. They possess certain attitudes and behaviours that are critical to achieving any goal in life. These include:

- Constantly striving to improve performance
- Focusing on higher goals and the next challenge
- Learning and bouncing back from failure
- Positivity and confidence in their abilities
- Focus and motivation
- Managing stress and anxiety effectively
- Working well with others

Today's athletes not only prepare their bodies to win – they prepare their minds.

Seeing is believing

For swimmer Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time with 28 medals, mental preparation is as important as physical training. He acknowledged that visualization or guided imagery played a big role in his success. Leading up to a competition, he would mentally rehearse each race twice a day - before he slept and when he woke up. He visualized diving into the pool, each stroke and kick, the rhythm of the race, the water on his face, his breath, his every turn and the sprint to the finish. "It's about seeing what I want to see, seeing what I don't want to see, seeing what I possibly could see," he has said. "I'm trying to picture it all, everything I possibly can, so that I'm ready for anything that happens."

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Seeing success

Visualization is about creating success in the mind. Here are some tips to help you master the technique:

- **Find a comfortable place** where you won't be interrupted. Relax your body and take several long, slow breaths.
- **Be detailed.** Visualize your breath, the weight of your racket or bat in your hand, the squeak of rubber on the wood floor, the adrenaline coursing through your blood and the joy of winning the match or achieving a personal best.
- **Have a specific goal.** Is it winning a race or match? Beating your best time? Overcoming a challenge? Whatever it is, make sure it's clear.
- **Imagine calmly dealing with problems.** Things do go wrong – your shoe lace breaks, it rains on race day or your goggles fill with water (this happened to Michael Phelps at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, effectively blinding him – but he had visualized every possible issue, so he stayed calm, counted his strokes and won gold!).

Remember, the more you do this, the better you'll get at it - and the better your performance will be.

Going for gold

Great athletes use many other tools to help them reach their goals. Try some of the following to help train your inner athlete:

- **Set a goal and make a plan.** Establish a realistic and measurable goal then design a workout schedule that will help you reach it. Track your progress and modify your plan as needed.
- **Mix it up.** When you do the same thing over and over, you may improve but you may also get bored, burned out or injured. Find different physical activities such as riding a bike, skiing or horseback riding. Olympic athletes modify their workouts every few weeks and often choose sports very different from the one in which they compete during the off seasons.
- **Create a support system.** You may not have coaches, trainers, psychologists, physical therapists and personal assistants, but you can still have a team behind you. Involve your family and friends in your activities. If they don't want to join you, they can encourage you.
- **Pay attention to your health.** Any training regime includes a healthy lifestyle – a good diet, plenty of sleep, and lots of water.

Be sure to check with your family doctor before beginning any exercise program. For more information on improving your performance in all aspects of your life, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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Surviving a breakup

The end of any relationship is tough, but the end of an intense romantic relationship – even a rocky one – can be devastating. It's not uncommon to hear people say, "I'm not over him/her" or "I'm not ready to move on" months, even years after a breakup. Why is the end of a relationship so hard to bear?

Love is a drug

Humans are social beings. We're hardwired to bond with others. When we fall in love, several "feel good" neurochemicals flood our brains, including adrenaline, dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin, and if the bond is extremely strong, oxytocin. We're euphoric. We're high on love.

When that bond is broken our bodies seem to go into withdrawal. Just thinking about an ex can activate key areas in your brain associated with craving and pain. These reactions can be so strong that some people will do just about anything to make the hurt go away - and that can lead to destructive behaviours such as alcohol or drug abuse.

Friends and relations

A breakup often affects other relationships. We can feel anger towards our ex but also anger with family and friends who took his/her side. They may also feel anger towards us. The friendships we had with other couples are now changed forever and we often feel unready and afraid to forge new friendships alone. It can be a lonely and confusing time.

The virtual world

Although no breakup is easy, the psychological damage is made much worse when the breakup is disrespectful and dishonourable. No matter how damaged the relationship, a breakup should always be done face-to-face – not by text, email, tweet or post. Unfortunately, impersonal, electronic "dumping" is becoming more prevalent - especially with teens. A 2016 survey by Pew Research found that 24 percent of respondents aged 13 to 17 felt it was fine to break up with someone by texting and 26 percent admitted to doing so. Adding to the hurt is being unfriended or even blocked on social media by friends and family members who have taken sides – and of course, having to let the world know by changing our status from "in a relationship" to "single." Not only do we have to explain the end of our relationship in the real world but again, in the social world.

Many of us struggle with breakups because we're not taught how to cope with them in healthy ways. So what can you do? The first step is realizing that you're grieving and that involves several stages, including shock/denial, bargaining, anger, depression and eventually acceptance. In other words, what you're feeling is normal.

Here are some other ways to cope:

- **Go easy on the guilt and blame.** It's normal to blame yourself for a relationship failing or regret choices you made. It's also normal to blame your ex for everything. Remember that neither of you began the relationship with the goal of making it fail or hurting each other. Focus instead on what you gained and learned from that relationship.

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- **Take care of your physical health.** You may not feel like it but focus on eating a healthy diet, staying active and getting enough sleep. Avoid unhealthy coping strategies such as drinking excessively, relying on prescription or illegal drugs, over or undereating, self-harm or working excessively.
- **Don't do it alone.** Sharing your feelings with friends and family can help you get through things. If people are not available or you don't feel comfortable discussing private thoughts, write your feelings down – it can often give you a different perspective about your life. Consider counselling or joining a support group where you can talk to others in similar situations.
- **Don't isolate yourself.** Yes, you need time alone but isolating yourself can increase your stress, deepen depression, and damage other relationships. Spend time with friends, volunteer in your community, sign up for a class, get back to playing your favourite sport or join a club.
- **Look forward.** Know that new dreams will eventually replace your old ones and that new friendships and experiences are now possible. This relationship may have failed because an even better one is waiting.

Most importantly, know when to seek help. If you're feeling socially and emotionally paralyzed or unable to cope, contact your family doctor. Your Employee Assistance Program can also provide invaluable information, resources and access to counselling.

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