

by Mike Hawkins
mike@alpinelink.com



Are you mentally tough? What are the attributes of mental toughness? No matter how difficult or urgent the problem, people who are mentally tough remain focused on solving the problem rather than becoming stressed out by it. They give their attention to taking action rather than feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

Does this mean that being mentally tough prevents people from being sensitive and caring? In other words, can mentally tough people be focused on addressing issues while being empathetic and considerate to people? Yes, they can. In a personal context some call this tough love. In the workplace, some call this inspiring better performance.

What allows people to be mentally tough yet considerate? Self-assurance. Confidence grounded in competence and humility allows people to remain calm and think clearly regardless of how difficult the issue or other people's stress level. Even when others criticize them, their self-confidence remains strong. They are secure in themselves and don't depend on others for validation.

In contrast, people who aren't tough minded struggle with stressful situations. They don't handle adversity well. They worry. They become agitated and upset. When confronted with a problem, particularly one for which people imply they are to blame, they are quick to defend themselves and even go on the counterattack. Rather than react calmly to challenging circumstances, they become upset. Rather than listen to opposing opinions, they react with criticisms of their own. When someone else says, "Can I give you my candid feedback?" they tense up. They are insecure.

Being tough minded is hard enough for most people, but to also be sensitive and caring at the same time can seem impossible. The two qualities seem incompatible. It would be relatively easy to be tough if you didn't have to also be considerate and caring. However, great leaders and problem solvers in general are self-assured enough that they don't let situations and people derail their demeanor. They are able to handle most any situation without becoming harsh, negative, or cynical. They care about people but don't let people upset them. They have a high threshold for adversity and difficult circumstances that would otherwise be stressful for others.

If you are in a position of significant responsibility or expect to attain a position of significant responsibility, your ability to handle difficult circumstances without becoming anxious or stressed is critical to your success. Particularly if you are a senior executive, your ability to handle customer complaints, coworker conflicts, project mistakes, media criticisms, and false accusations will determine how well your organization performs.

Consider these principles when you need to be tough minded and confident while at the same time maintaining your composure and compassion for people especially when you are trying to do the right thing but being criticized for it:

1. Set your own standards, priorities, and goals. Formulate your own values. Determine what is important to you and the people you care about.
2. Leverage your circle of trusted advisors. Seek wise counsel from those you respect. Use your allies as your sounding board. Validate your plans and be reassured that you are doing the best you can.



Being Mentally Tough (and Considerate) in Stressful Situations

3. If your adversity is “a battle worth fighting”, confront it. Rather than ignore an issue or hope it goes away, engage it as quickly and constructively as you can.
4. If appropriate, develop a written plan so you have a roadmap that takes you where you want to go and away from the troubling circumstances you may be dealing with.
5. Execute your plan and realize that as long as you are making progress against your plan that you will eventually arrive at your desired destination.
6. Live in the present moment. Set goals and plan for the future, but live for the current day. Give today your best and be satisfied that you did all you could.
7. When criticized, consider the source. Know when you are dealing with hecklers and ignore them. Don't reinforce bad behaviors by giving hecklers your attention. Don't lower yourself to their level.
8. Realize that if someone you don't respect says something negative toward you, you should be glad for it. If they said something positive about you, it could mean that you are like them.
9. Accept yourself. Accept your past and look forward. You are not perfect and neither is anyone else. Don't let your mistakes dampen your confidence. Quit comparing yourself to others.
10. Listen to the opinions of others whom you respect. Learn from them, but don't let them weaken your self-confidence. Don't outsource your self-esteem to anyone. Don't ride on the emotional roller coaster of others' opinions and moods.
11. Recall all the great work you have done. Review your accomplishments and past positive testimonials. Review thank you notes from past projects. One mistake or failure doesn't undo all your past successes.
12. Be grateful for what you have. Focus on the positive aspects of your life. Put your adversity into a broader perspective. Your adversity is likely a small matter compared to all else you are involved in.
13. Spend time with people whom you respect and who respect you. Engage in activities you enjoy. Get your mind off of your problems. Go to the gym and let your frustrations out on the training circuit.
14. Appreciate the learning and experience that comes with adversity. While you might prefer prosperity, that isn't where the best learning comes from. Learn the lessons to be learned and be grateful for the experience.

Apply these principles and enjoy the success that comes with being tough minded without losing your caring nature.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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