

# Insights from *Do Hard Things* by Steve Magness

Completing a hard and worthwhile endeavor requires a high level of toughness. People associate toughness with complete confidence, brute force, and bravado. But real toughness is none of those things. Author Steve Magness has explored the science of toughness, and he's found surprising differences between the traditional toughness maxims and the science of toughness. For starters:



Traditional toughness says, “*act confident.*” But the science of toughness says, “***embrace reality.***”



When the US army examined results from their survival training courses, they found that the soldiers who experienced doubt and expected the training to be difficult performed much better than the soldiers who thought the training would be a ‘*piece of cake.*’ As a wise and experienced military friend once told Steve Magness, “*An ounce of doubt keeps me sharp.*”

Your perseverance and toughness during the endeavor is largely determined by your expectations leading up to that endeavor. If you underestimate the challenge, you will panic when the endeavor is more demanding than you thought it would be. The key to staying tough is assuming nothing will happen as quickly or as smoothly as you hope, but with enough time and effort, you can achieve more than what most people think is possible. In other words, couple short-term pessimism with long-term optimism.



Traditional toughness says, “*ignore the pain and push on.*” The science of toughness says, “***acknowledge the pain but maintain equanimity.***”



Every challenging and worthwhile endeavor brings a heavy dose of discomfort. When discomfort strikes, the amygdala - a small region in the brain that scientists call the body's alarm system - is activated. People who burnout have an overactivated amygdala they cannot calm down.

To avoid burning out and checking out, we must understand our internal alarms and then quickly turn those alarms down and make intelligent decisions. It's like getting a low fuel alarm when we're driving. The alarm provides valuable information we should act on, but if we know we have enough fuel to get to the next gas station, we don't need the alarm to continue ringing.

Here is a three-part method to reliably return your amygdala to baseline and maintain a state of equanimity (evenness and composure in stressful situations):

1. **Zoom out and explain:** When I get frustrated while working, I zoom out and see myself from a distance, then think, "Nathan is getting frustrated." Explaining stressful situations to ourselves in the third person is an effective way to regulate emotion. In one study, kids who referred to themselves in the third person while working on a frustrating task were 30% better at regulating their emotions and staying on task.
2. **Reappraise:** When we take a test, we can interpret nervousness as a sign we are not prepared for a test, or we can see it as a sign the test is important, and our body is providing us with additional energy to focus. When we reappraise, we identify ways in which discomfort is beneficial. The more we reappraise, the more likely we are to deal with discomfort in a productive manner (rather than running from it or ignoring it).
3. **Reassure:** Experienced meditators are so good at calming themselves down after a stressful experience because they've spent thousands of hours observing thoughts and emotions come and go and understand that everything is temporary. We need not meditate for thousands of hours to know that discomfort is a fleeting sensation that rises and falls. If we use discomfort as a cue to tell ourselves, “*This too shall pass,*” we can return to a state of equanimity.



Traditional toughness says, “*forget your psychological needs and just do the work.*” The science of toughness says, “***satisfy your psychological needs and you'll work harder than ever.***”



Humans have three psychological needs: autonomy, competency, and belonging. If you can cultivate a feeling of autonomy, competency, and belonging during a difficult endeavor, you will dramatically increase your odds of finishing that endeavor.

- Generate a feeling of autonomy by acknowledging that you always have a choice. Even if told what to do, you can choose how you think about it or choose not to do it and accept the consequences.
- Generate a feeling of competency by constantly feeling like you're making progress. Reflect on the work you've completed in the past few days to get you to where you are today. Then, focus on one tiny thing you can do to continue making progress in the next 5 seconds. For a runner mid-marathon, that means reflecting on the miles she's completed and then executing the next few steps as well as she can.
- Generate a feeling of belonging by remembering the people or mission you are struggling for. A soldier sustains mental resiliency during a grueling battle when he fights for the soldiers next to him. A solo entrepreneur deals with setback after setback when she is on a mission to improve the lives of her customers.

**“When we satisfy our (psychological) needs, we are allowed to fulfill our potential, (because) our drive comes from within, so fear and pressure no longer consume us.” – Steve Magness**