

Can You Instill Mental Toughness?

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TIME:

To be mentally tough is to resist the urge to give up in the face of failure, to maintain focus and determination in pursuit of one's goals, and to emerge from adversity even stronger than before. Psychologists claim that almost everyone can benefit from strengthening these skills, even those people we might consider paragons of mental toughness: army drill sergeants. The U.S. military is now implementing a resilience-building program, designed by a team of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, intended to make soldiers as rugged in mind as they are in body. This effort—one of the largest psychological interventions ever attempted—holds lessons for anyone who wants to strengthen their mental muscles.

Drill sergeants were chosen to receive the training because they're in a position to teach the service members under their command, promoting a trickle down of psychological resilience. The program's key message: Mental toughness comes from thinking like an optimist. "People who don't give up have a habit of interpreting setbacks as temporary, local and changeable," notes Penn psychology professor Martin Seligman, describing the intervention in a recent journal article.

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