

Defining and  
understanding mental  
toughness  
psychology essay



Mental toughness has been described as one of the most used, but least understood terms in applied sport psychology (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). Many athletes, coaches, and sports commentators have associated mental toughness with sporting success (Clough, Earle & Sewell, 2002; Connaughton, Hanton, Jones & Wadey, 2008; Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2008). Yet some authors who claim to be concerned with the study of mental toughness, in fact refer to mental skills rather than mental toughness per se (Jones et al., 2002). As a result, there is much contradiction and conceptual confusion surrounding the definition and conceptualization of mental toughness (Connaughton & Hanton, 2008) which led Fletcher (2005) to argue that “ Mental toughness’ is perhaps the most ubiquitous but vague term in performance psychology”. This assignment aims to critically discuss the definition and conceptualization of mental toughness by juxtaposing the sport psychology literature, with (non-sport psychology) work from stress/coping, resilience and individual differences. Each of these elements has been integrated throughout the assignment, in order to demonstrate the perceived relationship between different authors’ definitions and conceptualizations of mental toughness.

## **Defining mental toughness**

Mental toughness has been defined in a multitude of ways, many of which suggest that it comprises of a constellation of inherent and/or learned mental skills. Many early definitions of mental toughness existed within applied populist texts and suggest that it describes; a resistance or refusal to give in (Goldberg, 1998), having the ability to consistently rebound from setbacks and failures (Goldberg, 1998; Teitelbaum, 1998), having the ability

to withstand strong criticism (Tutko & Richards, 1971), being able to cope with the stress and pressure of performance environments, achieving consistency by performing to the upper range of one's ability (Graham & Yocom, 1990; Loehr, 1995) and having the ability to sustain motivation and confidence (Teitelbaum, 1998). This indicates that mental toughness is likely to comprise of a combination of interrelated factors, which is congruent with recent authors, who have attempted to adopt more scientifically rigorous approaches to examining mental toughness (e. g. Jones et al., 2002; 2007; Gucciardi et al., 2008; 2009).

### **Early conceptualizations of mental toughness**

Prior to the current surge in literature, Loehr (1982; 1986; 1995) provided some of the most comprehensive discussion on mental toughness and proposed that it encompassed the following seven dimensions: self-confidence, motivation level, attention control, negative energy, attitude control, visual and imagery control, and positive energy. This conceptualization was based on extensive applied work with elite athletes and coaches and forms the foundation of more empirical research investigating the topic. Fourie & Potgieter (2001) were the first to study the psychological attributes associated with mental toughness from an empirical standpoint and identified 12 key components of mental toughness. These researchers established an empirical association between hardiness and mental toughness, which formed the foundation of more comprehensive examination within the topic. However, Fourie & Potgieter (2001) failed to provide a definition for mental toughness and the use of written responses

did not allow the interviewers to probe participants' on their responses (Gucciardi et al., 2008).

Clough et al. (2002) aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical research and applied practice in mental toughness. These authors combined their personal experience working with elite performers and drew upon the hardiness research of Kobasa (1979; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn., 1982) in the field of health psychology. Kobasa (1979) considers that hardiness comprises of three distinct but interrelated attitudes of commitment, control and challenge. Control is expressed as “ a tendency to feel and act as if one is influential in the face of the varied contingencies of life” (Kobasa et al., 1982). Commitment is a “ tendency to involve one’s self in, rather than experience alienation from what one is doing, or encounters” (Maddi, Hoover & Kobasa, 1982). Challenge is expressed as “ the belief that change, rather than stability, is normal in life and that the anticipation of changes are interesting incentives to growth rather than threats to security” (Maddi et al., 1982; Clough et al., 2002). These factors are related to the cognitive appraisal situations within an environment (Clough et al., 2002). However, according to Clough et al. (2002) the concept of hardiness fails to “ capture the unique nature of the physical and mental demands of competitive sport” (p. 37), and these authors subsequently chose to include confidence their 4Cs model of mental toughness.

The 4Cs model represents the first major attempt to combine existing psychological theory with applied practice in sport psychology, in order to conceptualise mental toughness within a sport-specific environment.

However, the theoretical foundations of the 4Cs model have been criticised <https://assignbuster.com/defining-and-understanding-mental-toughness-psychology-essay/>

by several authors. Some theorists argue that hardiness is a distinct conceptual construct from mental toughness, and that the 4Cs model simply provides a combination of hardiness and confidence (Crust, 2007; Connaughton & Hanton, 2008; Gucciardi, Gordon & Dimmock, 2009). Whilst the decision to include confidence within their conceptualization of mental toughness is consistent with the scant literature (e. g. Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005; Fourie & Potgeiter, 2001; Gucciardi et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2002; Thelwell, Weston, & Greenlees, 2005), it is important to note that Clough et al. (2002) provided limited rationale to support the decision to include confidence in the model. Furthermore, these authors failed to justify why Kobosa's (1979) conceptualization of hardiness should be applied within a sporting environment. Based on their conceptualization of mental toughness, Clough et al. (2002) stated that;

“ Mentally tough individuals tend to be sociable and outgoing; as they are able to remain calm and relaxed, they are competitive in many situations and have lower anxiety levels than others. With a high sense of self belief and an unshakeable faith that they can control their own destiny, these individuals can remain relatively unaffected by competition or adversity” (Clough et al., 2002; p. 38)

However, this definition arguably describes the characteristics that mentally tough individuals possess, rather than describing what mental toughness actually is. There is also the concern that Clough et al.'s (2002) work is largely based on anecdotal evidence and personal opinion, as opposed to sport-specific theory (Gucciardi et al., 2009).

## **Mental toughness as a personality dimension**

Crust (2007) argues that by placing mental toughness in the theoretical foundations of hardiness, Clough et al. (2002) view mental toughness as a personality dimension, which suggests that it cannot be developed. Early work in the mainstream psychology literature by Cattell, Blewett and Beloff (1955) also identified tough-mindedness as one of sixteen personality traits. High levels of achievement of elite athletes have also been associated with mental toughness (Tutko & Richards, 1971; Tapp, 1991). Tutko and Richards (1971) suggested that mental toughness constituted being able to handle pressure, and was characterised by “being somewhat insensitive to the problems of others” (p. 46). Yet the contention that mental toughness is a personality dimension is not congruent with the thoughts of those who suggest that it can also be developed (e. g. Bull et al., 2005; Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton & Jones, 2008; Jones et al. 2002; 2007; Loehr, 1995). Hence, the questionable theoretical and methodological foundations of the work by Clough et al. (2002) means there is insufficient evidence supporting mental toughness as a personality dimension.

## **Mental toughness in elite and super-elite performers**

Jones et al. (2002) aimed to provide a more scientifically rigorous definition and conceptualization of mental toughness using personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) as a guiding framework. These authors gave little attention to background theory (Crust, 2007), and adopted a three-stage approach, consisting of a focus group, individual interviews, and individual rating and ranking procedures. They defined mental toughness as;

“ Having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to: generally, cope better than your opponents with many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer; specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focussed, confident and in control under pressure” (Jones et al., 2002; p. 209)

This definition accepts that some athletes may possess a “ natural” mental toughness, as well as allowing for the possibility that mental toughness may be “ developed”. It makes a distinction between the general and specific dimensions of mental toughness (Connaughton & Hanton, 2008). Other authors have since provided some support for Jones et al.’s (2002) definition in the singular sports of football (Thelwell et al., 2005) and cricket (Bull et al., 2005). The only variation that Thelwell et al. (2005) suggest is that mentally tough performers “ always cope better” than their opponents, rather than “ generally cope better”. Whereas, Bull et al. (2005) state that Jones et al.’s (2002) definition was a positive development in the mental toughness research. However, Jones et al.’s (2002) definition has received some criticism from other authors (Crust, 2007; 2008; Gucciardi et al., 2008; Gucciardi et al., 2009).

Crust (2007) argues that Jones et al.’s (2002) definition states what mental toughness enables athletes to do, rather than defining what mental toughness is. This definition contains an outcome component, whereby, mental toughness is dependent upon individual’s ability to be “ better than your opponents”. It therefore assumes that an individual’s mental toughness is reliant upon the performance of others, making the measurement of <https://assignbuster.com/defining-and-understanding-mental-toughness-psychology-essay/>

mental toughness relative rather than absolute. It may be recognised, that the characteristics of mental toughness are not the same as characteristics of successful performance. Rather, mental toughness may contain components that lead to successful outcomes, but this does not necessarily mean successful performers are mentally tough (Connaughton & Hanton, 2008). However, the competition element of Jones et al.'s (2002) definition provided the rationale for recruiting elite and superelite participants for their studies.

The elite participants in Jones et al.'s study (2002) proposed 12 attributes that were considered to be crucial and fundamental to mental toughness. The attributes that were identified related to individuals' self-belief, desire and motivation, performance focus and lifestyle related factors, dealing with pressure, anxiety, and pain/hardship. These authors (Jones et al., 2007) conducted a follow-up study using a sample of sports performers, coaches and sports psychologists who had achieved success at Olympic or World Championship level. While both groups of participants (Jones et al., 2002) and Jones et al. (2007) were in agreement about how mental toughness could be defined, the makeup of mental toughness differed considerably. The superelite group of participants identified 30 distinct attributes, compared with the 12 attributes identified in the earlier study. Results from the most recent study were later used to develop an overall framework of mental toughness which clustered around four separate dimensions; Attitude/Mindset, Training, Competition and Post-competition. This framework shows a clear variation from those of previous authors (e. g. Loehr, 1995; Fourie & Potgeiter, 2001). Therefore, the work of Jones and



colleagues arguably represents some of the most significant research investigating mental toughness to date, and forms a highly comprehensive description of what constitutes mental toughness (Bull et al., 2005; Gucciardi et al., 2009).

Despite making a significant contribution to the definition and conceptualization of mental toughness, the work of Jones and colleagues has also been associated with some conceptual and methodological concerns. First, basing the work on the assumption that elite and superelite performers are mentally tough, fails to distinguish between mental toughness and ability, physical characteristics or other psychological factors which may have a more significant influence on athlete's performance (Crust, 2007; Middleton et al., 2004). Whilst it could be argued that mental toughness includes an outcome component, Crust (2008) points out that it is difficult to conceive why mental toughness should only be studied in such performers. A second limitation is the size of the focus group used during the early phases of Jones et al.'s two studies (Crust, 2007). A final consideration regarding the work of Jones and colleagues is that it does not attempt show relationships between each of the components that are identified within their research. In fact, a paucity of research has examined the relationship between each of the components that have been associated with mental toughness.

### **Mental toughness in relation to stress**

Fletcher (Fletcher & Fletcher, 2005; Fletcher, 2005) provides an alternative way of viewing mental toughness. He defines mental toughness as " an individual's propensity to manage the demands of environmental stressors, ranging from an absolute resilience to extreme vulnerability" (Fletcher & <https://assignbuster.com/defining-and-understanding-mental-toughness-psychology-essay/>

Fletcher, 2005; p. 158; Fletcher, 2005; p. 1246). This definition considers mental toughness as a constituent of the stress process, whereby the word “propensity” considers that mental toughness resides within an individual, thus eliminating the possibility of chance. Use of the word “manage” incorporates an individual’s capacity to exert control over, and direct the “demands” of stressors that lie within an environment. The view that mental toughness resides within individuals’ perceived control of the environment is consistent with the views of several previous authors (e. g. Clough et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2002; 2007). However, including mental toughness as a component of the stress process represents a different perspective to those of many existing publications. Based on this definition, Fletcher (2005) went on to devise the facet model of mental toughness.

Fletcher’s (2005) facet model of mental toughness is firmly rooted in his meta-model of stress, emotions and performance (Fletcher & Fletcher, 2005). The facet model proposes that mental toughness is a composite variable which serves to moderate the stress process and its theoretical relationship with performance. Whereby, the combination of different personal, organisational and competitive stressors a performer may encounter in a competitive situation, influence the way in which they appraise and cope with stressors. The model also suggests that mental toughness plays a pivotal role in determining the way in which an individual’s cognitively, behaviourally and emotionally responds to stressors (Fletcher, 2005). A key assumption of the model is that without stressors there would be no need for mental toughness, and Fletcher (2005) argues that future research should examine the moderating role of mental

toughness as a part of the stress-performance relationship. However, Fletcher's definition and conceptualization of mental toughness has rarely been directly acknowledged within the existing body of mental toughness research.

### **Sport-specific research**

Several studies have used a sport-specific approach to investigating mental toughness (e. g. Bull et al., 2005; Thelwell et al., 2005; Gucciardi et al., 2008). Bull et al.'s (2005) proposed that mental toughness can be organised into four global themes. The first theme, " Environmental Influence" was believed to be the foundation of mental toughness. The remaining three themes " Tough Character", " Tough Attitudes" and " Tough Thinking" focussed on the players themselves and included personality characteristics, desirable cognitions, emotions and behaviours. These authors argue that " Tough Thinking" is what many traditionally associate with mental toughness, but that this is built upon the foundation of many other factors. These findings offer some support for those of Jones et al. (2002; 2007), and further Loehr's (1995) markers of mental toughness (" Emotional Flexibility", " Emotional Responsiveness", " Emotional Strength" and " Emotional Resiliency"). However, Bull et al.'s (2005) study offers little in terms of constructing a sport-specific definition in respect to cricket, and also represents a largely descriptive conceptualization of mental toughness (Crust, 2007).

Gucciardi et al. (2008) explored the definitional and conceptual issues surrounding mental toughness the sport of Australian Football. These authors defined mental toughness in Australian Football as;  
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“ . . . a collection of values, attitudes, behaviours, and emotions that enable you to persevere and overcome any obstacle, adversity, or pressure experienced, but also to maintain concentration and motivation when things are going well to consistently achieve your goals” (Gucciardi et al., 2008; p. 278).

There is some similarity between this definition and that of Jones et al. (2002). Specifically, both definitions suggest that mental toughness is a collection of inter-related protective and enabling factors that allow mentally tough performers to cope with the demands and pressures of sport in order to consistently produce superior performance. Both definitions also suggest that mental toughness involves optimising physical ability. Moreover, Gucciardi et al. (2008) argue that their definition varies from those of other previous authors (e. g. Clough et al., 2002; Middleton et al., 2004) as it allows for the positive effects of mental toughness, as opposed to viewing mental toughness solely in relation to overcoming adversity. However, this definition appears to have several limitations. First, stating that mentally tough performers can “ overcome any obstacle, adversity, or pressure”, is not congruent with the real world environment, whereby circumstances may not be conceivably or physically possible to overcome. Second, similar to other authors (e. g. Jones et al., 2002; 2007), the definition appears to be overly concerned with sporting outcomes, and individuals ability to achieve their goals, as opposed to addressing mental toughness per se. Finally, the definition arguably tries to encompass too many specific components of mental toughness, thus neglecting to define what mental toughness actually is.

Gucciardi et al. (2008) devised a grounded theory of mental toughness for the sport of Australian football, which highlights the interaction between characteristics, situation and behaviours. These authors propose that mental toughness in Australian Football comprises of 32 characteristics. Many of the characteristics that were identified were consistent with those of previous authors, specifically; self-belief (Bull et al., 2005; Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Thelwell et al., 2005), motivation (Bull et al., 2005; Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Jones et al., 2002; Middleton et al., 2004), tough attitude (Bull et al., 2005; Middleton et al., 2004; Thelwell et al., 2005), concentration and focus (Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Jones et al., 2002; Middleton et al., 2004), resilience (Bull et al., 2005; Fourie & Potgieter, 2001; Jones et al., 2002), and handling pressure (Jones et al., 2002; Middleton et al., 2004; Thelwell et al., 2005). However, personal values, emotional intelligence, sport intelligence and physical toughness were thought to be unique to Gucciardi et al.'s (2008) study. A key finding from this study was that certain characteristics were considered to be more important than others.

Gucciardi et al. (2009) adapted their initial definition and proposed that mental toughness is;

“ A collection of experientially developed and inherent sport-specific and sport-general values, attitudes, emotions, and cognitions that influence the way in which an individual approaches, responds to, and appraises both negatively and positively construed pressures, challenges, adversities to consistently achieve his or her goals” (Gucciardi et al., 2009; p. 68)

This definition considers both the outcomes and processes of mental toughness, and addresses some of the key concerns with Jones et al.'s (2002) definition (Gucciardi et al., 2009). Specifically, it elaborates on what Jones et al. (2002) describe as a “ psychological edge”, by identifying a number of the human components (i. e. attitudes, emotions, and cognitions). It also addresses concerns regarding the comparative nature of Jones et al.'s (2002) definition, by adapting the outcome component from a comparison to one's opponent toward the achievement of one's goals. Moreover, the inclusion of appraisal and coping dimensions are congruent with Fletcher's (2005) conceptualization of mental toughness. However, Gucciardi et al.'s most recent definition also has several key limitations. For example, whilst the definition attempts to move away from direct comparison with others, these authors still view mental toughness in relation to sporting outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In 2002, Jones and colleagues released a paper entitled, “ What is this thing called Mental Toughness?” which attempted to provide conceptual clarity and consensus as to its definition. It is now nearly a decade later, and whilst there has been a recent surge in the number of papers being published on the topic, it appears that researchers have made little progress in reaching a widely accepted and consistent definition, or enhancing the conceptualization of mental toughness. There is some agreement that mental toughness relates to; coping effectively with pressure and adversity, recovering or rebounding from setbacks and failures, possessing a persistence or refusal to quit, competitiveness, insensitivity or resilience, unshakeable self-belief, and possessing superior mental skills, but many

more diverse and varied conceptualizations also exist. The work of Jones and colleagues and Gucciardi and colleagues may therefore represent an important starting point for future research by shifting away from the use of anecdotal evidence and personal opinion, towards more scientifically rigorous methods of investigation (Connaughton & Hanton, 2008; Crust, 2007). However, it appears that mental toughness researchers are attempting to accomplish too much. If the scientific study of mental toughness is to move beyond its vague and ambiguous foundations, then there is a clear need for researchers to remain constrained within the topic area.