

HOW TO DEVELOP MENTAL RESILIENCE

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My Story

A personal journey through various medical procedures and leg amputation

In the face of adversity, we often discover strengths we never knew we had. Over a period of many years, I underwent multiple foot surgeries, culminating in a leg amputation. This period represented one of the most challenging phases of my life. However, it was also a time of profound personal growth, during which I developed a strong mental resilience that has since become an integral part of my character.

I am writing this book with the sincere hope that it will inspire many others who find themselves in a similar situation and are struggling to overcome physical adversity.



My early struggles

My ordeal began 20-plus years ago when I developed peripheral neuropathy in both feet, the cause unknown (not diabetes). Due to the lack of feeling in my feet, I often injured my toes. Over time, this perpetual numbness led to a series of operations aimed at removing infected toes and parts of my foot which did not respond to antibiotics. Each surgery brought its own set of challenges, from the physical pain and the recovery process to the emotional rollercoaster of hopes and setbacks. The repeated trips to the hospital, the countless hours in rehabilitation, and the persistent uncertainty about the future were mentally taxing.

Finding strength in vulnerability

Through these early struggles, I learned that vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but a source of strength. In my most vulnerable moments, I began to find the courage to face my fears and forge the determination to persevere.

Motivation and discipline developed early on in life

Fortunately, from school days, I was an avid and active sportsman. This developed in me a lifelong commitment to physical training and constant improvement.

My progression to higher levels of sport, especially swimming, water polo, surf lifesaving and junior rugby was a seamless process and a constant source of a sense of achievement.

This culminated in my becoming a provincial water polo player, captain and coach.

All of this led to a strong determination to succeed which has continued to this day in the face of my disability.

Facing the ultimate challenge

Most of 2023 was spent in and out of various hospitals, and with each procedure, I raised my hopes of being able to walk normally one day.

In February 2024, I was admitted to hospital once again to try to get rid of yet another foot/lower leg infection. I became extremely confused with the profusion of drugs and anaesthetics I was subjected to, and started hallucinating. Occasionally, I also became very violent. During this time, I was not fully aware of what was happening to me.

On 3 March 2024, my left leg was amputated below the knee. During this operation, I was brought back to life after losing so much blood.

The reality of my amputation set in slowly, accompanied by a myriad of emotions such as grief for the loss of a limb, anxiety about the future, and a profound sense of uncertainty about my coping abilities and self-identity.

Subsequent vascular procedures were carried out in 2024, 2025 and 2026 to enhance the blood flow in my so-called "good" leg. During one such procedure, I lost many litres of blood and once again had to be resuscitated.

However, amidst all of this physical and mental turmoil, I found an unexpected wellspring of resilience within myself. The support of my beloved wife Janine, close family, and friends, combined with the unwavering care of my medical team, played a crucial role in helping me navigate an exceptionally difficult period. This became instrumental in helping me come to terms with my new reality. My renewed belief in God has also provided me with another powerful source of strength.

Embracing the new normal

My path to recovery was not easy, but with each passing day, I began to adapt to my new circumstances. My physical therapy sessions soon became a testament to my determination and adaptability.

I have now learned to walk well and conduct my everyday life with a prosthetic left leg, and each step forward is a victory, no matter how small. My journey has included challenges and successes and, at times, has been marked by both intense frustration and triumph. But it has also been an opportunity to redefine my sense of self and my physical capabilities. Each day, I thank God for allowing me a little more precious time on earth. I recently turned eighty.

The power of perspective

Through this journey, I have come to realise that mental resilience is not about denying the difficulties we face, but about finding ways to navigate through them.

It's about embracing vulnerability, seeking support, and maintaining a positive outlook. My experience has taught me that true strength lies in our ability to adapt, persevere, and grow in the face of life's challenges.

The lessons of mental resilience I have learned continue to guide me, reminding me that even in the darkest hours, there is always a way forward.

What is Mental Resilience?

In short, it's the ability to cope with challenges and bounce back from adversity. Other words to describe it include **toughness, grit, fortitude, tenacity, perseverance, and adaptability.**

Mental resilience plays a huge role in overcoming the physical challenges that often accompany ageing and disability. It's the inner strength that enables you to face adversity with a sense of hope and determination. As an older adult grappling with physical limitations, developing mental resilience can transform the way you approach your life circumstances. By fostering a mindset that emphasises adaptability and growth, you can not only improve your quality of life but also inspire those around you to do the same.

Building emotional strength is particularly relevant if you are recovering from sports injuries or any kind of physical setback. The journey to recovery often comes with frustrations, and emotional hurdles. However, by focusing on resilience training and motivational strategies, you can turn these challenges into opportunities for growth.

Surrounding yourself with supportive networks, whether through community groups, church or family, can provide the encouragement you need to stay motivated. Sharing personal stories of triumph can further inspire and cultivate a sense of belonging, reminding you that you are not alone in your struggles.

Another important consideration is building and maintaining your **physical strength**. You all know the saying "A healthy mind in a healthy body". The stronger your body, the more resilient your mind will be.

What is Mindfulness?

It is a focus on the present moment without distraction.

Mindfulness techniques offer you practical tools for enhancing mental resilience during your physical rehabilitation. Engaging in mindfulness practices such as meditation and deep breathing can help you stay grounded in the present moment, reducing the anxiety and stress associated with your physical conditions.

These techniques cultivate awareness and acceptance, allowing you to navigate your recovery journey with a clearer mind. By integrating mindfulness into your daily routine, you can lay a strong foundation for resilience, which enables you to face challenges with greater confidence.

A well-balanced diet plays a vital role in supporting mental health, particularly during recovery. Nutritional choices can influence your mood, energy levels, and overall well-being, enabling you to feel more equipped to tackle your physical challenges. By embracing mindfulness in various aspects of life - be it through journaling, meditation, or nutrition - you can cultivate a powerful sense of resilience, transforming adversity into an opportunity for growth and empowerment.

Acknowledging your inner strength is about harnessing the power within you to rise above your disability. Each day presents an opportunity to connect with your inner capabilities, allowing you to foster a sense of empowerment that can significantly enhance your recovery journey. Embracing your unique experiences and recognising your resilience can lead to profound changes in your outlook on life, even in the face of adversity.

By focusing on the present moment, you can cultivate awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. This practice encourages self-acceptance and helps reduce anxiety, enabling you to face challenges with a clearer mind. Simple exercises, such as **mindful breathing**, can help you reconnect with your body and emotions. As you become more attuned to your own needs, you'll find it easier to draw upon your inner resources during difficult times, reinforcing your mental resilience.

Including **meditation practices** in your daily routine can further enhance your ability to harness your inner strength. Meditation provides a space for reflection and self-discovery, enabling you to tap into your resilience reserves. Regular practice can improve focus, emotional regulation, and stress reduction. All of these are essential components for overcoming physical challenges. As you meditate, visualise your inner strength as a light within you, growing brighter with each session, guiding you through your recovery journey.

Incorporating mindfulness techniques into physical rehabilitation can be transformative. Practices such as deep breathing, and mindful movement allow you to engage with your body in a new way. These techniques encourage a gentle awareness of sensations, promoting a sense of control and acceptance over your physical state. By focusing on the present, you can alleviate anxiety related to your disability, making your rehabilitation process more manageable and less daunting.

Types of Journal

Gratitude logs: List things you really appreciate to boost a positive mood.

Freeform writing: Write non-stop to clear mental clutter.

Bullet journaling: Use rapid logging and lists to organize tasks.

Connecting with **community support networks** can amplify your recognition of inner strength. Sharing personal stories and experiences with others who understand your struggles can be incredibly uplifting. Whether through support groups, online forums, or local gatherings, these connections foster a sense of belonging and encouragement. By engaging with others, you not only gain insights from their journeys but you also reinforce your resilience. Remember, you are not alone in your journey. Together, you can inspire one another to rise strong and embrace the power that lies within.

Prayer can also be an important source of strength in adversity. Suffering is an inescapable part of life and it comes in many forms, including physical and mental struggles that limit us from reaching our full potential. God doesn't promise us a life without struggle, as we're called to "pick up our crosses and follow Jesus" (Matthew 16:24). But He does promise to be there for us during those times of suffering.

Mindfulness Techniques for Physical Rehabilitation

Mindfulness is a powerful practice that can significantly enhance mental resilience, particularly for older people facing physical disabilities. It involves being fully present in the moment and acknowledging thoughts and feelings without judgment. This approach not only fosters a deeper connection with oneself but also cultivates a sense of peace amidst the chaos that physical challenges can bring to your life.

Embracing mindfulness helps you recognise your strengths and weaknesses, enabling you to approach your rehabilitation journey with a balanced perspective.

Meditation practices serve as a cornerstone of mindfulness, providing an accessible way for you to develop your mental resilience. Regular meditation not only reduces stress but also encourages a deeper understanding of your emotions and reactions to physical challenges. This practice can be particularly beneficial if you are recovering from an injury, as it fosters patience and self-compassion. Community support networks can amplify these benefits, which offer you shared experiences and encouragement, crucial for maintaining motivation.



Breathing exercises

These are a powerful tool for relaxation, especially if you are facing physical disabilities. These exercises can help alleviate the stress and anxiety that often accompany chronic pain or mobility challenges. Engaging in deep, mindful breathing allows you to connect with your body, promoting a sense of calm and grounding. By focusing on your breathing, you can create a mental space that encourages healing and resilience, fostering a positive mindset essential for overcoming physical adversity.

Deep Breathing

To begin, find a comfortable position, whether sitting in a chair or lying down. As you settle in, close your eyes and take a moment to notice your breath. Inhale deeply through your nose, allowing your abdomen to expand fully. Hold that breath for a moment, then exhale slowly through your mouth.

This simple pattern of breathing not only helps to relax your body but also shifts your focus away from discomfort or negative thoughts. As you practise this technique, visualise each inhalation bringing in strength and peace, while each exhalation releases tension and worry.

Incorporating breathing exercises into your daily routine can significantly enhance your mental resilience. Aim to dedicate a few minutes each day to this practice. You may find it beneficial to pair your breathing exercises with mindful meditation. By focusing on your breath and letting go of distractions, you cultivate an environment where emotional strength can flourish. This practice not only aids in relaxation but also trains your mind to remain present, reducing feelings of overwhelm that can arise from physical limitations.

Rhythmic Breathing

As you explore different breathing techniques, consider trying the 4-7-8 method. Inhale for four counts, hold your breath for seven counts and exhale for eight counts. This technique can help to lower your heart rate and promote a sense of tranquillity. The rhythmic nature of this exercise is particularly soothing and can serve as a valuable practice during moments of stress or discomfort. Remember, the goal is not perfection but rather to create a gentle space for yourself to breathe and relax.

Finally, sharing these breathing exercises with loved ones, friends or caregivers can foster a supportive community around your journey to achieve mental resilience. Encourage those around you to join you, creating a collective effort to cultivate relaxation and emotional strength.

By building a network of support, you can share personal stories and triumphs, which reinforce the idea that you are not alone in facing physical challenges. Together, through the power of breath, you can rise strong against adversity and embrace the journey of healing with hope and determination.

The Value of Visualisation

Visualisation techniques serve as powerful tools if you are grappling with physical disabilities, offering you a pathway to mental resilience and emotional strength. By harnessing the mind's ability to visualise success and well-being, you can create a positive mental environment that fosters healing.

Visualisation allows you to picture in your mind your desired outcome, whether it's regaining mobility, managing pain, or simply feeling stronger. This practice not only enhances motivation but also helps you reduce anxiety and stress, making it easier to face daily challenges.

Incorporating mindfulness into your visualisation practice can deepen its effectiveness. As you settle into a quiet space, take a few deep breaths to centre yourself. Imagine a serene scene, perhaps a lush garden or a peaceful beach. Allow this imagery to fill your mind while focusing on your breath.

This combination of mindfulness and visualisation can help you connect to your body, enabling you to visualise healing energy flowing through your areas of discomfort or tension. Over time, this can lead to a greater sense of control over your body and emotions.

Picture yourself overcoming obstacles and achieving small victories. This method helps to reframe your mindset and reinforces the belief that you can rise above physical challenges. It's important to remember that each small victory contributes to your overall resilience, gradually building your confidence in the face of adversity.

In addition to personal visualisation practices, consider integrating **group activities** that promote collective healing. Sharing visualisation experiences in community support networks can provide additional encouragement and motivation. Hearing personal stories of triumph from others can inspire you, reminding you that you are not alone in your journey. When you visualise your goals alongside others, it fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose, reinforcing the notion that together, resilience can be cultivated.

Finally, remember that **keeping a journal** can complement your visualisation techniques. Documenting your experiences, thoughts and goals can clarify your aspirations and track your progress. Reflecting on your journey not only solidifies your commitment to healing but also allows for deeper self-understanding. As you continue to visualise and articulate your goals, you will discover an inner strength that propels you forward, proving that resilience is not just a possibility but a reality within your reach.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

This form of therapy aligns seamlessly with mindfulness practices, offering you tools for reframing the negative thoughts that often accompany chronic illness.

Through CBT, you can learn to identify your own distorted thinking patterns and replace them with much healthier perspectives. This mental shift can significantly enhance your emotional strength during recovery from sports injuries or other physical challenges. By combining mindfulness and CBT, you can build a robust framework for resilience, supporting your mental well-being while you navigate your own physical limitations.

Enquire from your medical aid whether you can access an online CBT programme through them, or from elsewhere.

I trust that you have found this eBook valuable. Please send me your comments and questions to bonesfuller@gmail.com

If you would like more information about developing mental resilience, please visit my website at fullerz.co.za

