

**RIAK.**  
F I T N E S S

**BALANCE - SIMPLICITY - ACCESSIBILITY**

## **RECOVERY STRATEGIES FOR YOUR MIND**

### **Part 1: Training v Mental Health**

#### **What is the point of this series?**

I should make one thing clear now, I am not a mental health expert. I have no qualifications enabling me to give evidence-based advice or to diagnose and treat mental health conditions. My understanding of mental health is borne out of my own experience and battles with mental health issues. I therefore purport only to provide my own thoughts on the subject and to summarise the advice of actual experts I have gleaned over time to help with what might be considered stress-related mental health issues.

I wanted to put together this series on mental health and training because I think the general and very simplistic view is that exercise can only be good for your mental health. If you are largely sedentary, then yes, getting outside and doing some exercise will improve your self-esteem, confidence levels etc. But what about if you are already an 'athlete'? In my view, the relationship between mental health and training for whichever sport is your passion, is immensely complicated. Life does not delineate simply between training, work and social life. Life is chaos really!

The point of this series is to unpack some of the issues that all athletes experience at one point or another and hopefully, either provide an analysis of how they can affect you; or probably more helpfully, provide advice on how you might like to approach the issues should they play a part in your life.

#### **What is 'mental health'?**

It is important to recognise that we all have 'mental health'. It is not a case of some people being unable to hack it and others having their sh\*t together. It is a sliding scale and often also a slippery slope, which can vary from day to day.

Labels such as depression, bipolar or anxiety are not easily defined and often encompass a range of emotions or personality traits. For instance, depression is not just feeling sad all the time. Depression can also involve bouts of anger, stress, mania, lethargy etc. My point is, the labels used to clinically diagnose mental health issues are widely misunderstood and often unhelpful when it comes to discussing the issues common to us all because they suggest that there is a clear dividing line between

those that have mental health issues and those that are 'normal'. In truth, we all have issues; it is the impact they have on our lives that determines whether we are considered to have a condition or not.

My goal with this series is not to combat any misconception. I would merely like to offer a few ideas for how we as athletes may look after our brains as well as we look after the rest of our bodies. After all, our brain is a lot like a muscle, yet many of us put it under enormous strain and believe we can maintain such burdens perpetually.

My overarching point is as follows: **we should view mental recovery, just as, and at times, more important than muscular recovery.** Not exactly a ground-breaking argument but how many of us can say we regularly implement common-sensical strategies, such as taking regular breaks during the working day, in a considered effort to preserve a healthy mind?

As suggested above, this series will largely be considering stress-related issues. Athletes, regardless of their calibre, all suffer stress. One obvious stressor is a form we happily recognise - training stress. However, this is just one of a multitude of stressors our bodies must absorb. Simultaneously, we must cope with work stress, relationship stress, financial concerns, insecurity over body image, illness, time pressure, stress over lost sleep and the list goes on and on.

All these stressors feed from a single energy source – your body's ability to synthesise Adenosine Triphosphate (ATP) from glucose, fat and protein. In terms of how it directs energy reserves, your body does not really differentiate between the forms of stress you experience. In response to a stimulus, often your heart rate will rise, the conversion of glycogen into glucose is increased to provide fuel and your oxygen consumption is elevated.

Take for example when you have an urgent same-day work deadline. For most of us, such an event is unlikely to be life or death, but still, our bodies react as if we were under attack. The adrenal glands release Catecholamines (Adrenaline and Noradrenaline) into your system, which elevate ventricular contractility (raise your heart rate) as your body thinks it needs to get ready to scrap like a spider monkey! Your body does not filter which stimulant is a threat in reality, it perceives a danger, so it prepares the body to get stuck in or leg it.

Why does this matter? This is an important point to understand because we recognise that there should be a limit to training stress and an appropriate recovery period to allow for supercompensation. However, when it comes to work or emotional stress etc., we often fail to acknowledge that after a trauma or even just a tough day, we might need to give ourselves more of a breather to allow for a return to equilibrium.

Logically, if allowing our minds to recover is as important as physical recovery, ignoring our requirement for mental recovery is absolute madness! Yet we are probably all guilty of it and no one is perfect at keeping life in balance. You will never stop having bad days. But like when you have a succession of bad training sessions, if you are having more bad than good days, it is important to acknowledge that something in life is out of kilter (e.g. you are fatigued) and rather than ploughing on regardless, look for opportunities to redress the balance.

### **Let's not just 'talk about it'**

Fairly regularly on TV these days you will hear discussion regarding mental health and in particular, concerning depression. Often, someone will say something in conclusion such as, "*we all need to talk about it more*" or "*if someone is feeling down, they should talk to someone; get help*". Thanks very much, never thought about that one genius!

Telling someone with depressive tendencies they need to talk about their feelings is like telling a toddler to explain the theory of relativity! They simply do not have the vocabulary yet to begin to tackle the subject. In my experience, depression is partly characterised by an inability to understand your emotions, or at least an inability to process them. So, it is not as simple as '*talking about it*' because for some, they cannot even put into words the turmoil inside. And that is absolutely terrifying! I am not

saying do not talk about your feelings, my point is that is stage two stuff and a very difficult point to reach.

It is, I think, uncontroversial to suggest this is particularly difficult for men. For centuries, men have understood their world in terms of weak or strong and that somehow understanding your emotions was the practice of women. This is not just hyperbole. We have gone from knowing our place in the world (i.e. we make war and we make money) to the lines being blurred and our purpose becoming amorphous. This is a fantastic development in social dynamics and gender equality, but it is unsurprising that as the stereotypes are pulled down, some of us are going to get lost in the furore.

Again, why is all this important for an athlete I hear you ask? Because emotional intelligence will help you to make the right decisions not just in your relationships and at work, but in your training. It will stop you from going to that track session when you are not yet over flu as you think that is what 'real athletes' do. It will help you make sense of the times when you just cannot seem to string two sessions together. You will be able to handle the ups and downs in your training better, which I would argue are often symptomatic of the situation elsewhere in your life. We often try to separate our emotional condition from our athletic condition as if they are mutually exclusive. But they are not. They directly affect one another.

Ultimately, greater emotional intelligence will make you realise that you are human and therefore, what you do to keep your mental health in check can have a real impact on your physiological health too.

### **What can we do about it?**

Endurance sports and triathlon are arguably the obsession of perpetual overachievers. With triathlon, they have decided one sport is not hard enough, so they have strung three together to ensure the entire body suffers! Endurance athletes tend to be highly driven, accustomed to working extremely hard and have very high standards. However, in my opinion, they might not be very well accustomed to failure or to working at anything less than full gas all the time. I would suggest therefore that endurance athletes could be at a heightened risk of developing mental health issues if things do not fall in-line with their history of success or if they finally become overwhelmed by all they have taken on.

Depression is an increasingly common scourge in Britain and something I feel we should all be wary of. An endurance athlete's heightened sense of what is physically possible can be a source of strength but also a weakness when it is pursued relentlessly to mitigate perceived flaws elsewhere in their personality. I have realised that I pursued increasingly extreme challenges because I subconsciously assumed it somehow evidenced my attribution of desired traits e.g. that I was invulnerable to weakness as I thought a man should be. It is only when you realise that training impossibly hard all the time will not make you a more emotionally complete person that counterintuitively, you become a better athlete.

But, what can you do if you, or someone you care about is struggling and cannot seem to '*just talk about it*'? I think the initial hurdle is understanding that you or they must first acknowledge the scale of the tempest inside or as a minimum, that it is even there. It is normal to have highs and lows in life, but the lows should not cause you to shut yourself away or cut yourself off from others for days at a time. Similarly, the highs should not always be tempered by the feeling that the next disaster is on its way.

My advice for those struggling to silence the storm is to do what mankind has always done. Make war. If you find that you are persistently reinforcing a negative self-image, you need to do battle with that perception otherwise it is getting a free reign on your psyche. It is not self-indulgent to cultivate the more positive aspects of your character. No one is completely worthless, so if that is where you have found yourself, you can be sure the balance needs to be redressed.

It is only once you have torn down the negative opinion you hold of yourself and the role you think has been defined for you that you will see that your self-perception is not how others see you. Break it down and build yourself up again. Rip up your ideals of heroic masculinity and romantic stoicism. Suffering in silence is no longer the pastime of the noble. These traditional ideals do not apply in this new world and you must adapt to survive. I think we must each rediscover what we think are desirable

characteristics in a man or in a woman in **this** reality, not the one built in our heads. As an athlete you will know that before progress must first come the struggle and opting to ignore your emotions is no longer tenable if you want to remain relevant in today's society.

## **Take the opportunities presented to you to listen and to share**

Only once someone has conceded that their struggle is not a simple reflection of life's ups and downs, can they finally begin to talk about it. If you are on the outside looking in, it is important to remember that you cannot force someone to open up, as frustrating as this might be. In my experience however, the times I have felt most able to talk about the issues I have had is when someone has offered an insight into their own situation. Therefore, my recommendation to anyone hoping to coax a person they fear might be struggling to move beyond platitudes, is to start by offering something personal about yourself and give them the chance to follow. Talk about your own struggles and they will be more likely to feel safe allowing the mask of congeniality to drop.

If you are the one that feels caged inside their own mind, be patient and take your time unravelling the potentially misguided image you have of yourself. Try not to spurn opportunities though should someone open up about their own fears and insecurities. In my opinion, it is the most fruitful bonding experience for individuals to trust one another enough to share their vulnerabilities. When someone does this, they are exposing themselves to criticism and feelings of shame; it is your job to meet them half-way as regardless of your own struggles, the only way to way to triumph over them is to join the sharing process.

## **Dealing with a crisis**

Experiencing mental health issues does not necessarily have to involve feeling sad. It is quite normal for those with a heavy training, work and social schedule to feel completely overwhelmed. The important thing to do at times like this is to quieten or slow down your mind. Whether it is anxiety, despair or anger you feel, it is important to slow everything right down and get your mind back on the here and now as this is the only temporal phase you can do anything about.

There are several mental well-being apps out there and I believe they can help. Typically, the protocol is to sit still in a quiet place, focus on your breathing and encourage your mind to focus on what is happening right then – you are simply breathing in and out through your nose. I find that counting breaths and imagining the numbers in my head helps to invite my focus back. Everything else becomes peripheral.

It might take some time for your mind to calm but keep at it and eventually it will. It can take a few minutes or sometimes a frustratingly long time. The key thing to remember is that a wave of calm will come, stay patient and nothing is as important as what you are doing right then. Everything else can wait.

Another thing I often find helps during this process, is walking. I have been on some mammoth walks when trying to calm myself down and the effect is similar to the more meditative approach described above. You are focusing on putting one foot in front of the other and where you are going rather than the other stuff that might have been swimming through your mind before.

It is obviously important to deal with the feelings you are experiencing and the above is not about shutting them out, but nothing can be solved whilst you are at DEFCON 4. Once the mania has subsided, then you can begin to understand why you were feeling that way and do something about it.

## **What next?**

If nothing else, hopefully the above has provoked you into thinking about your own state of mind and the condition of others you care about. Please continue through this series with a critical mind. Think about the points I make, don't just accept or dismiss. Is your reaction premised on logical judgment or a prejudice you formed a long time ago? Is that judgment still relevant? Is it affected by what you think should be the case or what actually is?

## Coming up in this series:

**Part 2: Sleep and giving your mind a break** - Letting our bodies recover physically is plain common sense, but why do we think our brains are impervious to strain?

**Part 3: Appearance** - One of the primary reasons people exercise is for aesthetic purposes. To some extent we all care how we look, but do we allow reality to keep our insecurities in check?

**Part 4: Losing or maintaining bodyweight** – Every man and his dog claims to have the secret. In reality, the principles of healthy weight loss are really rather simple. It takes small changes and an extended period of time...sorry!

**Part 5: Time Pressure** - The training and recovery killer – How do we fight back? We rethink our priorities and preconceptions of what time we have available.