

# Mantras of champions: How positive self-talk calms the mind

Tara and Greg | 16 Mar 2021



**We are taught from a young age to be mindful about how we speak to others and to make sure we are polite, encouraging and supportive. But how often do we do the same for ourselves?**

Positive self-talk can be an invaluable tool when it comes to traversing physically and mentally difficult situations in a variety of circumstances. Whether it's feeling as though you've made a mistake at work, or whether you're feeling lacklustre about your fitness goals, the power of our own voice can have an unexpectedly major impact on helping us truly get what we are striving for.

We spoke to some top athletes about how they use positive self-talk and why it is important for achieving your goals.

## Be your own hero

After joining the RAF (Royal Air Force) aged 19, Duncan Slater experienced a life-changing situation in 2009 in Afghanistan, when the vehicle he was travelling in hit an IED (improvised explosive device). The result of this impact – among breakages to his legs, ribs and even his lower back – was the eventual amputation of both of Duncan's legs.

While for some people, this may have resulted in low morale or a bleak outlook on life, for Duncan it led to a decision to inspire people across the globe with his incredible achievements – a lot of which stems from an incredibly positive attitude towards himself. He recognises his accomplishments, such as becoming the first double amputee to complete the Marathon Des Sables (the world's toughest foot race) and being the first ever double amputee to race to the South Pole with the Walking with the Wounded expedition.



Duncan also acknowledges that we are all human and that he, like everyone else, will of course have bad days. He says he motivates himself in these situations by recognising what he has done and what he is capable of by asking the questions, "Who else do I know that could do all of this?" and "Who else is in this circumstance right now?". This boost of self-appreciation has given him the fire in his belly needed to confidently do all that he is capable of doing.

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**"Mindset of trying to be the sort of hero in your own movie."**

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As he says, it is about having the "Mindset of trying to be the sort of hero in your own movie." This is something we can all do for ourselves. If we think back to a time that we accomplished something great and use this as a paradigm for our perseverance, we are sure to have a far better chance of succeeding with our goals.

## Finding your light

As an internationally acclaimed dressage rider who also happens to be blind, Verity Smith is no stranger to finding motivation in dark times. Due to being an advocate for the 'ability' in 'disability', Verity sees her blindness as a blessing in lots of ways. She believes that the challenges she has faced have made her who she is today and that, without them, she may have actually missed out on a lot.

Like a lot of us, Verity loves to challenge herself, especially when it comes to competing against her personal best and doing better each and every time. Just as you may cheer from the side-lines for someone else, pushing yourself with encouraging self-talk is a great way to drive yourself that little bit further.



As well as competing against herself, Verity also has a mantra in her mind that she uses in times of uncertainty, which helps to level her and create a sense of optimism and positivity. It revolves around "Taking what you've learned from the darkness" when you experience challenging times.

This is a great way to centre yourself when emotions are running high, bringing a sense of stillness and, most importantly, an acknowledgement that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. We can take what we know and use it to help us focus on positivity. As a result, this often helps us to lift ourselves up when we are feeling down.

## Setbacks are blessings in disguise

We have all probably been in situations when we have felt as though the rug has been pulled from under us and it is precisely at times like these that positive self-talk can really help to dust ourselves off and start afresh. British Para Table Tennis team member, Martin Perry, champions the ability to re-evaluate your thought process under such circumstances and to see everything as a "Blessing in disguise."

He believes that setbacks can actually help us to progress because we are constantly learning from each situation. If your mindset is focused on each experience being a 'blessing', then you are far more likely to want to proceed and progress with your goals.



Failure can be a tricky thing to digest but changing the way we see what failure actually is to us personally can help to put a positive spin on most situations. Martin is so confident in himself that he knows no matter how many times he has so-called 'failed' at something, the "Little voice in the back of my head" is always there telling him he can do it. Martin acknowledges that a setback can even be "Someone telling you that you can't do something," and that this element of reverse psychology can actually lead to more determined self-talk.

If we believe wholeheartedly in ourselves, then we have a much better chance of achieving anything we want. If the voice in our head is telling us that we can and will succeed, then we are one step closer to achieving our goals.

## Focus on your 'why'

No stranger to adversity and setbacks, ex-England pro footballer turned professional boxing champion, Stacey Copeland, is also a believer in positive self-talk to help motivate herself towards your goals. Despite being a naturally positive and motivated person, Stacey acknowledges that even she has had days where she has felt a little lacklustre. In those situations, she says that she thinks about impactful quotes that she likes. These go a long way in re-energising her and spurring her on with her goals. "Usually when building up to have a fight, I will have a quote that I can go back to all the time," she says. This is a great idea if you struggle to motivate yourself with your own words – a quote that resonates with you can really help you to frame yourself in a positive mindset.

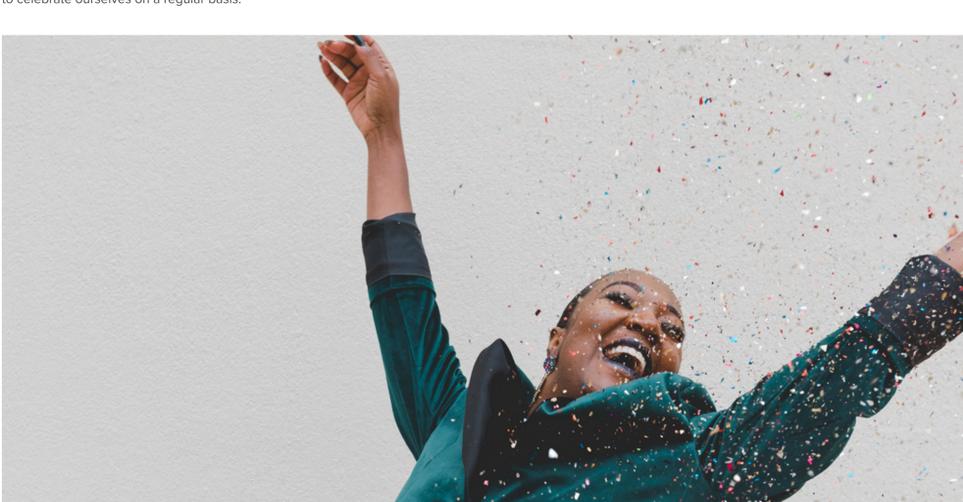


If remembering words isn't really your thing, you can use images too. Stacey recalls that, as she was "Getting ready for the Commonwealth Games, I had a picture of the belt to win me all the time." This really helped her to focus on why she was doing everything she was doing, from training to a restricted diet. This is a great tool to apply to everyday goals. Reminding yourself why you want to do something will help to give you a motivational boost.

## Celebrate small wins

Windsurfing champion Saskia Sills is a fan of motivating herself with short term goals that fundamentally lead to her ultimate long-term goal. By breaking tasks or objectives up into more bite-size chunks, we can celebrate ourselves more often, which will inspire us to keep moving forward. As Saskia acknowledges, "Life is overwhelming, and you don't have to make it difficult for yourself. You can make it as easy as you would like."

We have the power to set our own goals and applaud our own wins, big or small. By becoming our own cheerleaders, we have the power to dictate how we feel and to celebrate ourselves on a regular basis.



If we take a step back from a goal or task that potentially seems overwhelming or impossible, we can start with the smallest step forward at the very beginning and gradually work our way up, ensuring that we praise ourselves as we go. If a setback occurs, it is important to note that it just means that the path may have changed, but there is still a road to the top of the mountain. The more we keep the summit of that mountain as the main goal – while remaining truly flexible with our thoughts and actions – the faster we will achieve what we want to in a truly positive way.