

BUILD YOUR *emotional* STRENGTH

WORDS BY LAURA POTTER

THE
STRENGTH
ISSUE

We all know it's important to regularly raise our heart rate and challenge our muscles, but we should also be honing our emotional strength, training our minds and strengthening our resilience to face whatever challenges come our way

When we hear 'strong', we think of physical prowess, defined muscles and Olympic level poise; or of certain character traits – bravery, stoicism and calm. For both, we have a nagging suspicion that people were born that way – Jess Ennis always had the capacity to build a six-pack, our friend who always remains calm in a crisis has that strength built in. In fact, while some may have a sneaky head start, anyone can build their emotional strength, and achieving that is about allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, understanding our responses, and switching our mind set. It's something – like physical fitness – that we can improve every single day. ➡



{ Emotional fitness }

Train your bounce-back muscle

Imagine two people training for a 5k. One jogs three times a week, the other hasn't run since primary school. We all know who is 'fitter', but they weren't 'born that way' – the advantage is down to training. Emotional fitness is the same. 'Physical fitness is an ability to take on a challenge without feeling excessively fatigued,' says Chris Johnstone, author of *Seven Ways To Build Resilience: Strengthening Your Ability To Deal With Difficult Times* (Robinson, £14.99). 'That applies to emotional challenges, too. Somebody who is emotionally fitter would get through a stressful day at work, a disappointment or a setback more easily.'

It's not the case that you either have it or you don't, either.

'Some people have genes that make them better able to run, some have genes that make them better able to deal with anxiety, but whatever your starting point, learnable skills and regular practice can help you respond to challenges better,' says Johnstone.

The first thing we need to learn, when faced with a bump in the road, is to reflect on the fact that there are various potential outcomes. Our brain can gravitate towards worst-case scenarios, but research shows that our ability to deal with stressful life events is heavily impacted by how much we ruminate, so we need to break the cycle of 'awfulising' a situation. 'First, acknowledge that whatever you face, it can go different ways,' says Johnstone. 'Then ask yourself four questions: what's the best thing that can happen? What's the worst? What's the likeliest? Then, how can you make the better possibilities likelier, and the worse outcomes less likely – or less awful if

“After a slip-up, tell yourself, ‘I don’t get it right every time,’ and move on”

THE EXPERT



CHRIS JOHNSTONE is a Scotland-based resilience and wellbeing trainer, his books include *Active Hope: How To Face The Mess We're In Without Going Crazy* and *Seven Ways to Build Resilience: Strengthening Your Ability To Deal With Difficult Times*. He also hosts free online resilience webinars at collegeofwellbeing.com



DIANA THEODORES is a London-based international women's leadership coach, author, speaker and director of Theatre 4 Business. She has written a book entitled *Performing As You: How To Have Authentic Impact In Every Role You Play*.



they were to happen.' This immediately drags your brain out of a pit of doom and worry, and into a new, positive space, with a sense of control – even if a bad outcome may follow.

It's also important, after slip-ups, to check how you talk to yourself. 'We can all chew over something that went badly and get into a downward spiral of feeling humiliated, but instead, tell yourself: "I'm a work in progress, I don't get it right every time," and move on,' says Diana Theodores, international women's leadership coach and author of *Performing As You: How To Have Authentic Impact In Every Role You Play* (Rethink Press, £12.99). Also remind yourself of things that have gone well. 'Don't build up a body of evidence of failure, build up a body of evidence of success – it helps you analyse slip-ups more clearly. I didn't manage it well because I didn't take time to prepare, but I know I can do a brilliant job.' ➔



3 STRATEGIES TO 'MUSCLE UP' EMOTIONALLY

REFLECT on a time where you have risen to the challenge previously and recovered. 'Think of a difficult time you've faced in the past. What strategies did you use, what strengths did you draw upon, which resources did you turn to and which insights did you find helpful?' says Johnstone.

WRITE Get fears out of your head onto paper. 'The research on expressive writing is incredibly strong,' says Johnstone. 'If somebody is anxious about a maths exam, and they write about their anxieties for just seven minutes before, they not only feel less anxious but they also do better in the test.'

PAUSE 'So many so-called failures could be avoided in the first place if you just take 60 seconds to stop, breathe and prepare yourself,' says Theodores. 'Think about what you are going into, what you want to say, how you want to say it, what result you want. Take a moment to prepare, rather than rushing.'



find your strength

{ Redefine strength }

Hone your authenticity

Being strong isn't about being a superhero or about putting on a brave face, because if we all did that all the time, we'd be cracking under a fragile façade. 'If you're in a team where everyone is putting on a brave face, you can think you're the only one struggling, so your understanding of your struggle is centred in self-blame,' explains Johnstone. 'If you share it, you get a sense of common humanity, which normalises the difficulty and makes it easier to bear for everyone. Also, relationships are always deepened when somebody asks for help.'

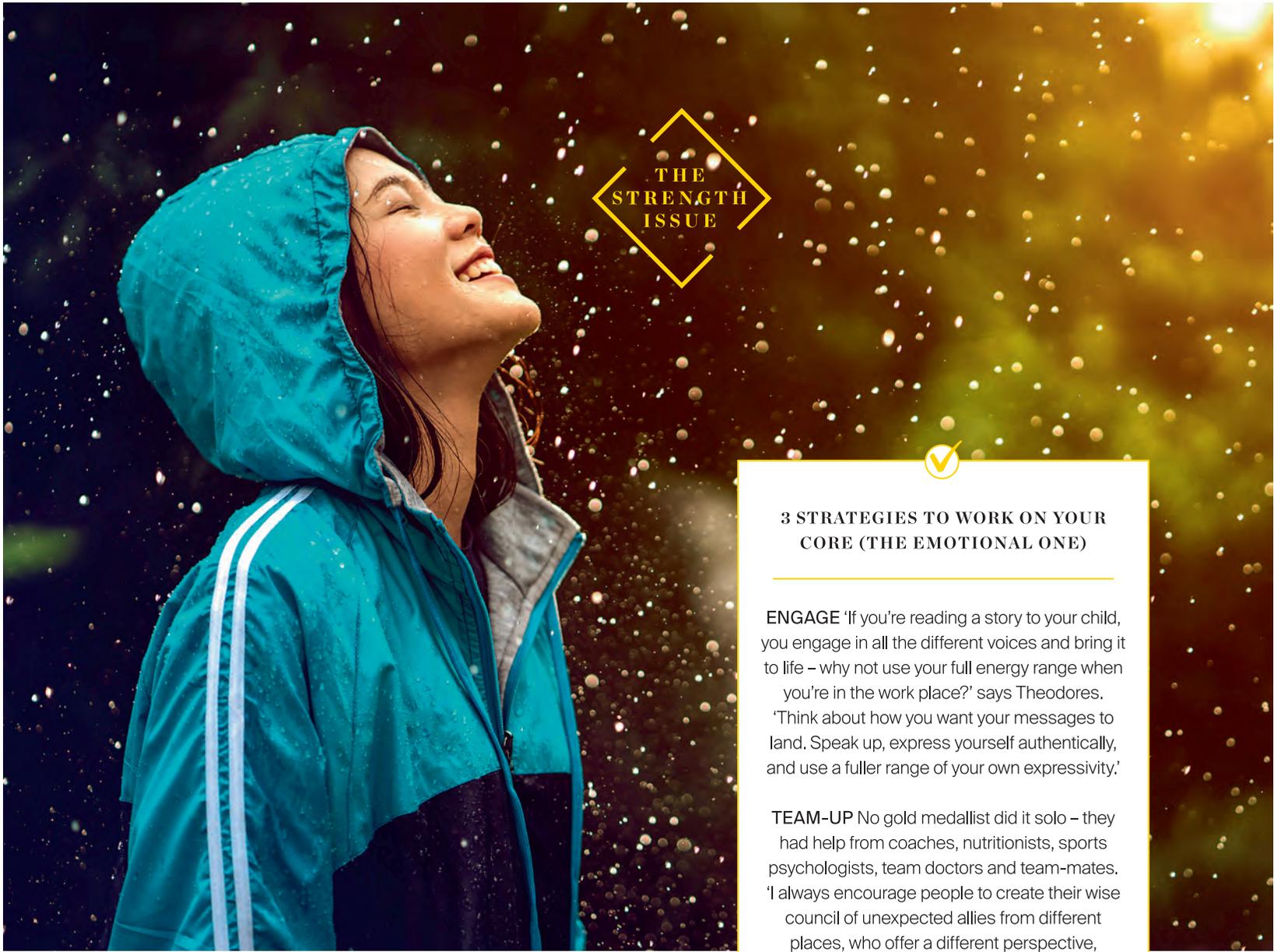
Theodores agrees, asserting that asking for help is a genuine strength, especially for those in a position of leadership. 'You create an instant network of resources and creative collaboration,' she explains. 'Asking someone for help immediately creates a relationship of trust and reciprocity, because you will also be able to offer help back.'

Women can feel that being too emotional can be a weakness, but again, it's the reverse, when channelled effectively. 'I can guarantee that the people who inspire you most show

emotion,' says Theodores. Take Michelle Obama as a case in point – she's an incredibly powerful speaker, who has shed tears when talking about a subject she feels passionately about. 'When we feel something, and we have the courage to show that, it gives everyone else permission to show more of their humanity,' says Theodores. 'When we come away from inspirational moments, 100 per cent of the time we were moved because that person dared to do something their own way. It was authentic, real, bold, expressive and made us think.'

A trap Theodores feels many of us fall into is dampening ourselves down. 'Organisations have a "this is the way we do things around here" mind set. They have their own jargon, rules, culture and dress codes, and when we conform to those, we do a great job, but we lose a little bit of our humanity. The part of ourselves that is animated and passionate ♦♦

“Asking for help creates a relationship of trust and reciprocity”



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3 STRATEGIES TO WORK ON YOUR CORE (THE EMOTIONAL ONE)

ENGAGE 'If you're reading a story to your child, you engage in all the different voices and bring it to life – why not use your full energy range when you're in the work place?' says Theodores. 'Think about how you want your messages to land. Speak up, express yourself authentically, and use a fuller range of your own expressivity.'

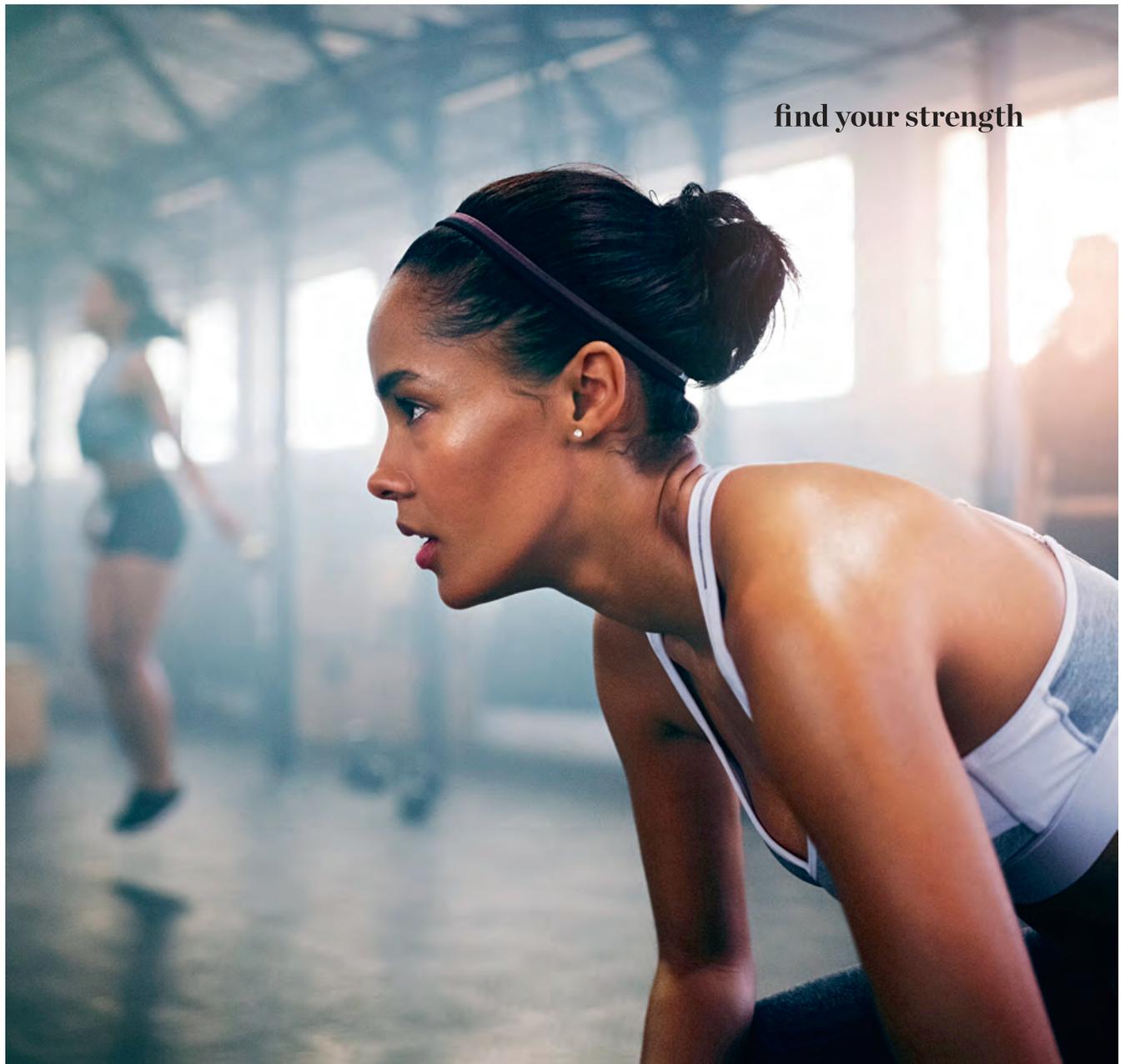
TEAM-UP No gold medallist did it solo – they had help from coaches, nutritionists, sports psychologists, team doctors and team-mates. 'I always encourage people to create their wise council of unexpected allies from different places, who offer a different perspective, practical knowledge or life experience,' says Theodores. Johnstone agrees: 'Being open to help and helping others is one of the most powerful ways to build resilience. In research, one of the biggest predictors of good outcomes after traumatic life events is social support, so pay attention to relationships.'

EMPATHISE Not everyone is a team player, but emotions can help you manage conflicts. 'Take a moment to get into a more empathetic state,' says Theodores. 'Visualise their emotional state, what they're contending with. This gets you into a more grounded state emotionally.' This is helpful in relationships too; 'If you're having a row, check your pulse. If it's racing, you're both likely to be in a fight-or-flight response state where you can easily misunderstand and trigger each other,' explains Johnstone. 'Take 30 minutes to cool off, and the conversation after that will be completely different.' ➡

outside of work is dulled, and when we leave that outside the door, we're losing who we are in our most authentic state.' Rather than endlessly trying to 'fit in', and mould ourselves to be the right type of person to please our boss, friend, partner or family, we should be making use of our unique skills – those that make us a brilliant runner, the one that makes everyone laugh at a dinner party, the friend who never forgets a birthday – whatever it is, it shouldn't be stifled. 'In interviews, we win a job by showing our wonderful character, experience, personality – then we start to hide,' says Theodores. 'People say "we", not "I", when they achieve something, and while it's great to acknowledge the help of others, it becomes a habit to forget who we are and what we bring that's unique. That's not arrogant or self-promoting, it's serving other people by being clear about our strengths.'

“Using our strengths isn't arrogant – it's serving other people”

{ Train and maintain resilience }



find your strength

A powerful way to feel more prepared for life's dips is to use any small difficulty you face as an opportunity to practise your resilience skills.

'There was a time we couldn't even walk. We got up, we fell down, we got up, we fell down. If we'd thought, "I've tried 17 times, I can't do this," we'd have ground to a halt, but we didn't because we've got natural resilience built into us. We just need to build on that,' Johnstone says. Doing that often means we can better

"We need to get more comfortable with negative emotions"

navigate stormy times by calling on our reserves. One key way to do that, says Johnstone, is self-talk – acknowledge what you're facing, then talk yourself into a positive response by thinking, "What might help me here is..."

We also need to get more comfortable with negative emotions, seeing them as prompts – not something to be escaped. 'We divide feelings into "good" and "bad", giving the impression that uncomfortable feelings are somehow pathological, or that we're doing something wrong if we do have them,' explains Johnstone. 'Uncomfortable feelings tell us if we're on the right track, and if we pay attention to that, it can help us navigate life.' He describes something called "inspirational dissatisfaction", where you're so dissatisfied by what's happening that it inspires you to change course. 'Your experience leads you to make choices, learn skills, find strengths or build relationships in a way that leaves you better equipped for the next challenge – it's called post-traumatic growth,' he says. 'Rather than seeing a crisis as all bad, you see a silver lining.' That could be true of coronavirus ➡

find your strength

– maybe it showed you how important it is to stay in touch with your parents, or to take time every day to exercise.

Try to make a habit of exposing yourself to things that make you nervous, reinforcing the idea that difficulties are temporary and you're capable. 'There's nothing like stretching yourself out of your comfort zone for human growth and development,' says Theodores. 'Whether that's submitting a poem to a competition, or signing up to a charity run. You can also set yourself a challenge like "Next week I'm going to speak up first in a meeting."'

Also, being aware that your brain works differently when agitated is helpful. 'We know from functional brain scans, that when people are in a state of distress, the parts of the brain to do with rational perspective and complex decision-making are turned down and the emergency battle station, or amygdala, takes over,' says Johnstone. It's one of our built-in resilience mechanisms. 'If we know that can happen, we can be more forgiving of ourselves, and we can do things to help,' says Johnstone. 'We fear what we feel, but we have choices about how we respond. Acknowledge the current reality, but commit to finding a better way of dealing with it.'



3 WAYS TO EXPAND YOUR RESILIENCE POTENTIAL

REFLECT One way to feel calm when something goes amiss is to reflect on the bigger picture. 'We'll get knocks and rejections, but when we connect to our higher meaning, to the things we're grateful for, the things we value, it gives us more resourcefulness,' says Theodores.

TREAT Tap into your metaphorical first aid box. 'When you're distressed, ask how you can respond to that pain. Mindfulness is one way. Ask yourself, "What am I noticing now?" You're looking at your worries, rather than getting tangled up in them, which brings a shift in perspective.' Johnstone also recommends writing, spending time in nature, taking exercise, and reaching out to your support network.

SAVOUR Regularly engage in things that feel good, and relish them. 'Hunt the good stuff,' says Johnstone. 'So pick your five favourite things to do, and do them often enough, but also savour them. Giving your attention more to the things that you appreciate extends and accentuates the positive experience, and the cherries of life become sweeter.' 