

Suffering

By Marvin Zauderer

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Your legs are burning. Your lungs are burning. Thoughts of flaming out, backing off, or giving up are dancing in your tortured mind. What will you do next? The mentally fit cyclist is highly skilled in responding to suffering, and thus has a distinct advantage over many competitors.

Last month, I explored [Communication](#), the fifth of the five core skills of mentally fit cyclists. This month I begin a series of articles on Responding to Adversity.

Last week I rode with a recently-crowned national champion. (Let me correct that. She rode, and I hung on for dear life.) I asked her about the race. She said, “the weather and the course negated any physical advantages that I might have had; I won because I could suffer more than the others.” How can we strengthen this aspect of our mental fitness?

When we cyclists use the word “suffering,” we’re usually referring to two all-too-frequent – and often interrelated – experiences that we have on the bike: pain and fatigue. In a word, we hurt. Not from injury, but from the sheer demands of riding. Clearly, at times pain and fatigue are sending us a warning that should be heeded. But for many cyclists, learning to respond differently to suffering is the biggest obstacle to increased performance. It can be the juiciest opportunity to grow as an athlete, and perhaps, as a person.

What’s happening when we hurt? The unpleasant sensation is obvious. What may not be obvious is what our minds are doing with that sensation. What meaning are we making of the pain? What thoughts are being triggered, influenced or fueled by the pain? Which behaviors – be they impulse-level reactions or conscious choices – are consequences of the pain? Which emotions – anxiety, anger, embarrassment – follow the pain? Pain is pain; when riding brings it on, it would seem that we don’t have much control over it (but I’ll come back to that). Yet we do have significant control over what our minds add to our pain.

So: It’s time, once again, to use your mind on your mind. If you can stop it from adding to your pain, you have a much greater chance of keeping your total suffering below threshold. To develop the advanced skill of managing your suffering effectively, you can likely use some or all of the five core skills.

Using the 5 Core Skills to Manage Suffering

[Viktor Frankl's](#) classic book, [Man's Search for Meaning](#), describes his experience as a Nazi concentration camp inmate. He observed, in the most extreme of

circumstances, how human beings can use even the tiniest shreds of meaning to cling to a reason to continue living.

Although suffering on the bike is not anywhere close to suffering in a concentration camp, it is often cycling's most intense, threatening, and difficult experience. So when you're suffering, it can be very useful to have a positive, pro-performance answer to this question: Why am I doing this? If your suffering is in service of specific goals, if your suffering has meaning that supports your performance, your tolerance for the suffering is likely to increase.

As I noted in the [article on goal-setting](#), outcome goals, such as "I'm going for a spot on the podium," are the most prevalent in cycling. However, suffering tolerance can often be increased by effective use of process goals as well. For example: "Even if I'm hurting or getting dropped, my goal is to maintain good form and rhythm on all of the climbs," or "before I back off and reduce my suffering at any time during this ride, I'm going to hang in there at least two minutes longer than last time when I feel myself reaching my limit."

Suffering, particularly when we approach our tolerance threshold, tends to generate anxiety. And you know from the [article on self-talk](#) that anxiety can fuel negative self-talk, which fuels anxiety. Not the kind of cycling we prefer. So if you're suffering and you hear a voice in your head saying things like "I'm a lousy climber," or "I can't hang on any longer" or "Look at her, she's so strong and I'm such a wimp," that's the time to confront yourself and question those assertions. Your anxiety may be distorting your perception and your judgment.

I'm not suggesting that you do your best Pollyanna impersonation and tell yourself, "this doesn't hurt at all, I'm feeling great!" At the very least, though, question the voice you hear and stop any negative thoughts. As you'll recall, you may also benefit from replacing the negative thoughts with positive (or, at least non-negative) thoughts, such as:

- Reminding yourself of your pre-ride/race outcome and process goals, such as "One of my key goals is to climb Mt. Diablo in under an hour this year; hanging on longer right now is going to help me accomplish that."
- Believable counterstatements, such as "All things considered, I'm actually climbing well today," or "I'm going to hang on up to that 17% grade sign" and "Now that I've done that, I'm going to hang on up to that next 17% grade sign."
- Affirmations, such as "I've trained hard and I am strong today."
- Cue words that have proven to be effective for you, such as "calm and focused" or "hang in there" or "Belgian beer at the finish."
- Behaviors – which may also be goal-reminders – such as, "I need to focus on

maintaining good form now.”

Now back to anxiety, perhaps the biggest dragon to be slayed (slain? OK, subdued) by the mentally fit cyclist.

Recall that I (somewhat flippantly) said above, “pain is pain”; turns out not to be true. [Research has shown](#) that improving how our minds respond to pain can decrease the pain. In other words, not only can we avoid making things (mentally) worse, but we can actually make things (physically) better at times. For example, when pain makes us anxious, we often respond to the anxiety by tensing around the painful area, which can make the pain worse. If you can notice that’s happening, you can use relaxation techniques – such as breathing into the area, concentrating on releasing as many of the muscles around the area as possible, and reducing your overall anxiety – that may reduce the pain. The [article on managing emotions](#) gives you many additional ways to reduce your anxiety.

Speaking of emotions, you might consider experimenting with using anger – within yourself, not directed at others – as a counterbalance to suffering. Remember Lance Armstrong in Stage 15 of the 2003 Tour de France? Less than 10km from the finish at Luz-Ardiden, suffering mightily and on the ropes in the Tour for the first time ever, his handlebar hooked a fan’s bag and he went down. When he got up, he was [clearly angry](#). He [used his anger](#) to generate “a huge rush of adrenaline” and immediately said to himself, “if you want to win the Tour de France, do it today.” He won the stage and, for all practical purposes, the race.

Besides the hottie in the feed zone, suffering is the strongest enemy of concentration for many cyclists. Knowing your focus style and how to return to that mode, as I discussed in the [article on concentration](#), may be one of your most effective tools when you feel suffering starting to dominate your attention.

And lastly, don’t forget [communication](#): Keeping your struggles with suffering to yourself may not serve you. For example, you might ask for help – for example, pacing you up a climb – from a friend or teammate during a ride or race. Don’t let any feelings of guilt or embarrassment derail you; if it helps, remind yourself that you’re likely to be in a position to return the favor someday. Also, if you have a coach or mentor who’s helping you with your cycling, they’ll benefit from anything you can tell them about your experiences with suffering during each ride and race. The more they know, the more likely they’ll be able to give you useful suggestions.

Beyond the Five Core Skills

Any or all of the above may be enough for you to increase your tolerance for suffering. But if not, here are some additional steps you can take:

1. Experiment with avoidance. On the one hand, I'm encouraging you to confront your suffering, to not be afraid of it, to manage the anxiety that comes up around it and deal with it. On the other hand, sometimes it's fine to use defense mechanisms like avoidance and denial. It's not always a cop-out to act like King Arthur and his knights in [Monty Python and The Holy Grail](#) and "Run away! Run away!" If you distract yourself from your suffering for too long, however, it may return with a much louder voice later. It usually does. So experiment with visualization, singing the Mister Rogers theme, doing sudoku in your head, whatever distracts you from the pain, and come to some judgment about when – if ever – to use distraction as a tool for managing suffering.

2. Create "suffering intervals." Just as with concentration, your tolerance for suffering can increase if you create specific periods of time in training for your experiments and practice. Note in your training log what you're discovering about yourself and what's working. Factor your knowledge into your pre-ride/pre-race plans.

3. Understand your pain profile. Speaking of self-discovery, your strategies for managing suffering may be influenced by what you know about your personality, your history, and your patterns. How sensitive are you to pain? What experiences, particularly traumatic ones, have you had with pain in your lifetime? How did you respond? Are there any notable patterns to the ways you respond to adversity of all kinds in your life? All of these things, and more, may influence the specific experience you have in suffering on the bike.

In addition to your self-awareness, your thoughts and your breath are your strongest allies when you're suffering. Turn toward the pain and use it. Like most anything in life, the more you turn toward it, the faster you'll improve your relationship to it and the faster your growth as a cyclist will be fueled by it. Let suffering be the fiery crucible where your mental fitness is formed.



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