

How to Get Out of Your Own Way and Deal with Legitimate Fears (A Triathlon Swim Example)

This is the TD Fitness Podcast with Coach T, episode number 87.

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Hey, guys. What's up? Welcome back to the TD Fitness Podcast. This is Coach T, and I'm here with you in episode number 87. In this episode, we're talking about dealing with legitimate fears and really how to get out of your own way. The example that I'll use throughout this episode is that of the swim portion of a long-distance triathlon. But there are a number of things that apply not just to that particular example or that particular event, but really apply holistically in a number of things. It could be a could be a fitness event. It could be really anything, though, in your life that you are contemplating doing or have hesitation or worry about because you're afraid to make the leap, quite frankly.

Specifically, the question that we're answering, though, in this episode, it really stems from a question, directly from a question, that came from one of the action takers, one of the members in the Action Taker Academy. She says, "Basically, I need some mental help. I have a huge phobia of ocean swimming. How do or will I overcome this for the triathlon?" She's worried that the race is kind of a huge obstacle in itself. But really, the swim in the ocean is just something that is so hard to grasp, and it causes some legitimate fear. She asked that I address this either in a Facebook live or a podcast, really on how to get out of your own mental way and work through legitimate fears. That is what we are talking about here in this episode.

Let me just say, as I say always, my favorite episodes to do and to provide for you all are those that come directly from the questions and things that you all want to know. So thank you so much for providing this question, and I encourage all of you to hit me up. I mean, that's what I'm here for. That's the reason why I do this. I want to address your concerns and answer the questions that you have.

This is important for a number of reasons, this topic. The first is, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, is that this is something that applies to so many people. A lot of times I will cater my content to those with busy lifestyles. But really, this is something when it talks about ... When we talk about addressing our fears or tackling our fears, this is something that applies to all of us. We all have fears that we would like to overcome or that, even worse, prevent us from doing things that we can do and keep us from reaching our full capacity and keep us from achieving those goals that are really possible for us, but that we're just scared to attempt.

So I want you to know that you're not the only one if you have fears like this. Things like this are a block from many people. They're a block from me, too, oftentimes. The takeaway with this episode, what I want to leave you with, really is three different, three big picture things. The first is perspective. The second is some ways to attack the ... or to address the mental side. And then some practical advice, particularly as it relates to the swim in a long-distance triathlon. So let's start with the perspective.

A little bit of background, so we have to understand that fear and stress are normal and they are good. We need fear in our lives. And we need the appropriate amount of stress. The example that immediately comes to mind for me, I was a basketball player throughout most of high school and in college. It was something that I really enjoyed doing, a sport that I really enjoyed playing, and I still like playing basketball. But before every game, I would always get nervous, Always. It didn't matter how big the stage or how small, whether it was on the college level where people had come to see us play or at the intramural level, if you will, on a military base. All of the time, I would always be nervous before the game. But I always had to go out there and always had to play. Like I said, it was something that I enjoyed, but it was just something that really caused a little bit of some butterflies before stepping onto the court.

Same thing with public speaking. I heard a recent statistic that said that there are more people that are afraid of dying. I'm sorry. There are more people that are afraid of public speaking than death itself. I mean, that's huge. That is literally the biggest fear that people have, that is public speaking.

I've had the opportunity to do a good amount of public speaking. In fact, I consider the podcast in some ways a form for doing that. But the more you do it, the better you get at it and the more comfortable you get with it. But still, before going out before a large group of people, I still get a little anxiety, a little anxious before going out there. But there are a number of things that serve to calm me, and I'm going to go through some of those things as they relate to triathlon. But again, as I said, these are things that kind of relate to just about all of our fears.

Understanding that fear and stress are normal and that we need a certain amount of that in our lives, the first thing I would offer along the lines of perspective is this. I want you to ask, what exactly is it that is stressing you out? Then, the what is it that you're afraid of? And after you answer that question, ask yourself, "Is it right sized? Are you blowing it out of proportion or is it a real thing?"

So let's use that example of a long-distance swim in a triathlon. Are you playing the odds or worrying about the minute chance that something may happen? So let's look at a couple of numbers here. The statistics for long-distance triathlon show that the do not finish rate, that's typically abbreviated DNF, those people who do not finish the race, for one reason or another, is typically, for a Half Ironman for example, it's about 2 to 3%. That is two to three people out of every 100 that participate. So you have a 97 and 98% chance, just looking at the numbers, of completing all three events and finishing the race.

Now, I will also tell you then when it comes to participating in these triathlons through the groups that I typically try to promote or help ... It's the small group of people, basically, that I recruit every year and try to loop them in or wrap them into completing their first Half Ironman event, or Ironman event. Everyone who has attempted that with me has completed it. I mean, it's a pretty small sample set, only about 20 people or so, but still, Every single one has completed. Now, I don't say that to put pressure on you to do that, but I just want to let you know that that's the history. So you're looking at an overall completion rate of close to 100%. And a completion rate on a smaller scale of those who do it with our group, that's 100%. So, those are the numbers.

So do you want to play the odds or do you want to worry about that minute chance, as I said, that something may happen, that, God forbid, you may drown or that there's a shark that's going to get you or that there's some kind of flesh-eating bacteria in the water? These are things that I know that, and speaking with this individual, we had a really good conversation about it, and these are some of the concerns that are legitimate that come up. But I'm here

to tell you that if you look at it from a numbers perspective, those things are very, very slim and minimal.

Now, so with that, I will tell you to save the worry for when you're there. Because what you could do is you can worry about all of this beforehand, but, really, that doesn't do much good. That just causes stress and anxiety. If you save the worry for when you're in the moment or when you're very close to the moment, that's what we call positive stress because it helps you to perform. Again, I said that stress is good, stress is normal. That is what is needed to push us, to challenge us, and really to get us to rise to the occasion. So stress is okay, all right? And you need those positive stressors.

In fact, it's when your ability aligns with the challenge at hand, when those things meet and you're on the right vector, that's called a state of flow. I just read that in a devotional that I was studying just this morning, actually. It talked about how when your ability aligns with the challenges that you face, you're in a state of flow. That is a good place to be because you're being challenged enough, but you have the ability to meet those challenges. I'll just say, you know what they call someone who worries through an entire triathlon race? They called them a triathlete. So it's okay to worry, all right? It's okay to do that.

Then the final thing I'll leave you with on perspective is this, and it's this concept of control. I want you to understand the things that you can control and the things that you cannot control. In the category of things that you can control, the amount of training you do, the type of training you do, how long beforehand you start to prepare, the amount or the type of equipment that you get, the mental state, the mental mindset that you're in, those are all things that you can control, surrounding yourself with like-minded people, with positivity. You can control all of these things. Things that you can't control, the water temperature, how rough the water is, what other people around you are thinking, the conditions of the race. Those are things can't control. So guess what? If you can't control it, then don't worry about it, okay?

It goes back to to the Serenity Prayer. "Lord, give me the patience to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." You have to be wise enough to know the difference between what you can control and what you can't control. And frankly, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to worry about the things that you have no control over. That's all I'll offer along the line of perspective.

Now, let's talk a little bit about the way to actually address, from a mental standpoint, a mental preparation standpoint, how do we address these, again, legitimate, completely legitimate, fears. I won't go so far as to say justified fears, but they're legitimate because any fear in our own mind is legitimate in its own right. It's something that causes us some consternation, so we have to address it. So I'm absolutely acknowledging that.

The first thing that I'll start with is that you have to believe. You have to believe in yourself. Again, this is one of those things that applies to so many different things that we do in life. One way you can look at this, so going back to the triathlon swim example, you can either tell yourself that you're not a swimmer, that you've never gone this distance before, that you're worried about some of those things, again, that you can't, can't control, or you can tell yourself that you are a swimmer. You can tell yourself that you've been swimming for the past few months in preparation for this race. You can tell yourself that you're going to complete it. That subtle shift in your mind from thinking that you are versus thinking that you aren't and thinking that you can versus thinking that you can't, sometimes that makes all the difference. I mean, it is huge.

I think back to some of the heroic examples that we read about in our nation's military and some of the just the seemingly impossible feats, the thing that military members have done, that athletes have done where everyone else doubted that it could even be done, but the individual believe that it could be done.

Another example that comes to mind is Bannister and the four-minute mile. Nobody believed that anyone could run a mile in under four minutes. But guess what? After Bannister ran a mile in four minutes, within a year, there were a bunch of other people who ran in under four minutes. All it takes is a belief that you can do it. So start with believing in yourself and changing your mindset to think positively versus negatively.

The second thing I'll tell you along the lines of mental preparation is to embrace where you are. Enjoy it. Again, back to the swim example. Don't think about the race, okay? Just think about enjoying it. How often do you get to get in the water with a bunch of other people and look to complete your very first Half Ironman? That in itself is a moment to relish.

Now, I will be completely honest. In my first Half Ironman, I was not thinking that. I was pretty terrified myself. So I'm looking back now thinking of ways that I could've done that better, and I'm trying to relay that insight and experience to you. Enjoy the moment. Think about it in the perspective of where it actually fits in your life and where it fits along with your goals for life, your goals for fitness. This is a big deal. You're starting the swim of your very first Half Ironman. That is huge. And once you're through it, you're going to look back at it and you're going to be extremely proud of yourself and you're going to feel extremely accomplished. So embrace it and enjoy it.

Now, another thing I'll say in this category of the mental preparations is that not only is ... So the first time, I get it. It's scary, okay? But from experience, I'll tell you that it's also the first time of many. So yeah, your first time is scary, but it's also the first time. What I mean by that is after you do it once, chances are you're to want to do it again.

My wife recently shared something that she read with me, and I think it applies here. I'm going to paraphrase the quote, but it said, "Even on your worst day, you have to remind yourself that your track record for getting through bad days is 100%." So think about that. Think about the challenges that you've had in your life. You're still here, right? You're still thriving. So you've obviously made it through. You are 100% on the completion rate for every, every, every single one of those things. So take that mindset and that philosophy into, in this case, the swim for the Half Ironman.

Now, another thing that's comforting from the mental standpoint is knowing that you're not alone in this. All it takes is a lot of times is to look around and understand that there are other people that are struggling with this, too. That is very, very comforting. One of the things that I led off with in this episode is that you're not the only. This particular concern, this fear of the swim in the triathlon, this is a block. This is a concern for so many people. It is the number one concern or the number one thing that I hear that keeps people from attempting triathlon.

Understand that there are a bunch of other people there with you. The folks at these races are not all high-time athletes. They're not all super experienced. I'd say there are a good percentage of first-timers. There are a lot of those because the Half Ironman, it's on a lot of people's bucket lists. It's a great race that's long enough and challenging enough that most people, believe it or not, most people can actually do it, but it's not so far that it prevents anybody from completing it. There are others that are there with you, so think about that as you approach this.

Then, the final thing I'll leave you with in the mental category ... And this is kind of a trick that I don't know where I picked this up, but I've done it for a long time. I can think back to my early college years and some of the things that I had to do there as I was going through my military training or as I was playing sports in college or even academics. And that is it's easy to think that I am the least prepared person here. But going back to believing in yourself, all you have to do is flip the script and just think, "Looking at all these people around me, I'm thinking there has got to be someone who has trained less than I have. They are super worried. They're not as prepared as me. And you know the truth? The truth of the matter is that they're probably going to finish the race. So what does that tell me about myself? I'm probably not the most unprepared person here. There are others that are more unprepared than I am, and they're still going to do fine. So I think I'm going to do fine, too."

Yeah, I compare myself to other people a lot of times, and I'll say, "Okay, this person has a pretty good shot. I think I have a better shot than they do. So I think I'll be okay." That's just the reality. That's just a trick that you can use sometimes when you talk about being there with others and comparing yourself to others, which all of us do. It's normal. But just think about it. If they can do it, so can I. That's what it boils down to.

We've gone through some of the practical ... Some of the perspective, I should say, some of the mental tips or hacks, if you will. Now, let's dive into some of the practical things that you can do to prepare for the swim in a long-distance triathlon or to complete the swim in a long-distance triathlon. Those first two categories of the perspective and the mental piece, those, as I said, are kind of broadly applied to many things, that many fears that we face in our lives in fitness, in business, in work, in whatever, you name it. But this is more specific to the race itself, to swimming in a Half Ironman race or an Ironman race itself. These are some of the practical tips. But we can draw some generalities from a couple of these, and I'll do that where I can.

The first thing is you got to practice in open water. You shouldn't expect to be as prepared with only swimming in a pool if the race is going to be an open water swim. You want to get into the open water beforehand. You want some of your training to be done in open water because it's different. In a pool, you can look down. You can see the lines in the lanes. You can see the wall coming up. You can understand where to turn around. Typically, you can stand up in the water and you'll be just fine even if you stop.

In some of these open water races, however, many times the water is not clear enough for you to see really anything in front of your face. It's completely dark when your head goes under and you're ... You will only see light when you come up to breathe, so you have to get used to that for one. You have to also get used to it not being as calm as the pool water, maybe. Sometimes it will be, but sometimes it can be a little choppy. So practice in open water.

And as I said, if you want to kind of draw a generality from this, the thing is to practice things that you want to get better at. I talked about public speaking. One of the reasons that I love doing the podcast is because I feel like it helps me to better organize my thoughts. It gives me practice in getting behind the microphone. It gives me practice in presenting. And those are all things that actually benefit me in not only my business life but also in my military life. I feel like that helps me, but practice is something that is required and necessary if you want to improve. So if you want to get better, if you want to be better at an open water swim, then you need to practice in open water. That's the bottom line.

The second thing I say is from a practical perspective. Understand that you have a couple of benefits here in the open water. A lot of times, the open water swims are done in like a bay or a river or something like that, which tells me that it's either salt water or brackish water,

so it's not fresh water. What that means is that you are more buoyant, that you and your body will float better than you will in a typical pool. So that's a good thing. You're going to be more buoyant in the open water.

And if you throw a wet suit on on top of that, which a lot of people wear wet suits in these races, as long as the temperature is not too hot ... There's a certain temperature for the triathlons, certain water temperature in the triathlons. And if the water gets too hot, you cannot wear a wetsuit. But, that's not typically the case. Well, it depends on which races you're racing. But I think every race that I've done, except for one, has been wet suit legal, they call it, so you could wear a wetsuit. And if you do that, then you're going to float even more to the point where sometimes ... I've noticed before that in a wet suit in some of the salt or brackish water I was floating so well that it was hard for me to keep my feet in the water to kick. So you could float pretty well, and you have that in your favor.

Another thing I'll tell you from a practical perspective, the method that I used to learn to swim is called TI, and it stands for Total Immersion. A few episodes back, I did an episode, and I talked about an individual named Terry Laughlin. He was the creator of the TI method. He passed within the past two years, but he was great. I mean, just so giving, such a warm heart, but created this Total Immersion swim method that really teaches you balance in the water. It teaches you to swim effortlessly. What you find, what I found when I do that, is that I'm not tired. I'm not tired after swimming 50 meters. I'm not tired after swimming 500 meters, and I'm not tired after swimming 4,000 meters. That's two and a half miles, basically. You can do it. You can do it with the right technique, the right method.

Another practical tip I'll give you ... And I'm going to give you two that seem contradictory to one another. The first is to stay with the pack, and the second is to stay outside or behind the pack. Here's what I mean. There are a lot of people starting their phase, starting the swim portion of the race just like you are. Now, you can choose to be in the middle of the pack. The benefit here is that the people in front of you essentially create a slipstream, and you can follow that so there's going to be less resistance. It may be a little less choppy, maybe a little more choppy, but it's going to be less resistance for you because it's kind of like drafting on a bike. If somebody is cutting the wind from you ahead of you, then you get in their slipstream or kind of like ducking behind a big 18 wheeler on the highway. You burn less gas because your car isn't working as hard because the truck in front of you is cutting through all the air resistance. It's the same concept. You can follow those individuals, and they create that slipstream for you in the water.

The other benefit of that is that you don't have to what's called spotting. You don't have to spot as much, meaning you don't ... As long as the pack knows where they're going, which sometimes is questionable, but is usually okay, as long as they know where they're going, they're going to swim in a relatively straight line. Then you can just continue to follow the people, and you don't have to lift your head up and look forward, which really breaks your stroke up quite a bit. So you don't have to do that as much. So those are the benefits of kind of staying with the pack.

Now, I also said start outside the pack, and I will tell you that this is my preferred technique, even now after having a handful of races under my belt. So I remember my very first. It was an Olympic triathlon, and my greatest concern was that I was going to get swum over. Somebody was going to come behind me, a faster swimmer, and basically either hit my legs, which would cause disruption in my kicking and my propelling going forward or they would come up beside me and inadvertently hit my head or hit my arm. I was just afraid that I needed to be completely by myself and no one touching me, otherwise I was going to have some trouble.

Well, it turned out that what I did in that first race was I literally waited. As my swim wave was called, I just worked my way to the back. I was literally, literally, the last person in the water in my swim wave. There were maybe a minute or so, minute or two behind me. There was another wave that started. But there was nobody in my wave that was behind me, so I didn't have to worry about anybody coming up behind me and swimming on top of me. That's one benefit, one thing you could do.

The other thing is you can start outside the pack. I'm a math guy. And if you're familiar with the Pythagorean theorem, it's basically an equation that says that $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. Now, if you understand that, you know exactly what I'm talking about. And some of you may have no idea what I'm talking about. But here's the deal. So if you're swimming in a straight line, that's one distance. What I'm telling you that is if you start outside the pack ... So if you're swimming straight for 200 yards, for example, if you go 60 feet to the right or left and then go the most direct path to the same point that those straight line people are swimming, you will only have swam one yard farther than everyone else. It's essentially the same distance, but now you're 60 feet outside of center line, which means there's less traffic out there, probably nobody out there. I mean, that's 20 yards yet. So you can stay outside the pack and still essentially swim the same distance over the course of a 200 yard stretch and not have to worry about people bumping into you, possibly, or swimming over you or getting in your way. So that's another technique.

Now, two more practical tips. If you find yourself in the water and you just have a panic attack, here's the deal, just stop, okay? Just like you would on the run, just like you would on a bike, if you find yourself getting tired or things just don't feel right, stop. Do the doggy paddle. And you can also, in these races ... A lot of people don't know this, but there are a number of canoes and rafts out there keeping an eye on everybody to make sure everyone's safe. You can actually stop and hold on to those things. It is completely legal. As long as you don't use it to help yourself move forward, you can hang on to that thing for as long as you want to, as long as you know you make the time cutoff, which most people have no problem with. So just stop, either doggy paddle or just grab onto one of those things, just like you'd stop on a bike or run, and then calm yourself. Just deep breaths. Understand that you're not in it alone, there are a bunch of other people with you, that you're going to get through it, and then continue on.

The final piece of practical advice I will tell you is this: Trust your training. That is the reason why we train, okay? Yes, there is a huge fitness component to the training piece, but I will tell you that a big part of it too is just the mental, just the comfort of knowing that you are prepared. I like to say that every single training session in leading up for a long race like this is a deposit into your proverbial fitness bank account, and you're going to look to make a withdrawal on race day. You just want to make sure that you have enough in the bank to cover the amount that you want to withdraw. That's why the training is important. Each training day, each training session is a deposit, and you're going to cash in on it come race day. Think about it in that way. So trust your training. Because if you put the time in, then you're going to be just fine.

Now, the final piece of advice I'll give you before kind of wrapping this up is I think all of this could be summed up in one broad term, and you've heard me say this before. Take the leap. Step out, embrace the fear, and take the leap not knowing where you're going to land. That's the hard part, okay? But you have to do it because that's how we challenge ourselves. That's how we grow. That's how we get better.

How many times have you talked yourself out of raising your hand in class because you weren't sure if your answer was the right one? And then sure enough, either the professor, the teacher, or a fellow student says exactly what you were thinking and you're like, "Man, I

should've raised my hand. I should've said something." Triathletes are a bunch of people who have raised their hands. All I'm asking you to do is raise your hand, step out, take the leap, and try.

That's what I'll leave you with for this episode. One final quote, and this is from a lady named Meredith Atwood. She's a four-time Half Ironman triathlete, motivational speaker, and she wrote a book called Triathlon for Every Woman. I will link to it in the show notes. But a couple of things in an article I read that she wrote, she said, "We can't sit in fear of the worst-case scenario and list of what-ifs. We have so much more to accomplish in life and with our fitness with triathlon." She also says, "Fear is a limiter and a blessing. It keeps us safe, but it also challenges us." So think about those things as you think about how to approach the big fears in your life, the things that you might be apprehensive about trying, the things that you may or may not want to do because you're being blocked by fear. Think about those things.

That's all I have for you for this episode. The show notes for this one can be found at tdfitness.net/087. Also, as I said, I love your questions. So you can either email them to me, you can submit a question through the website, tdfitness.net/contact. You can call in to the question line 888-TDFIT-01 and hit the appropriate option there. You'll hear it in the menu. And that's it. That's all I have for you guys. So thank you so much for tuning in. As always, I want you to have a blessed one. This is Coach T signing out.