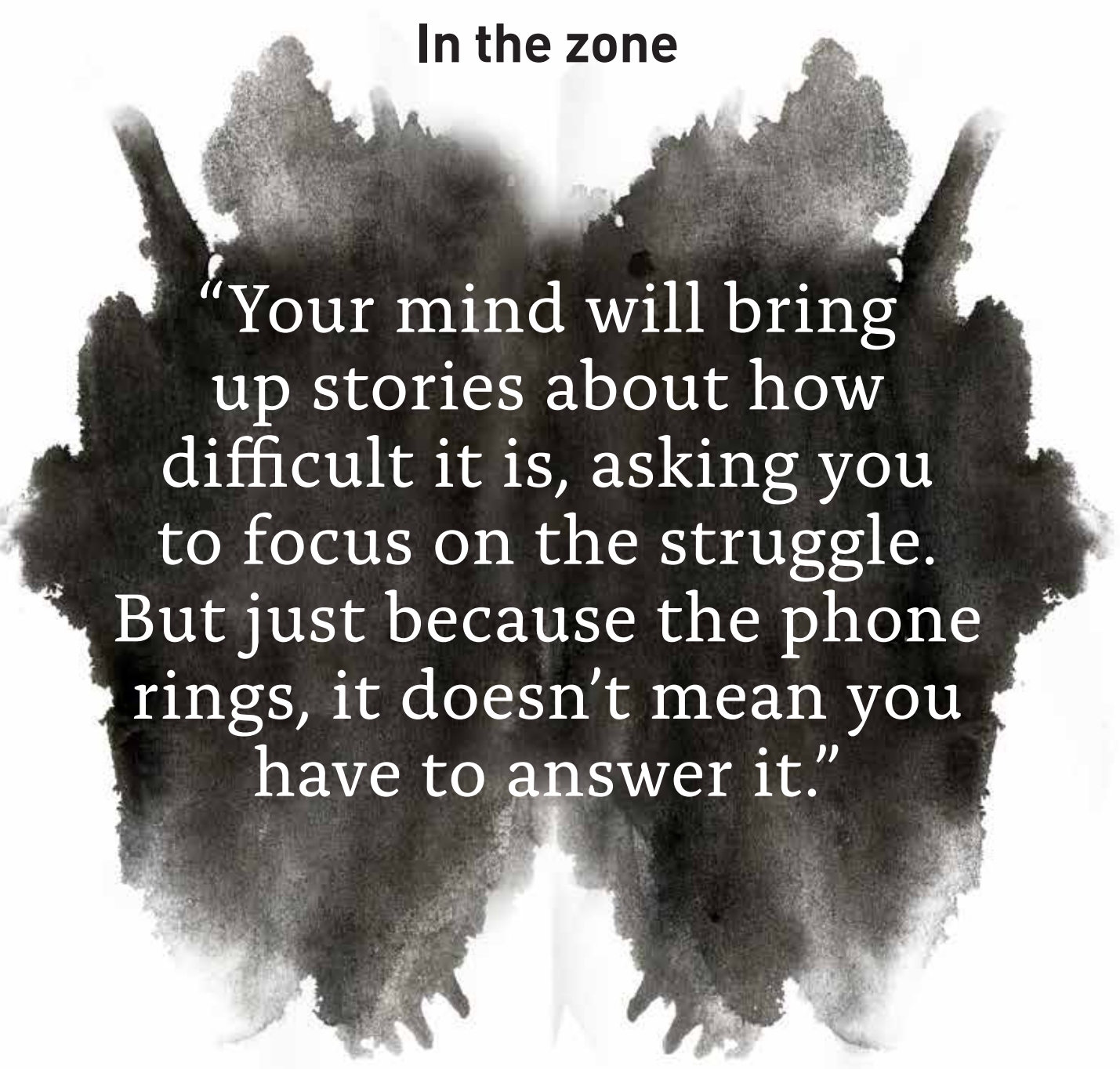


## In the zone



“Your mind will bring up stories about how difficult it is, asking you to focus on the struggle. But just because the phone rings, it doesn’t mean you have to answer it.”

Your mind can play a big role in your sports performance. Here’s how the principles of mindfulness can help you get in a calm, clear and positive headspace, so you can focus on smashing your goals.

Rebecca Howden

**Whether you’re running a half marathon, playing a game of basketball or just trying to smash your PB at the gym, your mind has an important job to do.**

Feeling confident, powerful and ‘in the zone’ can be the boost that pushes you through a physical challenge. On the flipside, anxiety and self-doubt can be your biggest saboteurs.

Sports psychologist Daniel Dymond, director of the Performance and Sport Psychology Clinic, says it’s essential to develop a mindset that allows you to take challenges on, and that is prepared to deal with difficult emotions and physical sensations.

“The ability to shift attention to what matters in the presence of pressure, stress, and opportunity is the most valuable skill an athlete can have,” he says. “And when it comes to your mindset, small changes can make significant differences.”

### **Grow your mindset**

The first thing to understand is that your mindset isn’t a fixed state. “I describe it as being more like a garden,” Dymond says. “It’s something you cultivate. It’s constantly growing, and sometimes you spend more time tending to one area. Sometimes you need to weed things out, cut them away. Sometimes you need to just let things be and grow in their own time.”

To perform at your best, it’s of course ideal to be calm, clear and focused on the task at hand. But sometimes the pressure of telling yourself to feel a certain way – trying to banish anxiety, nerves and self-doubt – can just make it worse.

Dymond suggests a more helpful approach is to cultivate acceptance, willingness and flexibility.

“You need to be flexible with whatever might come up for you emotionally, or whatever thoughts your mind may bring up during the pressures and stresses of competition,” he says. “Sports performance and competition are uncertain, so if your mindset is rigid, it can impact your performance in so many ways.”

### **Let discomfort in**

Learning to sit with discomfort is easier said than done. This is where mindfulness can be a really powerful tool.

There is plenty of research supporting the benefits of mindfulness for soothing stress and boosting your focus, clarity and resilience. For sports psychology, this can be a game-changer.

“Sometimes when difficult experiences come up, we fight with them, avoid them, wrestle for control,” Dymond says. “A skill to learn is to be able to sit with those experiences, and then place your attention back onto what really matters.”

The idea is to change your relationship with difficult emotions, so that you can work with them instead of being overwhelmed by them. This means practising what Dymond calls the three O’s of mindfulness – openness, objectivity and observation.

When you’re halfway through a lap of the pool and thoughts like “I can’t do this” or “This is too hard” barrel their way into your mind, simply let them in. Observe them for what they are – just thoughts,

nothing more. By learning to sit with them mindfully and non-judgmentally, you can take away some of their power.

“Your mind will bring up stories about how difficult it is, asking you to focus on the struggle,” Dymond says. “But just because the phone rings, it doesn’t mean you have to answer it.

“Once you understand a bit more about yourself and how your mind may operate in those moments – what fears and worries tend to come up for you – just acknowledge that it’s your mind bringing up an old story.”

### **Practising mindfulness**

Meditation is an excellent way to develop mindfulness skills, but it’s definitely not the only way. You can practise mindfulness while you’re walking down the street, or playing with your dog, or enjoying a nourishing breakfast. All you need to do is focus on what you’re experiencing with all your senses, let your thoughts come and go, and keep gently bringing your attention back to the present moment.

“You can do mindfulness with a cup of coffee,” Dymond suggests. “Use your five senses. Notice the temperature of the cup, the taste, the smell, the texture. Notice the whole experience of the coffee going down your throat and disappearing into your stomach.”

Keep practising these fundamentals so you can apply them when you need to – on and off the sports field.

“The whole point of mindfulness is to apply it to your life. Bring this attitude to your life and your sports. When you’re in a moment where you know you might start to feel some discomfort, use your mindfulness skills so that your mind doesn’t push you around.”