

Becoming the Person You Know You Can Be

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This is one of my shortest articles, and it may be one of my most important.

In bodybuilding, there is a principle known as "train-to-failure" (TTF). The idea is that you lift that amount of weight that permits you at least ten repetitions, but continue the lifting to the point of failure: the point at which you can no longer sustain the repetitions. Such a heavy-duty program, as outlined by the late [Michael Mentzer](#), is low force (to minimize injuries) and high intensity (drawing upon the body's full reserves). This program also contradicts usual practice, which has athletes lifting every day. Mentzer, a world class bodybuilder, found that a limited number of repetitions to failure were sufficient to stimulate muscle growth, as long as there was an adequate period of recovery following the training stimulus. When first espoused, the idea of doing a limited number of intense repetitions and then staying out of the gym during the recovery phase was heretical. Now it is the backbone of many successful approaches to bodybuilding and strength training.

As Mentzer noted, the idea of TTF is itself a reflection of a principle in exercise physiology called SAID: Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demands. The body, according to SAID, will develop along the lines of the demands imposed upon it. If you impose intensive demands upon a muscle set, that set will develop more than others that have not been challenged. The opposite of SAID is deconditioning: the absence of demand upon the musculoskeletal system. Astronauts in space for a considerable period of weightlessness lose body mass due to deconditioning and, at times, have had to be carried from their spacecrafts due to a loss of strength. Their bodies adapted to the absence of demand.

The vast majority of people live their lives the way uninformed athletes train: they take on too many demands, none of which are sufficiently intense to take them to failure. Theirs is the equivalent of lifting a twenty-pound barbell for hours on end. They become tired, but not strong. By the time they get old, they are chronically tired, and then retire from all demands. For many, retirement is an exercise in mental, physical, and spiritual deconditioning.

Truly great people live their lives on a TTF basis. They challenge themselves until they fail, and that provides new challenges. They ultimately succeed, because the challenges that produce failure also build their adaptive capacity. Their minds and their personalities exhibit SAID: they adapt to imposed demands.

Now ask yourself: If you trained in the weight room as hard and as smart as you train for trading success, how strong would you be?

The reality is that few traders train at all, and those that do rarely impose demands on themselves that require growth and adaptation. The bodybuilder knows that effort is a friend, a stimulus to development. You push yourself to your limits, and then you adapt to those imposed demands. In simulated trading--and in the practice that comes from trading small size--it is not enough to concentrate and focus: you develop the capacity to operate in "the zone" by testing the limits of your mental stamina. Similarly, don't just follow your trading ideas; test them until they break. Then you'll be able to figure out where they are weak and how you can fix them. *We cannot know our limits unless we are willing to venture beyond them.*

Mentzer realized that, to become the person you know you can be, you have to do more than you think you can do. Paradoxically, you will find your greatest freedom, in the gym and in life, in the imposition of your most stringent demands.

Bio:

Brett Steenbarger, Ph.D. first corresponded with the late Mike Mentzer in April, 2000 (see the "Testimonials" section of [Mike's site](#)). Brett is Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, NY and author of *The Psychology of Trading* (Wiley, 2003). As Director of Trader Development for Kingstree Trading, LLC in Chicago, he has mentored numerous professional traders and coordinated a training program for traders. An active trader of the stock indexes, Brett utilizes statistically-based pattern recognition for intraday trading. Brett does not offer commercial services to traders, but maintains an archive of articles and a trading blog at www.brettsteenbarger.com.