

The Mental Game

What to do with the voice that shows up when the results start to show.

I just spent a whole chapter telling you what to do with your body. I told you about the heavy days and the active recovery days, the slow eccentric, the tension, and the equipment standing in my living room, my den, my dining room; it's everywhere in my house. And every word of it is true. But I want to tell you something now that I probably should have told you at the very beginning, because it sits underneath everything else in this book.

None of it works without the six inches between your ears.

This is the chapter about the part of the work nobody can do for you. You can hire a trainer to write your program. You can buy a scale that reads your visceral fat. You can have a wife like mine who cooks real food and a doctor who watches your numbers. I have all of those things, and I am grateful for every one of them. But not one of them can get me out of bed on a cold, wet morning when the warm part of me wants to stay. That part is mine. That part is yours. And that part is what this chapter is about.

When my writer and I first sat down to talk about this section, the working title on the page was "The Mental Game." I looked at it, and I told him: " That is exactly right. Because so much of this - more than the food, more than the lifting, more than the sleep - is about what goes on in your head. So that is where I want to take you now. Into my head, on ordinary mornings, where the whole thing is actually won or lost.

I Was Always a Disciplined Man

People hear my story, and they assume I must have been some kind of mess before all this. A man with no willpower, making promises to himself and breaking them, falling off every wagon he ever climbed onto. I understand why they assume it. A man does not get to 310 pounds by being careful. But it is not the truth, and I think the truth matters here, because it is the first thing I want you to understand about the mind.

I have been a disciplined man my whole life. I grew up in a harsh house. My father was a strict, stern man, and whatever else that cost me, it gave me this: if I said I was going to do a thing, I did the thing. There was no other option in that house. I carried it into everything. I was up early as a boy to finish my schoolwork with a fresher mind,

because I had decided the night before that a tired brain would do a worse job. I made a science out of figuring out exactly what each teacher wanted, gave it to them, and got my grades. I carried it into my work. I used to tell other salesmen, flat out, the reason I am better than you is that I am more organized than you are. To me, discipline and organization are the same animal. That is just my nature. It always has been.

So how does a disciplined man end up at 310 pounds? I have thought about this a great deal, and here is the honest answer. I did not lose my discipline. I aimed it somewhere else and stopped aiming it at this. I let one part of my life - the food, the body, the recovery - run on autopilot for years while I poured all my organizational energy into my job and my children. Laziness is easy. It is the easiest thing in the world to let a thing run by itself. And when you let your body run by itself in America, it will run straight to the drive-through.

You are what you eat, and you are what you do. I let life do that to me. I did not take control of it; it took control of me. And I have come to believe that is the real root of the thing for most people carrying what I was carrying. It is not that you lack discipline. It is that you have pointed it everywhere except at yourself.

Discipline was never my problem, and I doubt it is yours. The trouble is where you aim it. I poured mine into my work and my family for thirty years and let my own body run on autopilot - and a body on autopilot in this country runs straight to the drive-through.

"It's Just a Holiday"

Before any of this, I had a sentence I used to tell myself, and I want to give it to you exactly, because I think you have a version of it too. The sentence was: "It's just a holiday."

Here is how it worked. I would gain weight every year during the holidays. Every single year. I would come home from the coast to an Italian household where the cannoli were practically a religion, and I would gain. And I would think, well, it's just a holiday. The next year, I would gain a little more, and I would think, "It's just a holiday." And the year after that, I would gain even more, and I would think, you know, this isn't bad; you get to go buy new clothes every six months - long pants in the fall, shorts in the summer, and none of last year's fit anymore - so what's the harm? I never explained it to myself: I'd donate the 6-month-old clothes if they weren't horribly stretched out of shape and just move on. I'd justified it to myself by

telling myself this is the American way: you put on a couple of pounds; don't worry about it. And then I did absolutely nothing for nearly thirty years.

The justifications held right up until my body took them away from me. I want to be plain about what that looked like, because it is not pretty and it is the truth. There came a point where I could not bend over to tie my own shoes. There came a point where I could not reach my own feet to cut my toenails, and I had to ask for help with a thing a grown man should never have to ask for help with. I could not walk up a small hill or a single flight of stairs without losing my breath, so I took the elevator. And I will never forget the first time I couldn't fit into a restaurant booth and had to figure out how to ask the hostess for a table without saying why.

I'd like to tell a quick story about one particular night out for dinner. Deb and I visited our favorite Asian restaurant. We'd visited there many times over the previous 15 years or so and never had an issue. The issue that cropped up had nothing to do with the restaurant; this issue was all on me. We were greeted by the host and shown to the dining room, where he led us to a booth. The dining room was set up with booths around the perimeter and two tables in the center. One was a table for at least ten, the other was a table for four. As we arrived at our booth, the host handed us our

menus and said our server would be in shortly. Deb slid into her seat on the left side of the booth, leaving me on the right. I began to "slide into" my side and wouldn't fit between the table and the back of the seat. These booths were commonly found in many restaurants, with tall backs and built for two adults. The booths were all positioned back-to-back, so the back of my seat was pressed up against the back of the seat in the adjacent booth. There was no way to move the bench I was sitting on backward. I asked Deb if we could slide the table toward her side of the booth a bit, and she, of course, agreed. No such luck. The table was BOLTED to the floor. I was stuck, nearly literally. Just then, our server arrived at our booth. I had two options. Leave the restaurant for another restaurant where we know they have tables, or ask to be moved to a table. We stayed. I thought leaving would be worse. It was dinnertime; we were hungry, and we liked the place and the food, so we moved. Remember two things here: there are two choices, a table for ten or a table for four, and they are both in the middle of the room; every other seat in the dining room is around the perimeter. The tables were in the middle of a ring of spectators, on display in a way. At least it felt that way to me. We took the table for four. The server moved all of our silverware, water glasses, basket of fried wontons, napkins, chopsticks, menus, and place mats to the table. We followed along with our personal items and sat

down. There were five or six booths, somewhere between fifteen and twenty people. I felt like all of their eyes were on us as the pretty blond lady, that's Deb, and the big fat guy moved across the room to the center of the room. I don't know, but I think it was pretty obvious to most of those people in the room why we were moving. We ordered, ate, enjoyed our meals, and left. We didn't visit that restaurant again for a long time after that night. Not until I knew I'd fit into a booth.

We still visit today, and we enjoy the food a great deal. I eat differently now when we visit, but I go back because the food is great, and the problem that night was me, not the restaurant.

Moments like these were terrifying. Purely emotional. Purely fearful. They always left me thinking, "What am I going to do now?"

That is what it finally took. Not a doctor's warning, not a number on a chart. It took my own body refusing to let me live my own life. The justifications are comfortable, and they will keep you company all the way to the bottom. They kept me company to 310 pounds. The day the gong finally went off in my head was the day the excuses ran out of room.

Every excuse I ever made sounded reasonable on the day I

made it. "It's just a holiday." "You get new clothes every six months." The excuse is never the problem in the moment - it is the problem in the aggregate, twice a year, for twenty years, until one day you cannot tie your own shoes.

Structure, Not a Magic Moment

People always want to know about the moment. The moment I decided this time would be different. The moment I knew it would stick. I am going to disappoint you because there was no such moment. I have never sat down once in these ten years and thought, " This is the one that's going to last. That is not how it happened, and I think the people who wait for that moment are waiting for a thing that never comes.

Here is what actually happened instead. I did the only thing I have ever known about what to do with a hard problem. When I take on a project at work or at school, the first thing I do -the first thing I have done since I was about twelve years old-is sit down with a piece of paper and write down this question. What is the target? What are you actually trying to do? So, I did that. The first target was vague: lose weight. Useless. So, I structured it. Lose how much, in what period of time? I wrote down: lose five pounds in one

week. And then I wrote: "How are you going to measure it?" You will get on the scale and write down the number. That was it. A framework, on a single piece of paper.

I did that every week for a year. Five pounds, one week, write down the number. Some weeks I lost six, some weeks I lost three, and some weeks I gained one. It was what it was. But I wrote it down every day, and I looked at it every day, and my little 'sciencey' brain started to see something in all those numbers. A trend. And the trend was going the right way. It was never a moment. It was an evolution. One little piece at a time, that single sheet of paper grew into a framework, and the framework grew into the structure that now governs everything - when I get up, when I go to bed, when I eat, what I eat, when I move, what that movement is. I did not become a different person to do this. I am the exact same person I have always been. I just let the disciplined part of me, the part I had benched for twenty years, get back in the game.

That is the difference between this attempt and every failed attempt before it. Not motivation. Structure. The other times, there was no plan, no tracking, no way to even know if I had succeeded. I was doing things willy-nilly and hoping. This time, I built a framework and stood inside it. If you take one thing from this section, take this: stop waiting for the magic moment, and go build the boring

framework instead.

There was never a single moment when I knew it would stick - and if you are waiting for that moment, you will wait forever. What changed everything was not motivation. It was structured. A target, written down, measured every day, until one piece at a time, it became the way I live.

I'm Driving This

There is a phrase that runs through my head all day long, and it is the closest thing I have to a secret. The phrase is: I'm driving this. I am in charge of this. Whatever it is - the car, the boat, the ship, my own body - I am the one at the wheel, and the choice is mine.

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

This free preview covers the first 10 pages of the chapter. The rest is in the book. To order Volume II - From 310 to Thriving, email metabojoe@gmail.com.