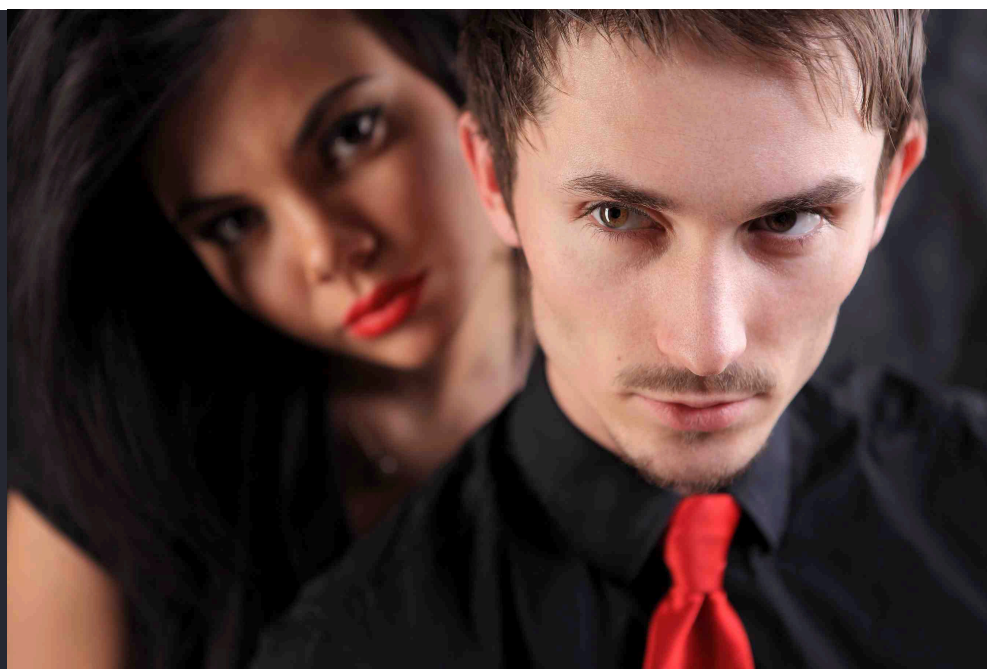


## Mind Games

Jon Lavelle



It's human nature to play 'mind games'; in fact they can serve a useful purpose.

But how do you respond when people play psychological games of a more manipulative nature?

*"Sticks and stones may break my bones  
but words can never hurt me"*

- Schoolyard Chant

We all know the schoolyard chant, but how many of us truly internalise this philosophy and make it work for us?

It can be hard, very hard indeed to dismiss personal slurs or insults, because they are just that; personal and potentially insulting.

Children can be cruel, nasty, manipulative and deceitful when they engage in 'nursery crimes'. For 'children' substitute 'adults'. We only have to observe kids in the playground to see just how vindictive they can be, yet adults, who should know better, can engage in verbal attacks that are just as cutting. Bullying is not confined to the school yard, it's alive and kicking in the corporate playground too. What went

on behind the boiler room continues in the boardroom... often openly.

My guess is that there are insults that you laugh at or even agree with, whilst others overstep the mark, make your 'blood' boil and you just cannot ignore.

A colleague in Asia, who I may only see a couple of times a year, recently greeted me with... *"Hey Jon, you've put on a bit of weight since I last saw you; have you filled out a bit?"*

He wasn't joking. Even though he was right (I had put on a few kilograms since I was last in Asia), this didn't stop me from reacting defensively. I told him it wasn't a nice thing to say, even if true. Suffice to



say, our business meeting didn't get off to a good start.

However, even more concerning were the number of times I thought about the incident during the rest of the week. It really threw me off my stride and made me question whether I was 'letting myself go' in other ways?

At that time I could have benefitted from taking the advice of Christina Aguilera, in her song 'Beautiful'...

*"You are beautiful, no matter what they say, 'cause words can't bring you down."*

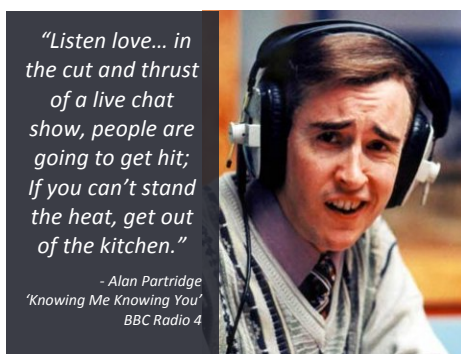
Christina Aguilera

### Fight or Flight?

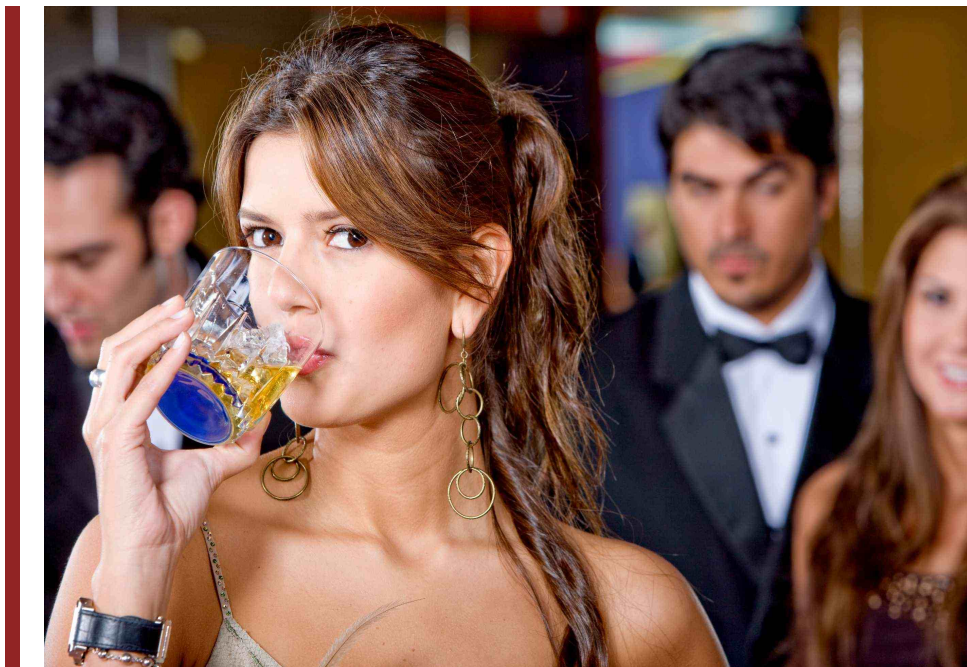
We're all aware of the deeply ingrained 'fight or flight' response that's been programmed into us from birth as part of our evolution as a human species. Instinctual, physical reflexes are just one example of this self-protective pre-programming. Without such an immediate and powerful physical response to real or perceived danger then we would not have survived as a species; our ancestors would quite literally have been someone else's breakfast!

The difference is that in 2010 we're rarely confronted with violent physical attacks that require an immediate, equally strong physical reaction. What we face in today's society are attacks of a different nature, be they verbal comments, inconsiderate behaviour, petty rudeness, awkward people and those who seek to manipulate us to their own ends.

So, recognising that much of our natural, human reaction to events is pre-programmed into us, it's impossible to be totally devoid of feelings and natural emotions. We're not robots, and neither should we try to behave like them. Within this context, how do we contain and control our natural (potentially damaging) human instinctual and emotional reactions, and retain a degree of composure in the face of provocation?



Punching someone in the face is unlikely to result in a happy outcome for anyone concerned. Equally, allowing yourself to become privately irritated and inwardly screwed up by someone else's behaviour can only damage you from the inside out,



eat away at you insidiously and result in you feeling bad. The key question is...

*"Why would anyone want to make themselves feel bad?"*

### People Play 'Mind Games'

Wouldn't life be so much easier if people didn't play mind games? I guess, but then it may also be a little boring.

In the real world, an absence of mind games is an unrealistic expectation. We often find ourselves becoming caught up in psychological games, sometimes unwittingly, when we're neither the initiators nor a willing player.

With an alcoholic, 'awareness' is said to be 'half the solution'; and this is also the case in learning to deal with the mind games of others. If you're aware that psychological trickery is being deployed, and you know what they're trying to achieve by doing so, then much of their negative power simply evaporates.

People who play malicious mind games are trying to manipulate others. But before we write off these psycho-jousts as despicable, completely underhand and without value, it's worth considering the many ways in which they can be useful.

For example, consider what goes on during the initial stages of a dating process. The idea that someone is, or is not interested in you will have an impact upon how much you like them, and upon how you then respond. If someone plays 'hard to get' (a conscious mind game in which they display behaviours that are either neutral, or the opposite of how they're actually feeling), then this can paradoxically increase your affection for them and your determination to succeed in winning them over. This is a perfect example of a 'mind game' because one person is pretending to feel the opposite of how they actually feel; an apparently counter-intuitive behaviour. Yet this deliberate manipulation and distortion is remarkably common.

Why should someone behave in this way? Because counter-intuitive or not, where humans are involved it often works! We're both complex and simple at the same time.

The underlying psychology relates to the principle of 'scarcity', in which the more unattainable something is perceived to be, the more its value increases in the eye of the beholder. If it's the 'last one in the shop' then you'll fight harder to ensure that you get hold of it ahead of anyone



*It's easy to be drawn into  
playing a mind game  
that's not of your making.*

else, and rationality and logic tend to fly out of the window. If it's the last girl or guy at the dance you might similarly drop your standards... in the hope of dropping something else later on! Put simply, if something is exclusive then it increases in perceived value simply because of its exclusivity, even though nothing material has changed.

Artwork is a classic example. When two rich bidders set their heart on a unique piece by Damien Hurst in 2008, the price rocketed way beyond initial art expert estimates of its value. Witness the countless examples of desperate parents who get close to Christmas and who are willing to pay well over the odds for hard to get items for their children; Pokemon characters or Transformers years ago, and the latest computer games machine, virtual reality game or i-pad (whatever that's supposed to be for!) in 2010.

Switching from software games to human psychological games, we know that any game or manipulative ploy can backfire. Therein lies the danger and intrigue of playing a game... you can win or lose... badly.

In the 'hard to get' mind game, the person on the receiving end may simply decide their 'target' really isn't interested in them, it's too much trouble to pursue them, or at a higher level, they recognise the game for what it is and simply refuse to 'play'.

In this case the recipient is playing a mind game of their own; let's call it a 'two can play at that' strategy, a game of bluff and counter-bluff; a game within a game. Unfortunately, in this case, the mutual game becomes counter-productive and neither person wins! How ridiculous when it would have been easier and probably more successful just to be up front, honest, to say what you mean and mean what you say from the beginning!

So it's easy to be drawn into playing a mind game that's not of our making, to be carried along with the game playing, and to stage our own counter-games in response. When it all backfires we wonder what on Earth we were all 'playing at'?

Importantly, in the heat of the situation this doesn't always happen at a conscious level, or at least at a level at which we can truly profess to be in full control of our thinking and our actions.

There is not necessarily any malice intended in the sort of mating mind game described above. There's no overt intention to hurt or disadvantage another person; it's more a case of 'psychological dancing', of covert influence, or good-natured well-intentioned tomfoolery. Think of it as the modern day equivalent of the Shakespearian masked ball, in which potential suitors hid behind masks, not wishing to reveal their true identities and feelings; at least not initially. However, as is also sometimes portrayed by Shakespeare, by hiding behind a mask the wrong person gets a knife in the back... literally!

Another familiar example is the mind game that's played between people exchanging presents. Here, the rules of the game are to exaggerate the perceived value of the gift you receive, even, and this is the farcical part of this game, if you don't want, need or like the item.

Admit it; you've played along with this game in the past, because not to do so would harm some of your most important relationships.

The second part of this mind game is to play down the value of the gift that you've given to the other person as in... *"Oh, it's nothing special, I hope you like it, but I wasn't entirely sure, you can always take it back if you want -I've kept the receipt!"*



Here the unspoken deal is “Help me to save face and I’ll help you to do the same; let’s both fool each other without admitting it to anyone, including ourselves. “We’ll both carry on in blissful ignorance whilst paradoxically we’re both fully aware of what’s going on.” A strange, but at the same time entirely familiar state of affairs... a ‘game’.

I was at a dinner some time ago, hosted by one of my suppliers. They had provided drinks, a nice meal in a posh London hotel and paid for an eminent guest speaker. Whilst the food, drink and company were great, unfortunately the evening was let down by the poor quality of the speaker, in terms of both delivery and content. His job title was ‘Professor of Innovation’ for a leading Business School, but unfortunately, he had little to say that could be categorised as innovative.

Next to me was a lady who was seated by the Managing Director of the company hosting the event. She was saying how much she was enjoying the evening and how interesting the speaker had been. As I disagreed, and in fact could not identify a single thing that I’d learned from the speech I asked her what specifically it was that she had found interesting, and what she’d learned from the speech that she found so useful? She was completely unable to answer the question; much to her embarrassment, the MD of the company... and myself!

Lesson to self... sometimes it’s best just to tell people what they want to hear, i.e. games are a dish best served warm.

So, as this specific example shows, many people will lie in order to be polite in public and not to cause a fuss. Unfortunately, there are unintended consequences, as if her assertion had gone unchallenged then the MD would have re-booked the speaker for another event and proceeded to bore another group of his valuable customers.

The positive side of this true life incident however, is that it spurred the MD to

work the room after the speech and seek genuine feedback from the participants on the basis of... “I don’t want you to be polite, I genuinely want you to be honest in your feedback.” Needless to say, by the end of the evening he had decided that the speaker had not gone down well with his audience, something that he might not have realised if he had simply taken my dinner partner’s comments at face value.

In trying to be ‘nice’ it’s also possible to be inadvertently cruel by, in this instance by not giving someone the thing that they really need.

Putting polite niceties and social lubrication aside for a moment, what about more troublesome or unhelpful mind games? What about the malicious mind games associated with bullying, backstabbing, belittling, blackmailing, gossiping, laying guilt trips, blaming others and general bad mouthing? These are all examples of ways in which people use mind games to damage the reputation of, or intentionally hurt other people.

It is these less than helpful, or downright destructive mind games to which we now turn our attention.

### Awareness is Half the Solution

Assuming we realise that a person is using a mind game upon us i.e. we’re aware of what’s happening, just as the alcoholic becomes aware that they really do have a

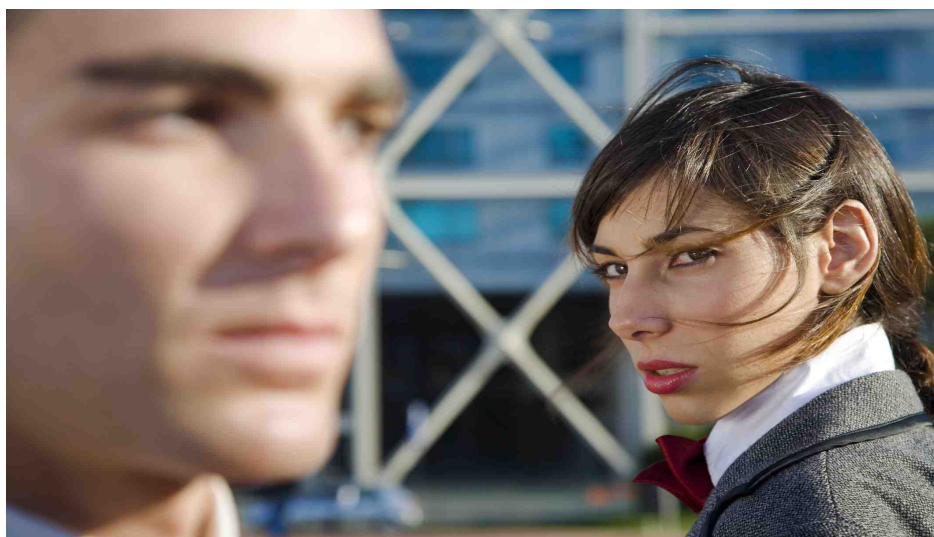
problem, then this confers a psychological advantage which enables us to move to the next stage of tackling mind games; uncovering and understanding what the person is hoping to achieve by behaving in such a manner.

Firstly, let’s understand that when a person bullies someone they’re doing it to exert control over them, to have their own way or to demonstrate power. When someone backstabs, gossips about, badmouths or belittles another person, they’re doing it in order to appear better than them; relatively speaking they’re trying to raise themselves up by putting someone else down. They try to elevate themselves by metaphorically stepping on other people’s heads.

A truly decent person on the other hand, gains respect by helping others to climb higher *with them*. It’s one of life’s positive paradoxes... the more you give away the more you gain.

When someone blames or guilt trips another person they’re doing it from a position of moral inferiority, and by using negative ‘attack weapons’ to try to gain control over their victim’s feelings they want the person to be emotionally hurt in some way.

We can see that destructive mind games are about one individual dominating another, making themselves appear better than that person in some way(s), or



## 1 Minute Coach



An acquaintance of mine was complaining some time ago about feeling 'trapped at work'. They worked for a large multi-national company, and had done so for 18 years. They were deeply unhappy, and had wanted to quit for a few years, but had not done so. Whenever the subject came up in conversation she reinforced the fact that she was not hanging on in the hope of a pay-off (voluntary redundancy), and that it wasn't a 'money thing'.

On one occasion it really did seem to be a case of 'The lady doth protest too much' and so I challenged her on this saying I didn't believe her, and the fact that she mentioned it every time we spoke about her situation led me to believe that it was exactly the hope of a pay-off that was keeping her in her unhappy predicament. "Come on Sharon, admit it. The only reason you're still with XYZ Ltd. is because you want to be paid off, and to resign voluntarily would mean that you're walking away from that possibility in the future, and, the more you go on denying this to yourself, the more entrapped you will become. Am I right?"

After a long pause she admitted that I was indeed right. Not only was she trying to deny this to her friends, she was also fooling herself.

about exerting control and power over another's emotions. So if that's what they're trying to achieve, what could be the root cause of their behaviour?

What all of these behaviours ultimately derive from is a sense of insecurity on the part of the perpetrator. People who play mind games, do so because it helps them to hide their own insecurity. They feel that by demonstrating the opposite traits they won't be found out for who or what they really are; scared and insecure.

In William Shakespeare's Hamlet we hear...

*"The lady doth protest too much."*

In other words, the more a person tries to portray themselves or a situation in one way, the more it becomes obvious that the opposite could in fact be true. The more one protests to be one thing, the more it becomes obvious that they are not. For example, the more a defendant protests their innocence, the more some people will tend to think they are guilty.

In the marketing and commercial world there's a concept called 'shouting too much' which can become self-defeating. If you try too hard to tell others what you are then you risk raising suspicions in their minds that the reason you're trying so hard is because you're over-compensating for what you're not!

In marketing, subtle is often best.

In day to day speech you will often hear people saying things like "I'm not being difficult, but...", or "I don't mean to complain, but..." When you hear expressions such as these you know that immediately following the word 'but' will be some form of disqualifier, excuse or complaint. They then immediately go on to demonstrate the exact attitude or behaviour that they are openly saying they do not possess. It's similar to the dating mind game we explored above, only in this case the deception is more clumsy, more transparent, and easier to expose. This is because a person cannot say "I'm not being difficult" without using

the word 'difficult', and in so doing they put the concept of difficulty out in the open! A person cannot say "I don't mean to complain, but..." without turning the situation into one of complaining.

I was in a meeting recently when someone said "If I was an Accountant... and I really don't mean to be rude but..." they were immediately interrupted by an Accountant who said... "Well, after that opening phrase almost anything that you say now is likely to be insulting!"

On this occasion it was a good-humoured interchange, but it makes the point.

*"People who play mind games, do so because it helps them to hide their own insecurity."*

Here are a couple more everyday examples that illustrate this psychological phenomenon.

How often, when you see a sign that says 'Wet Paint – Please Don't Touch' do you feel compelled to touch, if only just a tiny bit, in order to check if it's still wet? Even if it was wet, in what way does this confirmation of something that you have already been told help you?

It's similar psychology at work. The human mind cannot think in negatives so, for example, if you were asked not to think about your front door, you would have to think about your front door in order to understand the command not to think about it... it's too late already!

The lady referred to in the '1 Minute Coach box' on the left, was not playing a malicious mind game. However, she was playing a game; a game in which she fools herself...

What's that all about?



Back in the sphere of manipulative mind games, as long as you remain conscious and aware of these signs, use them to alert you to the fact that a person is playing with you, and remember that this is not a sign of strength, but rather they're telegraphing insecurity, then you will be able to keep a cool head. Mind games can only work against you if you let them, and so the first option open to you is simply to refuse to play.

It's often said that 'it takes two to tango'. Just as it takes two people to create a fight or an argument, or two people to play tennis, it takes at least two people to play a mind game. The exception, as illustrated above, is when a person is fooling themselves.

Generally speaking though, if one person refuses to play then the game falls apart, or at least that particular game falls apart, leaving the game initiator up a blind alley with fewer options.

When you realise the insignificance of the petty, psychological one-upmanship of others, and how childish it can be to play such games, you can start to lift yourself above such tomfoolery and focus upon what's really important to you in any situation or relationship.

At the end of the day who really cares if another person *thinks* that they are getting one up on you? Far more important questions are *have* they got one up on you, and if so, does it *really* matter in the grand scheme of things?

That said, I'm not suggesting that you simply walk away from mind games without dealing with any problems that they may create, and I am certainly not advocating the childish, emotionally unintelligent response of 'taking your toys home' or 'throwing your dummy out of the pram'. What you need to do is to reach the point where you can ignore the mind game, whilst at the same time, deal in your own controlled way with any problems that accompany it.

For example, if you're being badmouthed it's important to defend yourself, but in doing so it's essential that you don't get yourself caught up in the politics. Simply let yourself be aware of the impact the badmouth comments might have, and then coolly and calmly lay out the facts as accurately as you can. Separate facts from claims, the truth from bitching and make this clear to those who need to hear it.

Far too often we let ourselves get caught up in what everyone else thinks and in how 'important' we think we are. This is a



double-whammy time-waster, and another example of how it's possible to play mind games with ourselves.

You shouldn't need validation from other people to know that you are good, worthy or intelligent. What's essential to realise is that you are good when you do good things, and *you* know when you do good things. You are worthy when you do worthy things, and you recognise these. You are intelligent when you do intelligent things, and you know when you're acting intelligently.

Once you get to the stage where you're aware of such things, you can concentrate on feeling good yourself and letting people get on with their own lives without affecting you

At this stage you have true control, and no matter what other people's illusions might be of control and power, you can simply roll with it, stay focused on doing all you can do and be everything you can be, for yourself and for those who are important in your life.

It's also very important to ensure that you maintain a polite surface level respect for mind game players. Any demonstration of anger, irritation or abusive behaviour on your side demonstrates that you're losing some control and they're 'winning', which potentially gives them further ammunition. When you can smile and go about your business in a relaxed way then it is you who will win in the long run.

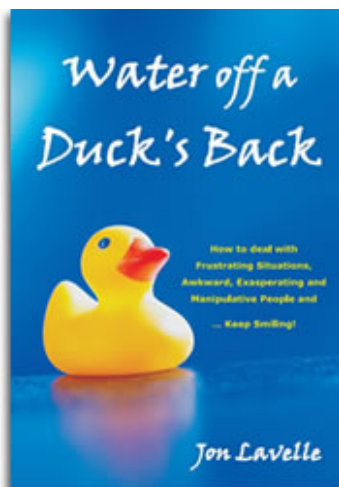
*"Nobody can hurt  
you with words  
without your  
permission."*

However, as human beings that live and work with others in the 'real world', not the imaginary one of fairy tales, telling tales and nursery crimes, we must recognise that there will be occasions when the spiteful and hurtful words of others will cut deep.

We only have to examine everyday language to clearly see this. Expressions such as "I was cut to the quick", "She was having a dig at me", "He cut me down with a single word", "It was daggers out" and "She really stuck the knife in" are commonly heard. Yesterday a colleague told me that he had just had his "... balls chopped off by the Marketing Director"!

Really?

In a future article I will look at how to deal with cutting and manipulative language, but for now, take some inspiration from Rudyard Kipling who summed up all of this in his poem 'If'....



This article is an excerpt from Jon's 3<sup>rd</sup> book; **'Water Off a Duck's Back'**

Available from  
Waterstones, Amazon and  
[www.blueiceconsulting.co.uk](http://www.blueiceconsulting.co.uk)

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:*

*If you can dream - and not make dreams your master,  
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breath a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!*

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

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