

Running Out of Your Mind: Psyching Tips for Runners

by April Clay, Registered Psychologist

Taking Aim: Goal: A four-letter word for good reason. They tend to cause a lot of people a lot of stress. The trick is to set goals to maximize both growth and feelings of success. Instead of setting yourself a time (otherwise known as an “outcome goal”) to finish the race in, consider a “range” goal. This is a goal that gives you some space- room for those uncontrollable factors that might get in your way that day. And because you have a bigger target, the odds of you walking away from your run with good feelings are that much bigger too. It’s not cheating, its common sense!



Mind games: Research reveals that runners benefit from both associative and dissociative focus strategies. An associative approach means going inside and monitoring your breath and tension levels. It is a strategy more commonly used by elite distance runners, and is correlated with faster race times. Examples of dissociative techniques include counting (how many red cars on your route), and alphabet games (a=apple, b=boat, c=cat, d=dehydrated, e=exhausted. Um, wait, better stick to nouns for that one). Basically, anything that will take your mind off the time or the pain is fair game. Dissociative strategies are especially helpful for getting you through tough times, and are used often by us mere mortals (recreational runners). Experiment on your next run with both techniques, so you will know what works best for you come race day.

Play pretend: Don’t you miss this from childhood? Here is your one chance to delude yourself for a good cause. So - run like the wind, a gazelle, Marion Jones, your next-door neighbor, super race guy, whatever works! Conjuring up a character or image that brings you power can help you through fatigue or your final bid toward the finish line. Many elite athletes are actors in their own right, having developed the ability to transform their emotional states at will. Using a visual image is just one way they facilitate this change-try it, it works!

Fatigue as an informant: Elite runners trust their bodies to provide them with information. Uncomfortable physical or mental moments are a normal part of distance running. The trick is not to allow these moments to overwhelm you. When fatigue comes knocking, listen for the message. It could be I’m hungry, thirsty, and sore, beyond sore - whatever. Decide how you will answer the need, and then move to a distraction strategy.

Call on the thought police: Like other athletes, runners can get caught up in a spiral of negative thoughts. If you have had this happen to you, you already know ignoring them doesn't really work. You have to be ready with "replacement thoughts" that will be helpful to your performance. Avoid overly emotional self-talk and focus on self-instruction or motivational messages. Once you have decided on your self-talk, be sure to practice using it during training. Alternatively, you can also use a running mantra like "run and flow" or my personal favorite, "go with the flow, like Frodo" (he had it a lot tougher than me).

Renaming the wall: I have seen many a runner become psyched out (ok, me included) by the idea of THE WALL. Some speak quite openly (loudly) about their perilous battles with the monster, which can leave you shaking in your Nikes. It is true, there is a very real physiological component to the wall, so do your homework and make sure you understand the dynamics. As for the psychological component, there are a few things you can do. You can rename it, or at least construct it out of Styrofoam bricks that slow you down but do break away. A more forgiving image can assist you in navigating this point in your run. You can also be prepared to alter your expectations of your comfort level at a crucial time in your race. If you expect a change in your body and label it as normal, chances are not as many negative thoughts will creep in to add to the physical discomfort.

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