

# Addressing the psychological demands on endurance athletes

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What are the psychological demands commonly faced by endurance athletes? New research published in the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* has identified psychological stressors common to endurance athletes across different sports at different performance levels. The article underscores where researchers can make effective recommendations to athletes of all abilities in helping them cope with pervasive psychological difficulties. The new research is therefore an important set of findings for anyone interested in improving performance in endurance sports.

Athletes in endurance [sports](#) face psychological 'stressors' that are specific to their particular sport. For example, channel swimmers have reported psychological stressors including feelings of loneliness and anxieties surrounding the duration of the swim. Similarly, runners describe a crippling mental phenomenon known as "hitting the wall", in which they experience deeply negative thoughts about their ability to continue. While research has been done on specific sports concerning the psychology of professionals – who enjoy access to professional sports psychologists – little research is available for recreational endurance athletes that provides effective and reliable psychological support.

In search of shared psychological difficulties across a variety of different sports – running, cycling, and triathlon – researchers conducted a study designed to provide useful data for those interested in performance enhancement. The resulting focus group interviews,

targeting 30 recreational endurance athletes across a range of distances and competitive levels, explored the psychological demands of training, competition preparation, and competition participation. Their analysis revealed similarities in the participants' responses. Themes were identified that capture the demands that were commonly experienced away from the competitive environment (including time investment and lifestyle sacrifices), preceding an endurance event, and during an event. These themes included 'remaining focused during an event', 'optimising pacing' and 'commitment to training sessions'. These themes were perceived to affect motivation and concentration, which in turn impact overall performance. Interventions that help endurance athletes to cope with these psychological demands could therefore encourage better outcomes in both performance and wellbeing for athletes. It is hoped that this trailblazing study will fire the starting gun on new psychological research to better support endurance athletes with these common [psychological difficulties](#).

The lead author of the study, Alister McCormick of the University of St Mark & St John, said: 'Our research highlights the mental demands that recreational triathletes, cyclists, and runners commonly experience at home, during their training, and before and during their sporting events. We're now encouraging researchers to design and test interventions that help endurance athletes to cope with these demands, so that endurance athletes can perform better in endurance events and experience more positive emotions through their involvement in [endurance sports](#).'

**More information:** Alister McCormick et al. Psychological demands experienced by recreational endurance athletes, *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/1612197X.2016.1256341](#)

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