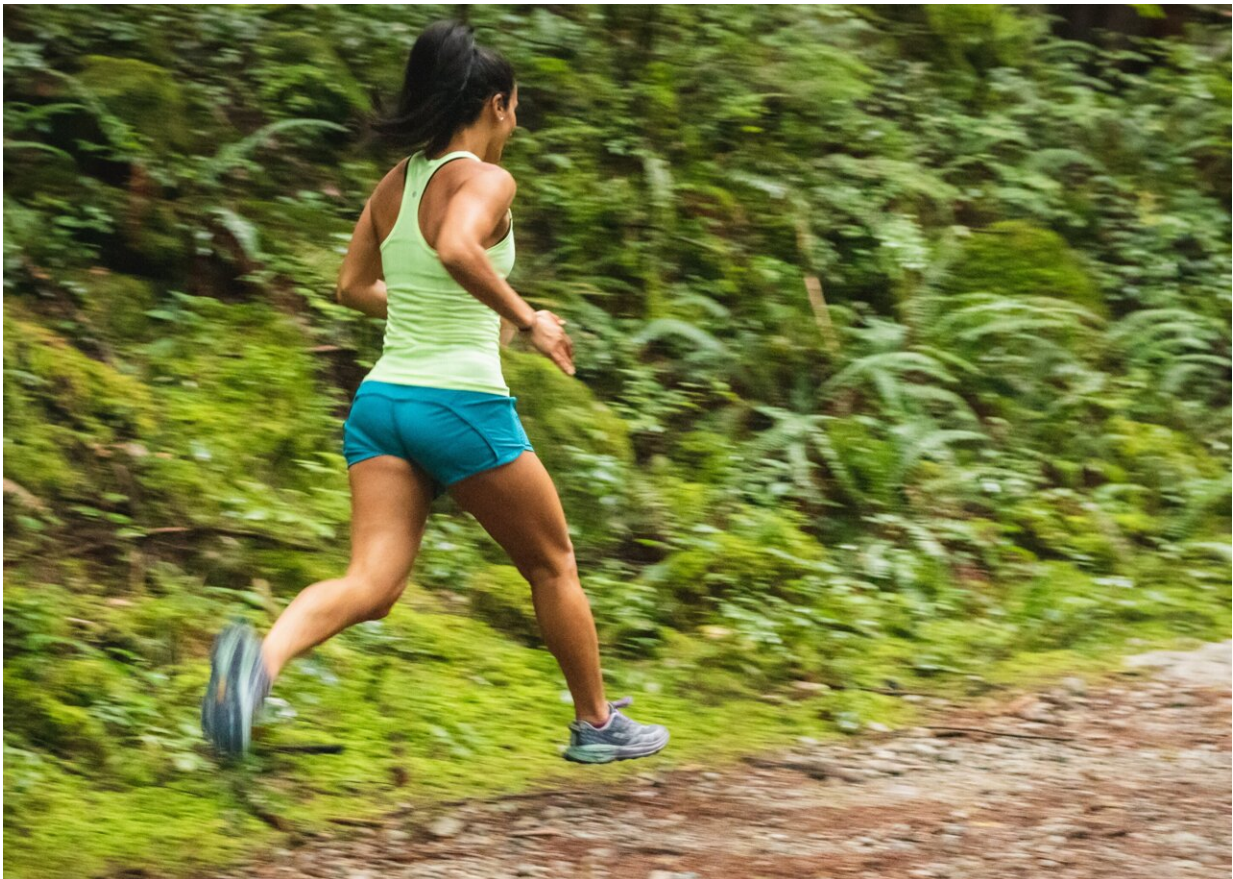


Ready to run: Train your mind as you train your body for race day

May 9 2023, by Anna Duggan



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Typically, training for a distance race means preparing yourself for the physical demands of the event. But don't overlook the mental aspects of

performance.

Most experts know the importance of mental [training](#). Roger Bannister, the first person to run a mile under four minutes, said, "It's the brain, not the heart or lungs, that's the critical organ."

Mental barriers

All athletes, no matter how strong or physically gifted, can struggle to be successful if they have mental barriers, such as low confidence, high anxiety, nerves or feeling too much pressure, that overtake them in the heat of competition.

Often, mental barriers are why many athletes do well in training, only to cave when it comes to actual race or game situations.

Overthinking is when runners shift their focus from process goals—What am I doing now to maximize my performance or effort?—to outcome issues—What if I don't finish? What if I get passed? This leads to anxiety, doubt and distraction.

Strategies for success

Fortunately, there are mental strategies that athletes can practice to overcome mental roadblocks and promote successful performance. They can help athletes set realistic, challenging and flexible goals.

Mental approaches, such as relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, focus plans, visualization and choking or panicking strategies, can help athletes confront mental barriers and trust their training to maintain confidence. They encourage athletes to expect competition discomfort, embrace it as an ally and use discomfort as valuable information—Am I

working hard enough? Should I adjust body position?

Using mental strategies helps athletes focus on the process of performance rather than outcome issues, such as winning or losing to other competitors. This encourages them not to overthink.

Goal flexibility allows people to adjust when needed and helps athletes to avoid feeling frustrated or down on themselves. Visualization helps athletes practice seeing themselves performing well during competition, preparing for any unforeseen situations and making adjustments.

Mental strategies encourage positive thought management. Many people have an internal critic. This well-practiced thought pattern is highly critical, lowers sense of self-worth, creates fear and hinders [athletes](#) from performing their best.

Mental training is finding keywords, images and thoughts to combat the internal critic and positively reframe negative thoughts if they develop.

Gearing up mentally

You can use these mental [strategies](#) as race day gets closer and throughout your race:

- Before your event, plan positive daydreams or things you want to think about to help divert your attention.
- Divide the race into segments, such as mile markers or water stops, and consider it a success when you complete each one.
- A week before the race, think of several reassuring thoughts or positive cue words to use during your event. These may be:
 - - I can do this; this is my opportunity.

- Full effort is full victory.
- I'm meant to be here.
- I'm tough and strong.
- Run strong.
- Run tall.
- Race discomfort is temporary.
- Visualize the race and how good you want to feel. Imagine being relaxed with easy strides, light feet and efficient movements. Picture this repeatedly.
- Imagine yourself maintaining a [positive attitude](#) if something unexpected happens. Plan on adjusting if this situation occurs. Remember: There are no musts or shoulds. When things happen that you can't control—weather, competition, recurring injury, course terrain—focus on what you can influence, like changing your stride, adjusting your pace and relaxing your arms.
- The day and moments before your event, remind yourself of your dream of attempting this run. Think about all the training and other efforts you've made to reach this goal.
- Embrace race discomfort. Allow any discomfort—unless you're in pain—to remind you that you are working with effort. Trust your body. Trust your training.
- Use other runners and spectators as motivation and energy. They're supporting you.

Returning to racing after an injury

If you're returning to racing after an injury, you may have additional mental barriers to overcome. Try focusing on the little victories that marked your recovery. First run without pain? Celebrate. First 30-minute run since your injury? Celebrate it. Finally able to run both up and down the big hill on your training route without having to stop? Celebrate it, and then do it again if you can.

All of those wins throughout the training journey can help combat the feelings of insecurity, doubt and fear about returning from an injury. On the day of and during the race, think about how it felt to achieve the little victories. These intermittent reminders of your accomplishments can help you through the [race](#).

No matter how strong or physically gifted you might be, it's crucial to have a positive frame of mind and be mentally prepared so you'll have a successful running event.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

Citation: Ready to run: Train your mind as you train your body for race day (2023, May 9)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-ready-mind-body-day.html>

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