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9 ways to boost your mental strength

These research-backed mental strategies will help you run your best.

by Jim Afremow



Getty Images

Think about your running heroes - they may include Olympians as well as the pack leaders in your local running club. Most people aren't blessed with the lightning-like fast twitch muscle fibres of Usain Bolt or the innate prowess of their club's podium climbers, but some of the traits you admire in them - their confidence, concentration and commitment - are within you. You just have to tap into your hidden potential. The mental strategies that follow are based on classic studies, along with the latest research findings in performance psychology and my own extensive professional experience working as a sports psychologist with professional athletes. These tips will help you learn how to think, feel and act like a champion so you can develop a mindset that'll unlock your full athletic ability.

See success

Imagining an optimal performance is accomplished by creating a clear mental image of what you want to achieve in a race. When visualising your ideal race, include the sights, sounds and emotions that accompany

the experience. Strive to experience the action from your point of view - what it feels like to stand in the starting area, feeling calm and composed; and what it feels like to cross the finish line feeling strong and happy.

Stay positive

Identify your self-defeating thoughts and challenge them with encouraging statements. When a negative emotion strikes, stop it in its tracks. For example: 'My split time is off. I'm feeling stressed. Stop. Breathe. I'm going to take a fresh, confident approach to my next mile.'

Be present

Focus all your energy on execution, not self-analysis. Don't write the review of your performance until it's over. Dave Scott, a six-time Ironman world champion, would repeat to himself during a race, 'Do what I can do in this moment.' That is, do your best right now and resist the urge to criticise the past or stress about the future.

Push on

Mental toughness is built by doing something difficult over and over again, especially when you don't feel like doing it. The discomfort you feel when you're doing a challenging workout is an important part of the strengthening process. Push through your down days when you're not feeling your best (unless, of course, you are injured or ill). Dogged determination requires keeping your feet moving forward through all those inconveniences, discomfort and insecurities to reach your goals.

Don't panic

Most top athletes feel anxious before and during competition. They accept this anxiety and use it to sharpen their focus. If you're feeling nervous, remind yourself that some anxiety is necessary for optimal performance, and interpret the sensations you're feeling as signs that you're primed and ready.

Own your zone

A close relationship exists between performance quality and intensity level: your performance may be poorer when your intensity level is too low (perhaps because you feel tired) or too high (perhaps because you're overexcited). To get in the zone, you must learn to throttle up or down to find the right intensity. Athletes may be underactive in workouts ('This doesn't matter') but will hit their mental peak for races ('This means everything!'). The next time you're running, ask yourself if your intensity level is too low, too high or just right. Adjust accordingly; upbeat music can help pump you up, while mellow tunes can calm you down. Dynamic stretches and strides can help prepare you for action; sitting calmly and reviewing your race strategy can help you chill out.

Project confidence

On race day, what's your body language saying? Is your chin up, shoulders back, chest out? Research shows that holding your body in confident postures for only a couple of minutes can produce elevations in testosterone, decreases in the stress hormone cortisol and increased feelings of power, as well as tolerance for risk when it's needed.

Manage discomfort

It's far better to focus on the joy of movement, maintaining correct form and good breathing, than to concentrate on the burning sensation in your legs. One elite runner told me he focuses on his eyelids while he runs 400-metre repeats. Why? 'My eyelids are the only part of my entire body that don't hurt when I run 400s,' he said. And an endurance athlete told me the act of smiling during a rough patch of a race helps her release pain and keep going.

Evaluate progress

Scrutinise your important workouts and races regularly. Ask yourself three questions: (1) What did I do that was good? (2) What needs to get better? (3) What changes should I make to become my best? This process will allow you to give yourself credit where credit is due and to learn from your mistakes. Develop selective amnesia Top runners have a long-term memory for success and a short-term memory for failure. Every athlete fails, but the most successful ones do not dwell on the failures. Instead, they focus on their positive training and racing experiences and keep confidently moving forward.

Adapted from The Champion's Mind: How Great Athletes Think, Train, and Thrive, by Jim Afremow (Rodale, 2014)

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