

# Mental Tools to Boost Running Performance and Pleasure

by: Rob Udewitz, Ph.D.

## **The Mind's Choice**

During most runs the road is laid out in front of us and we can see where we are at and where we want to go. I often do my most challenging runs on the Reservoir in New York City's Central Park. There is a spot I've noticed at the Reservoir where the path turns and I can see only a few feet ahead. However, if I look to my left I can see clear to the spot where my hard run will end in about 400 meters. It is at this moment where my mind has a choice. I can keep my gaze forward and see only where I'm at, or I can look to my left at see where I want to be. On the surface, my first choice promises nothing more than limited scenery, my own heavy breathing and the pain of lactic acid buildup. The second choice holds the promise of a beautiful view of the water and the place I want to be...the place where all the pain will stop. Initially, the better choice seems obvious.

George Sheehan (Running To Win, 1992) wrote, "of all the lessons sport teaches us about life, perhaps none is more dramatic than the danger of focusing on the outcome." This statement is most closely associated with our tendency to focus solely on success or failure and winning or losing. Most of us know that when these factors become our primary goal, performance and pleasure usually suffer. During a strenuous workout or challenging race, a primary focus on the finish line (even if you're not worrying about your time or place) can also put you at a disadvantage.

## **Goal Setting and Quieting your Mind**

Runners sometimes wait to "figure out" their goals like distance and pace during the actual run. They can fill their minds with thoughts like "run hard to that lamppost" or "just one more lap around". The mental chatter of goal setting and goal shifting during a run can detract from the pure pleasure of your run. Setting a goal prior to your workout will allow you to quiet your mind of these thoughts and allow you to focus on your run. When setting your goal for a run, account for variables like cardiovascular conditioning, workout schedules, weather conditions and how you feel that day. If your training calls for a harder workout, try setting a moderately challenging goal before the run based on these factors. Then make modifications, if necessary, after you've warmed up. If your schedule calls for an easy day, try to keep your mind on making your run as comfortable as possible. Setting a goal while allowing for flexibility will put your mind at ease and reward you with more enjoyable runs.

## **Distraction and Running**

There are many places to direct your attention during a run. Running is a great opportunity to experience nature, people watch or just review the struggles and triumphs of your day. Others prefer to listen to music on the run that inspires them to persevere or distracts them from discomfort. The problem with distraction is that it leaves little room for awareness to experience what you are actually doing. It's possible that we freely place our minds on everything else because running can come so naturally to us. Running is easy and most people can do it with minimal instruction, but it can also be very hard, requiring great effort. As the distance and intensity of a run increases, the simple mechanics of your stride begin to change and break down. Maintaining some focus on these elements will help you stay efficient, more comfortable and are guaranteed to bring you more pleasure during your run.

Staying in touch with your mind and body during a run will help you reduce negative thoughts and physical discomfort. You'll also be better able to avoid injuries by differentiating between types of pain. When you are unable to maintain your form because of discomfort you are at a greater risk of injury and better off slowing down or stopping. Checking in with your body also allows you to warm up better and get into the flow of the run more evenly. If you are listening to a Walkman, the intensity of your run is more likely to be dictated by the tempo of the song rather than how you actually feel. Subsequently, you may go too fast before you've sufficiently warmed up and leave yourself prone to injury.

### **Body Awareness on the Run**

You might think that running comes so naturally to experienced runners that they freely allow their minds to wander. Actually, elite runners often use a flexible style of focus that changes with the demands of the run. When the going is easy they may pay attention to other things, but they continuously “check in” with their bodies. When the going gets tougher, they pay particular attention internally, to their minds and bodies.

Focusing inward gives you greater control of your run. Our tendency is to try to ignore the pain that can come from a tough run; but when we ignore we ultimately lose control. Becoming involved in the rhythm of your breath can help your lungs more efficiently exchange oxygen for carbon dioxide and flush lactic acid from your muscles. Maintaining awareness of your form can help relax your muscles, reduce pain and allow you to run faster and farther.

### **Negative Thoughts**

Our first inclination is to distract ourselves from negative thoughts when we feel their weight bearing down on our minds. If we consistently ignore a persistent thought, we often end up fueling its power and pull. We are telling our mind that it is too scary to “go there” and our fear subsequently grows. Paying attention to these thoughts might be another path to managing them. If you really follow your thoughts, you may notice that they are more associated with how you *might* feel in the future, rather than how you *actually* feel in the present. We may think, “Wow, how will I ever finish this run if it feels so tough now”. Even though the future could be as short as a few seconds away, you really cannot know for sure how you *will* feel down the road. During a tough run we may worry that we cannot maintain intensity or even make it to the finish. But these thoughts, although very real, often have no basis in reality. We do, however, have control of the present moment. If we remain aware of our thoughts we are better able to understand their basis in reality and connect with how we actually feel in the present. Finally, you leave yourself open to the very real possibility that you might actually feel better down the road!

If you keep bringing your mind back to the moment you will be better able to manage how you feel during your run. You may notice that you feel pretty good or you may be able to change your breathing and form to help yourself feel better. Many runners successfully manage negative thoughts by noticing them while detaching from them emotionally. Some effective strategies might be to think, “Oh, there are my negative thoughts again”. Or you could actually say hello to them and invite them in. Much like an annoying houseguest, these thoughts are often less emotionally draining when you welcome them and take them lightly. If you really *are* having difficulty with negative thinking, you may experience a great sense of power in knowing that you can maintain the intensity of your run while feeling so lousy.

### **Let your Mind Flow**

The beauty of running is that there is so much time to think. The ability to engage our bodies while allowing our mind to flow may account for the great emotional benefits of running. There are no right or wrong ways to think or feel, but having some mental tools to try will reward you with the most pleasure from your runs.

### **ABOUT the AUTHOR**

**Dr. Udewitz is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist. He is affiliated with Behavioral Associates of New York City. His dissertation at Hofstra University was on psychological processes in runners. A collegiate runner, Rob still competes in races and most recently completed the Boston Marathon. He can be reached at: rudewitz@rcn.com**