Marathon continued from B1

First, let’s talk about the innumerable wall and what happens when you hit it. Hitting the wall isn’t just a failure; it really does happen. And it’s probably going to happen to you at some point if you’re brave enough to run the marathon. Hitting the wall is basically about running out of energy. Your legs feel like concrete, your breathing becomes labored, your stride turns into a shuffle. Negative thoughts flood your mind and the whole thing just seems overwhelming.

Identifying imaginary—but realistic—scenarios before the race is key to success on the actual day: “What happens when I hit the wall?” “What if I fall?” To get the most out of this, you need to identify potential strategies and situations to cope with these situations should they arise on race day.

Research suggests that elite marathoners use specific psychological strategies to help them perform.

In a study, 315 participants from three Eastern Seaboard marathons in the United States were asked about their experiences of hitting the wall. The researchers found that about 43 percent of participants reported that they hit the wall during the marathon, with results showing that fatigue, unintentional slowing of pace, a desire to walk, and a drift in focus to survival were all key features of the wall. The researchers also noted that recreational marathoners were asked about how they coped with hitting the wall. The participants used multiple techniques including physical coping efforts such as supplementation or hydration, emotion-focused coping, social support, and cognitive strategies like willpower and mental reframing.

To psychologically prepare for the wall, runners need to first accept it. If it’s going to happen, then find strategies to cope with this situation.

Talk to Yourself

One such technique is to help overcome the wall could be managing your self-talk. Self-talk refers to the “voice” in your head. It is useful mental strategy to apply to long-distance running, and many studies have shown the majority of competitive marathon runners use self-talk to overcome the marathon wall.

Runners report using a rich variety of self-talk, which include both positive and negative techniques as well as a wide variety of self-talk strategies. Repeating choice words when you need to focus, keeping a diary, and focusing on the outcome and goal can help direct your mind away from negative thoughts and toward a positive experience.

The Finnish word “murmuri” literally means “instrument for thinking.” As such, short, short words or phrases can be used effectively to focus the mind. To best manage self-talk, before the race, runners are encouraged to prepare multiple mantras tailored to various challenges during the race.

For example, to overcome inclines, you might use the words “balls are my friend.” Toward the end of the race, you might say to yourself “think strong, breathe strong, finish strong.” Or you might just keep “repeat running, don’t stop” over and over again. It really is a case of whatever works for you.

Maintain Your Focus

During a marathon, association and disassocia- tion are important cognitive strategies for maintaining focus. Association refers to the monitoring of the body and adjusting pace accordingly, while disassociation refers to using distraction to direct attention away from pain. A study from the University of North Carolina investigated the association and disassociation cognitive patterns of United States Olympic marathon trialrunners.

They found that the top finishers employed cognitive strategies that utilized both associ- ative and disassociative techniques, while bottom finishers only adopted disassociative strategies. So being at one with your physical state is really important if you’re trying to maintain your focus.

Paula Radcliffe—a British long-distance runner who set a world record for the fastest marathon in 2003—used a variety of associative and disassociative strategies during her running to maintain focus. These strategies included monitoring foot-strike and stride patterns, ensuring that her arms were swinging forward and back- ward rather than fixed to side; maintaining awareness of hydration levels, observing breathing patterns, and counting in her head to determine when she was within each mile.

These strategies can help bring a meditative practice to your movement, creating a healthier way to run that’s more enjoyable, with better results for both your health and performance. By running in sync with your breathing, watching your stride, and counting in your head, you can enjoy the pure joy of mindful running.

To make sure you’ve got the best chance of making it to the finish line, it’s important to prep in practice. Those three main strategies were the hallmark of Radcliffe’s success in 2003. “In long-distance events, the importance of your mental state in determining the outcome of a race can’t be overestimated.”

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Many runners use a variety of self-talk and spiritual strategies.