

Why athletes should treat the brain like a muscle

By Amanda Loudin April 11

After back surgery three years ago, 31-year-old environmental scientist Danielle Cemprola had become a frustrated runner, suffering from a sense that she might never return to her former level of performance. Having run 44 marathons pre-surgery and six after, she had all but given up on eking anything more from the physical side of training. That's when she decided to work on her mental game, something she says has made all the difference as she preps for an upcoming marathon.

While elite athletes have long honed their mental skills, Cemprola, who lives in Greenville, S.C., is joining a growing number of amateurs delving into the power of the mind. These athletes are working on their confidence, motivation and the mind-body connection to overcome obstacles and reach new heights. "Finding the limit of your potential as an athlete involves proper mental training along with the physical," says Joanna Zeiger, former Olympic triathlete and author of a book on mental toughness called "The Champion Mindset."

Some of this increased focus on mental training stems from the fact that some amateur runners are approaching a finish line of sorts. "As athletes, we're at the point of marginal returns from physiological sports enhancement," says Brad Stulberg, journalist, columnist and co-author of the upcoming book "Peak Performance." "So the next legal [non-doping] frontier is the mind."

Upping the power of the brain

One of the areas where athletes struggle the most is negative self-talk, which can be a big hindrance to progress, says Denver-based sports psychologist Justin Ross. "I have clients keep a mental log along with their physical log," he says. "They record their state of mind during training, what they do when things get tough, and how these responses shape their behavior."

Armed with the awareness of their behavior, Ross can work with athletes to flip the negative chatter. "I have them come up with three positive 'I am' statements to begin the day," he says. "Then in the evening, they finish off with three gratitude statements specific to their training."

Zeiger says the consistent practice of repeating strong words or sentences can go a long way. "Write it down so that you can go back to it," she says. "Then whenever you hit a rough patch, pull those words out so that you can overcome any negativity you're experiencing."

Cemprola has tried a wide array of tools to boost her mind's role in her athletic success. "I have read sports psychology books, listened to motivational podcasts and worked on visualizing race day," she explains. "I even found a video of the marathon course on YouTube and watch it several times a week to familiarize myself with spots that might be difficult for me."

Zeiger is a fan of visualization. "It's important to spend time picturing positive outcomes, seeing yourself racing strong, crossing the finish line with your arms in the air and carrying out your race strategy to perfection," she says. "I also encourage athletes to practice disaster visualization — imagining hitting a rough spot and envisioning how they will get through it."

Another difficulty athletes encounter is tying success to external gratification. "Eventually, you run out of good races and if your whole self is tied up in those results, you're setting yourself up for disappointment," says Stulberg. "Instead you need to remind yourself what is real and what can't be taken away. That balances out what you can't control."

Sometimes this means stepping away from chasing a particular goal, says Zeiger. "When the pursuit becomes all-encompassing, everything you do is detrimental," she explains. "This is when you need to step back and switch focus — maybe try a new distance — so that you can gain back your confidence."

Positive messages

Mental training can also involve practicing your response to pushing hard in training for a better outcome in racing. "It doesn't feel good to go hard," says Ross. "But if you practice positive self-talk in these moments instead of negative, you can excel, and not beat yourself up afterward thinking you could have done better."

To get the most of your mind's power, it's important to treat it as a muscle, says Stulberg. "The mind gets tired just like the body and if it isn't given a break now and then, it can't function at its top level," he explains.

This means forgoing the temptation to focus on metrics every single time you head out to train. "You have to incorporate some meta-easy runs, leaving the watch at home and running by feel," Stulberg says.

Since putting her mental training plan into place, Cemprola has "negative split" her last three races — meaning she's run faster on the back half than the front — not an easy result to pull off. "I focus on finishing every run strong, training my brain to believe that I can be strong at the end of any run, even a marathon," she says.

At the end of the day, it's the mental training that can deliver the extra edge many athletes seek. "Everyone has a physical limit," says Zeiger. "But the mind is infinitely malleable."

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