



Mental Strategies for Running

STRATEGIES TO FUEL YOUR RUNNING

As a coach, my goal is to provide you with multiple skills, tools, and strategies that you can use to fuel your running on any given run, any given day, and any given race.

Knowing which tool to use, and when, is an art in itself. Below you will find a number of skills, tools, and strategies. If you are used to using all of these strategies routinely, then you can call on them in the moment as they are needed. These strategies aren't just for when things are turning south, they are also for when things are going really great and you think you can push your limits.

Deena Kastor says it like this,

“I learned that some days it took scenery, music, or musing about dinner to get through a workout. Other days, I needed to think myself through the tough parts. Only one more mile. You've got this. Turning my attention inward, to my breathing, stride, or arms, worked in other situations. My job was simply to uncover the tool necessary for the moment. Often, I found it on the first or second attempt. Sometimes, it took several tries. But each time, a shift in perspective got me through the crux of a workout, and built more endurance, more speed, and greater confidence.”

Of all the strategies, mindfulness, is where we begin.

Mindfulness is simply tuning in to all your senses and emotions in the present moment, and using that present sense to guide your behavior objectively. What do you hear? What do you see? What do you smell? How does your body feel? Do you have tense muscles? Tired muscles? An upset stomach? A distracted mind? Are you happy? Are you sad? Do you feel energized? Don't judge these things, they just are. Be with those senses and feelings. Notice how when you tune into your senses and feelings that everything else that follows feels more deliberate.



Another Deena Kastor quote on the matter, “I noticed a subtle yet profound tonal change in my head. I would be running and I’m so slow today might come to mind, but as a fact, not a judgment, and I’d spend a little time considering how I could rest better to prepare for tomorrow’s workout.” This quote is a great example of how one can tune in mindfully in the moment, refrain from judging, and instead use the information strategically. That’s the gift of mindfulness, it helps you be present and objective.

Make mindfulness part of your routine. When you are training, routines help you regulate physically and emotionally. Get consistent sleep, eat nutritiously, practice mindfulness in all things. Use warm-ups and cool-downs. Intentional living leads to intentional running.

Notice how having a mindfulness practice impacts you in life and in the run.

“I began making connections beyond training. I noticed how an argument on the phone with my mom was followed by a bad workout. A fast mile-repeat session came on the heels of exciting news about a friend getting married.”—Deena Kastor.

Mindfulness is at the heart of conscious, and purposeful living and running.

Setting Intentions: An intention is a focus that you want to hone in on in a present-moment-experience. At the beginning of a run, try choosing an intention, or in the middle of a run if you need motivation and strength look to your intentions to get you through.

As you get better at practicing mindfulness on your runs, you may start to consider what motivates you to run. What is your “True North goal”? Finding higher meaning in running provides motivation and a sense of importance to what you are doing. Some examples might be, “I run to show an example of healthy living to my children,” or “I’m running to raise awareness about cancer, which someone I loved died from”, or “I run because doing hard things makes me feel empowered”.



Your True North goal should be something that reflects your personal values. True North goals can be called on in any moment of any run to fuel you with motivation and grit. True North goals are easy to recall and powerful to use intentions.

Gratitude easily falls into place as mindfulness and True North goals become established. True North goals may highlight the things we feel most grateful for, and mindfulness allows you to more consciously appreciate. This translates into happier, more joyful, more energized runs and adds to the motivation that fuels any given run or race. Gratitude is a really natural intention that can be used while running and in everyday living.

Deena Kastor on gratitude:

“I brought this idea to practice. The mountains had previously been a source of inspiration and distraction. Now as I ran, I imagined them filling me with their strength and beauty and I offered my gratitude back. Sometimes before workouts, I stood outside barefoot to absorb the earth’s energy. I felt the dirt or the grass under my feet. I took deep breaths, feeling the oxygen move through my chest to my legs, and exhaled my positive energy back into the world. I also pushed down into the earth to feel grounded, and to plant my own energy into the environment.

Simply being aware of this exchange added a richness to my running. I sometimes looked more closely at a single object---sage-brush---and considered its soft, warm energy. Or I took a moment to appreciate the caring way in which Andrew handed me my water bottle, and the selflessness of Mike as he ran farther and harder than he ever had before. With these small acknowledgments I felt closer to the world around me”.

Another form of intention is the mantra. Mantras are phrases or words that you repeat over and over again, often rhythmically with your running cadence. These words or phrases give you power, remind you of your True North goal(s), and help you cope in a moment of difficulty and stress. Some examples of mantras for running, “I can do this”, “Do hard things”, “Just a little farther”, “I’m doing this for me”. Find a mantra that works for you.



Visualization is a form of meditation and simulation that is used to imagine yourself successfully completing a run or race. It is a great tool to use in the days and minutes leading up to a race. Get completely relaxed and comfortable. Close your eyes and visualize the course. Imagine yourself going around each bend, climbing each hill, and pushing yourself to your limits with success. Imagine the heat in your muscles, the sweat on your face, and the type of thoughts and intentions you want to hone in on as you complete each obstacle. Imagine yourself strong, prepared, well rested, well hydrated, and in a state of flow.

Positivity: Positive psychology teaches us that optimism is a strong source of strength. It isn't that all things are rosy all of the time, but that one can choose which lens they use to view the world. Choose the optimistic, positive lens.

Through mindfulness one is suddenly more aware of the thoughts that stream through their mind. Many people experience a lot of negative self-talk. Negative self-talk can become a vicious cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, you think "I am so slow" (while running), this thought causes you to feel badly, then the body (often subconsciously) slows down. Mindfulness gives you the tool to look at negative self-talk and make more objective choices around it, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of giving in to the negative talk. On negative self-talk from Deena Kastor, "It took tremendous effort to control those thoughts. My brain easily slipped back into negativity, and I found I had to stay on top of my thinking in the same way I had to remain conscious and diligent about my pace in a workout. Oh, you're doing it again, I said to myself when I became aware of negativity, being careful not to rebuke myself and therefore wind up being negative about being negative. I told myself: Find a thought that serves you better".



To challenge negative self-talk you first practice mindfulness—bring awareness to the thoughts. Notice that you have them. Second, think objectively about the thought—Is there something useful about the thought? Is it true? Don't just accept what you think because your mind goes there. Third, as you practice mindfulness, you'll start to see patterns in your thinking. For example, if something feels hard maybe you think "I can't do it." It likely isn't true, and knowing it's a pattern of thought can help you shift your thought to a more productive and useful thought. Fourth, choose to respond objectively. Fifth, make a conscious effort to practice positive-self-talk. As Henry David Thoreau said, "We must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives."

An example of using a different, more positive lens to view a thought, "If you're pushing, the race is always hard. The strength I developed came from not being afraid of the fatigue. Every cell in my body still shouted I'm exhausted! by the end of each long run. But my mind was quick to respond. Yes, but you can still move forward." —Deena Kastor.

A State of Flow: Nothing feels better in running than getting to a state of flow. Flow is when rhythm and strength and motivation meet in one happy place and the pursuit of running suddenly feels natural and effortless, while in reality the body is working hard and proficiently. Many people report that getting to a state of flow often comes after breaking through the metaphorical "wall". Meaning, that the running will feel burdensome, then by some grace of energy, it feels light. Other runners report that they feel a state of flow when they are working in their 75%-85% perceived effort range. Maintaining a state of flow requires consistent, routine training, this is because flow happens when preparedness meets opportunity. When you find yourself in a state of flow, grab it by the horns, and really push yourself (especially in a race!) because you can rest assured that you have done the work necessary to reach this moment and fly.



Have a plan: In long runs, be strategic about your energy plan. Deena Kastor's coach told her, "The marathon is an energy game. Going out too hard and surging wastes energy. You want to be smooth and economical. In the long run, we are training the body's energy system..." Deena Kastor's also knew that we are training the mind in relation to the energy system: "In the early miles, the marathon mind needed to be calm to keep the pace controlled... Around the halfway point when the pace required more effort, the internal cheerleader stepped in--the encouraging voice that pushed me in every race. Good job, work this hill. Just focus on the mile you're in. Drive your arms. Drive. Drive!... The final miles of the long run required a whole new mental level: the insistent mind..."

Training and practicing physical and mental strategies aren't just about when it gets rough, it's also about when it goes well. "It occurred to me that while we need a plan B to turn to when races aren't going well, we should also have a plan when our strength exceeds our expectations"—Deena Kastor. My hope is that the information contained here will help you plan for when your strength exceeds your expectations as well as when things aren't going well AND everything in-between.

One final thought, "No two training cycles are alike, it's your job to run your best in the season you are in. There is no benefit to judging if you are better or worse than before. Find a way to be your best in this moment." —Terrance (one of Deena Kastor's mentors)

References:

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