

These 6 Tips Will Help You Build the Mental Strength You Need to Get Through Tough Runs

By Scott Douglas

Olympic medalist and champion marathoner [Meb Keflezighi](#) thought about dropping out of every [marathon](#) he ran—even the three he won.

So if you've had those thoughts, it's certainly not just you. All runners have rough patches when pushing themselves, whether in a race, during a [hard workout](#), or on a [long run](#). Experts use the phrase “psychological crisis” to describe when your body's signals dominate your attention and you think about slowing or stopping.

These moments often occur two-thirds to three-quarters of the way through a [workout](#) or [race](#). Speaking about the Ursuline Academy runners she coaches in Dallas, elite runner [Becky Wade](#) says: “They're deep enough into the race that they're hurting, but not close enough to the finish line yet to get excited or start [kicking](#). It's easy to doubt whether they'll be able to hang on, and they back off a bit as a protective mechanism.”

What separates Keflezighi, Wade, and other successful runners from some of us is that they know these rough patches will come, and they have mental strength techniques for dealing with them.

These techniques are quite simple. Even better, they can be learned, and then honed, so that you persevere despite the internal voice telling you to back off or drop out. Here are six elite-endorsed ways to build mental strength when the going gets tough.

1. Know Why You're Doing This

Good [goals](#) not only guide your [training](#). They can also fortify you during difficult stretches.

Know the purpose of a given workout or race, and how it will help you meet a [personally meaningful goal](#), says Olympian Roisin McGettigan, a sport psychology coach who holds the Irish record in the [steeplechase](#).

For example, “if it was a long workout, I would remind myself that this is the time to work on my [strength and endurance](#),” McGettigan says. “If it was an early-season race, the purpose might be ‘to see where I'm at’ or ‘blow off the cobwebs.’”

These why-am-I-doing-this thoughts can occur not just when you're acutely suffering, but also when you're [bored](#) or apathetic. McGettigan says to remind yourself why you're out there in those situations as well. Think of how [easy running](#) will help you [recover](#) for your next key workout, or how an hour alone on the roads provides a calming antidote to the message-a-minute pace of modern life.

If thoughts alone don't do the job for you, McGettigan recommends using visual cues. "I often drew a smiley face or heart on my hand to remind me that I really loved what I was doing and I was saying 'yes' to this experience," she says.

2. Enlist Family and Friends

Telling a few key people about your race or hard workout adds [accountability](#). When a moment of crisis occurs, picture yourself recounting the run to them. Will you be proud to tell them how you handled the challenge?

Keflezighi was in 21st place halfway through the [2012 Olympic Marathon](#). Bothered by stomach and [foot pain](#), he pondered dropping out. Then he thought about his family, who were waiting for him at the finish line. What kind of example would dropping out set for his daughters, he asked himself. He committed to finishing no matter what, and wound up crossing the line in fourth place.

You can also enlist others in practical terms. As McGettigan notes, most elite runners train with others, in part to be pulled through [hard efforts](#) when they're struggling and might otherwise slack off. Wade tells the high schoolers she coaches to latch on to a teammate or competitor if their resolve falters during a race. Doing so can shift your attention from how much you're hurting to the more straightforward task of maintaining contact.

3. Visualize Success

To reiterate: Successful racers know one or more psychological crises are likely to occur when they're pushing themselves. One way they prepare for the challenge is to [play the race through their head](#) before they get to the starting line. As Wade, a 2:30 marathoner, puts it, "I envision myself in a race atmosphere, down to the course, competition, and atmosphere."

A key benefit of doing so is that, when the urge to slow or stop strikes, you have a counter-narrative ready—that vision you implanted and watched several times of yourself rising to the challenge and continuing to [run strong](#).

"I think having visualized the race going well in my head many times allowed me to stay engaged, because I had already told myself I was going to have a good race," says [Mark Coogan](#), whose long elite career was highlighted by a spot on the 1996 Olympic marathon team. "Knowing what I was going to do in the race allowed me to be more aware of how I was running physically, so I could stay loose and smooth."

Coogan is now the coach of New Balance Boston, which includes on its roster Olympians [Elle Purrier St. Pierre](#) and [Heather MacLean](#). He encourages his athletes to spend 10 to 15 minutes a day visualizing in the [week leading up to a big race](#).

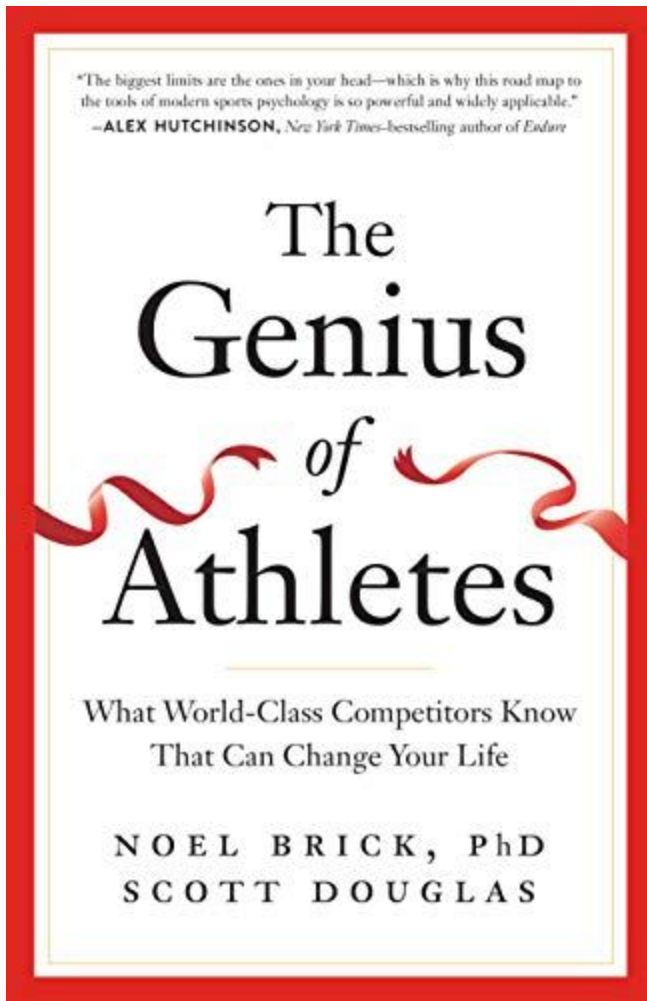
"I tell them to visualize seeing themselves running well," Coogan says. "Visualize the race you want to happen."

4. Focus on Your Body—But Not Excessively

Experts used to believe that [experienced runners](#) focus on bodily sensations (known as associating) and that less experienced runners focus on anything but their body

(known as dissociating). Thanks in part to research by Noel Brick, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Ulster and co-author of *The Genius of Athletes*, it's now known that that [old dichotomy is too simplistic](#).

[Brick has shown](#) that a Goldilocks-level of bodily awareness leads to [lower perceived exertion](#). “Focusing excessively on bodily sensations, like [breathing](#) or feelings of discomfort, can be harmful to our performance,” Brick says. Focusing solely on these sensations can negatively affect performance by increasing how hard the work feels and making the run feel more unpleasant. This then leads to [slowing down](#).



A better approach? Check in periodically, notice what your body is telling you, and then focus elsewhere. When [racing a 10K](#), for example, Coogan would do a body check about once a mile. He'd make sure his shoulders were low and level, that his hands were cupped loosely, that he wasn't overstriding, and so on. Now as a coach, he periodically yells “body check” to his runners to remind them to do a quick scan.

Consider [running form cues](#) when doing your own body scan, making sure you're running relaxed but strong—after you make adjustments, take your thoughts elsewhere.

5. Chunk Your Miles

If, a few strides into a [marathon](#) you think, “Oof, 26.2 miles to go,” you likely have a

long day ahead of you.

Successful runners avoid getting overwhelmed by what they're attempting with a technique known as chunking. "I mentally break the effort down into manageable bites, and focus only on getting through the bit I'm in," Wade says. "This often means completing a loop, making it to my water bottle, or getting through a specific stretch of road or distance." Or, as U.S. [half marathon](#) record-holder [Ryan Hall](#) put it in his book title, run the mile you're in.

Notice that Wade's examples of chunking are specific tasks. Psychologists call these process goals—step-by-step actions that contribute to performing well in the short term. Focusing on [process goals](#) has two key payoffs. First, they keep you from overthinking the run's outcome, such as what your time will be. [Research has shown](#) that thinking too much about outcome goals can induce [anxiety](#) and cause distraction.

Chunking via process goals also encourages actions that directly [improve your performance](#). One of Coogan's main focuses when marathoning was making sure he got his bottle every 5K, and then taking the time to drink adequately from the bottle. Doing so ensured that he stayed [hydrated](#) and [fueled](#), and therefore didn't falter in the final miles. Similarly, Wade's focus on the next stretch of a road race, or her next split in a [track race](#), leads to running that section of the race as well as possible.

Chunking is also helpful during [interval workouts](#). Wade encourages the high schoolers she coaches to focus on just the current repeat or set, and reminds them that a [recovery jog](#) and chance to regroup is never more than a few minutes away.

6. Talk to Yourself Like You're Your Coach

[We all talk to ourselves](#) when we run. (If you doubt that, monitor your mind on your next outing.) What matters here is the nature of that talk.

[A study published in *Psychophysiology*](#) found that people rated running at a given speed harder when they talked to themselves negatively compared to when their [self-talk](#) was positive. The runners also produced more cortisol, a hormone associated with emotional stress, when their self-talk was negative.

During a tough patch, Brick advises, "you might say to yourself, 'my [legs feel tired](#), but I can push through this.' Research has shown that using simple statements like this can help us [maintain our performance](#), despite how tired we feel."

Coogan would repeat a few go-to phrases to himself, such as "you're okay, Mark," during races and [hard workouts](#). And research supports Coogan's tendency to speak to himself in the second person—using "you" rather than "I."

[In a study with cyclists](#), the participants did separate 10K [time trials](#) in which they used two versions of positive self-talk phrases. The phrases were identical except that in one they addressed themselves as "I," and in the other they addressed themselves as "you." Although the cyclists rated the time trials as feeling equally hard, when they spoke to themselves in the second person, they rode 2.2 percent faster. If that seems like an insignificant difference, consider that a 24:30 [5K](#) is 2 percent faster than a 25:00 5K. Which would you rather run?

Psychologists say this distinction works because addressing yourself as “you” provides emotional distance from the duress you’re under. In this set-up, you’re talking to yourself more like a [coach](#) would talk to you. And a good coach would never say, “you stink—drop out.” They would find a simple phrase or two that would help you weather the crisis and push through for a [strong finish](#). With this simple switch in your thinking, you can provide that mental push for yourself.

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