

## CHAPTER 2

### Why can't I deliver my race plan?

Using psychological strategies to help you deliver your best performance

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***"I ran too fast at the start; I missed the break at halfway; I left myself too much to do in the final mile; I let nerves get the better of me!"***

I suspect you have heard runners use these excuses to explain a sub-standard performance or failure to achieve their race goal - you may have even used them yourself! In order to achieve your race goal, you will likely set a race plan designed to help you commit to your goal. Delivering this plan requires the ability to manage how you think, feel and act. For example, a runner who experiences high levels of anxiety before a race because they have arrived at the competition late might be worried they are not going to be able to complete their normal warm-up. The implication is that if she (or he) is not able to complete her warm-up she will feel underprepared and less confident that she is ready to perform well. For the runner to be able to stick to her race plan, such as following a certain pacing strategy, she will need to manage the way she responds to situations that may be out of her control.

In situations such as those described above, a runner needs to have good self-control. However, changing how you think, feel or act is challenging, particularly if the perceived effort required outweighs the perceived benefits associated with achieving the goal.

One theory of self-control suggests that changing behaviour is physically tiring and depletes physiological resources such as glucose. This theory has been developed and tested in lots of studies by the eminent researcher Professor Roy Baumeister. Prof Baumeister's work is freely available via an excellent website (<http://www.psy.fsu.edu/~baumeisterticelab/index.html>). Baumeister suggests that the brain consumes glucose during acts of self-control. And so acts of self-control, such as making a conscious decision to ignore the thought of wanting to drop out of a race or down-regulate anxiety before competition, reduces the amount of glucose available for future efforts to conduct self-control. The implication is that when less glucose is available for exercise, performance begins to suffer.

With regard to self-regulatory behaviour, runners will have to either increase effort or abandon the goal altogether in an attempt to preserve personal resources. However, the good news is that self-control can be trained. If you get better at self-control you should use fewer resources. Let's look at a few ways we can do this.

#### **I just can't use races as training runs!**

The following scenario highlights some of the challenges to one's ability to exert self-control.

You have just returned from injury and you think it is a good idea to test your fitness by racing, saying to yourself "I wonder how close I am to my best?" However, given that you have missed a large chunk of training it is probably unrealistic to try to achieve a personal best time in your first race back. You recognise you need to do some high quality training but also realise you struggle with motivation during training; and so you are in a catch 22 situation – you want to race and test your fitness but do not want to race if the time is so slow and you feel it would be public embarrassment.

You persuade yourself that it might be a good idea to enter a race as you are likely to run harder than if you were to perform a training session by yourself. And in your mind at the time of entering, this is a training session with other runners and because you are competitive, it will be a good challenge.

You line up and you notice some of your club mates are also running. Suddenly you change focus and goals begin to elevate in difficulty. No longer are you thinking about running your own race; instead, your attention

changes to what your club mates are doing and thinking. Thoughts such as “they have never beaten me” and “if they beat me they will think they are better than me” occupy your mind. And yet whilst you are not fit, you think they see it as a chance to beat you. Of course they know they wouldn’t normally beat you, but today they might and they will probably have to run very well to beat you. The thoughts likely to run through your mind are things like: “Do I stick to my own plan to use the race as a return to competition for training purposes, or do I not allow them the chance to gloat?” The best option is to stick to the original plan. In this chapter I talk about a strategy called “If-Then” planning that has been shown to be an effective way of getting people to act on their good intentions.

### **“Leave your ego at home”**

Social psychologist, Roy Baumeister suggests that many people fail to overcome temptations, such as pushing too hard following injury, because they are worried about how they are perceived by others. It is a common thought process I often hear runners engage in. The process of pursuing and attaining a goal can be viewed as a representation of one’s identity and so it is normal to feel anxious if you want to perform well but injury or current fitness levels don’t allow you to. And so remind yourself what the goal was and do so before setting off in the morning of the race. You could anticipate some of the issues that could arise.

#### **CASE STUDY: The elite runner**

Matt was a junior cross-country champion who achieved considerable success at national level and went on to represent his country at the World Championships. He has always held the belief that he is blessed with lots of talent and that his training partners have to work much harder to achieve comparable success. Even when they do surpass his achievements, it is because they have trained harder; not because they are faster. He was keen to point out that the times his rivals are running are times he ran as a junior. Despite promising much as a junior, Matt has struggled to deliver the type of performances he would have expected as a senior. What would happen is that if Matt felt he wasn’t able to run the times he thought he was capable of, or should be running, he would pull out of the race. In this case, Matt needs to resist comparing what others do against what he has done in the past. He needs to alter his thought process in training and racing when he finds himself in situations where he is tempted to drop out because he anticipates not delivering the performance he thinks he should be capable of. Unfortunately it has happened a lot over the years and as each season passes by it becomes even more difficult to attain those lofty goals.

When I first met Matt, I suggested that he forgets thinking about what times he should be running and starts thinking about what needs to do to turn his goals into reality. It is logical that his training should reflect his training maturity and so he should be prepared to invest more time and effort to improve upon what he did as a junior. I suspect part of the problem is that he is afraid that if he invests more resources into his training, the return might not be as great as he would hope for and so it would be seen as a wasted effort. More to the point, in his mind it would undermine his belief that he is blessed with an extraordinary talent for running.

Matt joined his local athletics club at 13yrs old and has been running for nearly 20 years. Many of his rivals took up running later which probably explains why they are keen to do more running to try and fast track their progress. I told Matt that some people mature later than others; some people respond to training quickly whilst others spend years and see little return for their efforts. What is important is that they are committed to discovering where their efforts will take them. Matt should start that quest in earnest. If he falls short of his goals, at least it won’t be for a lack of trying and he can then be certain he did all he can to achieve his goal. Otherwise he will continue to plateau or find himself dropping out of races as continues to use excuses such as “I don’t see any point in running XX time; I did that as junior” and “I’m in great shape; it’s just I’ve not done the right training to run that time.”

## Remind yourself of what you are trying to achieve

When trying to stick to a goal such as using a race for training purposes think about setting process goals. For example, trying to run with good form will help you achieve your goal of running faster without getting injured. Try to ignore what the result will look like. It is likely that you will be disappointed with the result if you compare it to previous achievements. Instead, focus on a goal that builds confidence such as completing a run and not aggravating an old injury.

Perceiving that you are being portrayed as an athlete who is not improving is not a fair representation of your current fitness, and an incredibly negative way of thinking, and so it is important to remind yourself of what you are doing. Not all races are opportunities to run a personal best. Some races should be seen as a stepping-stone to returning to full fitness.

### CASE STUDY: The novice runner

Rob was a 54-year old male, who until the last few years had not done any form of regular physical activity. He took up running aged 50 when he decided he would like to lead a more active lifestyle. As a result of his new found enthusiasm he decided he would target getting fit for a local 5km run by following a schedule from a well-known running magazine. However, work would often get in the way of any attempts to follow structured training and he would get demotivated and find himself constantly starting from square one. It didn't help that he would often develop niggles that would halt progress and leave him frustrated and depressed, "Not another injury; I don't know why I bother! I thought running was supposed to be good for you!"

After a few years of running in patches, and abandoning any goals he had to race, I suggested to Rob that he might like to consider doing a parkrun; a chance to run with others for free and with no added pressure that comes with entering a race. After all, it wasn't as though he hadn't kept himself fit. He had learned to swim in this time and also successfully completed the Land's End to John O'Groats cycle ride with his wife, Sandra. Four years on from when he started running he had repeatedly managed to find excuses not to run, telling himself "I'm not fit enough". I told him that he had enough base fitness to manage running 5km and that the barrier to running was in his head.

Many people struggle to commit to races due to lots of reasons, such as work, moving house, family, holidays and so on. I told him, he needed to abandon any time-related goals he had and to stop comparing himself to that of others; he would look at others at say "how do they manage it; they're 20 years older than I am!"

I convinced him to run his first parkrun with his wife, Sandra, who herself had not ran in nearly 40 years. Although Rob was not as prepared as he would have liked to have been, he learned to manage emotions and thoughts that would usually tell him "you don't need to run today, perhaps go when the weather is nicer" or "I've lost fitness; I need to train for it". He decided he would run round with Sandra to support her as she had done considerably less running and so this meant he wouldn't be tempted to try and run for a time. As it happened, Sandra tried to out-sprint him by surprise at the end! Following a mishap with the handing over the correct barcodes Rob managed to get himself ahead of Sandra on the results!

I told them it is good to want to perform well but that expectations must be managed – sometimes it is good to have the goal to run for the sake of being able to run without having to quantify an effort for it to be seen as progress. I reminded Rob that the first step is often the hardest and it probably felt much easier than it did in his head beforehand.

They have gone on to complete more parkruns, and more importantly they continue to run; for enjoyment. Rob is a classic example of someone who likes to set himself high standards across everything he does. He doesn't like to feel underprepared and whilst this is commendable, when doing something for the first time, the expectations must be managed to reflect one's current state. This current state is not representative of them as a person, merely a reflection of where they are at this point in time.

## Plan to overcome barriers

Whether or not a runner increases her (or his) efforts to achieve a goal, or override unwanted thoughts, will depend on whether she perceives she has the resources available to support such a pursuit. It will also require the runner to want to exert self-control when they feel an urge to quit.

When planning to override urges and behaviour, it is worth considering how you are going to get from your current state to your desired state. So think about what you want to do and when you want to do it. You then need to think about how you are going to achieve it. For example, a runner might want to run sub-4 minutes for one-mile or finish inside the top 10 in their local 10k. Starting with an intention to achieve something will involve setting a goal which has the format: "I want to attain Z!" (e.g., "I want to run sub-4 minutes for one-mile!")

Having stated your goal, you need to know *what* you can do to achieve your goal and *when* you can act to attain it. There are likely to be several opportunities for you to achieve your goal and so you must be able to identify opportunities where you are able to allocate your resources most effectively and engage in behaviour that is likely to see you attain your goal. A strategy known as implementation intentions or If-Then planning has been shown to help individuals act on their good intentions at the point it is perceived to be difficult to commit to their goals, such as running in hot weather or missing a drinks station. If-Then plans are designed to start the process of striving towards a goal and prevent it from straying off course.

An If-Then plan comes in two parts: The 'if' part is the situation, barrier or opportunity to use a solution you think will help. The 'then' part is the behavioural or cognitive plan you wish to happen when that opportunity arises. For example, "If situation X arises, then I will do Y!" Thus, in the case of the goal intention "I want to run sub-4 minutes for a one-mile!" a supporting If-Then plan could be "If no-one runs with the pacemaker, then I will!"

Research suggests that plans are beneficial. Firstly, plans maintain flexibility, allowing individuals to benefit from alternative opportunities for goal achievement. Secondly, even when plans do decrease the use of alternative opportunities for goal achievement, the process is conscious and within an individual's control. By forming If-Then plans, an athlete can prioritise and organise behaviour such that when they experience unpleasant and unwanted thoughts, they can carry out their intended actions (e.g., make a good tactical decision).

### **Build confidence that you can deliver your race plan**

If-Then plans are proposed to work by strengthening the association between the situation (If - a potential barrier to goal attainment) and what you would do to overcome this barrier. By setting an If-Then plan you are thinking through the barriers and rather than seeing them as problems, you are re-appraising these perceived barriers and seeing them as an opportunity to act on your good intentions (The 'if' part you establish raises the accessibility or readiness to encounter that situation if it arises in the future. The 'then' part has been primed to be linked to the 'then' response, following a similar mechanism to how habits form). Evidence shows that using If-Then plans help develop an automatic goal-directed response.

In the same way race pace training is intended to develop an runner's confidence that she/he can run fast and run at her/his goal pace, If-Then plans develop confidence that an athlete can translate training performance into actual race performance.

## Plan to deliver your best performance using If-Then plans

Let's look at another example of how one could use If-Then planning:

Runner A might want to run sub-3 hours at next year's London Marathon: *"I want to run sub-3 hours at next year's London Marathon!"*

We know that If-Then plans are formed to help you achieve your goal by specifying when, where, and how you should respond. Thus, a supporting If-Then plan could be *"If I notice my pace is too quick at the start...and lots of runners begin to overtake me...and I feel I sense a fear of being humiliated...then I will tell myself: Relax, the race is not over; remember your target pace. If I run that pace, the race will be a success!!"*

Once you have set the If-Then plan then say it out loud to yourself. Remind yourself of your plan when you are on the start-line. <b>Examples of barriers (If...situation X arises...):</b>	<b>Now think of a solution to overcome your barrier...(If...X arises....Then....I will):</b>
<i>If my warm-up has been cut short....</i>	<i>Then I will...</i>
<i>If my coach has said I am not fast enough to run with the leaders...</i>	<i>Then I will...</i>
<i>If my rival reminds me of when they last beat me in a race...</i>	<i>Then I will...</i>
<i>If my legs feel tired and sluggish...</i>	
<i>If I get boxed in on the final bend...</i>	

What barrier threatens you delivering your best performance? Discuss this with your coach and then have a go at developing your own If-Then plan.

One way to develop the effectiveness of your If-Then plans is to assess the plan you have developed, before and after each of your races. For example, in the days before you race, ask yourself 'How confident are you that you have identified an effective plan to respond to possible situations preventing you from achieving your goal time? (1=Not very confident; 7=Very confident)'. You may wish to write this in your training diary as a method for monitoring your mental preparation for races.

## Mental contrasting

Another highly effective strategy for helping you achieve your running goals is mental contrasting. Mental contrasting is a self-regulatory thought process whereby one imagines the attainment of a desired future outcome (e.g., losing weight, exercising more frequently etc.) and then contrasts it with reality. Mental contrasting is proposed to be an effective behaviour change technique it energises people to overcome obstacles that stand in the way of their desired future (Sheeran et al., 2013).

The process works by identifying the goal – let's say "to go for a run 4 days per week".

- First, you describe in depth the most positive aspect of attaining this goal.
- Second, you think about the best thing that would happen if you went for a run four times per week.
- Third, you try to identify the biggest obstacle to reaching this goal.
- Fourthly, and once this has been done the mental contrasting exercise continues in the same manner by identifying and elaborating the "next best" outcome of goal achievement followed by identifying the "next biggest obstacle" that impeded their route.

## Putting it into practice

1. Set the goal and set a singular goal rather than multiple goals
2. Mentally contrast where you are now and where you want to be

3. Identify the barriers
4. Identify possible solutions
5. Develop these into If-Then plans
6. Build rewards into goal achievement
7. Reflect on the successes and identify the barriers, thinking about how to provide solutions to these barriers.

### **Practical Tips**

- Better performances are observed when people set themselves challenging, specific goals as opposed to challenging but vague goals. Specifying the goal in positive terms “I want to achieve Z by X” identifies the standard required.
- Identify the barriers to achieving your goal. For example, weather, pacing, tactics, high anxiety etc.
- Think of a solution to overcoming this obstacle. For example, “I will run my own pace!”
- Remind yourself of your if-plan in the days before your race, and again on race day during your warm-up.

### **References and selected reading**

- Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. *American Psychologist*, *54*, 493–503.
- Webb, T. L., & Sheeran, P. (2008). Mechanisms of implementation intention effects: The role of goal intentions, self-efficacy, and accessibility of plan components. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *47*, 373–395

### **Commentary**

#### **Andrew M. Lane**

How many runners start races far too fast only to get a few hundred metres into the run and realise that this pace is not sustainable. Chris Fullerton’s chapter captures this process very well and offers strategies through runners can prevent this from happening. I think these strategies are very good and worth pursuing, but could my experience with athletes is that they will ask “which one should I do?” and want immediate results from doing it. I think you can make rapid changes, but I also think you need to put some work into planning how you want to respond. Managing your mind on the day of competition takes planning and you need to put time aside in order to do this. How much time should you spend doing this? I like using If-Then plans; I like their simplicity and practicality. Reflecting on what the barriers were and what you would like to have done is fundamental to establishing If-Then plans. Many runners get into a mind-set of thinking “if only I had done this or done that”. Rather than seeing this as moaning about performing poorly, write down the issues in an If-Then format. “Surely it’s just about thinking these things through and the format does not matter” is a phrase athletes tell me when I encourage If-Then planning. I emphasise a key point is that “If” you want the “Then”, the desired response to be in your mind when required, “Then” you have to stick to an “If-Then” format. The “If-Then” format helps create the link. And importantly, if you say it out loud twice, the chances that it will be effective are huge.