

CHAPTER 3

Why am I so harsh on myself?

Examining your self-talk when running on the limit!

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“You can do this”, “hold on in there”; “just concentrate”; “if they can do it, so can I”, “one step at a time”.

The above messages are examples of what runners say to themselves when racing and training. They are all positive and offer encouragement to try to run harder or focus concentration so that you run faster. However, the things you say to yourself; or your self-talk may not always be positive. It is common for runners to chastise themselves and be their own fiercest critique; “too slow; you are useless”, “c’mon you can go faster than this”; “he/she is getting away and you can’t keep up with her/him”, “clump, clump, clump – sound of a baby elephant” are examples of negative messages runners say to themselves. The effects of such messages are felt on your emotions; positive messages bring pleasant emotions as these messages are broadly saying “all is well”. Negative messages bring unpleasant emotions, as in effect they are saying “all is not well and action is needed”.

Why do runners speak to themselves like this? It is possible to suggest a number of reasons but if we use evidence from research to guide our thinking, then the best candidate will be based around the goals runners set for themselves (Stanley et al., 2011). Stanley and colleagues gathered data from over 600 runners and found that they set goals in terms of achieving a certain finish time or achieving a certain finish position. Our studies have shown that runners have a tendency to set challenging goals where the aim is to achieve a personal best and they expect to meet such standards in unfavourable conditions; that is aim to achieve a personal best on a hilly course or windy day.

The pursuit of goals activates emotions because achieving the goal is personally important. If the goal was not important, then it would be easy to dismiss it and consequently, there would not be an intense emotional response. Runners set goals such as finishing a race in a certain time (e.g., sub-20 for 5km or sub-90 minutes for half marathon, etc.) and share these targets with friends, fellow runners and family. Working toward achieving these involves a great deal of investment in not only training but also the lifestyle that surrounds it. The achievement of running based goals is also important to maintain a sense of self-worth. People define their identity as “being a runner” and an aspect of that identity is demonstrating competence. And so each race acts as an opportunity to show competence, and if the person thinks they will achieve their goals then pleasant emotions are expected and the pre-run stage is characterised by excitement and hope.

By contrast, if the person thinks the race will be a disaster then unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, anger and possibly depression will follow. However, life is rarely all positive or all negative but a mixture of both and competition has the potential to produce intense emotions. It is common for athletes to sense a degree of uncertainty and experience anxiety before competition. Evidence collected on emotions and mood states of thousands of athletes before competition shows that feeling nervous is normal. Sport is uncertain by its very nature. An athlete will have a some idea of her form and how hard she is prepared to push herself, and use this information along with knowledge of course and weather conditions as information to use when setting a goal, but will start getting an idea if she can deliver on these expectations when she starts running. Internal sensations of effort from running and indicators of progress obtained through a comparison against other runners or against time will influence emotion. There are numerous factors outside of her control such as the weather, the course, and the interaction with other competitors. In short, an athlete should expect to feel uncertain before and during competition and so should expect to feel anxiety to some degree and see this as no less a normal aspect of competition as feeling fatigued at the end of an endurance event.

A wealth of research and practice in sport psychology points to the positive effects of using psychological skills to help athletes perform better. Research has highlighted the benefits of using a number of different interventions designed to help change how people think. These strategies include techniques such as;

- a) Goal setting, for example setting a certain finish time (task goal), finish position (outcome goal), or focusing on what you need to do on a moment by moment basis (process goals).
- b) Imagery, which involves recreating performance in the mind.
- c) Attentional control training, where the aim is to learn to switch what you are concentrating on and be able to do so when you want.
- d) Self-talk, which involves changing what you say to yourself.

Research indicates that runners tend to use these strategies naturally. In the study conducted by Stanley and co-workers, we found that runners tried to manage emotions using psychological skills that are similar to those typically taught by consultants. The positive aspect of this is the idea that it is possible to build on these skills. If a runner can identify a strategy that they use frequently, then it's possible to fine tune this technique. Before considering whether to encourage an athlete to use a certain psychological skill, it is important to identify if it is working effectively. Psychological skills that people use naturally can have both positive and negative effects. They can be positive; for example, if self-talk persuades you to push yourself a little harder, and you achieve a long-term goal. In this case, happiness experienced from achieving your goal has seemingly justified the use of self-talk and when a similar situation recurs, self-talk could be used to help. In contrast, the self-talk might be negative and you talk yourself out of a challenge, and you reduce effort, possibly to the extent where you miss your goal by some margin.

An example of how the above might work can be seen through how marathon runners establish goals. For example, marathon runners want to attain "landmark" goals such as doing sub 3 hours, sub 3.15 or sub 4 hour. Before coming to work with me the trend was for athletes to be on target to achieve their goal at 20 miles, and let the time slip by some margin thereafter. On completing the race one runner indicated his thoughts as he went through 20-mile mark and was behind the pace required:

"Once I realised I needed to do sub 8-minute miles and this meant I needed to speed up, I convinced myself I couldn't do it and tried to get back as quick as easily as possible".

The above quote from the runner is representative of many others and the idea of trying to speed up at 20 miles, or even making a suggestion that you should try to speed up at that point, would be considered poor advice by many runners. However, it's worth noting the runner went on to finish and therefore, a certain level of motivation remained and this gives us something to build upon. The first part of this is to switch the focus of the goal. At the moment, the goal is all about a certain finish time. Runners have clearer estimates of time set as goals, using previous performances as guides but each run is a unique in the sense that weather conditions will vary; competitors will differ or their form and confidence will vary, and most likely course conditions will vary. There are multiple factors that are outside of the control of the athlete but can affect the mind-set of the athlete. There are also a range of factors that are within the control of the athlete, including interpretation of sensations of fatigue, pacing strategy, motivation, confidence and emotions. All of these factors can vary and although they occur in the mind-set of the athlete, and so an attempt to control them is a difficult task.

One way to consider changing this mind-set is to ensure some flexibility in how you judge how well you are doing toward attaining this goal. I see athletes looking at their watches repeatedly during races and training and wonder what benefits they gain from this data? If on pace, it reassures and if behind pace, it demotivates. An alternative option is to focus on what you need to do to go as fast as possible, and not the speed you are going. If you can do this, and focus on the process of running fast and efficiently, then the speed will take care of itself. In your mind, all of your concentration and motivation will be focused on going as fast as possible and if this is done, you should be positive about how well you are performing. The time it takes to get to the end will be what it will be; you are not the timer but the runner. When you sit back at the end of the race and ask yourself the question "how well did I do?" – "I concentrated on running fast from start to finish" is what you can say and if you think this, you should feel positive emotions.

Commentary

Tracey Devonport

What Andy illustrates beautifully is the relationship between goals (sometimes goals set/imposed by others) and self-talk. The goal to run a predetermined time may become untenable in adverse weather conditions, or if your pacing is hindered by crowds of runners you simply cannot bypass. Individuals can often be observed failing to adapt or relinquish goals that are no longer attainable or even counterproductive. As a consequence such individuals are likely to experience unwanted thoughts (self-talk) and associated emotions such as distress, frustration and even despair as they experience a failure to achieve their goal(s). Andy points out the importance of ensuring some flexibility in judging how well you are progressing toward attaining a goal. Self-talk can be an ally in ensuring flexible goals pursuits and a good performance 'under the circumstances'. This should not be seen as giving up, this is accepting that which affects performance and cannot be controlled, and consequently that which necessitates goal adjustment.



Keeping positive. University of Wolverhampton lecturer and marathon runner Tricia Bunn completing a track marathon in 2013