

## CHAPTER 4

### What do you think about when you run? Applying mindfulness to the games our minds play.

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#### The issue!

Growing numbers of individuals are entering ultra-marathon running suggesting that recreational and competitive runners are increasingly searching for bigger endurance challenges (Sehovic, Knechtle, Rüst, & Rosemann, 2013). An ultra-marathon, also called ultra-distance or ultra-endurance, is any sporting event that involves running and/or walking distances longer than the traditional marathon length. There are two types of ultramarathon events: those that cover a specified distance, and events that take place during specified time (with the winner covering the most distance in that time). The most common distances are 50 kilometers (31mi), 100 kilometers (62.1mi), 50 miles (80.4 km), and 100 miles (160.9 km). The most common time limitations are 6, 12, 24, 48, and 72 hours ([www.ultramarathonrunning.com](http://www.ultramarathonrunning.com)).

Given the amount of time involved, it may be of little surprise that one question often asked of someone who has completed an ultra-distance event is....

#### ...what do you think about during an ultra-endurance run?



Richard Weremiuk (Director of Beyond Marathon) during the Augrabies Kalihari 7-day ultra-marathon.

Ultra-endurance races tend to be, although not always, on the trail and in more rural areas. Added to this, the field will vary greatly in terms of their finish times, leading to a very strung out line of competitors across the course. Whilst ultra runs are becoming increasingly popular, they still don't see the numbers that shorter road races do. Combined, these factors all mean that during a race, an ultra-runner can expect to face many hours alone with their thoughts.

Given the enormity of the challenge, and the fact that the person will be doing the same thing for a long period of time, asking 'what do you think about during an ultra-endurance run?' is a good question. A combination of available scientific research, along with autobiographical and biographical information suggests that rather than thinking about very specific things whilst running, quite often we spend much of our time during an ultra-marathon trying *not* to think certain thoughts. Have you experienced any of the following

unwelcome thoughts on a long run or in a race?

- I feel so tired, I'm slowing the pace a bit to take a break
- I need a break
- I can't maintain this pace, I need to pull back a bit
- I did much better than this in training, this is clearly a bad day for me
- I didn't eat/ sleep/ hydrate well yesterday and that's why I'm suffering, there's nothing I can do about it
- I haven't done enough training
- It's ok to quit, I only meant to push to (XX) miles anyway, I've done what I came for
- I feel awful, clearly I'm ill, I need to give up

..... the list could go on. These are the thoughts we *don't* want.

## Commentary

### Andrew M. Lane

What to do with your thoughts and what to concentrate on is an issue that lies at the heart of running. Non-runners often say "it's boring" when giving reasons to justify why they don't run. An entire industry has developed to help runners have something "extra" in their minds, like iPods playing music. The exercise industry has created multimedia options to view television from the treadmill. The industry has blossomed on a belief that you need to be doing something else, or thinking about something. And so using the skill of mindful thinking during running offers a route for people to help cope with what they are doing, and live in the here and now. The skill of being mindful offers many possibilities for coping with multiple challenges that present themselves in daily life.

I have worked with athletes whose minds are filled with information on how good they should be, or how fast they should run, and whose motivation has been wrecked by comparisons between data observed from their watch and a supposed standard. The exercisers and approach that Wendy and Tracey outline in their chapter could be life changing for runners and people imprisoned by their own beliefs and consequent thoughts and feelings. The inability to enjoy what they are doing for what they are doing represents a massive opportunity loss. In the "can I run myself happy" (Lane, 2012), I wrote about the motivation babies have to learn to walk and how this motivation can be eroded. Running is something we do naturally and something we struggle to do eventually and so whilst you can do it, then keep loving it. Mindfulness offers a way of recapturing a way of living in the moment.

Lane, A. M. "Can I run myself happy?" In *Should I strap a battery to my head? (And other questions about emotion)*, ed. Totterdell, P., & Niven, K, Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing., 2012. eScholarID:[169585](#)

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/runners-guide-sport-psychology-nutrition/dp/1505575753/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438029104&sr=8-1&keywords=a+runners+guide+andrew+lane](http://www.amazon.co.uk/runners-guide-sport-psychology-nutrition/dp/1505575753/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1438029104&sr=8-1&keywords=a+runners+guide+andrew+lane)