

# GOALS, EMOTIONS AND PERFORMANCE

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PERFORMANCE BY PLANNING THE JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

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Marathon events are a popular way for people to challenge themselves and over 30,000 people complete the London Marathon each year. However, running 42.3 km is not an easy task and can present different challenges for different people. It is challenging for runners at the front of the race, whose goal is to maintain a fast pace and execute race tactics. These runners will be conscious of the benefits that achieving a specific time or position might bring. It is also hard for runners who take several hours to finish, often twice as long as their elite counterparts, where tangible benefits are fewer. What should be clear is that marathon running is not an easy task to take on.

This article will focus on how to mentally prepare for the challenge of running a marathon. It will explain that there should be discomfort and suffering, but that the runner should feel the achievement of their goal/s is worth the level of discomfort

they will endure. This article suggests methods for managing goals and emotions before and during marathon running and while it focuses on coping with fatigue, the underlying theory of self-regulation in relation to goal-setting, emotions and thoughts could apply to attempting to achieve any major goal.

### THE GOAL IS TO RUN A MARATHON: WHY ARE YOU RUNNING THE MARATHON?

Goals are internal representations of desired states<sup>1</sup>. Goal setting as a method of raising motivation is now commonplace and is applied in many different fields, including sport, business and education<sup>2</sup>. In sport – and in running in particular – goal setting is so integrated into the mindset of athletes and coaches that it forms part of software packages such as Garmin and Strava<sup>3</sup>. Goals are usually set toward achieving a certain outcome; whether it is a specific finish time or finish position. Goal setting is proposed to

focus attention on the elements which must be completed to finish a task<sup>2</sup>. Achieving a challenging goal brings a greater sense of satisfaction than achieving an easy goal. The emotions experienced when trying to achieve a difficult and personally important goal often include intense anxiety and excitement<sup>4</sup>. The importance of the event alone can trigger anxiety, for example, a child on the eve of her/his birthday will report feeling anxious in anticipation of what gifts he/she might receive. Feeling anxious is not necessarily a negative experience. Anxiety can help performance when it acts as a warning signal. The warning signal is the message that effort is required to achieve the goal<sup>5</sup>. While low anxiety might be considered desirable, low anxiety can occur when goals are not important and in some cases, the overall emotional state is better described as feeling lethargic than energetic. The desired emotional state is one that helps performance. Research has found



that anxiety coupled with excitement or energetic feelings is associated with positive beliefs and expectations that the goal can be achieved<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, anxiety coupled with depression is associated with low motivation and thoughts that the task requires too much energy or is too demanding to complete and as a consequence, poor performance follows<sup>4</sup>. Goals and emotion interlink<sup>5</sup> and so what is wanted is a goal that excites, but in setting one, it is reasonable to also expect anxiety. The function of anxiety is to inform the individual that the goal is important and thorough preparation is required<sup>6</sup>.

#### SET AN INSPIRING GOAL THAT WILL ACTIVATE EXCITEMENT

It is important to set a goal that inspires and excites because if it does, it will help you persist when things get difficult. Most people's lives are complicated, often with multiple goals to achieve in many different areas, on a daily basis. For example, there will be goals for work, home, relationships and sport. A work goal could be to turn up on time or get report X or Y completed by a certain deadline. A goal for life at home could be to make dinner or do the washing up. A relationship goal might be to cheer

your partner up who has had a bad day and a sport goal could be to complete a 2-hour training session. All of these goals compete for time and energy. As the goals are ongoing and sequential, attempts to achieve one goal can have negative effects on attempts to achieve the others. For example, if you come home tired from work, this can reduce the energy available to achieve your sport-related goals, unless you engage strategies to motivate you to do it. The sport goal would need to be sufficiently important to engage in mental preparation before training. Coming home in a fatigued state, it can seem easier not to train as you believe you are not mentally and physically ready.

In terms of training for a marathon, there will be times when you are required to prioritise this goal over others. You will need to invest time in running. Before setting out on this mission, you should ask yourself 'why am I running this marathon?' This seems an easy question to answer, but many people are not that clear on their reasons for participating. There will be times when your marathon goal clashes with trying to achieve a different goal. For example, you want to train for 2 hours but your partner wants to go and visit friends and

to increase the complexity of the situation, your partner raises the importance of that goal by saying she/he is looking forward to seeing them. Which goal do you try to achieve? If you do not do your run, then you will feel disappointed in yourself. You are likely to feel guilty for not following your training programme or not organising your time. However, if you do the run and do not achieve the standard specified in the session, then you might also feel guilty for not achieving your goal and those feelings will be amplified because you chose to run and risked upsetting your partner. Reconciling issues such as these occurs frequently and illustrates the type of goal conflict that can occur. The key point to the example above is that striving to achieve goals often means having to prioritise one goal over another.

Research indicates that goal conflict is a major source of emotional distress<sup>7</sup>. For example, many runners who have a goal of running fast, believe they need to have a high power to weight ratio to achieve this. They may seek to manipulate this ratio by losing weight, however, they may also eat a high number of calories before, during and after training and may justify the consumption of food of poor nutritional value, on the basis that they exercise<sup>8</sup>. The

conflict and subsequent goal shift occurs at the point when the high-density food -such as a chocolate bar has been eaten. The goal of gaining a better power to weight ratio via weight loss drifts into the background. If the runner in the example above is to achieve the goal of losing weight, then identifying the fact that he or she has a goal conflict represents a good starting point. The athlete will then need strategies to help manage this conflict. Many people will relate to this goal conflict and state that they will resolve this conflict by abstaining from poor nutritional food choices during training, opting to eat their 'chocolate bar' after competing. Alternatively, the individual might not like this aspect of their behaviour and wish to change the urge to eat poor quality food<sup>9</sup>. A wealth of research in weight management has focused on helping people manage their goals and activate reminders of the primary goal when lapses could occur<sup>10</sup>.

#### RESOLVING GOAL CONFLICT

The first step is to identify the important goals across the different aspects of life. By helping the individual become aware of these goals and how conflict in achieving them might arise, managing this conflict becomes possible. Once they have done this, they should analyse situations when attempts to achieve one goal conflict with attempts to achieve another. For example,

there is a clash between trying to lose weight and enjoying eating large portions (unless you enjoy eating very low calorie food such as lettuce). The evidence of the goal conflict becomes apparent when the athlete has not lost weight and as a consequence of failing to achieve the weight loss goal, feels guilty for a) not training harder and b) eating poor quality food. When preparing for a marathon, a key barrier is finding time to train. Working through the competing thoughts that prevent the runner from training are worthwhile. Identifying why these thoughts occur, what emotions surround them and making sense of the resulting actions is a valuable process if unpleasant emotions following poor performance are to be avoided.

A simple action to help identify goal conflict and the thoughts and emotions surrounding it is to complete a daily diary. As many athletes have training diaries, it can be as simple as adding a line for free text. Expressive writing is recommended to help better process and restructure information from these experiences in a way that if such a situation arises again, it is easier to deal with<sup>11</sup>.

#### DEALING WITH FEELINGS: LEARNING TO INTERPRET SENSATIONS OF FATIGUE

Within marathon running, one goal conflict that will occur is fatigue

management. Getting to a point when running begins to hurt is highly likely during a marathon. For the athlete to achieve their pre-event goal, fatigue management using a range of different strategies is necessary. Fatigue management strategies that the athlete could employ are to try to run more efficiently or think differently about fatigue; that is reinterpret fatigue as feelings that are a necessary consequence of goal attainment<sup>12</sup>. Slowing down to manage fatigue will reduce the immediate sensations of fatigue, but could have negative emotional consequences. Slowing down can be appraised as poor performance and lead to anger at knowing that goal achievement is being compromised. Slowing down could also lead to guilt if failure to achieve goals is attributed to inadequate preparation. Slowing down could lead to shame, if the athlete feels they gave up<sup>13</sup>. At the point of considering whether to slow down an athlete should remind themselves of the importance of the goal and anticipate the long-term negative consequences.

Once the goal has been identified, as well as the actions required to achieve the goal and the barriers to achieving it, the athlete has the basis of a plan for mental preparation. However, when striving to achieve a challenging goal, unexpected and unplanned challenges should be anticipated. This article deliberately avoids

***In training and racing I push myself hard, pain is a friend to welcome and push through to get the results I want. You keep going using any number of techniques to override the voices that tell you to slow down, visualising the aim and blocking the negative thoughts and pain – Paula Radcliffe<sup>15</sup>***

using the term 'setback'. The term setback suggests progress was thwarted or slower than planned and while it might be possible to have a seamless performance, these tend to be the exception. Therefore, within the planning, it is reasonable to assume that something will not go to plan, although the precise nature of this challenge will be unknown. Keeping this thought in mind, is like being ready for a final sprint at the end of a race, with reserves ready to cope with it. Therefore, unanticipated challenges should be built into the planning process, enabling the athlete to keep both the mental and physical reserves to deal with them effectively.

**EMOTIONS – THEY WILL INVADE YOUR MIND, SO EXPECT TO MEET THEM AND TREAT THEM AS YOUR FRIEND**

A marathon is challenging and emotions will vary<sup>4,12,13</sup>. Before the event, anxiety and excitement are the dominant emotions in many people. Anxiety, fear and dread, a sense of lethargy and the desire not to run are the dominant emotions among others. During the marathon, many runners will worry whether they are fit enough to cope or will be able to run fast enough to achieve their goals over the final few miles of the race. It helps to plan and have a strategy that can be practiced in training and implemented on race day. Runners will set goals for the pace they wish to run at, but rarely set goals for the thoughts they want to have and emotions they want to feel. If we have goals to manage these two factors, it can help to achieve the goals of a certain time or position. In a study where athletes were given false feedback by telling them they were going slower or faster than their goal, we found negative feedback was accompanied by unpleasant emotions such as elevated anger and depression, elevated physiological markers such as lactate and VO<sub>2</sub><sup>14</sup>. Negative feedback altered the athlete's inner dialogue, increasing perceived effort. However, results showed that there was no difference in performance – finish times for the 10 mile time trial were almost identical; suggesting that thoughts and emotions have little impact. However, the authors propose that when the narrative is positive, there is potential to increase the target level of performance set as the goal. It could be argued that if athletes worked

to the same physiological level as with the negative feedback, then performance would have been faster. It could be that positive feedback created a sense of cruising rather than pushing to improve. To improve performance the athlete would need to set a more difficult goal and in doing so, accept he or she can manage this level of performance. The balance between maintaining a positive inner dialogue is fundamental and this will occur even when physiological symptoms accompanying exercise are indicating otherwise. To do so, the athlete would need to learn to interpret intense sensations of fatigue as a necessary aspect of goal attainment<sup>12</sup>.

In conclusion, if you are clear about the value of the goal, what it will take to reach that goal and the way in which you will need to manage competing goals, then you maximise your chance of success. With marathon running, overcoming sensations of fatigue that signal slowing need evaluating with a view to reappraising such signals as indicators of goal progress.

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