

Breaking Down the Mental Marathon

American Running Association

If cognitive strategies during a marathon won't exactly make or break your race, they are still among the most important weapons you have in your arsenal against fatigue. To try and determine which might be the most effective, researchers questioned non-elite runners in the 1996 London Marathon about their race-day thought processes, and found the following four mental strategies to be the most common:

Internal association. This focuses on how the body feels while running.

Internal dissociation. This is essentially distraction: examples include playing songs over and over in your head and solving mental puzzles;

External association. This focuses outwardly, on factors important to the race: passing or being passed by other runners, looking out for fluid stations and calculating split times;

External dissociation. This, too, focuses outwardly-but on events unimportant to the race: enjoyment of the scenery, attention to throngs of cheering spectators or glimpses of outrageously costumed runners passing by.

The questionnaires keyed in on whether, when and how intensely these four groups experienced the Wall, the notorious elephant that sometimes lands on your back during the last quarter of the marathon. Whether runners may benefit from a particular combination of mental strategies as the marathon progresses remains a subject for further inquiry.

The study reported that the greatest percentage of those who hit the Wall said they had relied primarily on internal dissociation. It seems all-out distraction may make it difficult for you to judge your pace and to know other vital information, such as when you're dehydrated. It's therefore not a good idea to avoid monitoring your body altogether.

Internal association, while the most prevalent of the four strategies, magnified discomfort among the runners, who reported the Wall appearing much earlier and lasting longer than others.

Interestingly, external dissociation seems not to lead runners into the trap of hitting the Wall, as you might expect from the results of internal dissociation. The researchers speculate that the observance, however unrelated to racing strategy, of passing by other runners and spectators may provide enough of the focus needed to keep the correct pace, effectively anticipate hills and so forth.

Similarly, runners using external association didn't experience the Wall as often or as intensely as the internally-focused groups. It may be ideal, then, to check in on your body periodically-if briefly-and focus most of your attention externally: on both factors

important to the marathon as well as on the enjoyable atmosphere. The latter may be unrelated to performance in any direct sense, but it nevertheless has the power to surround and energize you as you strive to keep your head up, your confidence high and your feet moving toward that finish line.

(Marathon & Beyond, 2003, Vol. 7, No. 5, pp. 61-72; BJSM, 1998, Vol. 32, No.3, pp. 229-234) © American Running Association, Running & FitNews 2004, Vol. 22, No. 1, p.5

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