



Think Positive: 5 Visualization Tips to Help You Get Through a Tough Run

BY STEPHANIE SMITH

When it comes to making it through your next race, or in some cases, your next run, the task can seem daunting. Running can be an uphill battle—literally. You might start out of the gate quickly, but keeping a steady pace, finding your stride, and holding strong can be tough when motivation is low. Whether you're working on getting over that four-mile hump, pushing yourself to finish the last leg of your half-marathon, or just looking to complete the first ten minutes of your couch-to-5k, visualization can help. Embrace the power of your mind, and overcome physical challenges, with these expert tips.

1. Focus On The Process

Focusing on the process and living in the moment—especially during a long run—can make it easier to get to the end. “If you’ve planned to run five miles but, part way through you’re thinking ‘Oh my god, I don’t know if I can do 3.5 more—my body is hurting,’ focusing on the process can help,” says Nicole Detling, PhD, mental performance coach for professional athletes. Breaking up the larger challenge into smaller, bite-sized segments can make the task easier to digest. Detling’s advice: Get out of your head, and stay in the moment. “Maybe there’s a tree ahead and you tell yourself to run to it,” she says. “Then you run to the lamp post that’s up ahead, then to the next fence. Before you know it, you’re another mile in.”

2. Engage In Smart Self Talk

Visualization techniques aren’t just defined by what you see—self talk plays a role, too. You can think of it as your mind guiding your body, though it’s a process that differs for everyone. “For some people, cue words—terms you repeat to yourself during the most challenging parts of your journey—might be motivational, while for others they might be instructional,” says Detling. It’s the difference between telling yourself, “I can do this,” and “Take a deep breath,” versus “Keep a short, quick stride” and “Elbows at 90-degrees or less.” Don’t shy away from giving yourself tough love either. While some might group it as “negative self-talk,” the “dig deep, get gritty, push through” approach could work for you.

3. Focus On The Win

For some people, thinking about the endorphin-rush that comes with crossing the finish line is key. Whether it's a mile marker, new goal, or the actual finish, imaging the goal you're working for today, and how amazing you'll feel when you accomplish it, can help fuel your drive when motivation lulls. If the reward is worth the journey that you're putting yourself through, focusing on the end result could be that much-needed push.

4. Mind Your Breath

Adopting a steady rhythm by timing your breathing with your step count is another key visualization tactic. "Depending on your stride length, and how fast you're breathing in the moment, you could inhale on one, count 2-3-4, and on the next step inhale again," says Detling. "Or, inhale, count 2-3-4, and then exhale." It's less about the number you choose, and more about staying busy—and keeping thoughts of self-doubt at bay.

"Finding your rhythm and timing your breathing with your step count tends to occupy enough of your conscious brain space to allow you to stop thinking about the pain or distance that remains," says Detling says. "Research also shows that when you're able to regulate your breathing, your body can go a bit farther and push through a little bit more, because you're more in control of your running and pace."

Looking for a refresher? Use the Relax feature on your Fitbit Charge 2, Fitbit Blaze, or Fitbit Ionic for a guided breathing experience. Each two-minute or five-minute session uses your real-time heart rate to measure beat-to-beat changes and determine a breathing rate that's comfortable for you.

5. Map A Route

It's often said that preparation is the key to success, and knowing what your roadmap looks like before you lace up is a great way to accurately visualize your steps before you take them. It's a trick Detling recommends to many of her cross country collegiate runners. "Google maps is incredible these days," she says. "You can look at the route and note monuments or markers—such as a big tree, funny-looking rock, or where you come onto or go out of a clearing. Then, attach cues." If mile five is usually a struggle, and you know that's when the tall building appears on your course, use that landmark to remind you relax and refocus—whether that means breathing, counting, or distracting yourself by singing in your head.

After planning your route, Detling recommends spending 5 to 10 minutes the night before visualizing your plan of attack. "It evokes a feeling of confidence because you're more in control of the race and have an idea of what to expect," adds Detling. "You're not just planning what you're going to do physically, you're planning mentally, too."

This article is not intended to substitute for informed medical advice. You should not use this information to diagnose or treat a health problem or condition. Always check with your doctor before changing your diet, altering your sleep habits, taking supplements, or starting a new fitness routine.

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