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# Can the Right Mindset Really Make You a Faster Runner?

Researchers find that if you keep your emotions in check, you're likely to have a better race.

BY ALLISON GOLDSTEIN   APR 11, 2018

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As runners, we run intervals, log numerous miles, and (sometimes) cross-train with the conviction that if we are physically fitter, we will run faster. However, a recent study suggests that when it comes to racing, our minds might be just as important as anything we do with our bodies.

A group of researchers in Italy set out to investigate runners' emotional intelligence (EI), or their ability perceive, manage, and regulate their emotions and feelings. Two hundred and thirty-seven runners who were registered for a half marathon in Verona, Italy, filled out a survey that asked about the runners' previous experience and goals for the race—things like weekly mileage, previous half marathons, what time they expected to run, and what time they wanted to run.

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Then the runners answered 30 questions that assessed their EI, such as “On the whole, I’m a highly motivated person,” and “I often find it difficult to adjust my life according to the circumstances.”

After the race, the researchers paired each runner's finish time with their answers on the survey. To their surprise, they found that runners' scores on the EI questions—not training volume or half marathon experience—were the best predictors of when they crossed the finish line. Specifically, runners who scored higher in terms of managing emotional thoughts and feelings had faster half marathon finishing times.

From this data the researchers concluded that “athletes who are capable of keeping their emotions in check can achieve better results because they are less impacted... by negative feelings induced by fatigue.”

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Of course, that's not the only possible explanation. The researchers didn't ask about overall years of running experience, so it's conceivable that runners with higher EI stick with running longer and therefore, because of race experience and lifetime mileage, have faster half marathon times. This explanation is backed up by data showing that people with high EI are more resilient in general—meaning that if they have a bad race or suffer an injury, they are more likely to work through it and keep running.

But the researchers also noted that there's the possibility that these results don't extend to other race distances.

"In the marathon, we would expect that training takes on a bigger role," Enrico Rubaltelli, an assistant professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Padua and corresponding author of the half marathon study, told *Runner's World*. This difference is, in fact, what he and his colleagues found in a second study that they intend to publish soon: according to their survey of marathoners, both EI and training influenced runners' finishing times, with training showing more significance for the marathoners than the half marathoners in the current study.

Regardless of the study's limitations, however, high EI is undeniably a good thing to have when it comes to pushing through the mental challenges of midrace fatigue. So the question is: how do athletes improve their EI?

"There are already protocols both outside and in sports to improve emotional intelligence," Rubaltelli said. He and his colleagues have opened a sport psychology lab where they are experimenting with a short three-session training protocol to see how it improves EI in athletes.

The first session is based on mindfulness, or an athlete's ability to become aware of his or her state of mind and remain "in the moment." The second session has to do with body awareness, such as where an athlete feels tension. The third and final session helps athletes to specifically identify their "why." Why are they doing this sport, what are their goals, and what does the sport mean to them?

"There are many more dimensions we can add," Rubaltelli said of the training. Based on the results of current training sessions and future studies, he and his colleagues intend to improve and expand their protocol. "Another interesting idea for the future is to see which actual strategies EI runners use to keep going."

They are also interested in high EI athletes' strategies because there are so many out there, and they tend to be unique to each athlete. Paula Radcliffe counts to 100. Tina Muir repeats mantras. Gwen Jorgensen focuses on physical sensations.

There's no perfect rubric to better our EI—yet. In the meantime, we will keep taking tips from the best of the best and finding what works for us

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