

The Mental Playbook

by Brandon Daniels

All of these techniques require an open-minded/easy going attitude, i.e., *"If it works for me, then great. If not, then oh well. I can always try again or I can try something else."* As with everything else in life, all that we can really do is put forth our best effort. Other than that, what happens as a result is usually way out of our hands.

And, sure, it's extremely helpful to carry a positive mindset and to be mentally strong as an athlete. Those factors will definitely increase your likelihood for success. But, don't assume that mental techniques alone will turn you into the next Steve Prefontaine or the next Shalane Flanagan.

Always remember that you still need to put a great deal of effort into mastering the fundamentals: having lots of fun as a runner, healthy dieting, staying hydrated, getting a lot sleep, resting and taking time off from running, proper preparation, and proper training.

THE "K.I.S.S." TECHNIQUE

Unfortunately this technique doesn't actually involve any kissing. K.I.S.S. just stands for *'Keep It Simple Stupid.'* It's a really great solution for over-thinking.

It really came in handy when an 800-meter runner I had coached before approached me at a track meet. She told me that she was frustrated because she hadn't been racing anywhere near her P.R. all season. She had been running great workouts, so she really didn't know what the problem was.

"What do you think about during your races?" I asked.

"I don't know. A lot of stuff. I guess I just get really about worried how I'm gonna do."

"Alright, let's try this. Instead of thinking about all of that crap, just pick one word – one positive word. And, that one positive word is the only thing you're allowed focus on until you finish your race. If you start to worry or lose focus, then just re-focus on your one positive word. Don't even tell me what the word is. Got it?"

"Yeah!"

When she took off on her warm up, I could already see that her attitude had changed. I still don't know which positive word she used. But, it seemed to work

since she dominated her 800-meter heat, and she was only a couple of seconds away from her P.R.

“ALLOWING NERVOUSNESS”

When I first arrive at a meet, the most common thing I hear from runners is, *“I’m nervous!”* The truth is that it’s perfectly okay to feel nervous before a race. We’re all human after all. And, sometimes, we just can’t seem to avoid it.

But, the trick to handling it is to quit labeling it ‘nervousness’ or anything else. Don’t give it any name at all. In reality, it just is what it is without any name. So, instead of focusing on the name itself, just allow the experience of it to run through your body without resisting it. Don’t try to stop it, and don’t try to make it go away.

So, for instance, you may experience the sensation of ‘jitteriness.’ But, again, giving it a name really doesn’t help. It just is what it is. So, make an effort to simply focus on what that experience feels like to you without trying to label it or avoid it. For instance, you may experience an ‘uneasy stomach.’ Again, let’s not even use a label for that at all. Let’s just focus what that feels like without trying to label it, change it or make it go away.

Eventually, you may feel like you’re handling the whole experience like a boss! And, at that point, you can even ask for more of whatever you seem to be feeling, *“I want more of this! I can handle it! It’s not a big deal anymore.”*

Sooner or later, you’ll probably notice that the more you focus on it, then the less that it really seems to bother you anymore. Often times, it may even just disappear on its own (i.e., without even trying to force it to go away). Your attitude should always be, *“If it goes away, then it goes away. If not, then I’m just gonna handle it like a boss by allowing it instead of trying to make it go away. It only disturbs me when I try to make it go away.”*

Btw, it seems that the source of a lot of nervousness comes from over-hyping certain meets. Sure, it’s natural to feel some kind of emotion before a meet. And, some meets are definitely way more important than others.

But, in essence, every meet is just an opportunity to challenge yourself, to enjoy yourself, to be successful, and to share the experience with others. Don’t over-hype a meet so much that you lose sight of why you’ve chosen to run in the first place. And, don’t allow coaches, parents, friends, or others to put unnecessary pressure on you. Just shrug it off or laugh it off. Stay cool!

THE "MENTAL MUSIC" TECHNIQUE

Pick an uplifting song with a positive vibe/message. Play that song in your head as much as possible during your run, especially when it feels tough.

Because I was a Violin II in my high school orchestra, I tended to have symphony music stuck in my head all throughout the day. So, I ran many of my tough workouts with J.S. Bach or Vivaldi already playing in my head. And, if I got bored in a class, I tended to drift off into a visualization of myself running confidently with an awesome song playing in my head.

The mental music seemed to help keep my mind in a relaxed/confident state. And, being in a relaxed/confident mindset always seemed to make it much easier to run strong in tough workouts and in races. This is also very useful if you feel that you think way too much when you run.

THE "BOOMERANG" TECHNIQUE

You can use this to help get comfortable with the idea of performing extremely tough workouts/exercises (e.g., ones that you may not even be able to do right now).

So, for example, let's say that you're a high school girl and that you're running 6:00 on your 1-mile repeats workout. But, eventually, you want to improve to running 5:45 for each 1-mile repeat.

What you can do to make it much easier to reach your goal is visualize what it might look like if you were to actually run 5:45 in a 1-mile repeats workout. In your mind, picture yourself running the last few steps and crossing the 1-mile mark at 5:45.

This should only be about 1-to-3 second visualization clip, sort of like a Boomerang video clip on your phone. And, it should be a really cool looking visualization clip! If it doesn't look pretty cool in your mind, then start over and create a much cooler looking visualization. :-D

Be sure to play that cool visualization clip in your mind every now and then (e.g., especially whenever you get bored). And, just make it a fun habit to imagine yourself doing other things that you don't think you can do quite yet.

Basically, this is just about imagining the future as opposed to dwelling on the limiting thought, *"I can't do that!"* What you can't seem to do today might actually be possible to do in a few months, or in a week, or tomorrow.

You can apply this technique to any type of training. For instance, I've developed a few visualization clips of myself doing callisthenic exercises that I want to be able

to do about a month or so from now. And, I'm already doing many kinds of callisthenic exercises that I never realized I could actually do very well.

"VISUALIZING PROGRESS"

Another thing you can do to help stay focused in races and in tough workouts is to focus on your progress by visualizing numbers.

My college cross country coach, Coach Hunter, helped me sort this out for myself. Just before my freshman season, I drove up to his house and told him that I felt that had been struggling in 5K races. Plus, I wasn't happy that I was only the 6th or 7th ranked guy on the team at the time. I felt that I should've been running much better. I just didn't know how to fix it.

"So, which race do you usually run the best?" he asked.

"Probably the 800m or the mile," I told him.

"Alright, so how do you run your mile?"

I thought for a few seconds and then I broke it down for him, *"Well, I split it into three phases. In the first phase, I just focus on getting a good position within the lead pack and on running as relaxed as possible. In the next phase, I move up and try to pass as many people as I can. Then, I just kick."*

"Alright, so why don't you just do that in a 5K?"

Man, I felt so dumb! Hahaha!

That weekend, I applied that strategy in a 5K race. During the first part of the race, I just kept focusing on the fact that I was in phase "1." When I got to the second phase, I just focused on the number "2." And, as soon as I got to the third phase, I saw the number "3" and then I just took off.

The course was pretty hilly, but whenever it felt tough I just focused on the number of the phase I was in (i.e., rather than thinking about how tough the hills were). I finished 2nd on the team that day, and it was one of the best races I've ever ran!

I also use this concept during callisthenic exercises. For example, when I do a set of pull-ups, I don't just count out each rep "1, 2, 3, 4..." I actually visualize a huge mental picture of each number as I'm doing the exercise. Having something simple to visualize makes it less likely for my mind to wander or to get stuck on unhelpful thoughts like, *"Dang, this is really tough!"*

And, if you're doing heart rate based training, you'll find that you can visualize the beat per minute that you want to run at to help control your heart rate. So, for instance, if you want run at 160bpm for a few minutes, just picture "160" in huge numbers while you're running. If you want to move up to 162bpm, then just picture "162" in huge numbers.

THE "CREATIVE VISUALIZATION" TECHNIQUE

This technique can be very helpful with accomplishing long term goals. Begin by picturing yourself accomplishing a realistic, long term goal (e.g., setting a huge P.R., passing a tough competitor in a race, or whatever you want). Make this 'creative visualization' longer than you would in a 'Boomerang visualization.' But, again, make it an awesome looking visualization. :-)

After you've set up your visualization, close your eyes and relax. Then, think back to a moment in your life when you felt extremely happy and things were really awesome! Picture that happy moment in your mind. And, just spend about 10 to 20 seconds or so reliving that moment. Relive how amazing you felt in that moment, and get back in touch with the feelings you had in that awesome moment.

Then, switch back to picturing your 'creative visualization.' But, this time, picture that visualization while you continue reliving those awesome feelings from that happy moment that you focused on earlier. Stay in touch with those awesome feelings while you watch yourself accomplish your goal in your visualization of the future. Continue this for about 20-30 seconds or so. When you open your eyes, you should feel more confident about accomplishing your goal.

One camper told me that he used this technique to visualize himself winning his state cross country meet. He said that only used it couple times each week, but he still cruised to victory and easily won the state championship.

CREATE A "POSITIVE SUPPORT SYSTEM"

You never really hear successful people say, *"I got here all by myself! It was all me!"* Just go onto YouTube and watch Russell Westbrook's emotional 2016-17 NBA MVP speech. His whole speech was filled with a long list of heartfelt thank you's.

The thank you that seemed to stick out the most was when he thanked his little brother. First, he talked about how his little brother is his role model. Then, he expressed how much it meant to him that his brother ALWAYS texts him at half-time during every game. His brother's support during every game obviously means the world to him!

Imagine if you had someone like that in your corner win or lose no matter what. Those are the kinds of people you're going to want to surround yourself with if you want to be very successful at anything.

By now, you've probably already started thinking about the people you have in your life who've been supporting you so far. I'd just suggest that you expand that list of people as much as possible.

There are so many people out there who may be able to help us in ways we cannot even understand yet. Some of those people may be able to help uplift us when we're down. Some of them may be able to make us laugh when we haven't been having fun. And, others may be able to give us the honest feedback, constructive criticism, and new ideas that we may need to hear in order to improve as runners and as positive thinking people.

In fact, I'd say that the people who've helped me the most during my own mental slumps were friends who gave me honest criticism and suggestions on ways I could approach things differently in life. Their advice was invaluable, and they all helped me turn my life around in ways I hadn't even imagined.

So, always be willing to strike up conversations with new people who may share common interests with you. You can find many of these people in places you already spend time in (e.g., at school, at work, meeting people on other teams, coffee shops and other hangouts).

"EMOTIONAL FIRST AID"

Everyone seems to go through upsets and unexpected trauma in life (e.g., bad races, frustration at school, relationship problems, trouble with friends, frustration at work, frustration with parents, car wrecks, and the list goes on).

This visualization technique helps snap you out of the negative emotions and helps create a more positive mindset even in the middle of stressful situations.

1. "Thump the thymus." The thymus gland is located behind the upper breastbone in your chest. You can also Google "Thymus Point" to see a picture of where it's located. Thump that area with a closed hand and say, "Ha-Ha-Ha" rhythmically three times, and then, after a pause, do it three more times. Smile while doing that and picture something or someone that you love. That could be a divine figure or even a favorite pet.

2. Then, close your eyes and picture a ball of bright light at the base of the spine. Slowly breathe that ball of light up your spine/back, past your neck, and all of the way to the top of your head.

3. While doing the breathing in step #2, think of a positive word (e.g., Love, Beauty, Hope, Fun, Happiness, Laughter, or etc.), and visualize that word in the ball of light as you slowly breathe it up to the top of your head.

4. Picture someone you love.

5. Remember that a lot of things are out of your control. As they say, focus on the things that you can actually control and to turn what you cannot control over to a Higher Power (e.g., see the Alcoholics Anonymous Serenity Prayer).

Even on the first try, this should put you in a much better mood than you were in before. Feel free to repeat it as much as you need to in order to help stay in a more positive mindset throughout stressful situations.

THE "ADD ON" TECHNIQUE

This technique uses the power of Self-Honesty. It's very useful for situations when an upcoming event or if an event at hand seems overwhelming, daunting, or undoable. So, use this when you're not looking forward to doing something and it feels unbearable or like there's no end in sight.

For instance, let's say that you have a 12 X 400-meter repeat workout scheduled for the day. And, maybe you just don't feel like doing 12 X 400-meter repeats that day. You'd rather just do a quick, easy workout and then Netflix & chill...

In this type of situation, just take a mental timeout and ask yourself, *"Could I do 14 X 400-meter repeats today?"*

You might think, *"NO! I don't even want to do 12 repeats. So, why the heck would I try 14 repeats?"* Well, that really doesn't matter. What you 'want to do' and what you truly 'can do' are two completely different things.

So, if you were to answer the question very honestly, you'd have to admit that you'd probably hate doing 14 repeats, but you COULD still do them. It might suck. And, it might take a long time. But, again, the truth is that you could probably do 14 X 400-meter repeats even if you didn't want to in all honesty.

Let's take this concept further and ask ourselves, *"Could I do 16 X 400-meter repeats today?"* Yes, it would seem as crazy as hell. And, we know that you might not want to do 16 repeats. But, if someone held a gun to your head and made you do them, could you actually do them? Yes, you could honestly do them especially if your life depended on it. LOL!

Now, we could keep adding on repeats just for fun (e.g., “What if I had to do 18? 20?”). But, after all of these ‘add ons,’ how does 12 X 400-meter repeats sound? Probably not as bad anymore, huh? Not only that, we KNOW that we CAN actually do 12 if we’ve admitted that we can do 14+.

More examples:

Mind says: “*These 100 math problems I gotta do tonight are gonna suck!*”

You ask: “Well, what if I was assigned 150 math problems? Or 200? Could I honestly do them even if I didn’t want to? Yes, I’m not gonna lie to myself. I’d hate it, but I could do it. Thank God I don’t have to do more than 100. And, maybe I can play some music to make it a little more fun.”

Mind says: “\$&*%! I gotta work an 8 hour shift tonight?”

You ask: “Could I work a 10 hour shift if I had to? Could I do a 12 hour shift if someone held a gun to my head? If I can do 12 hours, why couldn’t I do 14? I wouldn’t want to, and I’d hate it! But I could definitely do it.”

So, whenever a thought like, “*This is taking forever,*” comes to mind, just mentally “Add on” time and imagine being in the situation much longer than you’re actually going to be in.

When you dread something that you have to do, the actual experience of that activity seems much tougher and much longer. But, when you apply a mental exercise like the “Add on,” then that experience usually seems to speed up and not feel like such a big deal.

Plus, you can always think outside of the box and try to make the dreaded experience more fun (e.g., play music; plan something fun for afterwards or whatever). Think of all of the experiences where you were having a lot of fun, and remember how fast those cool experiences seemed to pass by.

THE “ETERNITY” TECHNIQUE

This technique takes the “Add On” technique to the absolute extreme. Let’s say that you’re in the middle of a run, and it begins to feel tough. Or, maybe you begin to feel unsure of yourself and maybe you begin to doubt your ability.

In this case, just say ask yourself, “*What if I actually had the ability and the strength to do this forever, without stopping?*” So, just imagine what it would actually feel like to be unstoppable in that uncomfortable moment. Think about the kind of power it would require to run for the rest of eternity, without stopping. That kind of power would seem extraordinary and out of this world, right?

Make an effort to get a sense of what that kind of power might feel like, and continue to focus on that kind of power while you're running. It may also even help to visualize yourself running forever.

You should notice that thinking this way makes whatever you're doing feel easier. You can apply this to practically any activity like workouts, races, homework, or whatever.

More examples:

Mind says: *"I'm feeling a little nervous about this speech I have to give in class."*
You say: *"Well, what if I actually had the ability to speak boldly and confidently for the rest of eternity? What would that actually be like? Crazy! But, maybe it would be a lot of fun, too."*

Mind says: *"Man, I gotta lot of chores to do at home."*
You say: *"Well, what if I had the strength to crush all of those chores like they're nothing? I'd probably have them done really fast!"*

THE "SO WHAT?!" TECHNIQUE

Feel free to use this whenever you feel like you're being bombarded with negative thoughts. Instead of dwelling on your negative thoughts and instead of trying to stop them, simply reply to them by assertively and enthusiastically telling your mind, ***"SO, WHAT?!"***

For example, you may be running a tough workout, and the thought, *"I'm tired,"* may come to mind. Immediately reply to that thought with the phrase, ***"SO, WHAT?!"*** Then, you might hear, *"This is a really hard workout."* No problem. Just assertively tell your mind, ***"SO, WHAT?!"***

More examples:

Mind says: *"I just wanna stop and quit for the day!"*
You reply: ***"SO, WHAT?!"***

Mind says: *"I hate running in the cold (or heat, or whatever)"*
You reply: ***"SO, WHAT?!"***

Mind says: *"I always run bad at this cross country course!"*
You reply: ***"SO, WHAT?!"***

Mind says: *"I'm really out of shape."*
You reply: ***"SO, WHAT?!"***

Mind says: *"My parents are being very annoying."*
You reply: *"SO, WHAT?!"*

Mind says: *"I have a lot of homework to do when I get home."*
You reply: *"SO, WHAT?!"*

Any thought that distracts you from whatever your goals are can be challenged with the phrase, *"SO, WHAT?!"* This technique first came to mind on a tough run where I felt tired and miserable! So, I simply replied with the phrase *"SO, WHAT?!"* to all of my negative thoughts.

After a couple minutes of applying *"SO, WHAT?!"* to every single thought, without any warning my mind suddenly went completely blank. Believe it or not, all of my thoughts literally disappeared. At first, it felt a little weird because my mind never seems to shut up.

But, in that instant, I went from feeling tired and miserable to feeling completely peaceful and full of energy that never seemed to ever run out. Basically, I felt like I could run as hard as I wanted to for the rest of Eternity without getting tired. It was incredible and unbelievable!

THE "CANCELING B.S." TECHNIQUE

This is a more advanced version of the *"SO, WHAT?!"* technique. And, it's one of the most powerful techniques in this playbook.

As a running coach, one the most frequent self-limiting beliefs I hear is along the lines of, *"I don't have any leg speed. I hate running short distance races. I'm only good at long distances."* Now, while that may seem to be true for some of us, it's really just a story that we tell ourselves to justify our lack of development and our lack of faith in ourselves.

Maybe it's more that this type of athlete just hasn't trained enough to develop and enhance their leg speed. Maybe that type of athlete just hasn't mastered the proper technique necessary for running fast at shorter distances. Maybe that athlete just hasn't reached their potential quite yet. Or, maybe it's a combination of many things that can actually be addressed and gradually improved upon.

Regardless, there's still no excuse to give up and condemn ourselves to *"sucking at short distance races and sprinting."* Maybe this athlete won't be the next Usain Bolt, but maybe he/she can still increase their sprinting ability beyond what they think they can.

So, in these cases, we can challenge these negative belief systems directly by assertively saying to ourselves, *"I cancel all of my limiting thoughts and beliefs about running bad at shorter distances! I refuse to allow any of those thoughts to apply to me anymore. Those thoughts are total B.S. Maybe I can actually improve at shorter distances."*

The more that we challenge our negative beliefs in that way, then the more empowered and confident we'll begin to feel. And, sooner or later, we'll become more likely to actually break through tough barriers and accomplish what once seemed practically impossible.

When I first started distance running, I felt extremely weak when I ran up hills. So, I believed that I sucked at running up hills. But, that next summer, I practiced sprinting up hills nearly every single week. During the next season, I was considered one of the best hill runners on my team.

But, had I kept thinking, *"Man, I suck at hills,"* then I would have limited myself to that belief. And, I never would've improved as a hill runner. I probably would've continued to suck!

A few years ago, I learned how powerful this technique works for dealing with life in general. One day, it seemed like everything was going way wrong. I felt like I was experiencing a horrible case of never-ending 'bad luck.' Then, it dawned on me to challenge my belief in bad luck.

So, I simply said to myself, *"I cancel the belief that 'bad luck' applies to me."* I said that a few more times to myself, and then it felt as if a weight was lifted off of my shoulders. Everything that happened to me for the rest of the day miraculously seemed to work out in my favor. Nothing seemed to go wrong for the rest of the day. I guess you could say that it seemed like I caught a stroke of 'good luck.'

But, did I cure bad luck forever? Nope! Occasionally, I unconsciously slip back into the mindset where it seems like I'm experiencing bad luck. All I do is remind myself, *"I cancel the belief that 'bad luck' applies to me."*

So, be persistent with challenging your limiting beliefs. Cancel them out as many times as you have to. You may be able to cancel the effects of some negative beliefs very quickly but others may take much more time and effort.

More examples:

Mind says: *"It's just not my day."*

You reply: *"B.S! I cancel the belief that it's not my day. Other people may think like that. But, that sort of thinking hasn't helped me. Things don't seem to be going my way so far. But, that can always change at any moment. And, maybe I can learn from this experience to prevent these types of things from happening again in the future."*

Mind says: *"Bad things always seem to happen to me."*

You reply: *"Cancel that! I no longer agree to buy into that way of thinking. It's just B.S. Good things have happened to me before. And, good things can happen to me again. I refuse to buy into the belief that bad things are destined to happen to me."*

Mind says: *"I always run bad at that cross country course."*

You reply: *"Cancel that thought! The belief that I have to run bad at any cross country course or track is B.S! I'm done with that kind of thinking."*

Mind says: *"I always get injured."*

You reply: *"B.S! That doesn't have to continue happening to me. I can search for new ways to prevent injuries and stay healthy. And, I can look into ways to heal faster if I do get sick or hurt. So, the thought that I always get injured really doesn't have to apply to me anymore. Just because it has happened in the past doesn't mean it has to happen today or any other day."*

Mind says: *"I have bad knees."*

You reply: *"Cancel that thought! I refuse to allow that thought to affect me. My knees don't have to be bad even if it seemed that way in the past. Maybe I can look into ways to make them stronger and less prone to injury."*

So, we have to be very careful about what we allow ourselves to believe. The more that you believe something about yourself, then the more likely that that belief will actually play out in your life.

We pick up many of our limiting beliefs from loved ones like our coaches, our teachers, our teammates, our friends and our family members. But, just because we like or admire someone doesn't mean that we automatically have to agree with EVERYTHING that they say or believe. After all, no one is perfect.

That said, you may even have to cancel discouraging comments others have made about you that you've unconsciously bought into. For instance, someone may joke, *"Gee, you can't seem to do anything right!"* Be sure NOT to let such thoughts go unchallenged, *"That's B.S! I can certainly do things right."*

THE "PRAYER" TECHNIQUE

Personally, I've found that this is the most helpful of all of these techniques.

Some of you may already be using certain prayers to help with your running. And, some of you may not be using any prayers at all. Either way, just do whatever seems to work for you. The only reason why I recommend it is because it always seems to miraculously help me out in desperate situations.

This style of prayer uses the power of Faith, Surrender and Humility. And, like all of the other techniques, it requires an easy going attitude.

Unlike some prayers, this style of prayer doesn't necessarily ask for a specific outcome or result, e.g., *"Lord, please help me win!!!"* Prayers that are disguised as selfish demands don't seem to work very often and tend to lead to bitterness and discouragement.

So, for this style of prayer, all you really do is ask whichever Higher Power you believe in (by whichever name you prefer to call it) for strength and energy on your run. For instance, *"(Insert Higher Power's name here), I ask for your strength and energy on this upcoming run instead of my own."*

And, if you're nervous before a race, you could always ask for Courage and Confidence. Obviously, these are more "quality oriented" prayers than they are "results oriented" prayers. For races, you could also even add, *"If things don't workout as planned, I ask for you to help me through it."*

I've found that this style of prayer works best when you do it long before you actually have to run. So, avoid waiting till the last minute if can. But, it still seems to help even if you do it right before a run.

If you don't have a particular spiritual background and you're still curious to find out if this technique actually works, then you can test it out yourself by open-mindedly asking, *"If there is a Higher Power, then I ask to experience its presence on my run."* Then, forget about it and carry on as usual.

In my experience, prayer seems to work better when it's done with more of a cool attitude and an unselfish mindset. Other than that, just remember that you really have no control over whether or not any prayer actually works. After you make a prayer, then it's really out of your hands.

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Special thanks to the late Dr. David R. Hawkins, M.D., Ph.D. for sharing many of the concepts and ideas for these techniques. You can find all of his work at www.veritaspub.com