

Boosting Your Mental Energy during a Marathon

By

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It is common knowledge that the body constantly releases innumerable hormones and chemicals. This article will focus primarily on hormones related to our thoughts, moods and feelings. Basically there are two types of hormones, those that create positive effect and boost the energy level in our system, such as Dopamine and Serotonin, (justifiably referred to as “happy drugs”), released by the brain when we are feeling good, and thinking positively, and those that create negative effects and drain our energy, such as Adrenaline and Cortisol released as a result of fear, worry, stress, and negative thinking. When these conditions persist the ability of our immune system to heal the body is eventually reduced.

Figure 1 demonstrates the fluctuations of these substances in our brain, **yellow** indicating positive substances, and **red** indicating negative substances.

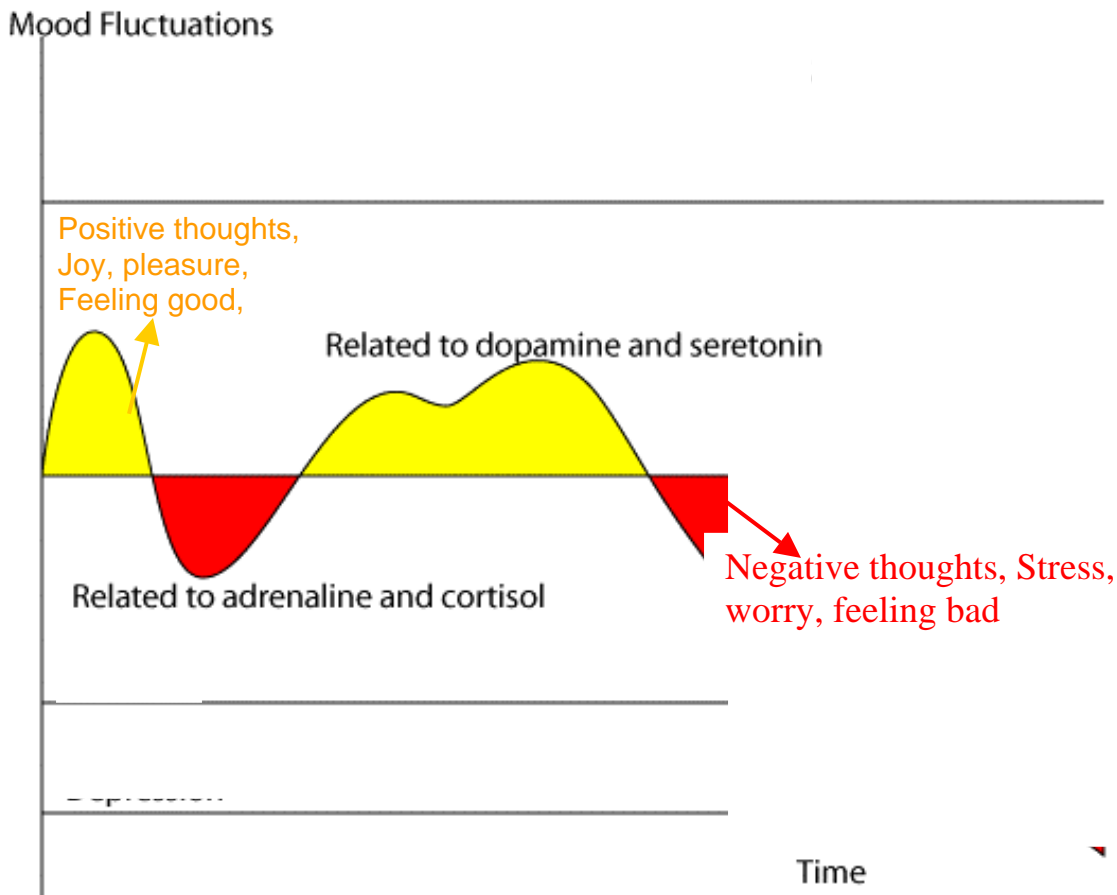


FIG 1: Mood Fluctuations in Time

We can loosely say that any running “event” is comprised of two parts, the physical and the mental. The physical content of the event, such as the images of the trail, the scenery and the people is one part; our mental thoughts, feelings and emotions during the event comprise the second part.

Figure 2 graphically depicts a running ‘event’: the inner blue circle denotes the ‘content’ of the event, while the outer ring (either yellow or red, depending on the type of emotion) denotes the feeling and emotions associated with the event.

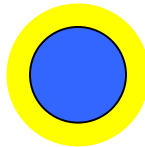
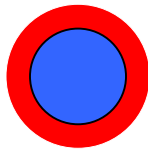


FIG 2: Event depiction: inner circle denotes the content, outer ring denotes the feelings

It is very likely that one runs the same trail twice, each time with totally different thoughts and emotions. For example, the San Jose Fit training program (www.SJFIT.com) offers running an 8 mile stretch twice, with a 10 mile stretch in between (i.e. 8 miles one week, 10 miles the next, and 8 miles again on the third week). During the first 8- mile run, most of the runners are worried about the inability to finish, or the possibility of injury, and feel quite exhausted after the run. The second 8-mile run two weeks later is totally different, after having conquered the fears in the first 8-mile run and the 10-mile run the following week, this time around the runners are more confident, in a better mood, and most characterized the run as ‘a piece of cake’. See **Figure 3**.

Negative Emotions



Positive Emotions

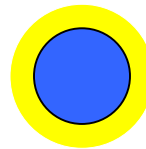


FIG3: two identical 8-miles run with totally different emotions

Let us now analyze these observations. It is very unlikely that the runners gained that much physical strength within a two week period. What really happened is that fear, stress and worry caused the release of Adrenaline and Cortisol, which impeded the runner’s energy and momentum the first time around, whereas confidence and positive thinking released Dopamine and Serotonin, which boosted the energy level for an enhanced performance during the second run.



FIG 4: Negative thoughts impede your momentum; Positive thoughts boost your momentum

The “bar” of conscious energy

Thoughts and emotions are changing constantly. The bar in **Figure 5** is used to depict the total mental energy spent when we are consciously awake. This bar represents a second by second representation, split into parts. One is the energy spent focusing on the task at hand; the other is the energy spent on background thoughts and emotions.

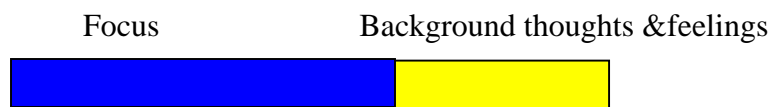


Fig5: The Bar of conscious energy

For example, if a student is taking an SAT test, part of his energy is focused on answering the questions; the other is on background emotions. If the thoughts and feelings are negative (red), such as fear or nervousness, it is going to reduce energy and affect the concentration (Focus) on the actual test. On the other hand, if the thoughts are positive then the positive energy will further help the student to focus on the test, as shown in **Figure 6**.

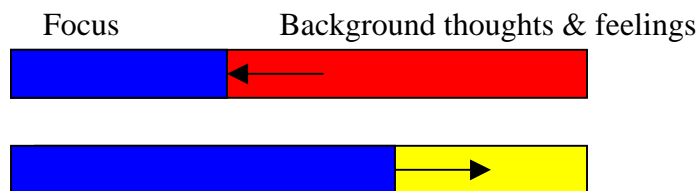
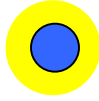


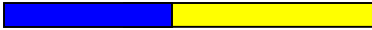
Fig 6: Negative thoughts reduce the Focus, while positive ones enhance it.

Similarly, while running, the focus on background thoughts and feelings is constantly changing. One second it will be negative and on the physical aches and pains and “I cannot go on”, then it will change to something good, your next vacation, dinner tonight. The aches will subside as the brain secretes a dose of Dopamine.

Therefore, we have two major goals in running a Marathon

1. You want to be positive and boost your confidence and minimize unnecessary worries **before** the actual event takes place. In other words you want a yellow band around the coming event.



2. You want your background thoughts and feelings **during** the marathon to be fluctuating on the positive side with minimum stress and worry.
3. 
- 4.
5. . This will ensure a boost of good energy and help you to achieve your goal. In other words you want your background thoughts and emotions to be positive as shown

Before the event my recommendations are:

- **Create strong incentive:** Strong incentive such as: I want to prove to my friends that I can do it, I want my kids to be proud of me, etc. Such thoughts will help you overcome the difficult moments during the run.
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- **Join a training program.** ...join a training program, (like SJFIT) because I doubt that anyone has the discipline and the stamina to do it on his/her own.
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- **Seek encouragement...** during the training period – you need the constant and upbeat support of your friends, family, and colleagues. Positive feedback will fuel and **strengthen** your initial incentive
- .
- **Make sure no surprises...** it is essential to eliminate unnecessary worries (red) that may arise during the marathon, since that will drain your energy and impede your performance. Make sure there are no surprises, and **don't experiment** with anything new:

New shoes must be tested at least a month before the Marathon. Even if they turn out to be ok, you will still be constantly wondering if they are not going to bother you, since the last thing you want to worry about is blisters during the run. It is analogous to a rope climber, having been told that the rope hasn't been tested. Imagine the energy spent worrying about it when he is hung in the air at 8000 ft.

Drinks and food intake: By now you should know how much water, liquids and various foods intake you need to keep you hydrated and give you the proper amount of needed energy.

Trail: Familiarize yourself with the trail **prior** to the actual event. Walk it or run it, so you will create milestones and know what to

expect in terms of slopes, turns and water stops. Failing to do so will cause nervousness, and unnecessary worry.

- **Prepare alternate focuses...** In order not to dwell on your aches and pains during the event, focus on affirmative experiences from your past and bring these memories to the surface of your consciousness **prior** to the run so they can be invoked at tough moments while you are running. Try to think and rehearse the details of a favorite vacation, movie or book, going through the details in your mind, music that you like, a positive event that is coming up in the future, a date, a post-marathon celebration, a good dinner that evening etc. These are just some examples which will vary by individual.

During the Marathon my recommendations are

- Remind yourself of all the miles you have run over the past weeks while training and concentrate on finishing the remaining miles.(In my case I ran 23 miles in training so I consider 23 miles in my pocket, and all I have to worry about is the remaining 3.2 miles which I place in my other pocket!!)
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- Set small goals: to the next curve or the next hill, the next mile, the next water station or the next snack. Don't think of conquering the whole stretch in one shot.
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- Try to run with companions, exchanging jokes to induce laughter and dopamine.
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- Each time you feel pain or fatigue, change your focus to something else (the focuses you prepared earlier), away from the physical and mental strain of the present.
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- Chanting or singing will block negative background thoughts, as the conscious energy is concentrating on the process of chanting or listening to your own voice.
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- During the last 5 miles, start to think back on your incentive, evaluating the advantages of the whole experience, including finishing the marathon: your friends and family will be proud of you, you look forward to a great meal, and you can relax and goof off tomorrow....

Maximize that positive energy and run your marathon! And good luck.

This article is part of Dr. Zloof's work on a visual model of the mind, "MindVisualizerTM". For more information Email to mzloof@aol.com.