

HEAD CHECK
If training gets overwhelming, take your mind off running.

Reboot, Refresh

Not feeling it? Learn how to break through common mental barriers that impede your training **BY JAYME MOYE**

STUCK IN A RUT, caught in a slump, stalled out—whatever you want to call it, every runner eventually reaches a period in their training where their progress levels off. “There’s no way around it, plateaus are inevitable and part of the training process,” says Jeffrey L. Brown, assistant clinical professor in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *The Winner’s Brain*. That’s because it’s impossible for an athletic ca-

reer to climb only in a straight trajectory. Over the course of a running life, there are natural peaks and valleys—and flat lines in between.


Plateaus get a bad rap, but they aren’t always detrimental. When you’re facing a demanding period at work or experiencing a major life change like moving or expanding your family, why not happily let your training idle in neutral? If you don’t have extra time for long runs or

energy for speedwork, keeping your running in status-quo mode can keep you from overextending yourself. “A plateau is rarely permanent, and it doesn’t define you as a runner,” Brown says. “It just indicates what’s going on with your training—and perhaps your life—at a particular point in time.”

Of course, sometimes a plateau isn’t a welcome break. If you really want to tackle a new distance, set a personal record, or drop a few pounds, the struggle to make headway toward that goal can be frustrating. Brown says that barring illness or injury—two major physical causes of stalled progress—a psychological barrier could be in your way. Here are ways your brain can stall your progress and how to fight back.

YOU’RE OVERTRAINED

Sure, overtraining is a physical condition, but it can also be mental. It can happen when your head ODs on running. Suppose, for instance, you become so fixated on a race goal that when you’re not running you’re stretching, icing, foam rolling, blending recovery smoothies, charting your mileage, Tweeting about your runs, and plotting out new routes. “The mind needs downtime from running, just like the body does,” says Chris Janzen, a mental conditioning coach and founder of TriathleteMind.com. “It’s hard to sustain that level of motivation for long. When your life revolves around running, you risk burnout.”

BREAK THROUGH Experts typically prescribe overtrained athletes R&R. Step back and impose a running (and charting and social-networking) sabbatical  for a few days. When you resume

Hit a plateau? Don’t dwell on it. Consider it an opportunity to gain feedback about what’s working—and what’s not—in your training.

FEEL
better

training, try to keep perspective and remind yourself that running is just one element of your life, Brown says. Do a workout at least once a week that you don't time or track (go for a fun run or cross-train), and keep up with other interests. Post social-media updates that don't detail your workouts, and hang out with friends who don't know how long a marathon is and have zero interest in your splits. You'll be a better runner for it, Janzen says. "You'll feel refreshed and will have more mental energy to put into your actual running."

YOU'RE OVERWHELMED

Everyone has a threshold for what's mentally manageable, and when your head gets overwhelmed with too many tasks—balancing a fast-paced career, keeping up with the kids, worrying about an ailing relative—you can hit the tipping point. Overload usually leads to inertia: Like a deer in headlights, you have so much to deal with that you just freeze. Janzen says to think of your life in terms of units of energy: If you have, say, 100 units per day, where is it spent? A big deadline at work or financial concerns can sap a very high percentage of those 100 units, leaving you with barely enough to do an easy three-miler, let alone tackling hill repeats.

BREAK THROUGH Be mindful of your tipping point, Janzen says. If summer is your least flexible time of the year, for example, don't sign up for a fall marathon that will require a major time and energy commitment over your busy season. Pick a more manageable time of year for demanding training, or scale back your goal and opt for a half-marathon instead. If you are already in the midst of training and feel more overwhelmed than motivated by your goal, break your training to-dos into smaller tasks. Focus your mental energy on tomorrow's workout only. "Spend a few minutes thinking about it—what you're going to wear, when you're going to do it, where you're going to do it," Janzen says. "Being forward-thinking and making decisions about those small details will give you a game plan, which will help you feel in control and less overwhelmed."

YOU'RE OVERFOCUSED

Runners are by nature dedicated, ambitious, and results-oriented. But when you hold a narrow definition of success—*qualify for Boston Marathon or bust!*—you're in danger of falling short of that goal, which can invite feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness and interfere with the ultimate goal of having a healthy, happy

running life. "Becoming obsessively fixated on just one goal can backfire and destroy your motivation," Janzen says. Even if you do succeed and, say, qualify for Boston, and that's been your driving force for months or years, you're at risk of suffering from post-major-event letdown once Boston wraps if you're without another meaningful reason to lace up.

BREAK THROUGH Don't put all your eggs in one basket: Have multiple goals of varying degrees of achievability. That way, if you miss your most ambitious goal, you have other more feasible ones still within reach. Develop process goals—not just outcome goals. Instead of just focusing on setting a PR, you could aim to not slow down in the final miles of a long run, or to keep your upper body tall as you climb hills. These types of goals can be easier to focus on and achieve, which will give you little nuggets of success. Also, while outcome goals are important, they shouldn't be the sole reason you run, Brown says. If you don't have a great workout or race, remind yourself of all the positive things running gives you—better health, stress relief, opportunity to experience nature, bonding with running partners. Focusing on those long-term benefits can give you the motivation you need to push on. **III**



A GOOD PLACE?
Gauge your motivation level to see if you need a change in routine.

Check Yourself

Are you stuck in a rut, or have you found your groove?

HAPPY WHERE YOU ARE

- > You finish your runs feeling satisfied and fulfilled.
- > Running for stress relief, improved mood, or social time with friends drives you.
- > You're coming off a period of intense training and are taking time for casual, off-the-clock running.
- > Getting out for a run is victory enough right now; work and family life are too busy to leave you time or energy to train more than you are.
- > Training hard for a race doesn't motivate you or appeal to you.

KICK-START, PLEASE!

- > You're training as hard as ever but aren't seeing performance gains.
- > You're unmotivated to start and finish your runs. You have to drag yourself out the door and then are tempted to turn back early.
- > You failed to reach a goal and don't know what to do next.
- > You've been running the same routes or have been focused on the same goals for months, or even years, and the routine is growing stale.
- > A chronic injury is preventing you from training as hard as you'd like to.

PLATEAUS OFTEN HIT IN THE "AUTONOMOUS PHASE" OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT—WHEN GAINS ARE SMALLER AND HARDER TO REACH.