Running is both a physical and motivational challenge—requiring fitness, endurance and a solid plan of action. For many of us, the hardest part isn't preparing our bodies for the race, but rather staying committed to months of training. The following advice will help you maneuver around those motivational roadblocks you're sure to encounter leading up to race day.

Setting Goals
According to Paige Dunn, a sport psychology consultant based in the San Francisco Bay area, it is important to understand exactly what motivates you to train for a particular race in the first place. Perhaps you overcame an obstacle in your life or are in the process of doing so. Maybe completing a marathon has been a lifelong dream or you want to support your favorite charity. No matter the reason, a solid understanding of why you want to run will motivate you even when times get tough. Proper goal setting is the foundation of motivation, Dunn says. Start with your season or race goal and break it down into daily goals, which should be specific, realistic and measurable. “These short-term goals can be individual workouts or something more mental like, ‘I’m going to relax during my run or focus on my breathing today,’” she says. Daily goals help to build confidence and keep you on track throughout months of training.

Dunn encourages runners to create a mission statement for each race season. “As a runner, you need to understand why this race will be a significant achievement for you,” Dunn says. For women who have been running for years, it is important to continually re-evaluate your goals “otherwise you’re just going through the motions,” she says.

Keeping Track
Brian Baxter, a sport psychology consultant from Portland, Ore., recommends keeping a training log to keep track of every workout. A day or two before race day, you’ll be able to flip through your log for proof of all your hard work. This reinforces in your mind that you’re well prepared and deserve to be at the starting line. “When you write down your goals, it’s like making a promise to yourself,” Baxter says. “One of the easiest ways to not achieve a goal is keeping it inside.”

Sharing Goals
In addition to writing down your goals, it is important to share them with supportive family members, friends or even a local running group. Not only will these people be there to encourage you, but because they are invested in your goal, they’ll also be the first to call you out if you’ve been slacking. “A solid support system will help you to stay motivated and be accountable,” Dunn says. For an inspirational boost, runner Kara Thom says she corresponds with her best friend and former training partner on a regular basis to discuss each other’s training progress. Thom, a mother of four children, says finding the motivation to run can be a challenge with her busy schedule. “My main motivation is knowing that I will be running the race with one of my best friends.”
In Good Company
Scheduling a running date with a friend or group of runners like Team in Training is another way to stay motivated, says Ronda Jameel, a certified running coach and owner of Run2Dend, LLC, a Phoenix-based company specializing in training for beginner to intermediate runners. “You’ll be less likely to forego your workout if you’re planning to run with someone,” Jameel says. Not only will a training partner keep you company, but he or she will be there to encourage you when it’s a tough workout and you feel like giving up. Also consider running with your most loyal companion. “Dogs are great training partners because they are always excited to go running, whether it’s a cold, rainy day or early in the morning,” Jameel says. If you prefer running alone, consider training with a coach, either online or locally. He or she will follow up with you on a weekly basis via phone or email without having to be there physically while you run. “A coach keeps you accountable and knows in what areas you have more potential or perhaps need more assistance,” Jameel says.

Spice Things Up
Months of running in the same location and at the same time of day can take its toll. Jameel recommends spicing up your routine by altering the scenery or time of day you typically run. “Do different kinds of training so you’re not always running the same course all the time,” she says. “Here in Arizona, we have great trails—some hilly, some flat—that train certain muscles and offer unique scenery to prevent burn out.” Also consider running certain days with a friend or listening to a new style of music or motivational audio. One of the best ways to beat boredom is to integrate cross-training exercises into your weekly routine such as yoga, cycling or swimming. “Aside from the mental benefits, cross-training exercises can help you improve your flexibility, strength, balance and more,” Jameel says.

It’s Individual
The answer to staying motivated is a personal one—everyone has a different reason for putting one foot in front of the other. It is important to understand how you run best, whether alone or with a friend, first thing in the morning or late at night, on the trails or in your neighborhood. “There is no magical solution—you can’t tell someone to be motivated,” Dunn says. “They have to figure it out on their own.” What is the first step to finding your motivation? Dunn explains, “Knowing yourself as a runner is key—what energizes you, excites you, inspires you?”

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