



FAST LANE

**TALK
YOURSELF
UP**

Practice silencing negative thoughts to run your fastest.

BY ALEX HUTCHINSON

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN MORRIS/PHOTORUN (TOP RIGHT)



If you reach the halfway point of a 5K, you're feeling calm, comfortable, and confident that you can maintain your pace to the finish line, then you're doing it wrong. Physiologically, 5Ks are short enough to run them faster than your "critical pace," a demarcation that separates relatively comfortable paces that you can sustain for longer than about 30 minutes from faster ones where discomfort rises rapidly. Halfway through the race, if you're chasing a PR, you should seriously wonder whether you'll make it to the finish.

Of course, this makes the urge to slow down—just a little, of course—almost irresistible. One of the best ways to fight that urge, it turns out, is to tell yourself that you don't need to. "Motivational self-talk" is a tool that sports psychologists have used for decades, but in recent years researchers have made new progress in demonstrating its effectiveness for endurance athletes and figuring out how it works. Here's what you need to know.

Shelby Houlihan, 24, loves "the grind" of long tempo runs—which may be why the 800- and 1500-meter specialist took to the 5,000 so naturally. About six months after her first 5,000 finish as a pro (15:06.05 in February 2016), she placed 11th in the Olympics final (15:08.89) in Rio.

1 Adjust Your Effort

With every stride of a 5K, you're deciding whether to speed up or slow down based on how hard your effort feels compared with how hard you expect it to feel. Your sense of effort is influenced by bodily signals like muscle fatigue, but it also depends on how your brain interprets those signals. Dwelling on how hard the effort feels makes it worse; focusing on how well you're doing makes it better. This is the essence of motivational self-talk.


In a 2014 study, cyclists who were asked to maintain a set pace reported a lower sense of effort after being trained in self-talk. In another study where cyclists raced 10K, their effort ratings stayed the same but their average pace was faster. In both cases, self-talk altered the relationship between pace and effort.

2 Deploy It

Self-talk studies have found benefits in a wide variety of situations. A British study found that self-talk training boosted performance in a grueling 60-mile overnight ultramarathon. A Canadian study found that cyclists performed better in 95-degree heat after self-talk training that focused specifically on handling hot weather. For relatively short, intense races like a 5K, research suggests that the benefits are most pronounced in the second half of the race, when the pain (and accompanying negative thoughts) hits home.

3 Practice It

Planning to control your internal monologue is the first step, but it's not easy to implement midrace. As the boxer Mike Tyson put it, everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face. You need to train yourself so that your self-talk statements become second nature even in stressful conditions.

Start by taking a moment after races or hard workouts to jot down the thoughts that went through your head. Identify the negative ones, like "Uh-oh, I started too fast," and brainstorm positive replacements, like "This is what I've trained for." Try your replacements in training, draw up a list of the best for different stages of a race (such as after each mile of a 5K), and practice them more. Negative thoughts will sometimes still intrude. When one does, acknowledge it, put it aside, and replace it with one that will spur you on. 



Key Workout

Who
Shelby Houlihan,
5,000-meter
Olympian

What
14 miles, with 4 at tempo pace and 4 getting progressively faster

Why
It taxes two different systems in one workout by combining the grind of tempo pace with speed intervals, and it allows you to practice hard running on tired legs.

When
Every two or three weeks until you start tapering for your goal race

How
Warm up for 3 miles, run 4 miles at tempo pace (5:20 pace for Houlihan), and recover for 6 to 8 minutes. Then run 4 x 1 mile progressively faster (5:15, 5:10, 5:05, and 5:00 for Houlihan) with 90 seconds to 2 minutes recovery in between. Cool down for 3 miles.