Speaker 1:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson:

Many runners find themselves drawn to races and long runs like a marathon, but how do you begin to tackle the intense physical and mental hurdles that come?

Nicki Donnelson:

I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal. Today, as my guest, I have Dr. Sara Powell, Assistant Professor of Kinesiology at Missouri State University. Powell tells us the distance is just one of the challenges to crossing the finish line.

Dr. Sara Powell:

They say about the marathon that once you cross the finish line, your life is changed forever. That is a hundred percent true. The process of training for something of that magnitude is really daunting. It's overwhelming. There are days when it just flat out is uncomfortable, but the psychological processes that go along with that, you build this sense of self-confidence in your ability to do something that's really, really hard. I did a study on an ultra marathoner, so a whole nother level of crazy that I have yet to reach and probably never will. She ran a 136.8 mile trail in Southern California, nonstop. I mean, obviously she would stop for food and those sorts of things, but we did a study on her because I was like, "Well, this is just fascinating to me." One of the things that really helped her was that sense of resilience. Being able to overcome those barriers when things got really hard and seemed insurmountable, what is it psychologically that makes us push through those? It's not only the ultra marathoners. Absolutely anyone who's run a marathon will tell you that they're going to hit a wall, but that's one of those things where you have to psychologically train yourself as much as you do physiologically.

Nicki Donnelson:

In addition to getting fitted for good footwear, Powell provides some tips for training.

Dr. Sara Powell:

If you're currently able to, let's say, run a 10K, fantastic. That's a good starting base. Work yourself up incrementally. Find a training plan. There are several free ones on the internet that will train you the right way to be able to incrementally increase your distance. It's just as important to train your mind as it is to train your body. So, utilizing things like setting goals, utilizing self-talk. When I'm doing longer races, especially marathons, psychologically for me, one of the things that I do is I run the last 10K first, in my head. Then by the time I've finished that first 10K, I'm like, "Oh, I only have 20 miles left to go and I've done however many 20 mile training runs when I've trained for this." [inaudible 00:02:48] choking it out like that. For me, that works really well.

Dr. Sara Powell:

Practicing how you want to perform on race day. So, obviously there's several different physiological training aspects that go into that, but mentally as well. Putting yourself in conditions, running when it's hot, running when it's cold, running when it's raining, anything that you might see that would psychologically impact your ability to feel confident and strong and prepared on race day and try and train in those conditions if you can.

Dr. Sara Powell:

Going off of those times when you did feel really strong, giving yourself a cue word to put you back in that mental state. Maybe it's, "I feel strong," or "My legs can do this," or "I am invincible," whatever that is for you. The more that you do this, the more that you continue to run. You'll build those things up.

Nicki Donnelson:

Powell remembers one time in particular that challenged her more than any other. It was during the Boston Marathon several years ago. It wasn't her first marathon, or even her first time in that prestigious race. But the adverse weather conditions of rain, near freezing temperatures, and high winds were incredibly difficult. But the self-talk and imagery got her through, even reaching a personal record.

Dr. Sara Powell:

I kept pushing through, knowing, okay, I'm like, "You know what? You're running one of the best races in the world. The conditions are not favorable, but you have the ability to do this." So, I kept persisting and pushing through and showing that sense of resilience. Once I started to get to the big hill segment, I actually started to feel a little bit better. By the time that I was at, I don't know, it was probably mile 20 or 21, I figured out by doing some math in my head that if I picked up my pace a little bit, I could PR. I could pull a personal best in those crazy conditions that day. That's when I started telling myself, "You are nothing but strong. You are nothing but strong." I actually negative split, which means I ran faster, the last 10K of the race than I did any other, and I was able to pull a personal best. Training yourself psychologically can really help get you through difficult physical conditions. Then once you have an experience like that, if you draw on it again in the future and put yourself in that head space, you will find that same ability that you had previously, because you still have it. You don't lose it. It just kind of maybe gets muddled by conditions or other factors at certain amounts of time.

Nicki Donnelson:

That was Dr. Sara Powell. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

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For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at (417) 836-6397.