

Incorporating Mental Health Skills into Daily Activities: The First Run of the Year

By: Lauri Doepke, MS, LPC, NCC

It's Sunday January 3rd, 2021 as I start to write this. Many of us resolve to better ourselves in the new year; oftentimes in health related ways. Today I lace up my shoes for the first run of the year. I have mixed feelings about it; part of me wants to hit the pavement since it's been a while; the other part is dreading it. I'm **chatting on the phone** with my sister who has the same intentions as me; though she's a bit more motivated. We set a departure time for 9:30am--her from her home, me from mine.

Today we're **accountability partners** for one another, ready to motivate and support one another if we fall short on our goal. I leave around 10am. Not timely, but I **started** nonetheless! I invite you to **take a run** with me; a run riddled with various mental health tools, techniques, and skill sets **(identified in bold print)** that I hope you take note of and apply yourselves, whether it be on your own physical run, or your run at life.

I set sail at a balmy 21 degrees outside. This is mostly why I was dreading the run. I'm not a fan of the cold, but I know I'll warm quickly since I'm dressed appropriately and there's little to no wind. The more I think about it, I find that I actually perform better in the cold. My **breathing** is more regulated because I'm not fighting the heat or humidity, nor do I need to carry an annoying water pack. I note that it feels both mentally and physically freeing to **drop the excess baggage**. **Identifying and acknowledging the positives** of a cold weather run has already **changed my mindset** from grumpy to content.

As I settle into my pace, I use a few different **distraction techniques** to keep my mind off the cold. I **meditate** by focusing my eyes on an object in the distance and combine that with focusing on physical sensations such as my breath or my feet hitting the pavement. I **repeat a running mantra** to stay focused and strong. I use **music**, focusing on songs that motivate me. I **check in with my body** to make sure I'm running as efficiently as I can. How's my form, posture, stride? Is my body feeling tense or loose? And then I **change, adapt, or cope** as necessary.

Today's route is a bit unplanned. I have a loose idea of distance in mind but am really **relying on my body to tell me what I need or what I can do**. Speed is not a factor today. I'm **not**



competing with anyone, including myself. I **set an intention** for my run, just to **get out and move**. The second goal was to maintain a running pace even if it was tortoise speed. As I run, I notice the terrain. At times I'm running on clear pavement, other times the road is covered in semi-compacted snow which

makes it more difficult to propel myself forward. The ground underneath my feet feels unstable as the snow begins to build up underneath my shoes. When I return to the clear road, I kick the excess snow out from under my shoes. It's at this point that I realize this run is riddled with metaphors for life. Life isn't always easy, nor does it always feel stable, but we **press on one step (hour, day, or breath) at a time**. We run through the sludge of life, reminding ourselves that "**most things are temporary**" and things will eventually feel stable and well-grounded again. Even so, we must continue to move forward.

After about two miles, the scenery is beautiful. All the trees are covered in frosty white. It literally looks like a winter wonderland! I smell wood burning in the distance, notice that my body temp has warmed, taste the bubblegum I popped into my mouth before taking off, and hear the sounds of various musicians playing through my headphones. I'm **being mindful of myself and the world around me**--noticing, acknowledging, **being present** and alert, but **not judging**. I'm deliberately being mindful on my run which allows me to **stay in the here and now**, and avoid focusing on the many other (negative, annoying, pressuring, etc.) things that could run through my mind in this hour, which would take away from the intention and benefits of this run.

Eventually I notice the shift in the terrain. Thus far my route has been either flat or inclined, but luck has shifted and I am now "crushing the downhill" as I like to say. Any of my running buddies can tell you that I dislike the inclines. I've given this a lot of **introspection**; I've **analyzed, speculated, processed it out** and have become

self-aware that on an incline I become lazy. I throw my body into neutral and trudge forward, simply going through the motions but not really invested in the process. My running buddies tackle the incline! They **approach** (the hills) **with intention**, pushing off each step with power, and firing the right muscle groups to propel themselves forward with the most efficient use of energy. Since I've become aware of my lazy incline tendencies, I also incorporated a **self-improvement goal**. Now I make it a goal to **be intentional** with my movement when I'm on the incline. I still dislike them, but I try to not let it change my mood or my efforts.

By now you've probably gathered that during my run I engaged in a lot of self-talk. Here's the part where I throw some **education** at you. We all engage in self-talk or inner dialogue. Those are the conversations that we have with ourselves in our heads. It includes our thoughts, beliefs, questions, and ideas. They can be positive, negative, or instructional. How often do you notice your self talk?



By **increasing awareness of your inner dialogue**, you can begin to notice what areas you are confident in (such as. knowing my strengths and accepting my weaknesses, feeling good and confident within myself, being optimistic/positive, etc.) and what areas might need improvement (for example, being self-critical or insecure, being highly judgemental of others, comparing myself to others in a negative way, etc.). Once you've increased your awareness, you can begin to **challenge and work on improving those negative belief systems** that often bring you down. Ok, end education and resume running!

As I'm "crushing the downhill," cruising along with momentum pulling me forward, I begin to focus more on what's going on around me, which leads me to a surprise moment! My route was a bit rural, but it borders the city so it's really not "too far country." For this reason, I'm a bit caught off guard when I raise my head to check out the neighborhood and see a few ostriches!

Their fenced area is set back from the road, but even so, I'm amazed at the size of these flightless birds. I **have to laugh** about the oddity of seeing this because it was completely unexpected and what a quick **shift in headspace**; I went from being focused on my run to taking in the sight of these gigantic birds! I smile and continue running; **thankful** that there's a fence to keep them in, knowing there's no way I could outrun an ostrich LOL! (Though what a sight that would be!)

Just a couple of miles later and I'm back at my driveway. I feel accomplished, emotionally replenished, and hungry. I head inside for some **self-care**; a stretch for my muscles, water and

food for my belly, a hot shower, and some comfy clothes. I **reflect** on how I felt before I started (dread) versus how I'm feeling now that I've finished (successful and stronger). Sometimes it's just a matter of **getting started**. Once you're over that hurdle, the rest will come to you.

I appreciate you joining me on my run! I hope you can see how in this one activity--this one hour out of my day--how many mental health skills are utilized. These are all skills that are doable and teachable. If you need help getting started on any personal goals, please contact your [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP). We have many skilled counselors who are eager to help and ready to meet you where you're at. Remember, every day is a new day to start a goal, it doesn't have to be a New Year's resolution! And I promise, if running isn't your thing, we won't make you run with us!

