Should You Ever Give Up On a Fitness Goal?

Long-term goals require Yoda-style brain training in the power of positive thinking

By Karla Bruning

"Do. Or do not," Yoda famously says in Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. "There is no try."

Yoda obviously wasn’t a runner.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, I first tried to break two hours in a half-marathon. It was 2010 in Montreal, Canada, and I failed. Six years later, I’m still trying. I’ve run more than 25 half-marathons, gutting out 2:00:30 at my fastest. (What Makes You a Runner?)

At this year’s Star Wars Half Marathon at Walt Disney World in Florida, I channeled the Force for yet another attempt. Dressed as Rey from Star Wars: The Force Awakens, with my husband as Chewbacca by my side, I set out on a 13.1-mile—or, you know, 6.83 parsec—quest.

In running and in life, goals and dreams keep pushing us forward. What keeps us chasing them? In a word: Hope. It’s true in Star Wars, running, and in life. But when is it time to say enough is enough? Should we ever let hope fade into resignation?


Perhaps that’s been my problem, and the problem of so many who fail to achieve attainable goals. My training and other race times indicate I’m perfectly capable of running a 9:09 pace for 13.1 miles. But every time I’ve tried, a mixture of self-doubt, mental weakness, and bad weather have stood in the way. I’ve failed to believe I am capable.

Science, it seems, sides with Yoda. "Often runners tell me they believe all the negatives and setbacks because they haven’t achieved much,” writes Boston Marathon psychologist and Assistant Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School Jeff Brown, Psy.D., in Runner’s World: The Runner’s Brain. "Usually it works the opposite way: You believe first, then you achieve."

Here’s how: The part of your brain that sorts nearly ever piece of information thrown at you is like a filter. It decides what’s important for your conscious mind to acknowledge—someone shouting your name versus a bird chirping, for example. Those conscious thoughts then trickle into your subconscious. It’s like a tank, Brown explains, storing your beliefs. "One of its most important jobs is to scoop up any information that either supports or refutes your view of yourself to store for future use."
Enter the power of positive thinking. You can fill that tank with feelings that wallow in self-doubt or thoughts that celebrate confidence. Basically, you can program your mind to believe whatever you want. In order to achieve a goal, you first have to train your brain to believe in yourself.

Otherwise, failure has a way of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. "Fear is the path to the dark side," Yoda says in Star Wars: The Phantom Menace. Ain’t it the truth? Each time I failed to break two hours in a half-marathon only reinforced my disbelief. My brain tank was full of negative thoughts.

Because here’s the thing about goals: Sometimes you achieve them and sometimes you don’t. "Is that possible?" Rey asks in Star Wars: The Force Awakens. "I never ask that question until after we’ve done it," Han Solo replies. Sounds like he learned a thing or two from Yoda.

I’ve lived long enough to learn we don’t always get what we want and dreams don’t always come true. "I find your lack of faith disturbing," Darth Vader says in Star Wars: A New Hope. Sorry to disappoint you, Darth. The pessimist in me started to believe this just might be a quest I’m not meant to fulfill.

It certainly wasn’t at the Star Wars Half Marathon. At the sound of the starting fireworks, I set out with my positive mantras on repeat. By Mile 4, doubt had crept in. My legs were torched from the 20 miles I’d walked around Walt Disney’s World’s theme parks in the three days prior. Florida’s infamous humidity didn’t help either. By Mile 7, the battle was over. I decided to enjoy what was left of the race, stopping to take photos with Star Wars characters lining the course. I finished in 2:11.

And that's OK. If I’ve learned anything in the six years I’ve been chasing my goal it's this: Running, like life, is in the journey. "Having goals keeps you in the learning zone," Brown says.

I’ve had some incredible experiences and learned a lot about myself along the way. I've been injured and bounced back, I’ve paced friends and family to their goals, run personal bests in 5Ks, 10Ks, and other races, too. I’ve learned I’m capable of more than I give myself credit for, and that, contrary to all reason, I’ve gotten faster as I’ve gotten older. I’ve also learned that I’m not afraid of failure.

It's all part of striving for something just out of reach. Sometimes stretching toward the sky makes you a little bit taller. This time around, stopping mid-race meant I got a hug from a 7.5-foot-tall Wookiee greeting runners on the course. #WorthIt.

And so, my quest lives to see another day. I tried again just three weeks later at the Tinker Bell Half Marathon at Disneyland in California. I came thisclose, but failed after pushing my body to its total limit. I dry-heaved eight times in the last 2.5 miles, losing loads of time and crossing the finish in 2:05. "Traveling through hyperspace ain't like dusting crops," Han Solo says in Star Wars: A New Hope. No, it's not, Han. No, it's not.

But I’m not ready to power down my lightsaber just yet. "Impossible to see, the future is," Yoda says in Star Wars: Attack of the Clones. That sub-two-hour half-marathon is my future. Some dreams are worth holding on to, even if we never attain them. The quest, the journey, the reaching, and the striving make us better Jedis, better athletes, and better people.

I’m a Jedi-in-training, working on believing in myself, filling my brain tank with blasters of positive thoughts. Pew! Pew! Pew!