

Blue Steel Dash

LONG DISTANCE WALKING

The Mental Game



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You are match fit. Your kit is squared away. You have been trekking short walks and training over long distances. You are as ready as you can be – at least physically. But what is going on in your head? How is your mental preparation? Chances are you have done no mental preparation at all. This short aide memoire will help you prepare your mental game, essential if a long distance trek is going to be all you want it to be. Get ready. Get set. Now go!

Walking for say, two or three days, or even a week, requires a certain mental toughness and mental agility in order for the experience to be enjoyable. Many people are able to handle one or two days with little difficulty. However walking for ten days or even fourteen days requires another level of mental preparedness again. Not many people are forced to deal with that preparedness simply because they don't undertake treks of that duration. And, even for those that do attempt a long trek, not everyone handles the mental demands well. That is in part because, unlike the shorter walks, it is harder to visualize the end of the trek in the first or even the second week. And, as noted below, visualising the end of a trek is one of the key tools for helping you mentally manage yourself.

What do we mean by mental toughness? Well, it's not about being a hardarse and closing your mind to what is going on around you and just 'crashing though'. In fact it is the complete opposite. It is about having an objective insight into your own mental, physical but especially your emotional strengths and weaknesses, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your colleagues, and understanding what happens in a group as it evolves over a long period of time. Mental toughness is about taking all this information and carefully and rationally using it to manage your responses to, and expectations of the long trek.

Understanding Yourself

Mental toughness in this arena is about admitting in the first place that you are not superhuman. You have physical, emotional and mental limits. You don't have to prove how superhuman you are on a trek. Everyone knows you are capable of doing well. Rather, you need to know your limits and what the warning signs look and sound like as you approach your limits. And you need to know and accept the triggers which might take you to the edge. Or even over it. Some examples might help.



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- You might be a person who feels irascible with the world for the first few hours of the day and are not interested in the banter of the rest of your trekking group. In fact their chit-chat drives you up the wall and you are frustrated by the early morning ‘rooster’ in your group who only seems more and more happy the earlier they rise. What might mental toughness look like in this case? Without being antisocial perhaps you can look to have your early morning routine settled before you retire for the evening. That might help minimize the interaction with others over breakfast and allow you to sleep in that extra ten minutes. Then maybe look to walk by yourself for the first hour.
- You are a walker that finds the middle of the day tough. You have been walking all day and dread all the walking to come. You drop into bit of a funk around lunch time. What does mental toughness look like here? To combat the funk, perhaps find others to walk with who can lift your spirits. Admit you are flagging and ask others to help you. Or simply hang behind the team telling the most jokes. Or partner with a person who finds this part of the day exhilarating. And visualize what the end of the day will look like. A hot fire. Hot drink. Boots and socks off. Don’t over do the visualizing though – that can also get you down. Finally, break the walk into two hour chunks of time and reward yourself with a treat at the end of each period. Suddenly that trough has slipped past without you knowing. Some walkers use lunch as the reward and make it, rather than dinner, their highlight meal.

Knowing and understanding yourself is the first step to having a robust walking mind, capable of handling long distances. It is of course a very personal thing.

I prefer to crack these big walks by myself or with a good mate. It is also maturity and learning to understand how I am wired. I have a good mate who wants to walk 200 km with me on the Heysen Trail. He will drive me nuts only because of expectations. I want to walk from dawn to dusk; planned out and focused on distance and time. I see this type of walking from a fitness perspective. His priority would be to go a little slower and enjoy the sights, vegetation etc. I am not wired that way and would become impatient. So I have learnt what makes me tick.....the hard way.

Frank, British Antarctic Survey Guide and Survival Specialist

A Positive Approach

To help you reinforce your mental toughness there are some general but key, positive points to remember about any long distance trek. There are always helpful ways to making your trip a positive one, and starting out thinking with a positive view of your trek is the best (and only) way to start.

- Any long distance trek more than seven days in length puts you in an elite group of trekkers. You are not just a part-time hiker or bushwalker. You are a serious trekker putting some unique experiences under your belt. But that is no reason to and get a big head.
- You are experiencing this as a valued member of a team. Everyone is here to help each other get through the experience. This is not a race to beat our colleagues but an opportunity to help them. And have them help you. Be open to that assistance. The moment you shut your colleagues out and resolve to ‘do it on my own’ you leave yourself open to compromising your mental toughness.
- The shared experiences are the most valuable and precious elements of this sort of activity. You will tell stories to each other about this or that for the rest of your life. The shared experiences are life shaping and transformational experiences. It’s not just any old walk in the park on a Sunday afternoon but a tough challenge that you face and conquer together. You won’t take away memories of any pain but of the powerful and life affirming bonding and friendships of the trek.
- The shared experiences are to be... shared. Stop and wait for your colleagues when you find a unique view. Invite them to look at the old ruin you have found. Introduce them to the local with whom you have been chatting. Sharing, and letting others share with you is a powerful ingredient in having a healthy mental toughness.
- This is not a fashion competition. Don’t fret what you look like. Be comfortable and warm and yourself. Are you dirty and is your hair out of place? That is perfectly okay. Even being disheveled is part of the experience. Don’t fret the things that truly do not matter.

Not only is it worth having a positive view of the group and what you have set out to achieve but it helps to have some positive self talk as well. What does that mean? It means the talk in your own head as you tackle the hard inclines or declines. It’s the image you paint in your head of yourself as an imaginary Olympic



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athlete breasting the tape in front of the cheering crowd. It's the cadence you invent to help you roll through the tough spots of the day. It's whatever mental game you invent to help you rise above the challenge, rather than let the challenge get you down.

Know Your Emotions/Emotional Reactions

Any long period of time away can create conflicting emotions. There is a sense of adventure possibly mixed with the worry about the unknown or the longing for home/homesickness. How do we handle these negative emotions? The homesickness? There are some things that can help.

- The most easy, but also them most difficult decision is to simply tell someone you are say, homesick. Now we are talking real mental toughness. How many of us want to admit we feel isolated, lonely, homesick where we are walking with some of our best friends? The mentally tough will do just that if it helps. And sometimes just saying it is the best medicine – you will be surprised how many others are feeling the same way. Just take care to ensure you don't turn your conversation into a negative pity session.
- Team up with those who have lots of experience being away for long periods of time. They may still have those feelings of loneliness but chances are they have learned to recognize and manage them. Or you may strike one who is genuinely pleased to be in the wild and does not feel alone at all. You don't have to get all confessional with them if you don't want to, but hanging with a colleague with a positive view of being off the map can be very helpful.
- On matter of emotional fragility beware the jokester in the group. They might make you laugh but in the long run, especially over a period of weeks the jokester may well be unhelpfully covering over any fragility. The best solution – talk out any fragility first then get your dose of the jokester.

It is important to understand that you will experience a period, multiple times, when you are 'in the zone'. It might be at the top of a peak, at the furthest point from civilization, or it may even be when you are filled with exhilaration at being at such a remote and uncivilized place. Maybe it is when you realize that you have accomplished more than you have ever accomplished before. The zone will be a place where you will feel that nothing can beat you, that you are capable of any physical challenge and all is well with the world. Hopefully on a long trek you will experience 'the zone' on multiple occasions.



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Why is it important to recognize this? Simply because there will be a corresponding departure from the zone. It is most often experienced when you are sitting in your office, back in the classroom or otherwise caught up in the mundane minutiae of life. But you can and will come out of the zone while on the long distance trek. Ensure you recognize and anticipate the transition and that you talk it out if necessary.

Managing the Length of Time

A major contributing factor to anyone mentally or emotionally struggling with a long trek is the sheer length of time that is involved. Few people you meet, even on your regular walking tracks have been in the bush a week. Even fewer have been out for ten days. Those who have been out for twenty one or twenty eight days are far fewer still. So how do they, and we, manage a long period of time on the track?

There are a number of tools to help you.

- First, be resolved to enjoy the experience. Too many start out with a sense of dread, a gloom they never shake off and which colours their whole trip. They start from behind, even before they start. Anticipate a positive experience. Soak up what each day gives you. Do that and ensure you are not just counting the days.
- Keep a diary. But get confessional in it. Write down what you are really feeling. Down as well as high. It's a good way to test what you are really going through. If you are missing someone, write to them, and tell them what you are feeling. You may have to wait to post it of course. Or you can simply show them when you get back.
- Walk each day at a time. If your trek leader is not briefing you on what is happening each day ask them to do so (they should be doing so as a matter of course). Understand when the breaks are planned. Know what the objective is for each day. Visualise your camp spot that night and what you will do when you finish for the day.
- In walking each day, break the trek into two hour blocks. It's not a marathon in which you have to run for hours and hours. Reward yourself at each stop. It might be a simple 'well done' or a snack or some other treat. One person I know pulls his boots off and airs his feet whether they need it or not. It's his little reward for making it that far. And it has the added benefit of forcing himself to pace

himself. On Kokoda one trekker made a point of swimming in each stream we crossed, as his reward to self.

- Resist thinking about 'next week' or dwelling on events many days into the future. Worrying about them will not make them come any quicker and may only make you fret ore. Worse, that thinking and focus has the potential to distract you from the enjoyment of the trek. Walk each day and at the end of the day start thinking about the next day ONLY. A good trek leader will help you do that by debriefing on the day just completed, and will start to give you an idea of what to expect on the next day. And at the beginning of each day the trek master will give you a decent brief on what to expect for that day.

I spend a lot of time poring over the map and planning the stages. Looking at the ground, estimating times and breaking it down into legs. By the time I come to my route card I can picture all the stages in a macro sense. The daily legs are then broken down into a micro sense. I know that 2 hours into the day, I should be passing over a col, crossing a stream.

What this does is put a sense of responsibility on me to keep focused, be aware of my surroundings; geographically, and force me to watch the weather and changing conditions and if need be adjust my planned day as I go along. If I don't do this and rely on others to do it then I would just mong along and then all the doubts you talk about creep in.

The first 3 days is about getting fit. After that I am away and feel strong.

I walked the Swiss High Alpine Route. The Guide book said it was 15 days of strenuous walking. I did it in 9. I had 10 days leave. Good planning, good weather all helps get over the humps and crack a good hard walk.

Frank, British Antarctic Survey Guide and Survival Specialist

- Summary: the best way to handle a long walk is to reduce it to single, day-bite pieces. **Walk the day, not the trek.**

The Group

Handling a long trek is also managed well if you understand what happens in a group as it morphs through various stages of its life over a long period of time. The group dynamic will likely reflect your own sentiments and emotions.



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Over a short period of three to seven days most people can keep their emotions to themselves. If they are having a bad run they can see the end in sight and hang in there. It's not entirely honest but it's one way to manage being down. And over a short walk that approach does not always impact in a negative way on the overall group.

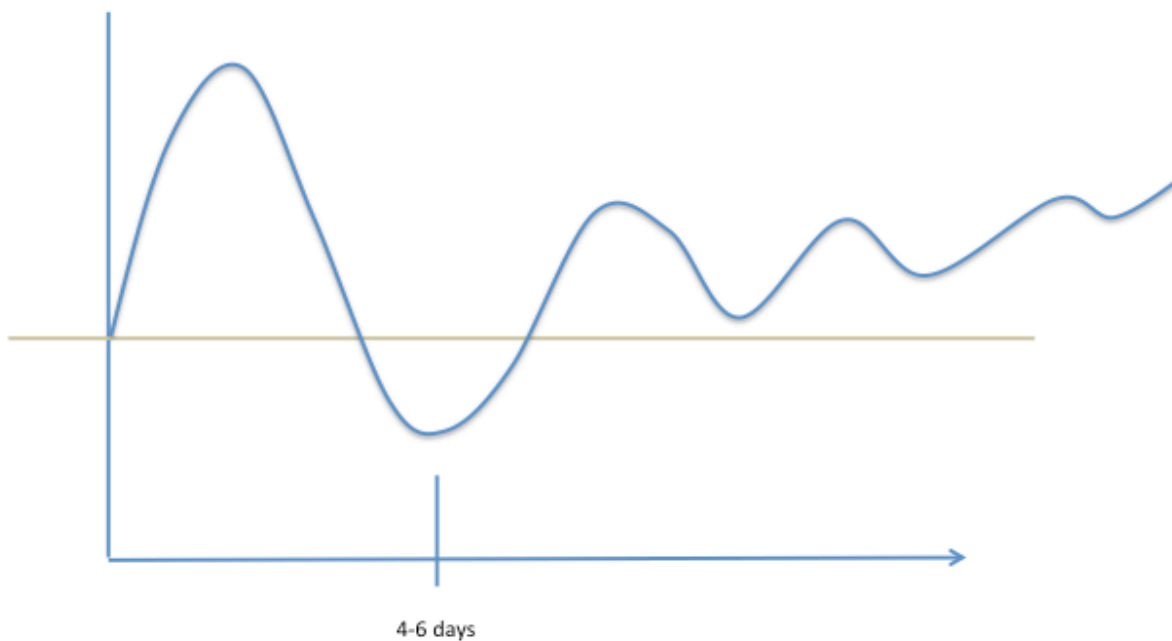
Over the longer period of time trekkers find it more difficult to keep their emotions in check. Those can range from the super excited to the suicidal low. Okay, perhaps not suicidal but they can be extreme. One ten day walk revealed undercurrents in friendships that erupted in a very negative way – fortunately just in time for the walk to finish.

Note after Machu Picchu trek: when we are on a track and sleeping in tents and otherwise roughing it, it seems that we are all able to focus on the challenges that need to be overcome. We help each other out and otherwise ensure the group reaches the end of each day in good shape and safe. However when we ease off that physical challenge and face less strenuous days, and are camped in hostels and hotels it is easier to get focused on the perceived irritations and shortcomings of fellow travelers.

A group will swing through highs and lows in a very natural way and you need to understand this is normal. But because it is normal you need to work that little bit harder to avoid the while group sinking into a funk – understanding group dynamics is not about watching or even avoiding the lows but helping you manage them.

The general group dynamic, and your own, will something like the chart below. The tan horizontal line can represent your starting state – excited, keen to get going, really looking forward to the adventure. The first few days see the excitement lift.

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After the initial excitement you can find yourself in a low. But not everyone does. Many ride a slow high all the way out. Lucky them. But if you are going to get low it is likely to happen in those days around 4-6. Your clothes are wet. The billy has burnt the treat you were saving for yourself. The tent has developed a leak. Your trek buddy snores like a banshee. A whole lot of little things can start to take the edge off. But the biggest challenge at this point of a long trek is that you cannot see the end of it. This is your most significant mental obstacle. And the only way to deal with it is to not dwell on it but focus on each day as it presents itself. There are some ideas for handling the lows suggested below.

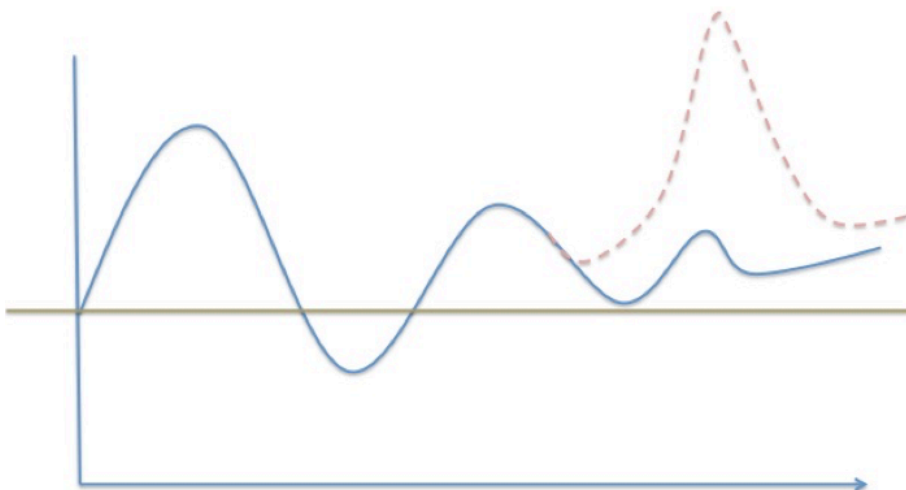
As you work through that period you will find yourself picking up, then perhaps cycling to a not so dramatic low until eventually you get into your own emotional (and physical) rhythm of the trek.



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As noted above, you also need to be alert to the “zone” – perhaps a point when you are on an extra special high. You have reached the toughest part of the trek, the highest point, the most remote spot. There is real potential to swing from the highest high to the lowest low.

However, ideally, by the time you are this far into your trek you will recognise the high and manage it well. Your return from the high might look something like this instead.



How do I Manage the Lows?

Be sensitive to those less experienced in the group who may now be struggling. Listen out for the sharp word, the biting rebuke, the tart tongue – often from those who are usually far more gentle. Be alert to those who might withdraw into themselves and not say anything. Be aware of yourself doing that too. Be attuned to your own feelings of frustration and irritation. Take some time out if you feel like that. Walk separate from the group for a while – let others know why you are doing so.



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Once camped find a reflective spot – but don't withdraw completely. You are part of a team after all and you need to contribute your presence, not separate yourself. The low will not last for long.

Understand your motives for doing this walk. Is it for the companionship of the group? The achieving of something unique? Achieving a personal best in something? The sense of adventures, of exploring and finding out what might be over the next hill? The opportunity to immerse yourself in a different culture, meeting new people and indulging new experiences? Chances are it is all of these things. When you feel those lows coming on, remind yourself of what motivates you. The moments when you achieve your trip goals, which are hopefully daily occurrences, will be moments of reward and satisfaction. Build on them.

Rather than focus on how tough everything is, think about more mundane things. It's a tactic employed by some of the world's top sports people. They focus on every day objects. Tennis great Andy Murray works with sport psychologists who have helped him improve his game. "When my mind's clear I can go on the court and play, not worry about anything else. I can play and think a lot better on the court. "Blocking out distraction and being able to focus on just you, your racquet, the ball and the court will improve your performance no end. A simply way to do this is to give yourself a cue word, often something which helps you focus on your goal or your strength, so that whenever you find yourself getting distracted, retreating this word brings you back into your bubble and focusing on your next move."¹ A common trick of the soldier is to think about the cadence or rhythm of their foot steps which helps them focus on the outcome and provides as pleasant a focus as possible given the circumstances.

What Happens if I Get ill?

The most problematic low can come about if you get ill, though not always. Without placing your body under any unnecessary stress many illnesses can be mitigated by a combination of medication and a positive perspective. If you are wired to simply turn on a positive view, and some are, then you

¹ Sports psychologist Josephine Perry in "Train Like a Top Player" The Times, 7 July 2017 <https://performanceinmind.co.uk>



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are blessed indeed. If not then you need to work on making sure your illness is dealt with in as positive way as possible. How?

First, at least tell your trek master/leader that you are ill. They can make allowances for the length of the trip that day, help alleviate the load you are carrying, ensure someone walks with you at a slower pace, look out for medical solutions, and so on. Never try and suffer in silence. That tends to be a difficult thing to confess when you are the sort of person who feels self contained and very prepared to crack on with a long endurance trek. But keeping your mouth shut when you are ill not only does you a disservice but it places an unnecessary burden on the group as well and can possibly contribute to any low the group is going through. Talk it out and get help.

Many trekking illnesses can be better dealt with when you realise they are more embarrassing than potentially fatal. So keep that grumbling stomach in perspective. And understand that it is very likely less likely embarrassing for the group than you suspect. Again, if you have shared the news of your illness the group can help ensure any embarrassment is mitigated. And possibly even help you laugh about it, always good mental medicine.

The Power of Heat

Never underestimate how much better you can feel if there is a hot meal, hot drink or fire in front of you. It's not just the hot food that helps but the pause you take to prepare it, the little bit of fussing around to get it ready, sort out your cutlery, set up your dining area and the time it takes to settle in. Sometimes the activity is just the tonic you need.

On the Stewart Island trek in New Zealand (November 2017), when confronted by a high and fast flowing stream and a removed bridge the group was delayed for a number of hours as it waited for the water level to drop. The busy-ness of attempting a fire build, and creating a shelter (in case we needed to stop overnight) were powerful means of lifting morale, especially for those intimidated by the water.

Similarly, sometimes the antidote for feeling low is not a mental jog but a simple solution such as a drink with electrolytes, trace elements and so on.

Don't Forget to Sleep

That sounds like a case of the obvious. But lack of sleep can put you at an emotional disadvantage as well as a physical disadvantage. Have you gone to bed early enough? Is the cold keeping you awake? Are you sleeping on hard ground?

There is a useful summary of the benefits of sleep written by sports psychologist Josephine Perry. She notes the following

Lindsay Thornton, Senior Sports Psychologist at the US Olympic Committee would say about its impact and importance for Athletes. Here are there headlines...

The headlines:

- Paying down sleep debt improves performance.
- Sleep extension will give you even better performance.
- More sleep = greater recovery, a chance to consolidate the mental and physical gains made during the day, fewer injuries and a better mood.
- You need to maintain a regular sleep wake schedule.

Thornton talks about the way sleep is a performance enhancement tool for both brain and body. It improves your recovery from exercise and new skill learning as while you are asleep as all the information on everything you have learnt and done throughout the day is transferred and downloaded. Sleep also helps your metabolism (appetite and weight), tissue repair, immune function and mood. In short, she says that sleep provides a bonus learning period and you wake up a smarter, stronger version of yourself and in a better mood.

There is no formula for how many hours athletes should sleep but it is advised to be between 7-9 hours (Federer is said to sleep for 11 hours, LeBron James for 12). Less



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than six can impair your psychological and physiological functioning. The positive information from your day is the last to be downloaded so you need longer in bed to wake up positive and happier.”²

Check the page at the footnote below for more commentary on sleep.

Summary

There are numerous tools to help you manage the long distance walk. At the end of the day your ability to derive enjoyment from a long trek comes down to you and your willingness to use those tools. Anyone can be miserable if they allow themselves to be. It takes some extra effort and conscious work to ensure you don't clash with your colleagues, or clash with yourself. Use the tools and encourage others to use them as well. Understand your limits and build defences against them.

² <https://performanceinmind.co.uk/resources-2/sleep-for-athletes/>