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Michael Phelps' Training Strategy Is a Blueprint for Any Kind of Success

Foreshadow failure to win big

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By the sixth day of the 2008 Olympic Games, the swimmer Michael Phelps was on the cusp of making history. He'd already won three gold medals that year, and winning his next race, the 200-meter butterfly, would set him on course to become more decorated in a single Games than any other athlete before him. But right as he dove in for the start of this race, [his goggles started leaking](#). By the 150-meter mark, they were almost completely full of water and he couldn't see.

But he didn't panic. He was prepared.

Despite his unprecedented dominance in his sport, Phelps is a doomsdayer of sorts. During training, he imagines [each possible failure](#), crafting a vivid, concrete, and tangible scenario of how his plan might go wrong. Then he takes it a step further and devises the solution.

So, when Phelps' goggles began leaking in Beijing, he calmly switched his concentration to his stroke count — which he could do because he already knew exactly how many strokes would get him across the pool as fast and efficiently as possible. Because he'd practiced both visualizing success *and* troubleshooting solutions to major obstacles, he knew exactly what he needed to do when disaster struck at those Olympic games — and did it, to win his [fourth Olympic gold medal](#) of a record-breaking eight that year, adding to the six he'd already won four years earlier in Athens. Eventually, he'd have nine more — an astonishing 23 in total — and [hold the record](#) for most gold medals won by any single athlete in Olympics history.

Phelps' habit of materializing obstacles and solutions [doesn't just benefit elite athletic prowess](#). Scientists have found that people who incorporate this tactic into their daily routine accomplish more of what they set out to do.

In one 2015 study, a [team of psychologists](#) from the University of Chicago and the University of Cologne set up the smartphones of 110 people to ping them four times a day for a week. Each time, respondents jotted down a description of one thing they wanted to get done that day: something fun,

like reading a book; an obligation, like an assignment for school or work; health and fitness activities. Every so often, they would be prompted to think about what might make it [difficult to achieve their goals](#) and how they might overcome those challenges. Other times, they listed a goal they were working on, but they received no follow-up prompts to help plan its pursuit.

When participants were asked to anticipate challenges and come up with solutions, they made 50% more progress, compared to the goals for which no planning prompts followed. Moreover, when they had anticipated the challenges and solutions, participants reported feeling much happier that day. Materializing the hurdles and planning how to handle them improved productivity and mood.

Our brains actually respond to events differently when we foreshadow failure, as Michael Phelps did. Inge Gallo, a researcher at the University of Konstanz in Germany, [investigated](#) why some people can overcome their fears and others can't, even when they're trying to. In a 2009 study, she focused on people with an irrational fear of spiders. Arachnophobes were shown a series of photographs that included some pleasant items, like delicious-looking food, and some mundane items, such as a telephone. The occasional photograph of a spider was thrown into the mix.

Some participants adopted a simple strategy to cope with these images, just reminding themselves of their goal: "I will not get frightened." Another group took it a step further: they stated their goal to not get frightened, but also acknowledged the difficulty of this aim, and made a plan for what to do when they did see one of the forbidding images. In this case, the plan was as basic as: "I'll ignore it." It seems like the slightest change and only a minor addition, but it had a big impact.

The participants who anticipated the challenge and planned for how they would handle it didn't have nearly as bad an experience. We know this because Gallo used electroencephalographic recording — caps with electrodes — to study what went on inside the participants' brains when they

viewed the photographs. She measured the electrical signals sent from the visual cortex, the part of the brain that specializes in processing information we take in through our eyes. Compared to everyone else in the study, the subjects who had visualized a concrete plan *and* foreshadowed failure showed less activity in the visual cortex immediately after seeing a spider.

In other words, planning for how to react led to a sort of adaptive blindness. The visual cortex of their brains responded as if the spider wasn't even really there, like they didn't really see it. As a consequence, the participants didn't feel as scared when they came upon one.

What's clear is that successful outcomes rely on well-rounded plans. Inspiring real progress early on requires us to move beyond clearly identifying the destination. We must materialize *where* we want to be, of course, but also *how* we will get there.

We know that we are more likely to master life's to-do list when, in addition to visualizing what the moment of victory looks like, we materialize what we need to do to win. Effectively materializing our goals, though, requires that we push our preparatory visualization further. Because while visualizing the steps we must take to become our successful future selves produces benefits, the steps we choose might not always be the right ones. We might not fully know what to do or how to do it. We'll likely stumble in trying to get to where we want to be. Materializing our way to the top involves foreshadowing failure — and coming up with a plan of action.