

MICHELE  
UFER



# MENTAL TOUGHNESS **FOR** RUNNERS

A COMPLETE GUIDE

MEYER  
& MEYER  
SPORT

*This book provides you with an astounding piece of knowledge, a tool, and the personal experiences of an extraordinary ultra-distance runner and sport psychologist. With this book, Michele Ufer has added another milestone to the existing literature on running.*

Prof. Dr. Oliver Stoll  
Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

*You will learn much about yourself and our sport. Whether theorist or practitioner, you will definitely put it to use!*

Jochen Schmitz  
Chief editor, RUNNING magazine

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**MICHELE UFER**

# **MENTAL TOUGHNESS FOR RUNNERS**

**A COMPLETE GUIDE**

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# PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE BY PROF. DR. OLIVER STOLL, SPORT  
PSYCHOLOGIST

This book provides you with an astounding piece of knowledge, a tool, and the personal experience of an extraordinary ultra-distance runner and sport psychologist. With this book, Michele Ufer has added another milestone to the existing literature on running.

What makes this book so exceptional? On the one hand, it is the rock-solid technical foundation presented in language even the psychological layperson is able to understand, and on the other hand, it is the extremely candid treatment of sport psychology techniques, which he not only describes, but also presents via actual exercises in this book. And he did not leave out an opportunity for self-diagnosis.

A book like this can only be successful if the author can bring quite a bit of personal experience in distance running to the table. This, along with his own sport psychology training and his ability to build a network during his time as an active athlete, can validate his personal experience or allow him to process it with a book like this. In addition to world-class ultra-runners like Florian Reus, we also hear from scientists who do cutting-edge research (e.g., exercise addiction).

I do not know of any previous sport psychology book about running that bundled not only the author's experience, but also that of his colleagues—or rather other runners—and made it available to the public in this way.

This book is also not a purely celebratory book, stating that mental training is the only and exclusive key to success; Michele Ufer also impressively points out the limits of mental training and addresses the so-called *dark side of running*. Michele thus demonstrates his ability to have a more differentiated view of his passion. In addition to his role as a runner, Michele Ufer is clearly also a practical sport psychologist and scientist.

Although I am an experienced sport psychologist and runner myself, I was able to personally benefit from the content of this book. I can only imagine how much more beginning runners and athletes who are less knowledgeable about sport psychology can learn from this publication. I wish all of you many hours of productive reading and lots of fun trying out the techniques, and most of all continued joy in running and achieving your personal goals.

*Dr. Oliver Stoll  
Leipzig, Germany  
August 8, 2016*

PROLOGUE BY JOCHEN SCHMITZ, CHIEF EDITOR OF  
RUNNING MAGAZINE

Dear Readers,

A few years ago, a previously unknown athlete appeared out of nowhere on the German ultra-running scene. This person caught our attention when we saw impressive photos in the editorial department of *RUNNING* Magazine that showed the athlete at a 250 km stage race in the Atacama desert, which he went on to finish seventh overall. I, of course, had to get to the bottom of this thing and picked up the telephone. In the end, I got Michele Ufer on the phone. He was the new guy, the athlete in the photos, and he told me how he came to participate so successfully in the aforementioned race with some physical—but lots of mental—training. This conversation was followed by many more, some remarkably long, and my curiosity about Michele's approach and the subject of sport psychology continued to grow.

As a result of these discussions, we decided not to deny our readers this subject matter and created the series of articles called "Mental training in practice," a column in our magazine which continues to be very popular. Thus it seemed only a matter of time until Michele would publish a book on his field of expertise. You are holding it in your hand.

During my time at university, I was able to take several semesters of psychology, and in my capacity at *RUNNING* Magazine I am in daily contact with athletes of various performance levels for whom sport psychology is an important factor. Moreover, as a runner, I have gained

insight into my mental potential and myself. Based on this experience, I highly recommend this book. You will learn much about yourself and our sport because this is a hands-on book with lots of tests as well as examples that invite active participation or imitation. It also satisfies the science- and theory-oriented reader via cross-references, sources, and a long list of references. Whether theorist or practitioner, you will definitely make use of it.

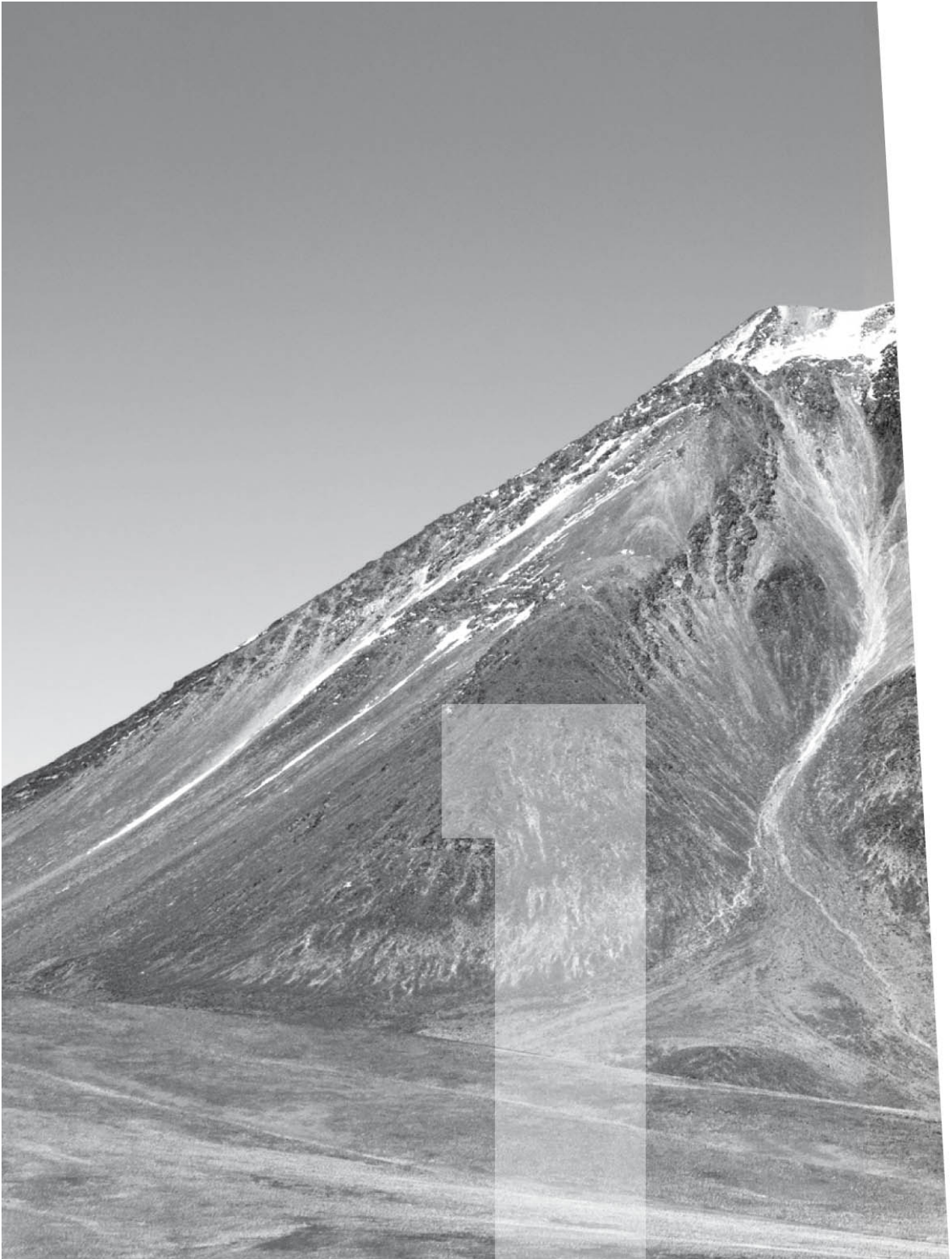


And now some personal information about Michele: He is a true jack-of-all-trades! Next to his professional activities, he is always working to increase his knowledge and, of course, balances that part of his life with regular running. And on top of all that, he organizes a trail event by the name of *Traildorado*. Michele usually has a smile on his face and

possesses a mischievous sense of humor (which you will see that now and then in the book).

In this spirit, I hope you will gain many insights from what follows.

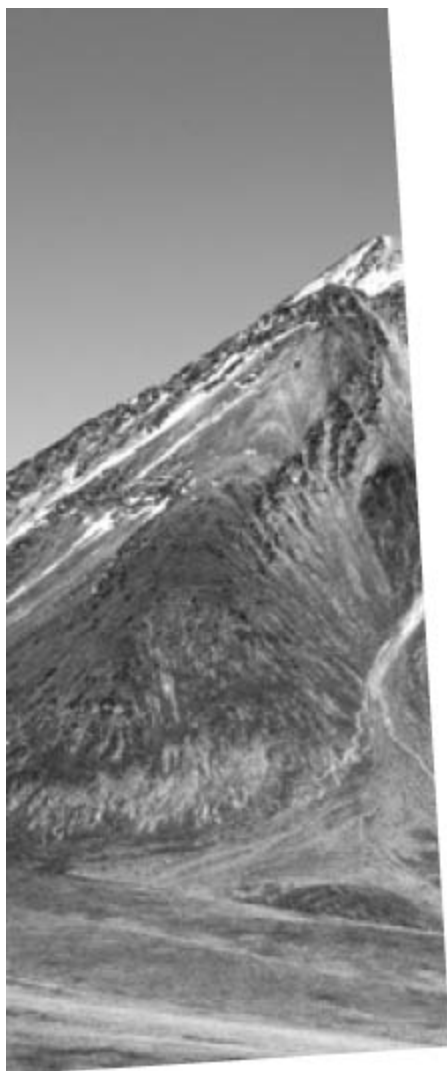
*Jochen Schmitz*  
*Berlin, Germany*  
*January 13, 2016*



# IT ALL BEGINS WITH AN UNUSUAL RUNNING STORY

- 1.1 THE ATACAMA EXPERIMENT: PERFORMANCE THAT  
DEFIES THE IMAGINATION
- 1.2 THE BOOK'S CHARACTER AND STRUCTURE: HOW  
IT WORKS





*Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.*

—André Gide

*If you want something you never had, then do something you never did.*

—Nossrat Peseschkian

# 1 IT ALL BEGINS WITH AN UNUSUAL RUNNING STORY

Imagine the following: You have a friend who was an ambitious soccer player in his youth, but never stood out for exceptional athletic performances, especially for running or endurance sports. This friend has never run a marathon, a half-marathon, or even an official 10K, and he knows nothing about the sport of running or the running scene. He has never really been interested. But one night, you meet up at your favorite pub and, over a beer, he cheerfully tells you that he just signed up for a 250 km ultra-marathon at one of the earth's most hostile places! Surely this news would cause you to at least sit up and take notice.

## 1.1 THE ATACAMA EXPERIMENT: PERFORMANCE THAT DEFIES THE IMAGINATION

Now let's listen to what this guy has to say. This race consists of six stages over a distance of 250 km through the driest desert in the world, the famous Atacama in Chile, during which runners compete at an altitude of 2,500-3,500 m. This South American desert is said to be 50 times drier than the infamous Death Valley in the United States, with some areas recording zero precipitation since the beginning of weather records. Moreover, the race is organized as a self-supported run; in other words, runners must carry all of

their personal items during the entire race. Filled with the mandatory personal gear (e.g., sleeping bag, ground pad, extra clothes, First Aid kit, provisions, headlamp), the running backpack weighs 7-10 kg (15-22 lbs.). Drinking water is supplied every 10-15 km during the race and at the target location at the end of each stage. Simple group tents that sleep 10-15 people are provided at the end of each stage. Participants run through deep sand, hilly terrain, and rocky canyons that sometimes require some climbing. The route travels through dried-up salt lakes, across razor-sharp scree, and sometimes even through mountain streams in deeply carved canyons. And it all takes place in a completely surreal landscape that is surrounded by snow-covered volcanoes that stand more than 6,000 m high.

When your novice-runner friend goes on to tell you with a cheerful smile that there isn't much time to prepare because the race takes place in four months, what would you think? Maybe something like:

a) "He's nuts! Impossible! Much too dangerous! Crazy! He'll never be able to do it!"

Or preferably:

b) "Wow, awesome! What an adventure! What courage! Why not? He might be able to do it."

Most people would agree with the first reaction, wondering what in the world your friend could be thinking. But the novice runner was not deterred by any of it. He was completely focused on the challenge.

As you might suspect, that novice runner was me, and in 2011, as part of an extreme self-test, I wanted to experience

and demonstrate the increase in athletic performance the human body is capable of with the targeted use of mental training and sports hypnosis. And now that the cat is officially out of the bag, I can openly admit that my foolhardy goal was really just one thing: to somehow make it from stage to stage in spite of my lack of experience and very short preparation time. But onsite everything turned out much different than planned, and in fact much better.

Instead of just struggling through the desert day after day and arriving in one piece or somehow managing to make it across the finish line, I relatively quickly ran my way into the top ten much to everyone's surprise, including my own. And I got better every day. Of course I also made a number of mistakes and had some crazy experiences, but I was nevertheless able to secure an unbelievable seventh place finish overall, with my daily best being a fourth-place finish. And with that I left some experienced and semi-professional runners in the dust. It was an incredible experience and result. The organizers and many participants I talked to could not believe that I had never previously participated in an official race and had never run more than 29 km (18 miles) during the entire four-month preparation period. It was a perfect sensation. I was on a total emotional high and the psychological experiment was a complete success. In my book *Flow Jäger (Flow Hunter)*, I offer a more detailed account of my experiences at the Atacama race.

Now you might think there was a lot of luck involved, too, and I agree completely. Of course we always need a little luck in life, particularly for such adventurous undertakings, that's for sure! But it's also good to know how one can help that luck along a little. And so, after my adventure, people

often asked me precisely how I did it, how I trained, and especially which mental techniques I used.



*Michele at the Atacama Crossing*

## MY MENTAL TOOLBOX

How did I do it? In addition to four moderately hard running units per week based on the principle of training smart rather than (too) hard prior to the race, I worked intensively on my goals, imagining myself reaching them as specifically and acutely as possible. And I especially imagined how I wanted to achieve them. Intense and vivid mental images emerged. I experienced emotions. You might say I built a wonderful memory of the future inside my head that I would remember again and again along with all the corresponding emotions. Despite the fact that it can be incredibly

motivating, in my experience, it is surprisingly often neglected.

Neuroscientists have long known that new synapses are created that allow the desired result to become more probable. First, I extrapolated concrete challenges as well as abilities I would need in order to master the challenges on the path to my goals. Then I thought of past situations—in sports and in other areas of my life—in which I was successful and during which I had already demonstrated these strengths. This allowed me to access positive, performance-enhancing emotions and unconscious knowledge of how I had accomplished something in the past. And since it is possible to purposefully talk oneself into or out of something, I embellished the entire thing with strategies to turn negative thinking into positive thinking.

I created a set of emotions, internal images, self-talk, and inner monologues that helped me achieve my goals. I then mentally and physically embedded these sets or equipped them with triggers so they would be activated in certain situations, either unconsciously or consciously, to let their positive effect unfold. Such triggers can be images, symbols, music, small movements, or words, but also stimuli like the starting signal, lacing your shoes, or positioning your foot. I also occasionally used little subtle scenarios to positively impact seemingly automatic processes, like, for instance, the sensation of pain, movement coordination, metabolism, and regeneration. That's the quick version.

I often didn't have the time for a detailed explanation of my approach. And some people justifiably commented that things that worked for me don't necessarily work for other athletes. And I agree wholeheartedly. However, in recent

years, I had the wonderful opportunity to share my approaches with many running athletes. In 2012, I received an inquiry from Jochen Schmitz, the chief editor at *RUNNING Magazine*, asking if I would write an article on the topic of motivation and health.

After initial hesitation, I declined and offered a counter-proposal. I did not want to discuss this topic in such a limited way because I thought the risk of it turning into just another factoid story about motivation was just too high. Instead, I suggested a series of articles, each featuring a well-defined sport psychology topic presented in a realistic way. The suggestion was well received. The series of articles, “Mental training in practice,” was born and has been a feature in every issue since (beginning in 2016). The feedback on the published articles has been very positive. Time and again, readers or runners tell me that the suggestions are helpful and also inspire self-reflection.

Because lots of material had accumulated over the years, in 2015, the idea was to make a selection of previous articles available to a greater audience in a bundled and expanded form. Of course, this was also an opportunity to include my practical experience in coaching runners, as well as more detailed explanations of my approach during the Atacama experiment. That was the idea. You are holding the result in your hand. Enjoy!

## 1.2 THE BOOK’S CHARACTER AND STRUCTURE: HOW IT WORKS

This book is not a textbook that offers a comprehensive overview of sport psychology. It’s also not a scientific book.

The use of technical language has been reduced to a minimum in favor of everyday language. For a more immersive experience, simply refer to the bibliographical references. I also won't offer you any secrets to success or open up a box of tricks. Such a title might sell better, but that would be deceptive marketing.



## HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY: WHAT THIS BOOK CAN AND CANNOT DO

I want to be honest. You may find that you are already doing many of the things in this book unconsciously in your everyday life, and that's good! It means this material will justify or confirm all the things that have already worked or



have proven to be helpful. Continue to use them in the future and spread the word! Other strategies have been used for hundreds of years in many cultures around the world, but many have been forgotten. Or they may just not get the necessary attention in your busy everyday life, even though they can be powerful tools. So it is good to be reminded. And some suggestions are based on current research findings from the areas of psychology, medicine, and neuroscience. They offer information on how you could change something to achieve your goals better, faster, more easily, or more reliably, regardless of whether they involve motivation, performance, or health and general well-being. Nothing more, but also nothing less.

## EXPERIENCE STRAIGHT TO THE POINT

The contents of this book were gained by experience. They were successfully tested around the world by myself and other athletes during various races in more or less extreme conditions. Moreover, they were tried and tested on recreational and high-performance athletes during different coaching processes that lasted from one intensive hour to multi-day seminars, as well as over an extended period of time as part of comprehensive personal and career development. The contents and methods are presented succinctly and simply so you can get started as quickly as possible without first having to labor through pages and pages of explanatory theory.

## DO IT!

You are holding a workbook in your hands. It can effectively help you to ... work on yourself. But only if you really want to, and actually do it! Only by using the presented strategies will the true value of the book reveal itself, will

you acquire a taste for it. Thus I would be honored if you were to really put this book to work. Grab a pencil and underline the passages that are most important to you, circle places in the text, take notes, and try the exercises and strategies. This book is a utilitarian object and wants your personal additions. Only then will it be complete, if that is even possible.

### WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is for **runners of all performance levels**, from beginners to old hands, regardless of whether their preferred running terrain is trail, street, mountain, desert, rainforest, tartan track, urban forest, or whatever. **Triathletes, cross-country skiers, expedition participants** will also be able to find many suggestions that go beyond running. And anything that is helpful to athletes might possibly be of interest to those who accompany and support athletes in their sport, such as **running coaches, personal trainers, (sport) psychologists, mental trainers**, or **significant others**. The strategies presented here are also very well suited for challenges outside the running sport. So it is possible that some non-runners—corporate leaders, executives—will also enjoy reading this book. And then we could think of running as a symbol for things running smoothly, professionally and privately, because after all: “Life is like an ultra-marathon.”

### FIND YOUR PERSONAL TREASURES

Since our motivation, personality, past experiences, and goals can be very different, it is likely that not all contents will be equally relevant to all readers. You should therefore choose those things that are currently of particular interest to you. That might be the entire book, or a particular

suggestion or exercise that will make the difference in the future or that initiates an important change. And periodically pick up the book again because we always continue to change and evolve. Over time, things can become more important and interesting even if they weren't before.

## THE PERFECT SIX-WEEK PLAN TO HAPPINESS?

We can draw the following conclusion from what has been said so far: Although you would probably like to be given a plan that tells you exactly when you have to do what how many times per week, I cannot do you that favor.

Every person is different. Mind games that help one individual might drive someone else crazy. A training rhythm that works fabulously well for one person might make someone else feel pressured. Training content that might fit one person's current situation perfectly may well be completely wrong for another. For this reason I would like to invite you to use the presented material to develop your very own plan that meets your actual needs. Mental training becomes most effective when it is specifically adapted to your situation. That means fine-tuning: experiment, experience, reflect, and if necessary, adapt again. You can start by working your way through the exercises, and then build on them to develop your own creations.

## THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE

- ◆ In [chapter 2](#), we take a critical look at typical everyday training for runners, shine a light on the different ways the mind can influence and affect the body, and consider which possibilities mental training can offer us.

- ◆ Next, we make a sound determination of our current situation (GPS), based on which we will define the current status quo as well as future target states. We will then be able to deduce our personal developmental goals. Moreover, determining our current location via our personal GPS is an excellent way to evaluate the goal achievement processes.
- ◆ In [chapter 4](#), we will address a topic that is often given surprisingly little attention and, possibly for that very reason, can lead to unnecessary motivation problems. We will answer the question of how we should structure and manage goals so they are truly effective. And we will also learn which attitudes are helpful or impedimental in overcoming challenges.
- ◆ One core element of mental training is working with mental images and thoughts. [Chapter 5](#) outlines many opportunities for the use of so-called visualizations to create memories of a successful future and magic moments.
- ◆ In [chapter 6](#), we will address how we can activate, develop, and, in critical moments, use or access our (to some extent unconscious) abilities, strengths, and resources.
- ◆ Since everything isn't always going smoothly in life, in [chapter 7](#) we take a look at how we can constructively deal with injuries, failure, crises, and exercise addiction.

And we will frequently look at concrete application examples of the presented strategies within the context of practical examples and the explanations for the Atacama project. Now and again we will add a brief look at research.

As you read you will notice that some topics seem to repeat themselves. That is indeed the case and it is intentional. Just like in any good cookbook, there are some ingredients that we use again and again, in different variations and combinations depending on what it is we are preparing or trying to achieve.

Since the first publication of this book, I have received numerous messages from readers about their experiences and successes with my methods. I was very happy about—often touched by—every single one of them. I had the idea to let some readers share their success stories in this book because that could motivate and encourage others to apply the presented strategies. I am very happy that some readers agreed to share their experiences with us. To read these success stories, see the section at the end of the book.

I am really curious to see which suggestions you will find most valuable and what changes and improvements you will notice after their implementation. 3, 2, 1, go!

