

So I'm going to talk to you today about 10 life lessons from ultra running and how running has made me a better leader.

I'm Nikki, I'm 34. I'm an EM Consultant and a clinical lead. I'm also an ultrarunner; the evangelical type. It will come as no surprise to anybody that knows me that I'm talking about running today. I'm also an accidental leader.

Lesson number 1. Mindset is Everything!

This is a photo of me at the finish line of the Northern Traverse a couple of weeks ago. 300km across the country, running coast to coast in less than 61 hours. Only 3 days before the start of this race, I was debating not starting; I'd been having a bit of a tough time. But I was able to use positive self talk and have a really good experience. So good that I finished 11 hours quicker than I expected, and in second place. I set out to succeed and I did that.

Positivity is really important; how we act affects everyone around us. We have a choice. I choose to go and run ultra marathons. Therefore I also choose to experience awe and enjoyment, rather than be negative.

Our positivity really affects the whole team. You can see it so much at work. If you have a negative consultant in charge of the shift it pulls the whole team down.

You'll notice in every photo today I've got a smile on my face. Science shows that smiling releases endorphins, so even when I'm having a tough time, I smile.

Lesson number 2. It's ok to have a tough time.

In this photo it is sunrise on the Yorkshire moors. I've been running for 48 hours and I've got really sore feet.

In October 2020 I was having a really tough time. I was a new consultant in the middle of the pandemic and I had been really struggling with my mental health. I had low mood. I was running around the Llyn peninsula in the middle of the night (like you do??) training for a race, and realised just how low I was; I was feeling suicidal. I asked for help. It's so important to ask for help, and I got the support that I needed; from my team, from the staff wellbeing support services, and from my friends and my partner.

What this photo shows for me is that dawn will always come. Night time is often the worst time in an ultramarathon, when you are tired and starting to slow down. You are cold. But dawn does come, and things get better.

It sounds very clichéd, but in order to really experience the highs, you have to have those low times too. It's ok to have tough times, but things do get better.

Lesson number 3. The importance of sleep.

This photo is me having a short sleep at Greg's Hut on the Spine Race. I had just had the most harrowing experience and been the most scared I'd even been racing. I'd crossed Cross Fell in a storm, in the middle of the night, by myself. I'd made some bad choices. I was especially sleep deprived and I was struggling. I got to Greg's Hut in floods of tears, relieved to be alive, to not have laid down of the flagstones like I wanted to in the storm.

Sleep is really important. It helps make us safe to carry on. I've since learned about the importance of micro naps when racing. On my last race I had 15 minutes in the sunshine in a grassy field, and 10 minutes on a bench in the middle of the night in the frost. Micro naps allow me to keep performing and keep moving forwards.

Science shows how important sleep is; it suggests we need 7 – 9 hours of sleep in order to recover, have good health, and perform.

Lesson number 4; find your tribe!

This is a picture of me at the end of Cape Wrath Ultra; a 400km race up the North West coast of Scotland. This is me with my Cape Wrath Boys. These guys I didn't know before the start of the race, but by day 4 we had teamed up and ran the rest of the race together; singing Disney songs, chatting, and pulling each other along; carrying each other through difficult times.

Surrounding yourself with awesome people helps make our lives better; helps make coming to work better. Building a team of people that make your job easy is really really important. And knowing where your support comes from at work. For me; that's popping into the admin office; cuddling the office teddy bear, having some sweets and a chance to offload.

Lesson number 5; the importance of self care.

This photo; these are not my feet! I'll let you know. Believe it or not, despite hating feet, I've actually become a bit of a footcare expert, and do give talks on footcare and provide foot care when I work as a medic on races. But I still make mistakes.

In the Spine Race in 2022 I didn't finish the race; I was unsuccessful. A combination of not enough sleep and not looking after my feet. I'm always learning. Hopefully I don't keep making the same mistakes.

Looking after ourselves is really important; both in running with eating, drinking, footcare, wearing enough clothes. And in real life; looking after our physical and mental health in order to prevent burnout and keep us working and healthy.

Lesson number 6. The importance of coaching and accountability.

This is a picture of me and my running coach wearing masks in covid. I started with a coach in November 2020. This accountability made such a difference for me, particularly in that first winter. It gave me a reason to get outside in the rain and the dark with my headtorch on and get my miles done. I've been with my coach for 2 ½ years now and my running performance has improved rapidly; it is really good.

A couple of months later I became the Clinical Lead at work. This wasn't in my game plan. But I got a coach through Academi Wales which helped to support me in that role. It helped to address my weaknesses and to develop as a leader. It's been really important to me.

Lesson number 7. It's about stretching yourselves; pushing outside of your boundaries.

This is a picture of me kissing the wall at the end of the Spine Race. It is tradition when you finish the Pennine Way. You run 268 miles up the country in the middle of winter. It took me 5 and a half days. If we stay comfortable and don't stretch ourselves we don't have the opportunity to grow or see what we are able to achieve.

My friends know I don't do things by halves. My first ultra was 56 miles. My next was 8 days long and 400km. I do have a habit of stretching myself, and it is amazing to discover what is possible when you try.

It's the same at work. I became Clinical Lead after 10 months of being a consultant. As I say, It wasn't in my game plan! It is amazing what it has been possible to do, and how I can support my department and help make the ED in YG a better place for my community.

Lesson number 8. The importance of planning and understanding what lies ahead.

This is a picture of me running across Crib Goch on day 1 of 6 days of running from Conwy to Cardiff on the Dragons Back Race. It is a race across the spine of the mountains of Wales. I reccied all of the Dragon's Back. Well, all of the mountain bits. I didn't do the industrial southern bit in advance. The bit from Merthyr Tydfil to Cardiff; you will probably understand why. Reccying allowed me to give my best performance. It allowed me to know what lies ahead; where the tough bits were. I knew all of the short cuts and all of the best lines.

At work I have a habit of jumping in feet first. I am learning to spend more time planning; to have more strategies in my toolkit. To be able to go forwards and be more successful.

Lesson number 9. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable.

This is a picture of me crying, on the boat at the start of Cape Wrath Ultra. You take the boat across the Loch before you start running. I was really scared. Had I bitten off more than I could chew? Would I really be able to run for 8 days up the North West coast of Scotland? I was a triathlete, not a runner.

Vulnerability is about uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. It is about being authentic and developing meaningful connections. Brene Brown talks a lot about this. It is about risking failure. Doing that allows you to develop much more **powerful** connections with the team around you.

I have learned from my failures, and from my successes.

Finally. Lesson 10. You are stronger than you think, and more capable than you will ever realise.

This is a picture of me at the end of the Dragon's Back Race, having a massive hug with one of my mates, the Race Director.

I didn't think I'd finish this race. It was really hard. Actually, all of the preparation and planning meant I had one of the best races I had ever had; I finished fourth woman. I was gobsmacked.

I want you to go away from here and challenge yourselves. Stretch yourselves. Step outside of your comfort zone. You don't need to go and run an ultra. That's fine; we're not all crazy; I understand that. Maybe go and run a 5k parkrun. Spend time outside. Push yourself outside of your comfort zone at work, and see what really is possible.

Thank you.