

# A Three-Point Checklist for Winning the Rat Race

*When pursuing your goals, follow this mental checklist.*

**BY ALDEN CASS**

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On a recent Sunday, I went for my regular jog around the reservoir in Central Park. Regular exercise has a positive impact on my mental health and stress management, so I make it my mission to keep in shape. That way, I can maintain a frenetic and relentless pace in building a successful business.

As I was running around the track listening to my iPod, I became acutely aware of my thoughts. With the *Rocky IV* song *No Easy Way Out* to keep me motivated, I initially turned my focus to the current weather, my mood, track conditions and the people in my immediate area.

Once I completed this visual, emotional, auditory and tactile inventory of my current situation at the park, I picked up the pace of my jog. I focused on joggers ahead of me. I stopped thinking about my physical fatigue, the sweat and the purpose of my jog. I used runners ahead of me as targets to overcome as I made it around the track.

Let me describe my stream of consciousness that kept me motivated:

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"Look at this guy with the orange sweat band around his head! There is no way I am letting him stay ahead of me on the track."

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Cass is a performance enhancement coach and clinical psychologist for Catalyst Strategies Group ([www.catsg.com](http://www.catsg.com)) who specializes in working directly with individual and teams of senior investment executives, including high-profile CEOs, top hedge fund and prop traders, investors, and financial advisors to help them achieve their financial and personal goals. He works to modify behaviors that are hampering their performance and to give them the mental edge within competitive work environments. He is a licensed clinical psychologist and an expert on the use of psychology in the financial services industry. He has conducted behavioral healthcare studies on retail stockbrokers that indicated that 23 percent of the group measured met criteria for major depression. His research has been presented at both national and international conferences (APA, ICPP). He is a major contributor to columns in On Wall Street Magazine and Traderdaily.com. Cass has also conducted workshops with the Securities Industry Association, Money Management Institute, Trader Monthly Magazine's Peak Performance Workshop, The Wall Street Branch Managers Meeting at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and the London Bullion Market Association, the Silver & Zinc Association, the Investment Management Consultants Association (IMCA), and the Investment Products Association (IPA).

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"Look at that arrogant guy running with his shirt off! I am not letting him beat me!"

I focused my attention and efforts on future goals and conquests. I guess you can probably infer that I grew up as a rather competitive individual and that I am a bit cynical.

As I continued to set new records for time around the beautiful circle, I did not remain complacent. I knew that I was approaching the end of my run, satisfied that I had left many targets in the dust. I use a landmark water fountain as my finish line, and once it was in sight, I checked off the last task in my mental checklist -- looking in my rearview mirror. The worst thing that could have happened to me would have been getting blindsided and passed by the man in the orange headband or the shirtless guy. I took a brief look behind me and once I knew that my own personal victory was assured, I allowed myself to focus on completing the finish.

### The Mental Checklist

My jog is a metaphor for the challenges and competitive landscape in which we work. When it comes to work or investing, to stay ahead of the pack, you must be disciplined. If you stray from this discipline, you will set yourself up for disappointments, apathy and impaired decision-making processes.

Here's the checklist I keep in mind:

**The here and now:** If you do not start off by making sure that you are emotionally and physically sound before making a decision or starting an activity, you might neglect some pivotal data (i.e., being sick or depressed) that could impair your overall performance. Focusing on the present helps you to ignore past failures or negative thoughts. You must know the landscape or the current information about a particular investment before you flick your switch on and make a go at something.

**The future:** Looking ahead and setting short-term goals can keep you motivated to follow through with any project or potential investment. Once you have determined that you are ready to start a work project or a sound investment idea, you can start to look ahead at your goals. Looking forward allows us to take risks and make big money if our initial strategy or mental set was sound. Keep looking for those targets to pass and you will keep making progress.

**The rear-view mirror:** As a rule of thumb, never get complacent. (Look at what happened to the New York Mets.) Once you have achieved a financial goal, completed a project or passed your competitors, never take for granted that they can make a comeback. Once you

have identified a trend in the data, look around for other contenders or historical data that could impact the outcome of a trade. Once you have ruled out any potential impediments, you can move on and cross the finish line.

Please write to the Stock Doc with your trading, emotional or investing dilemmas. Dr. Cass always welcomes comments and stories, for which he'll try to offer solutions in later columns.

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