

RUNNING AS A WAY OF LIFE

Running is a way of life not only for competitive athletes, but for thousands of people. Dedicated runners are on the roads, rain or shine, as a way of balancing their lives. Why do these people, who will never win a race or even compete in one, persist? What motivates them to this singular activity?

“Are you still running?” is a question that I am asked countless times by friends and acquaintances. I am always slightly amazed at the question. It is as if they were asking if I am still reading, or still brushing my teeth, or still working for a living. Behind their question is the assumption that I might have stopped running, and to me this is ridiculous. Perhaps they do not understand how I persevere, or are amazed at the self-discipline involved, but for me running is an integral part of life. Indeed, it takes more discipline for me not to run on a given day than to hit the road. On the rare days that I do not run, if I see a runner on the street I am jealous and think “Why can’t I be out there instead of him.” After 21 years of running, 40 pairs of running shoes, 10 marathons, and about 40 other races it is almost impossible for me to imagine life without running. So when they ask me if I am still running I feel like asking them if they are still breathing.

The physiological benefits of running, or any regular program of aerobic exercise, are well known. A lower pulse rate, increase in “good” cholesterol, improved cardio-pulmonary functioning, strengthening of the bones, and a general enhancement of fitness. Indeed, recent medical research reported in the Israeli press suggests that regular aerobic exercise can decrease the incidence of certain forms of cancer. Yet, as a psychologist I know that most human motivation is irrational, and people rarely do things because they have been told that it is good for them. If everyone who knew that running is beneficial for their health ran, the whole State of Israel would be pounding the streets and roads, and we would have runners’ jams instead of traffic jams.

People generally begin running and persevere in this activity because it appeals to deep irrational layers in their personality. I will give you a few examples. A friend began running because of a driven sense of competition with me, and this need to one-up me also led him to participate in races and even a few marathons. Another friend pestered me so much to join him in a race that I finally agreed just to stop his nagging and this led me to the starting line of my first race. A woman that I know told me that she ran

every day just so that she could eat whatever she wanted. A man that I met running told me that he ran every day and hated it, but running had been prescribed by his cardiologist after his first heart attack. I concluded that he needed to run in order to drain off the hatred in his heart. I began running after reading an article in the New York Times called "Run For Your Life," and was so inspired by the elegance of the writing that the next day I began. On my first day out I was hardly able to run 100 meters without gasping for breath, but I continued with both endurance and fitness improving.

Beginning to run on a regular basis and persevering over the months and years are two different things, and many people who begin a running regimen drop out after a few weeks or months. Perseverance in running is also an irrational matter, it is not logical or done for the "best of reasons." Psychiatrist William Glasser coined the term "positive addiction" to describe people who feel compelled to engage in some positive activity on a regular basis. Such people, and I am certainly one of them, feel that a day without running is a day without sunshine. I discovered, rather late in life, that I have the physiology and metabolism of a peasant; I like simple foods and enjoy hard physical work. Along with this I realized that I need a basic workout, which includes a good sweat, every day. This is what my organism craves, I do not have much of a say in the matter. Running is the perfect solution for this psychotherapist who spends his days sitting and listening to people. Running helps me balance my life and compensate for my sedentary profession with vigorous activity.

In addition to the physical exertion that is a necessary balance for a sedentary life, running has a profound effect on the mind. President Bill Clinton claimed that daily running has a calming effect on his mind and helps maintain his optimism. My own experience is one of stimulus overload, sitting and listening to psychotherapy clients all day long. Running gives me the opportunity to attend to my favorite patient -- myself. It is a time for undisturbed reflection on the events of the day, questions that are troubling me and also events that bring me joy. It is a time to contemplate the dream that I had last night and generally to see that dream in a new light. It is an opportunity to think about plans and projects, and gives me a chance to approach dilemmas from a new, more creative perspective. When a problem is bothering me I take it out for a run and often return with a solution that I had not thought of before.

When President Clinton speaks of the calming effects of running and the optimism that it helps maintain he is referring, whether he knows it or not, to the effects of the hormones called endorphins that are secreted during aerobic activity. Endorphins are the body's natural equivalents to morphine,

and produce a similar psychological effect. They enhance mood, decrease pain, result in optimism, and are probably responsible for the “runner’s high”; that feeling of euphoria which so many runners experience. Endorphins are produced by the body during aerobic exercise, in combat, and, I suspect, during peak experiences of intense love or great enthusiasm. Because of the effects of the endorphins an injury suffered during a game or in combat is not felt immediately, the pain making itself known only later. Although there are many activities and situations in which the body produces these endorphins, running is the most efficient of the aerobic exercises and is probably the most reliable way to generate endorphins. Addicted runners, like me, are probably addicted to their own endorphins.

Yet, in addition to the physical and mental benefits of running there is a deeper, more irrational reason for persevering, and this has to do with our need to play. The social historian J. Huizinga’s book Homo Ludens presents a brilliant analysis of the play element in human life and culture. Huizinga teaches us that play is the basis for culture in all of its forms, and that it is a vital element in human life. Playing is first and foremost fun, and in play we voluntarily enter a different reality, a reality bounded by rules that are different from our day to day life. The playing space is delineated, a magic circle; be it a tennis court, a track or a chessboard. In this magic circle the game is simultaneously the most important event in the world and, nothing but a game. Playing within the magic circle offers an opportunity for transformation. The common man can become a hero and the sinner can become a saint. Each of us can discover new aspects of our personality as we play. The route that I run every day is my magic circle, and on my run I often learn something about myself; about my competitiveness or passion, my vulnerability or aggression. Running, all by myself, with no excuses or cover-ups, provides a dynamic opportunity for self-renewal and psychological growth. Furthermore, Huizinga’s most important point is that play is not just for children and professional athletes. From the cradle to the grave we never ever outgrow our need for play. It is not enough to sit in the stadium or by the television and cheer the team. We need to participate actively, to join the game.

So, do not ask me if I am still running, come and join the fun. Running will add days to your life and life to your days.