

Keep up your spirits

Breathing in, breathing out. Air into the lungs, breath of life. Feet, legs, eyes, mind, spirit and heart all connected. I notice the sights, smells, sounds and sensations of my surroundings as I run with a group of companions down the Worcester Canal to Diglis Canal Basin and its sign displaying the number of locks to Tewkesbury and Birmingham. We cross over the bridge, past the imposing 13th century cathedral of St Oswald and up towards the Old Bridge, where a rowing eight is shooting through the arches, scattering swans as it goes. We double back to pick up the tail-enders, as the proud boast of Worcester Joggers is that 'We don't leave anybody behind'.

I look into the faces of my companions: Lisa, Mike, Vicki, Charlie and others. Some are wearing T-shirts displaying the races they have run as badges of honour – Pat with his bright 'Sodbury Slog' emblem and Teri with her 'Race the Horse' (don't ask!). I feel inspired by the physical sensation of running, the connection with nature and the buildings of an ancient city, and the company – old friends and new ones, the jokes, mutual support, the sharing of news and problems, and the encouragement to push oneself that bit further. But also there's the non-talking, the ability to run with people but to be within one's own head and thoughts and feelings – solitary but not lonely.

As we pause to cross the bridge I mention this article to Gary, who tells me that he had depression when work pressures, moving house and the birth of a new child pushed him into an unfamiliar zone. A combination of a

sympathetic GP, antidepressants, good friends and running kept him going and eventually lifted him again. I am constantly stirred by the number of runners who say to me that they have experienced an episode(s) of mental distress at some stage of their lives and that running has helped them to recover and thrive.

As we run over the bridge, down the Riverside Promenade with its flower baskets and towards the park, a group of youngsters remark that we must be '****ing mad!' Of course, a few years ago, that's exactly what I was.

I had an idyllic childhood on the island of Jersey. But a major turning point in my life came when I was sent away to boarding school at the age of eight. I can't think of much good that came out of it, except that it gave me later as a childcare social worker an empathy with kids who were removed from home. One of the problems that remains from those years is the little voice that comes into my head when things get tough. It tells me what the teachers at that boarding school used to say: 'You'll never achieve anything.'

Talking with people over the years, I realise just how prevalent are the problems caused by these childhood voices. One of the benefits of any strenuous exercise is that it clears your head of pressures and negative thoughts and tends to refresh you. As a social worker with 13 years' direct practice, I found running a great release. Speaking with a new runner this week, she remarked simply: 'Running keeps me sane.'



But from preserving sanity back to my recovery from mental illness. In 1997 I went from Staffordshire to Worcestershire to become Director of Social Services of a new department following local government reorganisation. I had been warned that there would be difficulties with particular people and that there had been a series of financial crises over at least the previous 10 years. Having to take 7% in the first year out of a budget that was already a busted flush created inevitable problems.

What happened left me with an abiding sense of what ethical, value-based leadership is and what it isn't.¹ I found that trying to do the impossible meant I got into a pattern of sleeping about two hours a night, losing 2lbs a day and finally ending up in my GP's surgery. Her response was human, direct and very reassuring. 'This is shit!' she proclaimed angrily. 'They are using you as a scapegoat.' I spent six months off sick with depression and I feel myself very fortunate to have survived – and even more fortunate to be in a valued work role again.

What helped? I had a good GP who, while she recommended antidepressants, gave me some control. With all the issues around medication at the moment, I have to say that antidepressants were extremely helpful, had minimal side effects and enabled me to start my recovery. I was also fortunate to have a place of spiritual asylum – Worth Abbey (BBC2's *The Monastery*, May 2005). I had a friend who was able to absorb both my sadness and my anger (because I was certainly mad in a different way); real leaders like Professor Antony Sheehan, who welcomed me back into the world of work; and my running club, Worcester Joggers.

Earlier this year, the Mental Health Foundation brought out its report 'Up and Running?' The research found that 55% of GPs commonly prescribed antidepressants as their first treatment response to mild or moderate depression, while only 35% believed that this was the most effective strategy. The Foundation points out that there are many advantages of exercise therapy, and that these can act in four main ways:

- biological/chemical – through the increased release of endorphins and encephalins²
- social – exercise enables people to build new social networks
- esteem boosting – the learning of new skills and achieving goals
- distraction/flow – moving away from the preoccupation with negative thoughts and creating a more positive state of mind.

Exercise is cost-effective. It has coincidental benefits and fewer potential side effects than antidepressants. It is also

an active, sustainable, recovery choice and a 'normalising' experience. And there are some inspiring stories around about how exercise can help – like Laura Boswel's. Training for the London Marathon, she ran even though there were days 'when ... I could hardly clean my teeth.'³ On depression she said: 'I'd liken it to a Victorian ghost story; you know something bad is lurking, but you don't know what. You just have a creeping dread.' This accords very much with my experience, where I felt I was literally running to save my life. Although the lofepramine helped enormously, there were days in the 'chasm' when I couldn't do anything. But I would still get out and run.

Since we found in my own running group, Worcester Joggers, that so many people had experienced some form of mental distress, I conducted a small survey and people were very open about what caused them distress.

Many had indeed experienced extreme unhappiness, as well as 'stress caused by life!', as one person described it. Bereavement, childhood experiences, relationship breakdown, children leaving home and stress from work were all cited in very moving ways: 'It was a celebration of life and good health. I was just so grateful my body worked [having cared for their partner who died from cancer].' 'I became depressed and got to the point where I didn't want any contact with the outside world ... I continued to run and became quite competitive, as this was my way of dealing with my anger [after the break-up of a relationship].' 'When I was extremely stressed at work and under a lot of pressure, running helped to make me forget work.' As one person said, 'It's preventative medicine.'

Worcester Joggers has existed informally for many years, but in the last seven it has grown from about 20 members to more than 100. This seems to be due partly to people's desire to run as a social group. As one runner put it: 'Running puts people at the same level, irrespective of their professional status or standard of living. The club is like an extended family, sharing experiences and ideas, achievements and disappointments.' Interestingly, at least one person also spoke of the wider issue of social responsibility: 'It is also extremely fulfilling when running to raise sponsorship money, as you feel you are putting something back into the world.' And for others, what works is simply the sheer exhilaration of running: 'Running helps me connect with nature. I enjoy MUD and lots of it. It's a kind of adventure!'

Running can be a spiritual experience too, providing a sense of wellbeing. It may bring one closer to nature, stimulate a sense of beauty and foster community and solidarity. A recognition of the spiritual dimension of each individual is becoming increasingly prevalent in Western

societies. This is despite (or perhaps because of) our increased secularisation and materialism, people often feeling that they are just one more commodity and that their value as human beings is based purely on their financial ability to consume.^{4,5,6}



Spirituality and religion are not identical. As Stephen Wright puts it: 'Everybody is spiritual, but not everybody is religious. We all seek meaning, purpose, relationship and connectedness in life, but not everybody chooses to channel that quest through the more formal structure and belief system of a religion.'⁷ There are a huge number of definitions of spirituality, including the essence of our humanness as unique individuals within a common humanity; what is deepest in us, inspiring us and giving us direction, especially at times of crisis; and the human quest for meaning, purpose, identity, meaningful relationships, and a sense of the holy.^{8,9}

As part of the national Spirituality and Mental Health Project, Mary Ellen Coyte is producing a book on spiritual strategies for survival,¹⁰ in which exercise will play its part. The Worcester Joggers echo this sense of the spiritual accessed through exercise: 'Running helps me connect with myself when running on my own or silently.' 'As a group, running helps me make and connect with new friends and existing friends as it gives me a common interest.' 'It is a good reminder of what we are doing – living, rather than living to work.' 'As a Christian, running seems to bring together the spiritual, mental and physical aspects of life. It is a wonderful way to enjoy God's creation.'

Is it stretching a point too far to say that being a member of a running club is similar to religious practice? One definition of religion is as follows:

'Religion encompasses aspects of spirituality, usually in the context of belief in a transcendent being or beings. Religious faiths can provide a 'world view', which is acted out in narrative, creeds, symbols, rites, rituals, sacraments and gatherings; and the promotion of ties of mutual obligation. It creates a framework within which people seek to understand and interpret and make sense of themselves, their lives and daily experiences.'⁹

In the same way, it could be said that runners have a set of beliefs. While there are a number of 'birth' runners who started running on the beach with their parents, there are also 'born again' runners who only came to the activity late in the day – a 'Damascene experience' brought on by seeing themselves in the mirror or hitting a crisis of health or meaning.

Club runners certainly have rituals. They get together on club nights and the gathering can seem like a church congregation, especially when the chair of the club welcomes people to the gathering, gives out the notices and praises 'Sister Emma' and 'Brother Jim', who ran a muddy cross-country in some remote part of Worcestershire! Worcester Joggers also head off for a monthly club meal, usually at a Balti house. We also have a strange, coded language. Sacramental institutions may involve rites of passage, sharing a meal and awards and prizes. Those who have dropped out through injury or lethargy are welcomed back like those who repenteth!

My comments about the religious nature of running are only partly serious, but there is no doubt that running has benefits that are not only physical. As well as the experience of being inspirited, of solidarity with others and a sense of the sacred in nature and in people, there is, as one person put it, 'a sense of belonging'.

With encouragement (and perspiration) from Vicki Hasler, Mike Sell and Tracey Hall.

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