

CHAPTER 27

CAN I RUN MYSELF HAPPY?

Andy Lane

Medical statistics worldwide portray ailing societies. Recent increases in anxiety and depression mirror increases in physical conditions such as obesity and heart conditions – and these trends appear to be on the increase, presenting a pessimistic view of the future. However, according to exercise psychologists, taking regular exercise is an effective treatment for both conditions¹. Indeed, such claims are based on evidence; exercise burns calories and so acts as an effective weight management strategy. Equally, exercise releases chemicals in the brain, known as endorphins, which produce a pleasant experience commonly referred to as the *runners' high*. The two positive effects of exercise appear to act in harmony; as many people's self-esteem is tied to their physical self, losing weight can serve to raise self-esteem. Thus it seems that exercise can make you look better and feel happier. So the treatment is clear: Go and run yourself happy.

Running Into Roadblocks

Unfortunately, the idea that exercise is a panacea probably does not tie in with many people's personal experiences of exercising. For many, exercise activates memories of abusive Physical Education teachers yelling orders to exercise harder, while reprimanding someone for wearing blue socks rather than black. Thus, for many people, the thought of exercise activates unpleasant memories that do not need revisiting. It is also worth noting the annual wave of New Year's Day 'resolutionists' who set goals "to get fit" and "to lose weight", but whose ability to act on their goals rarely lasts beyond January. All of this begs the question: If exercise is so enjoyable, then why do so many people find it so difficult to maintain?

One explanation lies in how exercise is sold to us by the exercise industry. Claims like, 'You can run yourself happy' are extremely bold. Changing this sentiment into the question, 'How can you make yourself happier by exercising?' instantly shifts the emphasis to looking at what we need to put in place for exercise to improve mood. So what do we need to do to make exercise enjoyable?

First we need to look at our attitude toward exercise in the first place. Taking the example of running, which is arguably the simplest exercise to implement as it requires almost no specialist equipment, many share attitudes like "I hate running" or "Running is so boring". People give themselves a reason not to run and explain why they could not enjoy it even if they tried. While such comments have some truth

to them (certainly, physical exercise has some unpleasant side effects, such as breathlessness, intense sweating, and possibly pain), it is also true that this does not have to be the experience.

When I hear descriptions such as these, I wonder how they arose, given that humans are natural exercisers. If you watch a child learn to crawl, struggle to walk overcoming hundreds of falls and bumped heads, knees etc., then run, you can see that running is a natural process. In evolutionary terms, if humans could not have learned to run, they would not have survived. Children experience so many failures in their efforts that it seems surprising just how easily their adult counterparts find reasons to stop. If we are biologically programmed to exercise, why do we give this up? Somewhere along the line, it seems that many adults have learned, via their experiences, to find exercise unpleasant rather than enjoyable².

We also need to look at the goals that are driving us towards exercise (or away from exercise, as the case may be!). Many people enjoy hard and intense exercise sessions because they are pursuing some kind of goal. This motivation for exercise is known as *instrumental*, and the key point is that the end justifies the means; if the end goal is seen as worthwhile, then exercise is worth it. The person is not necessarily enjoying exercise for its own sake; just what it can do. Like our ancestral forebears who needed to run to kill in order to eat, or to flee an animal to avoid being eaten, exercise is used to achieve something.

What goals does exercise typically serve for people? Exercise is often positioned as means of preventing something nasty from occurring, like heart disease, depression, or obesity. However, to make the most out of exercise it is also worth thinking about the *benefits* of exercise. Exercising is associated with numerous desirable outcomes; feeling fit, looking good, and demonstrating physical prowess. You can even impose more positive external goals, such as raising money for a charity or completing a fun run.

Understanding How Your Body Is Responding

So exercise does not necessarily lead to improved mood – our attitudes and goals toward exercise are also important. If you change your attitudes and goals then, will exercising all of the sudden become enjoyable? Unfortunately it is not that simple. When people begin exercising, there are a number of immediate physiological responses that occur: increased heart rate, movement of blood to the working muscles, increased breathing rate to remove unwanted carbon dioxide and to deliver oxygen. When running, we know that if we tried to sprint as fast as possible, a sense of pain would rapidly build in our legs and our breathing would become rapid, to the point when we would feel we had to stop – and we would get to this point in seconds rather than minutes. The human body has different energy systems and the

one set up for sprinting uses a lot of fuel very quickly and cannot replenish faster than it can use. Our other energy system (the one associated with slower exercise) is set up to allow us to take on additional fuel and to keep going. It's worth remembering humans are capable of great feats of endurance. Many people each year complete the marathon Des Sables (running two hundred miles in six days) and the marathon of Britain (six marathons in six days)!³. People who run ultra-endurance races like these teach themselves to run at a pace that they can sustain through training. Even for elite athletes, running too hard and too-long produces unpleasant sensations of fatigue. However, these sensations of fatigue can be interpreted in different ways, and it is these interpretations that matter.

Let's work through an example. Imagine two runners preparing for a marathon: an experienced runner and a novice. The experienced runner goes out and runs hard for two hours. He expects and intends to feel fatigued during the later stages of the run, but is also pleased that he can run for so long, because it shows that his fitness is improving. An experienced runner then draws on previous experiences and judges his current feelings against those experiences. So what about the novice runner, who has much less experience to draw on? He starts off quickly because he wants to improve fast and because running feels easy at the start. But starting off too fast rapidly leads to sensations of tiredness, from lactic acid, a waste product of hard exercise that signals slowing down or stopping. He quickly becomes demotivated and limps off home. For novice exercisers, the message is clear: If you want to enjoy exercising, begin by giving yourself a chance to enjoy it. Run at a pace where you can still talk to someone; if you find talking difficult then slow down.

Learning To Enjoy Exercise

What the cumulative wisdom of exercise psychologists tells us then is that we can learn to enjoy exercise and reap its benefits. We can overcome the negative experiences we may have had in the past, and the immediate negative side-effects associated with exercise, with the right attitudes and goals in mind, and an understanding of how our bodies are responding. There are clear long-term health benefits of engaging in regular exercise that far outweigh the relatively short-term discomfort. And, if that isn't incentive enough, next time you begin to start talking yourself out of a decision to go for a run, take a moment to think about the almost insurmountable hurdles you have already conquered during your infancy to be able to exercise in the first place.

It is also worth noting that there is an entire industry developing to try to help people to enjoy exercising. Companies are writing music to accompany running; health and fitness centers typically have a multitude of different media to watch and listen to whilst exercising. Therefore, it should be possible to go to the gym, jump on a treadmill while watching your favorite television program, exercise comfortably

for an hour, shower, and then go home. By coupling exercise with activities you know that you enjoy can make the experience tolerable. When you start getting fitter, your sense of self-esteem will improve, and you may even start believing that you enjoy exercise!

Practical Tips

- When exercising, your goal should be to enjoy the session, so there is no need to start out fast or hard. Begin with something that seems achievable to build your confidence (e.g., walking for 5 minutes). Say to yourself, “I will go for 5 minutes and then make a decision on how long to go after that”. What happens is that people often do another 5 minutes and then another.
- You can make exercise more enjoyable by picking the right environment. If you can choose to exercise surrounded by pleasant scenery, that’s great. But even if you don’t have this option, you can control what you listen to. Select motivating songs to listen to; your favorite songs, or maybe a new album you’re excited to hear.

Further Information

- For more information about the use of music in exercise, check out Karageorghis, C. I., Terry, P. C., Lane, A. M., Bishop, D. T., & Priest, D. L (2011). The BASES Expert Statement on the use of music in exercise. *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, 28, 18-19. <http://www.bases.org.uk/Music-in-Exercise>.
- To find out more about how you can manage negative feelings during exercise, see Lane, A. M., Beedie, C. J., Jones, M. V., Uphill, M., & Devonport, T. J. (2011). The BASES Expert Statement on emotion regulation in sport. *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, 29, 14-15. www.bases.org.uk/BASES-Expert-Statements.
- Other chapters in this book discuss alternative ways to improve our emotions. For example, see ‘Can I make myself feel better just by smiling?’, and ‘Should I strap a battery to my head?’

References For Endnotes

- 1 Fox, K. R. (2007). The influence of physical activity on mental well-being. *Public Health Nutrition*, 2, 411-418.
- 2 Berger, B. G., & Motl, R. W. (2000). Exercise and mood: A selective review and synthesis of research employing the Profile of Mood States. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 12 69-92.
- 3 Lane, A. M., & Wilson. (2011). Emotions and emotional intelligence among ultra-endurance runners. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 14, 358-362.

