

Running commentary – Connect with yourself through running

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I have often expounded on the mental-health benefits of running, and when I heard the term “mindfulness” for the 10,000th time in the last two years I thought it might be time to find out what the term means and how it might apply to my own life and those of the runners I know.

The webzine Mindful defines mindfulness this way: “Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us.”

That sounds good, but how in the world do we achieve this state of being even for portions of our daily lives?

In my brief study on the topic I discovered that mindfulness has to do with taking the time to pay attention to our surroundings, our place, and what is going on around us. It means taking time for ourselves.

Mindfulness practitioners agree that being aware of our body is where to start.

Most mindfulness articles and books emphasize the use of meditation of some type to become more mindful. The word meditation conjures up the connotation of

spirituality and religion for some, but for the purposes here, I use the term more basically and I think it might be possible to actually “meditate” and become more “mindful” through the act of running. I think running works particularly well, especially if you can find a more natural setting that is not too technical, which is what we are surrounded by here in Sisters Country.

This sort of routine is called moving meditation, and there are full programs available online and in books that are much more specific and elaborate than what I describe below.

Let’s try this out in practice. I get up in the morning with the plan to go for a 30-minute easy run. I have laid out my clothing and shoes the night before so that there is no stress involved in getting out the door. Once dressed I begin by sitting on my step to quiet my mind and go over my route in my head. I take a minute or two to sit with good, but relaxed, posture, arms at my sides, eyes partially closed, and breathe. I try to still my mind and appreciate what I am about to do.

Next I stand and take quick stock of any tension in my body. My calves are perpetually tight, so I quietly take time (and relaxed breathing) to stretch them. I tend to hold stress in my shoulders, so I do my two

favorite stretches to sort of open up my upper body and then I am ready to head out the door.

I am lucky that I can go right out my back gate into the woods, which is relaxing in itself, to start my run. I consciously start very easily, no need to hurry, and get into cadence of movement and breathing. I take in the path before me and the forest around me. I notice the smell of my neighbor’s wood stove in the air and hear the squawk of the raven whose nest is in one of the tall pines along the trail and who always has something to say to me when I venture past his tree.

(As much as many people love running with earbuds, it is my opinion that sticking to open ears is a good way to go in practicing mindfulness).

Having started out more quietly, relaxed and mindful, I fall into a pace and course that doesn’t require much thinking on my part. I am not worried about time or about getting lost, so my mind has the freedom to just “be” for a bit. Typically, once I warm up a bit, I begin to have ideas pop into my brain at times like this. It’s almost like dreaming in that thoughts that have not really gotten my attention pop into my mind and I can take time to consider them. It is often at times like these that solutions to

problems take place for me or that conversations that I need to have with someone important begin to crystalize. It is common that my best creative ideas come to mind during my run.

As far as mental health goes, after a run like this I often experience the sense of relief similar to when you empty your e-mail folder or make a drawer in your desk more orderly. Things are just a bit more sorted out.

My example assumes starting the day in a mindful way, but of course any time of day can be positive. After a hard work day, it’s a wonderful way to regain perspective and some level of peace. A mindful mid-day “pause” or “escape” can make the rest of the day go better.

In a perfect world workers would have at least occasional level of flexibility to build this sort of practice into the work day. It reminds me of my early years at Sisters High School when the principal, Dennis Dempsey, once or twice said, “Get changed, we need to go for a run.” It was his way of getting his head cleared from the demands of being a building administrator. Sometimes I acted as a listening ear and other times we would just run in relative quiet. It felt good to have the freedom to pick up and go for 40 minutes. We would come back ready to tackle the work before us.



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