

Exercise addiction - When more Is less

by Richard Benyo

In 1980, at the height of Running Revolution I, it was as common as shoelaces to hear this statement: "Running is wonderful. Running means everything to me. I'm gonna run for the rest of my life!" A fine, noble, unabashed, unapologetic declaration -- and also -- well -- a fib. Certainly, it was not a premeditated fib or a well-constructed deceit. No. It was merely an enthusiastic wrongheaded belief in a saved life built on sand. Very few of the runners I heard utter those words in 1980 are running today. Not because they wouldn't like to be running today, but because either physically, mentally, or spiritually, they no longer can. The sin that kept them from the kingdom of consistency is a sin that we runners seldom acknowledge: exercise addiction.

Positive addiction vs. exercise addiction

"Exercise addiction" is not to be confused with "positive addiction," a concept defined and made popular by Dr. William Glasser in 1976. Glasser studied long-distance runners and found that they faithfully pursued what would seem to the uninitiated a rather boring pursuit, but that they were able to persist because they became "addicted" to it. Glasser referred to this addiction as positive to differentiate it from the classic negative addictions to alcohol, drugs, sex, bingo, and so on.

Positive addiction is that state of mind that allows a person to pursue a seemingly boring activity until it is no longer boring. All aerobic sports are based on that concept. Explanations of the mechanism involved include addiction to the fabled endorphin-induced "runner's high," addiction to increased self-esteem due to the myriad physical and psychological advantages running provides, and tapping into an individual's natural obsessive-compulsive nature. Long-distance running has, for some, served as a positive addiction replacing a recently-shucked negative addiction such as cigarette smoking and alcoholism. For long-distance runners, the sport and lifestyle often complement other aspects of their lives. For the exercise-addicted, the sport and lifestyle of long-distance running are their life.

The temptation to romanticize that level of obsession and commitment is only too common. One must remain aware, however, that the negative side gradually overwhelms the positive. In an ironic way nature balances the situation when the thing obsessed turns on and bites the obsessor.

Similar to some ex-smokers, the most fanatic runners I ran with in the late 1970s and early 1980s who gave up the sport are now its harshest critics. Their mantra is "Running is bad for you. Look what it did to me." This admonition is accompanied by a litany of chronic physical and psychological injuries that have been endured, like chronic wrist problems for a hard-core bowler.

Are you addicted?

So, how do you know you've become an exercise addict?

The logical response is simple: when your exercise controls you, instead of the other way around. When, no matter the circumstances or previous commitments, you must get a workout in today. When, in spite of a nagging injury that you feel ill-equipped to allow time to heal, you batter it with today's scheduled workout, and then lament your body's shortcomings. When you think and talk about nothing but your running. When the obsession with your running turns to an arrogance of mind over matter, where you confuse willfulness to overcome your body's physical limitations with being strong-willed. Running for the elite, for the gods of the sport, is a calculated tightrope walk between appreciating the potential of their bodies, and respecting the innate weaknesses of those same bodies poised to topple them. Their mission is to keep from mindlessly abusing themselves; otherwise, their elite careers would be short-lived.

Running for those of us with jobs, families, and other commitments is a physical and mental challenge, an outlet for mental and physical stress, and an affirmation of the fact that our bodies were designed to use their huge leg muscles for motion - a regular positive reaffirmation, if you will, of our physical selves fighting the negative tide in a modern world that increasingly attempts to barcolounge our nature-given physicality.

The pursuit of a balanced life that includes a generous positive dose of running is possible, even among the best runners, among those we claim to emulate while regularly thrashing ourselves.

My ultradistance running hero is Tim Twietmeyer, four-time winner of the Western States 100. Tim is one of the most intelligent, well-rounded elite runners I know. Although he regularly performs at a very high level in a very demanding sport, he never allows himself to be consumed by his training and racing. He has a rich family life and a satisfying professional life at Hewlett-Packard. Despite the fact that he is a volunteer fireman, backpacks, and enjoys a social life outside running, he regularly wins races.

Therein lies one of the great paradoxes: the exercise addicts seldom perform to their potential because they are so consumed with their exercising that they are usually running hurt or running tired. Addiction, after all, allows for nothing else within its sphere. And addiction to running, like addiction to anything else, has one ultimate outcome: overload and burnout. In exercise addiction among runners, the typical outcome is that the body or the mind breaks down.

With few viable options available, the addicted runner runs whether or not the body can or should. This results in chronic injuries (which are never allowed to heal), which in turn lead to mental frustration and burnout. Ultimately, that which nourished the spirit comes to bedevil the spirit, to drain the spirit, until the runner (now an ex-runner) turns viciously on that which he or she supposedly loved with a passion that transcended time. "I'll run for the rest of my life" turns to "Running ruined my life!" The ancient Greeks in many ways offer ongoing inspiration to long-distance runners. We would do well to take to

heart one of their enduring philosophies: "A sound mind in a sound body." In other words, an addiction to balance.

An addiction self-test

Where addiction to running stands in your life

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the strongest, weight each of the following statements as they apply to you and your running. Then total your numbers and check the interpretations at the end of the test. Fill out the test in pencil, or make photocopies so you can retake it periodically.

- ___Running is extremely important to me. I'm positive I'll be running for the rest of my life.
- ___A day without a run is a day without sunshine.
- ___If it becomes downright impossible to get my workout in today, I can always double up tomorrow.
- ___Until I get my workout in, I'm a real bear Ä as in unbearable.
- ___A little pain indicates there's serious progress being made.
- ___If two aspirin/ibuprofen are good, four are twice as good.
- ___Warm-up and cool-down are important, but it's what comes in the middle of a workout that counts.
- ___As far as running goes, more is always better.
- ___A string of running days must remain unbroken.
- ___Quality without quantity is impossible.
- ___Of course I know how many miles I ran last month_
- ___Unless you've run a marathon, you're not a real runner.
- ___The more marathons you've run, the more serious a runner you are.
- ___Rest is for the weary, not for the strong.
- ___Discomfort exists to run through, not to be an insurmountable barrier.
- ___All my friends are runners, and I wouldn't consider befriending a nonrunner.
- ___Many running-related pains can be gotten rid of by running through them.
- ___If a shirt doesn't boast a race logo, it isn't one I want to wear.
- ___It exhibits their inbred weakness if people don't want to hear my step-by-step re-creations of races I've run.
- ___If I have a piddling injury and a sports medicine expert says I shouldn't run, it's obviously time for a second (or third) opinion.

Where does your total fall?

- 161-200: Running addiction personified. Get help quickly.
- 121-160: Leaning toward running addiction; beware.
- 81-120: Neutral.
- 41-80: Fitness with a mellow bent.
- 20-40: Approaching terminal mellow; better sign up for a race.

*Richard Benyo is editor of a new running publication, **Marathon & Beyond**, which debuts in January as a bimonthly published by Human Kinetics . Benyo has written 15 books on fitness, health, and sports, including **Masters of the Marathon** (Atheneum, 1983) and **Making the Marathon Your Event** (Random House, 1992). He has served as executive editor of **Runner's World** (1977-84) and is the veteran of 37 marathons. In 1989, he and running partner Tom Crawford became the first athletes ever to run in midsummer from Badwater in California's Death Valley to the peak of Mt. Whitney and back, a distance of 300 miles. He claims to be a recovering exercise addict.*

Permission granted to redistribute, as long as you acknowledge the author, FootNotes and the Road Runners Club of America.