



## Mind How You Go By Jj Runners world May 2008

**The mental agony of an injury can often be worse than the physical pain - here's how to deal with the psychological hurdle of being sidelined**

It's a truth universally acknowledged that a happy runner in possession of a good few miles under his or her belt must at some point be in need of a physio. Between the first shuffling steps of the self-conscious beginner and the confident cadence of the sub-3:00 marathon runner there is frighteningly large potential for problems and a whole world of pain.

But pain is far more than physical. A worn cartilage or sprained ligament can bring us up short with a shout and an emergency call to the home-based rescue service. But that can just be the beginning. Because it's then that runners are reminded - or in the case of someone who's not been running long, it's a dawning realisation - that being a runner is a key part of their life, their very identity. And when injury threatens that identity, that *raison d'être*, it's important to acknowledge the effect and then to do something about it.

It's impossible to say who suffers more when they're struck by injury: the 100-miles-per-week club star or the back-of-the-pack plodder. A runner's reaction to injury depends on their individual psychological make-up, but sports psychologists acknowledge that the extent of the downturn of a runner's mood will affect not only their life in the short term, but also their response to the injury itself. And a runner's ability has no bearing on that.

**Running as therapy**

The Runner's World community is a slice of running life. Visitors and contributors to the forums - not just the [Injury section](#) - will soon see that injury and its psychological effects form a huge proportion of discussions there.

Whatever a runner's ability, they use their running time as therapy, to lift their mood and in some cases, treat depression. They use it to escape, whether it's from screaming children or a stressful desk job. They use it for self-improvement, from losing a few pounds to beating a PB; there's nothing like it for boosting your self-esteem and giving you a sense of achievement.

Injury takes all that away. As soon as a runner feels a pain, the fear begins. Fear that their fitness is going to take a nose-dive and take with it all those feelings of contentment, self-esteem, control and escape. Often the fear is greater than the fact - the flaring agony of a twisted ankle can actually settle quite quickly, but not before thoughts of doom and gloom take root. It sounds extreme, but grief is a very real emotion when a runner hears that he or she will be off the road for weeks, or even months.

Regular forumite [Mrs Pig](#) posted recently that she was at the 'panicky stage' of injury. She took up running because she needed an outlet, and found the way blocked when she developed a stress fracture. "I'm absolutely gutted," she says, "I recognise it's trivial in the grand scale of things, but I'm angry that I have it.

"Running calms me, gives me time and space away from pressures of family, work and life. Now I'm worried about gaining weight and how hard it will be to get back to fitness."

### **Patience is a virtue**

Thankfully, as Mrs Pig realises, there is light at the end of the tunnel - but you need patience and an open mind. If you can't get your 'high' from running, try other forms of exercise, which will also keep your fitness up when you're ready to hit the road again.

Forumite TR has learned this lesson. He describes himself as 'a fit bloke who runs a bit', managing a 1:06 10-miler off not much training and getting close to his goal of a sub-3:00 marathon. Last June he was out for a run when he slipped and smashed his knee on a concrete wall. "I damaged my medial knee ligament with the slip and then smashed the bone," he says. "The knee was really swollen for a while, but almost immediately I was swimming and biking on it to try and get it moving again. Icing also helped reduce the swelling."

TR took advice from a physio, then eventually started running slowly, while cycling or swimming most days. He

dropped out of some key races, but knew that he should hold back. "I finally ran a race in November and then picked up the running to six days a week for the London Marathon," he says "Now my knee is slowly getting better."

TR's background in other sports, and willingness to cross-train, has helped his recovery. "I'm not a person that has to run everyday, so I was happy to find other ways to keep fit."

### Help Yourself

Unless you're very lucky, or very cautious, or both, then injury will strike at some point. But watching out for the warning signs and following a few tips could prevent the worst psychological effects and help get you back on the road a bit quicker.

- Discomfort is normal; sudden or increasing pain isn't. Be aware, and be prepared to stop. Our experienced and knowledgeable sub-3:00 marathon runner is just as likely as our determined but naïve beginner to tough out the pain, but both will end up on the bench.
- If self-treatment (rest, ice, painkillers or anti-inflammatories) doesn't work after a few days, seek professional help. A good sports physio is ideal, but don't be put off by the negative press that a few unsympathetic GPs have had. Most are keen to help.
- Keep things in perspective. It's probably not terminal. By all means get angry and fed up - and if it was overtraining that led to the injury, learn the lesson! But there are other things in life. Do them for a while.
- Cross-train. It's unlikely that your running injury will stop you doing everything physical. Walk, swim, go to the gym, cycle. Vast numbers of triathletes go into the sport because they were injured for a time.
- Continue to set goals in whatever you do. Achievement in anything is a mental boost.
- Don't go back to training too early. Listen to advice, including your own. Would you advise someone else to do what you're about to do, when you take a sneaky jog around the block 'to test it out'?