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# Get Some Running Therapy

Exercise-induced happiness fights anger, sadness, and anxiety. Who needs a shrink?

By

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Some people work through issues lying down, feet propped up on a leather couch. Austin "Ozzie" Gontang, Ph.D., however, finds problem-solving most effective when he and his clients are in running shoes. Gontang, a psychotherapist, marathoner, and director of the San Diego Marathon Clinic, has been hitting the streets with his patients for the past 30 years. "Getting out and talking with others while you run or walk can help change your thoughts and give you a different perspective on how you choose to deal with anger, grief, or trauma," he says.

You don't need to be clinically depressed or severely troubled to benefit from "motion therapy." In fact, Gontang says many people run out their problems, perhaps unknowingly, on a regular basis. "Your therapy might come from your running group, your running buddy, the Saturday morning bunch," he says. "When you run sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles together, you trust each other, bare your souls to each other, and help each other heal."

Numerous studies have shown that exercise stimulates the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine, epinephrine, and beta-endorphin, all of which elevate mood and reduce depression and anxiety. Research is showing what runners have known all along: In this state of mind, they are more likely to disclose thoughts and feelings--whether it's to a training partner or licensed therapist--when they are logging miles. Gontang strongly believes in motion therapy and offers discounted rates to those who will see him on the road. About 75 percent of his clientele do--to his delight. "It's a healthy outlet for me as well," he says.

## Putting It in Motion

As a graduate student, Gontang worked under Tad Kostrubala, M.D., who coined the term "running therapist" in his 1976 book *The Joy of Running*. Dr. Kostrubala's research showed that as therapists and patients moved together, anxiety and blocked thoughts gave way. His findings continue to be substantiated and fine-tuned today.

"I would learn more about a person walking or running with him than I would sitting in a chair across from him," says Keith Johnsgard, Ph.D., professor emeritus at San Jose State University, who before his retirement often took counseling sessions on the road. While having exercise partners is helpful, it's not essential. The uplifting power of running is at work even when you're out solo. "For every bout of exercise you engage in, you get some relief and distraction from your troubles," says Johnsgard, who wrote *Conquering Depression and Anxiety Through Exercise*. "With just 20 to 30 minutes of vigorous

exercise you get five or six hours of lasting effects--reducing anxiety, anger, fatigue, and other negative emotions."

And runners are at an advantage. "The therapeutic benefits of exercise increase with intensity," says Madhukar Trivedi, M.D., professor of psychiatry and director of the mood disorders program at the University of Texas Southwestern. Dr. Trivedi's research shows that a particular dose (30 to 35 minutes, three or four times a week) and intensity (moderate to high) of exercise is most effective for relieving feelings of sadness and irritability.

### Active Recovery

Dan McGann, a 49-year-old social worker, has long found emotional healing on the road. As a child, he ran to cope with a turbulent home life. As an adult, he has run to overcome depression. In September 2006, after completing his first marathon, McGann decided to put his therapeutic experiences to work by developing a running group for teens diagnosed with depression or anxiety at the Credit Valley Hospital's Child and Family Clinic in Mississauga, Ontario. McGann meets with 14- to 19-year-olds twice a week for 10 weeks to train them for local 5-K and 10-K races. The teens record their prerun and postrun moods, using a scale of one to 10. Most start at two or three. After a run, the scores are up to six, seven, or eight. McGann says parents of participants are equally happy. They credit the running program with helping their kids develop coping skills, confidence, and friendships.

"The kids learn they can overcome obstacles, such as running up a steep hill, and that they don't have to face problems alone," McGann says. "Running helps us bypass some of our barriers and defenses. We all have the potential of creating positive energy--running helps us do that."

Like group therapy, group runs allow you to air out a problem with a supportive listener. But to clear your head on your own, Gontang says to take a few deep breaths at the start of your run. Deep breathing stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for calming us down. As you run, be conscious of your breathing. Tell yourself that you are breathing in energy and positivity and breathing out distress and anxiety. As you exhale, imagine that whatever issue that's bothering you is being released. Doing this outside is ideal. While you'll still produce all those feel-good brain chemicals on a treadmill, Gontang believes that running through a town, park, or forest enhances the effect. "Being outside, we realize life is a lot bigger than our problems," he says. "All the visual, aural, and olfactory experiences of the outdoors help you remember that you are experiencing life. It brings you into the present--you are part of nature, not just a passive observer."

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