

3 Mental and Physical Aspects of Jogging

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PHYSICAL fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body, it is the basis of dynamic and creative intellectual activity. The relationship between the soundness of the body and the activities of mind is subtle and complex. Much is not yet understood. But one knows what the Greeks knew — that intelligence and skill can function at the peak of their capacity only when the body is healthy and strong; that hardy spirits and tough minds usually inhabit sound bodies.

The beneficial effects of jogging or any other form of physical exercise have already been highlighted. Jogging is one of the best means to achieve overall physical fitness. Why is jogging or running superior to other forms of physical exercise? Running is the most natural form of activity and does not require any equipment except for a pair of good shoes which too is optional (remember Abebe Bikila, the Olympic marathon champion, who ran barefoot!). It does not need any learning, any special locale or any special athletic ability. It can be done in group or alone, any time and anywhere. It has been one of the most primitive and basic forms of activity for survival of the animal.

Men and women, young and old all can undertake jogging without any restrictions. Children should be encouraged to develop a life long good habit of physical exercise. The popular belief that children are naturally fit is not true. Adults can take up this activity regardless of body build and stature. The unfortunate misconception that running or sports activities have masculinising effect and are not for the females should be condemned and all efforts should be made to dispel it. Exercise is

beneficial for females also. It improves the figure as well as skin health and complexion. Menstruation is hardly a contraindication and even during menopause the physical and psychological benefits may provide a powerful diversion and relief from the menopausal symptoms.

Many psychological hang ups and obstacles may come in the way of starting and maintaining a jogging programme. There are various motivating processes that operate to make a resolve to start a programme. There may be a strong desire to improve stamina, to lose extra body weight and so on but procrastination gets the better of many people. Resolving to do something in the future which one could do immediately is an accepted substitute for doing it and permits one to delude oneself by not doing what one has set to do.

Besides the physical benefits there are some very cogent psychological aspects that are worth enumerating. What ever be the motivating force for starting the jogging programme, there is something more to it at a higher mental level. There is an emotional change, something sublime, that elevates the mind to a different psychological plane — sometimes a profound experience of the mind. The joggers describe their experience in quite a colourful language. There is a sense of euphoria, some describe it as the ultimate exhilaration, a catharsis and others say that they feel the unification of the body and mind. Many claim elevation to a sensory plateau that produce clarity, inspiration, sense of freedom and at times a mystical spirituality. Some others say that it is more than fun more like a divine sometimes excruciating bliss. There is pain and

pleasure. The intense psychic experience has been very vividly described by Amby Bunfoot, the 1968 Boston marathon winner. He says, "I run because I enjoy it — not always but most of the times. I run because I have already run — not trained, but run. What do I get? Joy and pain, good health and injuries. Exhilaration and despair. The feeling of accomplishment and a feeling of waste. The sunrise and sunset."

These unique psychic sensations and experience are felt in timed segments. Kostrubala based these findings on one hour long slow distance (LSD) run. During the first twenty minutes or so he finds that most people feel 'stiff and slow', even rotten to the extent of doubting their sanity in engaging in such an activity. He refers to this reaction as dysphoria. During the next half hour period there is an 'opening up experience'. It may coincide with the second wind. Breathing seems easier, there is a sensation of altered consciousness. The senses become more acute and the sights, smells and sounds become more pronounced. There is euphoria. Kostrubala calls it "cleaning of the field" which in effect is a wiping away of consciousness and an emptying of the mind. It is as if the conscious mind gets exhausted and other areas of consciousness are activated.

The physical activity and its consequent effects on the psychological processes may be used as an effective therapeutic tool for treating some forms of mental illness particularly depression. It is virtually impossible to be depressed and active at the same time. In one study on athletic programme at the University of Virginia, USA, jogging showed very measurable changes in depression level before and after. Even people who scored normal on the depression scale became more normal as they become physically fit. According to Morgan, the

mental benefits derived from running may not be the direct result of the act itself, but rather that it provides the runner with an opportunity to get away from the normal stress and pressures of daily life. He calls it the "time out theory". It provides a powerful diversion. Some others maintain that exercise may burn up the energy that might otherwise go to anxiety. Still others say that it acts as a natural psychotherapy as against the drugs that change the brain chemistry and act as an intruder. It stimulates the unconscious and is a powerful catalyst to the individual's psyche.

Whatever be the mechanisms of action, there is a distinct relationship between physical fitness and mental health. Fitness is a step further to health. Health refers to absence of disease or injury where fitness refers to the ability to perform physically. One can be healthy and not fit, but one cannot be fit without first being healthy. Mental health and physical fitness go pari passu. To enjoy life good health is a prerequisite. Jogging not only helps to enjoy life but also prolongs the enjoyment by prolonging life.

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