

VOL. 1 ISSUE 1 · MAY 2022

Therapy Thoughts

Official Newsletter of Forward Motion Counseling

Welcome

BY MARIA ANTELL, LCSW

Hi there and welcome to my first newsletter! This seasonal newsletter is a way for me to communicate tips, research, facts about mental health, social justice issues, and news about my practice.

We are continuing to live in a world touched by a pandemic and changes to our lives. Many are experiencing grief, pressures at work due to staff shortages, consequences of inflation and changes in our economy, a sense of uncertainty, and fatigue.

I hope this Spring can bring you a sense of renewal despite your circumstances.

I've been getting by with a little help from my furry friends, time outside, walking/running, and some good old rest.

With gratitude,
Maria



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How To Find The Right Therapist For You

May is Mental Health Awareness month! Although every month is an opportunity to acknowledge our mental health, May is an extra reminder that our mental health is important. There are many ways to honor our mental health and going to therapy is just one of them. Therapy is cool and worth it if you find the right therapist for you. I've been asked what one needs to look for when looking for a therapist and so I'd like to share my thoughts:

- Pay attention to a therapist's specialties. There are SO many therapists out there and we are not all the same. Look for a therapist who has experience with the issue you are experiencing.
- Ask how the therapist identifies or about their lived experiences if this matters to you-this may include but is not limited to racial, cultural, spiritual, Health At Every Size®, LGBTQ+, veteran, or disability communities.
- Boundaries. Boundaries. Boundaries. Does the therapist email you or text you late at night? Do they overshare about themselves? Unhealthy boundaries are a sign that your therapy will be unhealthy. Find a therapist who sets healthy boundaries and sticks to them. You both need that.
- Ask about insurance and fees. Also check your own insurance to see if you have out of network benefits in case you find a therapist that is out of network. [Openpathcollective.org](https://openpathcollective.org) is a way to search for affordable therapy.
- If you see a therapist you think you will like and they note that their practice is full, reach out anyway. They may be able to refer you to a colleague or keep you on a waitlist.
- Check the vibes. Do they feel authentic? Do they feel safe and like they're listening? Do they feel like they could work well with YOU? It's fair to give someone a few tries, but don't spend too long waiting for a spark.



What Happens in Our Brain and Body When We Run

Written By Maria Antell, LCSW

I once ran a relay race with friends that required us to collectively run 200 miles over a weekend in New Hampshire. I found myself getting ready to run four miles at 3 AM (my second leg with one more to go later in the day). I never ran in the dark before and I certainly never ran at 3 AM. I had my headlamp and reflection vest on. My team members, fatigued but filled with adrenaline, cheered me on just as I cheered them when it was their turn to run. I was off, initially with other runners but eventually on my own, at my own steady pace. I suddenly stopped feeling tired. My senses were heightened, with very few sounds other than my feet hitting the pavement, runners and cars in the distance, and the wind wooshing through the trees. The stars were bright and big on this clear night. The moon was full and lit up my path, to the point that I did not even need my headlamp. I was so grateful and at peace. Euphoria washed over me and it made me want to kiss the ground I was running on. It was just so beautiful, to experience the earth at an hour when I would typically be asleep. To see the moon light my way and be my guide. To be with friends who were all working on the same goal no matter how tired. I thought to myself, "So this must be the runner's high everyone talks about." I had no idea that a few years later I'd own a private practice with the intention of helping clients experience this joy. I began doing research and the information I discovered was not only validating for me personally, but it has inspired me to spread the information as much as I can. This growing body of research indicates that running improves our mental health...but how?

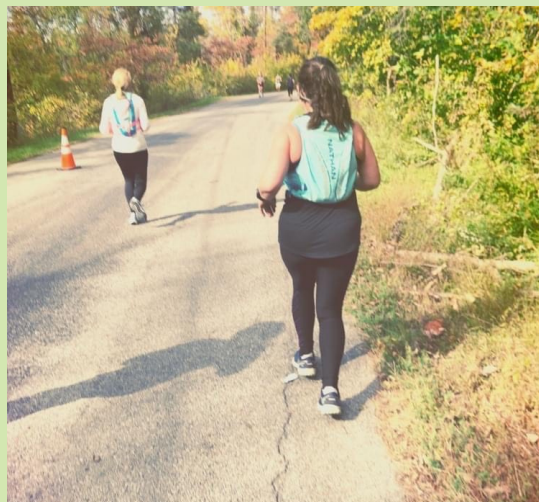
I'm going to simplify what I've come across in studies and books on this subject. In order to understand how running impacts mental health, we must understand what is happening in the brain. Let's start with what most people are familiar with and what I described earlier, the "runner's high." The runner's high is generally described as a feeling of euphoria that occurs during a run. We usually hear about endorphins and how great it is to get those endorphins going when we exercise. Recent research has challenged the idea that it is endorphins actually creating the euphoria and changes in mood. Although endorphins play a role in blocking pain when we run, they are not able to have an impact on our mood because they don't actually enter the bloodstream and change the chemistry in our brain. We have recently learned that there is also a different system involved when it comes to this euphoria, which you may have not heard of: the endocannabinoid system. Running or exercising at a moderate intensity releases endocannabinoids, which impacts the body much like how the cannabis plant does. Endocannabinoids naturally occur within the body and can help us enter a meditative, calm, and euphoric state. We may also experience disappearance of worries, alleviated pain, heightened senses, slowing of time, empowerment, and greater connection to others. Endocannabinoids have been referred to as the "don't worry, be happy" chemicals that have been biologically built in to our bodies. These chemicals not only help us in the moment, but can remain in our system and ward off depression and anxiety symptoms. Running can also help mitigate stress that builds up in our bodies by cueing our parasympathetic nervous system, which in turn regulates our feelings of safety and helps us to feel calm.

Understanding the biology that is in play when we run or move could help us to better understand why it happens in the first place. Researchers have theorized that the endocannabinoid system is likely activated during moderate exercise for evolutionary reasons. A calm state, reduction in pain, connection to others, and feelings of bliss could all serve as the reward for a behavior that was required for survival when we were largely foragers and hunters. If we are rewarded for physical exertion, we are more likely to do it, repeat it, and more likely to survive.

Dr. Kelly McGonigal coins the term “persistence high” in her book, [The Joy of Movement](#) when she writes, “Anything that keeps you moving and increases your heart rate is enough to trigger nature’s reward for not giving up. There’s no objective measure of performance you must achieve, no pace or distance you need to reach, that determines whether you experience an exercise-induced euphoria. You just have to do something that is moderately difficult for you and stick with it for at least twenty minutes. That’s because the runner’s high isn’t a running high. It’s a persistence high.”

Studies also indicate that it is not just running that can activate the endocannabinoid system. Cycling, hiking outside, dancing, swimming, and walking at an incline can have the same impact and are all activities that would get the heart rate up. The more we move, the more the brain builds capacity for endocannabinoid binding sites. In other words, we can experience the runner’s high even more if we are consistent in our movement. It may be difficult for some to achieve this if they are new to moderate exercise and unable to sustain movement for at least twenty minutes, but it may be a goal worth working toward! Our bodies are built to experience perseverance and the benefits of perseverance have a major impact on our mental health.

I know that the more that I have moments like I did in my race, the more peaceful and mindful I am as a person. I will warn you, not all runs can feel like that and it is important to not worry or stress if you are not achieving this feeling. We can also greatly benefit from runs that have no agenda or goal, allowing us to stay in the present moment. You get to determine how you want each walk or run to be, maybe with a certain goal in mind or maybe to simply just be with yourself. I believe that we can all access joy from movement if we are taught the tools to get there and are willing to work on it...much like most obstacles in life.





Reasons to Run or Walk

There are so many reasons to run or walk. The obvious ones could be for physical and mental health. Check out my [website](#) for mental health benefits. Here are some other neat reasons to get moving:

- Social justice, fundraising, and charity-most races dedicate your funds to a cause when you sign up. Pick a cause that matters to you, sign up for a race, and let it be a way to give back or fight for a cause.
- Community. Walkers and runners are everywhere. Most running stores facilitate groups and can be a great resource for establishing a community and making friends.
- Because you can! This is a good enough reason. Every run or walk is a celebration of what your body can do.
- To get outdoors. There is nothing quite like being in nature and enjoying the sights while we move.

What is your reason?
If you don't
walk or run and want to, what
could be your reason?

Mantras

Mantras are words or phrases we can tell ourselves when we're feeling down, hopeless, and/or in need of positive self-talk. Our body listens in on what we tell it and words to ourselves matter. Everyone is different and it depends on what YOU need to hear and what needs healing. Think about what you need, which words sound healing to you, and repeat them to yourself. It can help to refer to yourself as "you," as if you are your own best friend talking to you. Mantras are great for when we need to persevere in a run, but also apply to when we are struggling in life!

Some mantras for running, walking, moving, or life!

One foot in front of the other.

You can do hard things.

You're tougher than any negative thought.

Keep going.

A Bit About Health At Every Size® (HAES®)

The HAES® movement is an evolving approach to healthcare. It is an alternative approach to our weight-centered treatment so that people of all sizes receive adequate care. It promotes size acceptance, strives to end weight discrimination and lessen our cultural emphasis on thinness. This is my approach when it comes to body acceptance and mental health. When we blend HAES® concepts with movement that brings joy, we gain a deep understanding of our bodies without emphasizing size or weight. This shifts the focus on what your body is able to do and how you can enjoy living in it rather than hating it. Contact me for questions about this! And check out the [Association for Size Diversity and Health \(ASDAH\)](#) for more information on HAES® concepts.



In the Media

[Motherhood and the Marathon: Alysia Montañó and Christy Turlington Burns Fundraise for Maternal Care Access, by Allison Torres Burtka for Women's Running](#)

[Indigenous Athletes Are Running for Justice](#)

[Road Races Have Begun To Add Nonbinary Divisions. But Is That Enough?](#)

