

RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW

ONLINE EDITOR **RHALOU ALLERHAND**
EMBARKS ON A SPIRITUAL QUEST
TO HELP GAIN SOME SPEED

One of the reasons I've fallen in love with running is because it's the ideal time to think through my problems, while simultaneously getting fit. Thinking a lot comes with the territory; I usually zone out on long runs and get completely lost in my thoughts. The problem is, if your troubles start to outweigh you, running with a heavy burden on your shoulders can be more of a hindrance than a help. During my long weekend runs, I started to find that, instead of easing my worries, I was ruminating obsessively and sometimes came home feeling more wound up than when I left the house!

So, contrary to solving my problems, thinking too much was beginning to slow me down. I realised this was happening when, despite having access to one of the most beautiful green spaces in London, I'd get home from my run and realise I hadn't even noticed the world around me. I was utterly oblivious to my surroundings, barely noticing the park, the trees or the endless sky. I was trapped in my own head and my running was starting to suffer.

PRESENT TENSE

It occurred to me that if I could find a more peaceful state of mind, it would not only ease my day-to-day worries, but might also improve my speed and put me in better stead to run a marathon in April. As luck would have it, the NHS has started an alternative healthcare initiative in East London and I managed

to persuade my doctor to refer me to a mindfulness meditation course.

Although meditation might not be the first thing that springs to mind if you're keen to improve your running speed, the process is surprisingly beneficial. Mindfulness is a type of meditation that essentially involves focusing your mind on the present. To be mindful is to be aware of your thoughts and actions in the present, without judging yourself.

While we wouldn't think twice about tending to a physical injury that might impact on our running or day-to-day activities, many of us rarely spare a thought for the most important muscle in our bodies – our brain. Research suggests that mindfulness meditation improves mood, decreases stress and boosts immune function. By being mindful, you avoid dwelling on negative thoughts about the past or the future – which are essentially beyond your control – and focus instead on the present.

MEDITATION ON THE MOVE

Although the practice of meditation is generally best carried out while stationary, the skills developed can start to spill over into the rest of your life, giving you the tools to cope with all of life's stresses in a calm and rational way, as opposed to ruminating endlessly and getting wound up.

Three weeks into the course and I'm already feeling the benefits. Focusing my senses on the physical world around me really magnifies the reasons why I love to run, and definitely makes me feel lighter and quicker on my feet. It's not just about

fitness – it's also about the pure thrill of racing through the park, enjoying the beautiful scenery, the sound of my pounding feet and the sensation of speeding along with the wind in my hair.

It's too early to tell whether mindfulness meditation will enable me to run a marathon. But so far it has certainly had a positive impact on my enjoyment of running, which is surely half the battle. ■

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