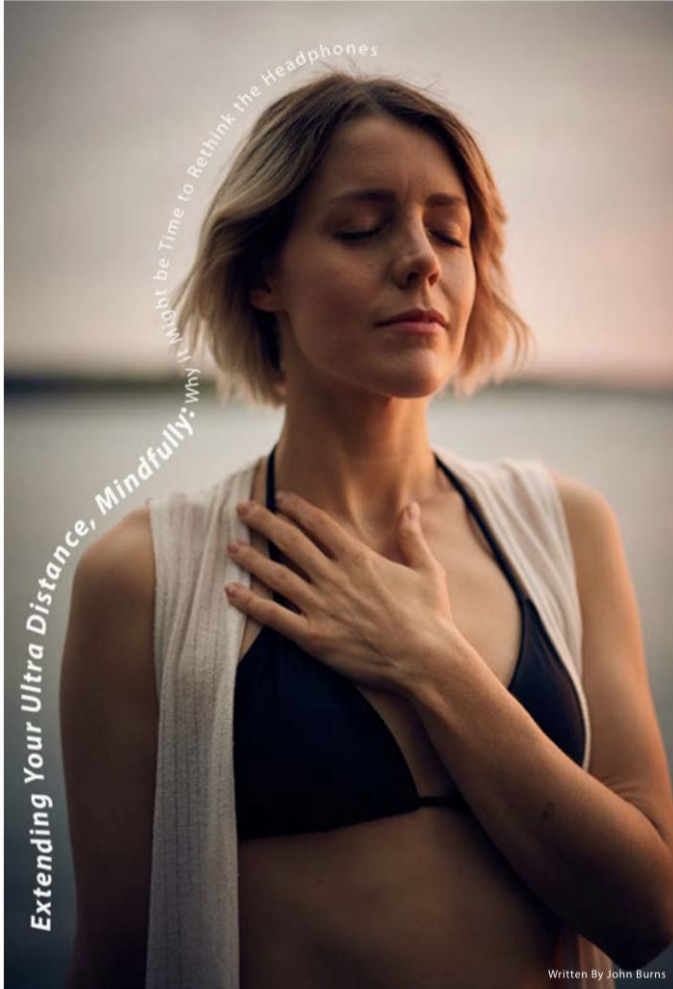


Health



Written By John Burns

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There's something special about cranking up the music and letting your feet do their stuff. The right music enhances your mood, turning a familiar route into a new adventure – a new set of emotions to be explored. Music can guide your tempo, pumping you full of adrenaline and giving you the strength to push that little bit harder for that little bit longer. It's motivating too – your favourite artist drops a new album? Stick those headphones on and get out for a run.

The science backs this up. Music essentially overrides the natural chemical processes in our body, firing up the fight-or-flight mechanism even when neither fight nor flight is required. When stimulated by a particularly resonant track, the brain releases adrenaline and cortisol, flooding the muscles with oxygen and increasing the power in your legs. That sudden feeling of invincibility when the good part of a track kicks in? You're not imagining it – this is your brain giving you a handy boost.

Even mournful, down-tempo tunes can give us a boost. A joint study from Durham University and the University of Jyväskylä found that sad music can provide positive feelings of sorrow – namely 'comforting sorrow' and 'sweet sorrow' according to the study – for many listeners, something that could turn even the most grueling of Tuesday morning winter runs into a profound philosophical experience.

All of this is great for short, powerful sessions, giving you the strength and positivity you need to keep on pushing. It's also highly effective over longer distances, keeping you engaged with your run as the miles tick by.

But what about as the hours tick by? What happens after you've been running for two hours, three hours, five hours, ten hours? Chances are the music is starting to wear a bit thin. Now, you're looking for sustainability in terms of pace and form, rather than short, sharp chemical bursts from deep in your brain.

You might turn to something else. Perhaps an audiobook or a great podcast. A long run might just be the perfect time for making a dent in that work of literature you've had on your mind for some time now. An ultra-distance run provides ample time to make headway on *The Luminaries* or *The Goldfinch*, or one of the other mega-works of our age.

And how about podcasts? How about broadening the mind as you run, learning something, stimulating cognitive processes while we get the miles in – thinking, laughing, agreeing your way towards your weekly mileage targets.

But perhaps this is missing the point. All of these stimuli – music, audiobooks, podcasts, lectures, radio plays, comedy sets – it all boils

down to the same thing. Distraction. We are seeking to distract ourselves from the action of running, from the pain and sometimes – truth be told – drudgery that comes from ultra-distance training. By distracting ourselves in this way, we are leaving ourselves exposed and vulnerable. After all, what happens when the distraction doesn't quite do the job anymore?

You love running, and you wouldn't do it if you didn't. You love the feeling of getting out there, putting miles under your feet, challenging yourself, and then receiving the payoff of success, surprising yourself by going further, going faster, doing more than you ever thought possible.

But this doesn't mean you love every aspect of running. A challenge wouldn't be a challenge if it wasn't difficult. Training would be redundant if there weren't obstacles to overcome. And so a little distraction here and there is very welcome indeed.

It's when distraction becomes a crutch that problems begin to arise. We've all felt the panic of misplaced headphones ahead of a long run, or of a sudden technical failure that cuts off the audio midway through the session. We've all felt the sickness, the feeling of nakedness and vulnerability that comes with this. We've all felt doubt seeping in – what if I can't do this alone? What if I need Donna Tartt or the Kings of Leon to carry me through?

Concepts of mindfulness, of being present in the moment, get a bad press. We might associate these concepts with shortsighted comments about how 'things were so much better in the '40s before everyone had mobile phones' or with #blessed influencers living their best lives on exotic beaches. But let's put all this to one side for a minute. In fact, mindfulness is not just a handy buzzword to drop into conversation with your ultra-running crew, it's a practical necessity for anyone who wants to push the distance in a meaningful way.

Distance running always involves a psychological battle. Run a strong full or half-marathon and there will be moments when you wonder if you can sustain this pace for the whole distance, moments when you wonder if body and mind can handle it. However, run a strong full or half-marathon, and you're going to be finished in a few hours. Win those key psychological skirmishes, and you're well on your way. It's still hard work, but the time parameters are more manageable.

It's a little different in an ultra-marathon. Difficult terrain, masses of ascent and descent, and extreme distances can see runners out on the trail for mind-boggling amounts of time. The internal psychological to-ing and fro-ing is not only magnified – it is extended, stretched out over hour after hour. There's going to come a time when, no matter how well you've physically conditioned yourself,

the tunes, the sparkling prose, the stimulating conversation, are no longer enough. And then, well... then you're on your own.

You can train for this. You can overcome this self-doubt, the sudden black hole of realising you've still got X-amount of miles and an indefinite number of hours left to go. You can become mindful, present in the moment. You can run for running's sake.

This means ditching the headphones. Not permanently, or even completely, but simply getting used to running out there in the world, stimulated only by the action of running, by the sights and sounds all around you, and by your own thoughts.

It can be nerve-wracking to do this. So many of us – myself included – have built up such a dependency on these artificial stimuli that turning our back on them feels scary. The proposition may also be unpleasant – it's fun to listen to music when you run, it's fun to tune into an audiobook as you leg it up and down hills. Why deny yourself this pleasure?

Think of it as conditioning. You're conditioning yourself to enjoy running and to enjoy the action of running. You're also conditioning yourself to enjoy music and other audio the way it was intended, not merely as a distraction but instead as something engaging and exciting. You're conditioning yourself to break free of dependency.

You may decide to take the headphones with you but leave them unplugged for as long as you can. That hit of adrenaline and cortisol is very, very real – the science has told us this – and rationing it out can be highly effective. Something I have done personally is set myself a 'silence target' – a specific mileage I need to hit before I plug in the phones and press play. Knocking off 20 miles on a 30 mile trail run in a state of mindfulness is made all the better by the knowledge that you've got a secret weapon in your back pocket. And the sudden hit of energy and strength when you do finally plug in? Wow. Those final couple of hours become joyous.

Essentially, we're talking about gaining control. If you know you can run – just run – alone with your thoughts, and do just fine, you're going to find it far easier to push yourself as the miles begin to stack up. This is crucial to ultra-running success, regardless of your own level or your personal goals.

But there are other benefits too, beyond performance and tenacity. Seeing an eagle suddenly rise up from the brush and soar on a thermal, do you reckon a moment like this needs a Motown accompaniment? A blood-red sunrise creeping over the far horizon at the end of a nighttime session – enhanced by the words of Hanyu Yanagihara, or not?

And there'll be countless more things out there – less dramatic things you might not

even have noticed. The stillness of a forest trail in the early morning with no one about. The whistle of the wind coming down from the ridge and settling in the trees. These moments can be transcendental – truly life-affirming snapshots of the landscape, made even more beautiful by their fragility and their ephemeral nature. The meditative state of distance running becomes even easier to achieve as you become present – genuinely present – in the moment.

Perhaps this doesn't appeal. Maybe this is all becoming a bit 'pseud's corner'. Well, let's put the brakes on and focus on the practicalities. By training yourself to be present in the moment as you run, you are expanding the possibilities in terms of distance and performance. This alone is good enough reason to give it a try.

Don't go throwing away those headphones just yet. Just consider unplugging them every once in a while, or even leaving them behind when you head out for an hour or two. You might be amazed by what you can do all by yourself, and they'll always be there for you when you want to blast that feel-good playlist.

