

This slightly chubby, cherubic faced thirteen-year-old who wasn't afraid to be seen trying, never considered herself a runner. One of my formative memories from elementary school was the outside track constructed of a few plastic drums in a field. This track haunted me for a long time because running seemed to continuously illuminate my inadequacies. Whether it be for a presidential fitness test or relay racing for a field day, I was walking that track with conviction. My mind was made up early on; I was never going to be a runner. However, after taking on the weight of young adulthood, my mindset shifted. Movement transitioned from a chore that I loathed to a privilege I enjoyed because it helped me reach certain goals. I discovered that I loved dancing and weight lifting and walking, so I performed those activities for a short period each day. Thirty minutes turned into forty-five which stretched into an hour of movement as my endurance strengthened. When I looked in the mirror, that chubby little girl didn't feel so trapped in her own skin. She could achieve whatever she desired, and now she stood face to face with running around that track.

Running is as much about your physical health as it is about mental health, which is where I struggled. I could run short distances, but eventually my lungs felt like they were collapsing and my legs turned to jello and my mind would turn off out of self preservation. Those feelings inhibited me, but consistency aided me in progressing. If I kept running for a half a mile, eventually I could make it to a mile without stopping. Then I made it to two. Then I was running 5ks consistently and could run the last half of a half marathon. Then I was running laps around that elementary school track in my mind. My mindset not only assisted my running, my increase in exercise also benefited my mental health.

Exercise as a whole is therapeutic to mental health. It has been used to treat mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia. A study found that patients with major depressive disorder (MDD) who trained on the treadmill three times a week exhibited effects similar to antidepressants. Even just walking briskly for two and a half hours a week can lower the risk of depression. This effect is due to the increase in brain-derived neurotrophic factors (BDNF) after physical exercise (Koury & Nagy, 2023). BDNF is a protein that encourages the "growth and survival of neurons," in turn, helping with memory and decreasing depression (Koury & Nagy, 2023, p.4). In a study of black female runners, eight out of twelve participants found that running enhanced their "emotional and mental state" (Cameron, 2024, p. 426). Running acted as a stress reliever and aided these participants in making difficult decisions. It "prompted them to take better care of themselves-holistically" (Cameron, 2024, p. 427).

Running can impact multiple facets of your life. It is known as an anchor practice, which is an activity that "prompts additional healthy behaviors" (Cameron, 2024, p. 418). I engaged in healthier eating, drank more water, and increased my stretching after running more frequently. My body doesn't perform as well if I don't hydrate as well or eat a bag of gummy bears before running. However, after my run I can put away more food than my six foot tall baby brother.

Running can also impact your wallet. As a trendy form of exercise, people all over social media, especially on TikTok, are running and posting about the sport. Despite appearances, you don't

have to purchase Lululemon align leggings or HOKAs or a running vest to get into running. You just need a supportive pair of shoes, a nice path to run on, and the willingness to try.

It can be difficult to identify as a runner, especially as a black woman. It is a sport that is notoriously marketed to the white middle and upper classes. Also, being concerned with pacing can lead to a sense of defeat, if you don't run a ten minute mile (Cameron, 2024). Maybe you see a version of yourself that couldn't possibly be a runner. If your body allows it, I encourage everyone to give running a try. It is one of the more accessible forms of exercise, and it can benefit your mental health and your mindset about movement. For most of my life I never considered myself a runner, but that little girl who used to walk the track can now run miles.

References

Cameron, S. J. (2024). "We Out Here": Black Women, Well-Being, and #blackgirlsrun on Instagram. *Journal of Black Studies*, 55(5), 418-436. doi: 10.1177/00219347241244539.

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