

The Running Life: Running Through The Fog

A runner deals with depression

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As featured in the November 2006 issue of Running Times Magazine

O God, O God, how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world! — Hamlet

Leo Tolstoy wrote that all happy families are alike but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. For my family the cause of most of our unhappiness was the direct result of depression. There is a rich and ongoing history of the disease in my family — grandparents, aunts, and siblings, even my father — all wrestled with this dreaded demon. It was our dirty little secret, a secret that was poorly kept and unsuccessfully hidden behind alcohol, anger, and silence. Depression arrived in our house unannounced and unbidden, wreaking havoc and trailing a spectacular swath of destruction. Growing up, I learned to recognize its symptoms in the people I loved, the withdrawal into silence, the half-focused stare at some unseen middle distance, the inability to laugh or even smile and the overwhelming sense of pessimism. I hated the sorrow and the desperation that depression left in its wake. I prayed that I would never fall into its cavernous maw, because I knew how hard it was to find a way out.

In my twenties and thirties I congratulated myself for having avoided the family disease. I had dodged the bullet and was, in spite of personal setbacks and tribulations, the very model of mental health. It seemed that the physical and psychological benefits I derived from running conferred even greater immunity from my familial curse.

It was hardly noticeable at first, just a feeling of unease, and though I should have expected its arrival, I ignored the initial telltale signs. As the weeks passed, the joy seemed to leave my life, escaping like the slow leak of air from a tire. Colors were bleached from my personal landscape, rendering everything around me a muted version of a more vivid time. Holed up in my office with the phone off the hook, I made excuses for not seeing friends. I stopped running with my regular group, preferring to go out in the pre-dawn hours while the rest of the world slept. Even time spent with my children became a chore, something to be endured until I could once again wrap myself in solitude.

People who are depressed are very, very difficult to help. I knew this before I was in the grips of a full-on clinical depression. But by the time it was evident to everyone around me that I was ill, I had lost the ability to recognize my symptoms and to seek help. Comparing depression to a fog, as has been done so often in literature, is a perfect metaphor. It creeps in slowly at first, finding corners and empty spaces to fill. Gradually, almost imperceptibly the fog surrounds you, obscuring what was once clear, draining the vitality and energy from everything around you. When at last the fog fully envelops you, you are trapped, unable to determine where you are, how you got there, and how to get back. To those who know you best you become the "not you," the "zombie you," a simulacrum of your former self.

Depression is tricky; symptoms can vary greatly from person to person. It can make you eat too much or not enough. It can cause you to take to your bed, sleeping long hours into the day or it can rob you of any restful sleep, waking you in the middle of the night and keeping you up. I was of the "can't eat, can't sleep" variety of depressives. My thoughts were scattered and disorganized, keeping me from completing the most basic tasks. Though I am someone who has had a lifetime struggle with weight, I was transformed, almost overnight, into a stick-thin version of myself. At first, I managed to keep running, though the joy it had once brought me was a thing of the past. I ran to get away from people, from obligations, from my life. Eventually, I quit running altogether.

Over time my symptoms became so alarming that my friends and family forced me to get help. I found a sympathetic doctor, a runner herself, who guided me through the minefields of recovery. One of the first things she recognized was that running could play a major role in that process. Because I had an adverse physical reaction to antidepressant medication, my recovery relied on talk therapy and a strict schedule of daily exercise, one that I had to document. Having someone take the wheel of my life, if only for a short time, was my first step on the road back to mental health. And using running as part of the therapeutic process helped me reconnect with the visceral pleasure running brought me before I got sick.

As my recovery progressed and my confidence rallied, I told my doctor that in four months I would run a marathon. The marathons I had run in the past made this goal realistic, if a little ambitious. During that time the regular training helped regulate my faulty brain chemistry and I benefited from the salubrious effects of endorphins, released during long runs. The increased activity helped reduce the levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, in my system. I ate and slept more. I ran my race. I got better.

It has been 10 years since depression changed me forever. I remain free of the grip of the disease, still acutely aware that it is a shadow that will always follow me. Though running has resumed its rightful place in my life, delivering on its promise of gifts both physical and spiritual, I will remain in its debt for helping me remain mentally healthy in this running life.

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