

Mental health Running with stress

What if running is actually adding to your stress levels or fatigue?
Learn about the importance of balancing training stress with life stress

Words Bernadette Dancy

With more and more women reporting that they're feeling stressed and overwhelmed as they try to balance family, children and careers, running has become more popular than ever. After all, it's free, can be done anywhere, anytime and be as fast or slow as we want it to be. There is lots of evidence that running enhances our mood and keeps us fit and healthy – so despite it perhaps starting off being hard and uncomfortable, running quickly becomes one of our most treasured activities of the week.

For stressed, over-worked women, running is a great way to relax, get us outside in nature, meet up with friends for a 'run and chat', and get much needed 'me time' to counter the stress that comes with putting ourselves at the bottom of our to do lists far too often. Running is scientifically proven to cause changes in our brain's neurotransmitters resulting in a dopamine hit, otherwise known as the runner's high, allowing us to enjoy running, feel great (especially after we finish) and coming back for more.

But because stress (ie, the reason many of us run in the first place) can present with a host of symptoms such as exhaustion, sleep disturbance, headaches, anxiety, depression,

inflammation and a weakened immune system, it begs the question: is it a good idea for an exhausted body and mind to have to contend with the training stress we're exposed to when we run?

Stressful research

Research in novice and untrained runners has shown that training stress has the same impact on our body as life stress, meaning the thing we're doing to relieve stress symptoms is simultaneously causing stress at the same time. This happens because in order for our bodies to prepare for 'fight or flight' the sympathetic branch of our nervous system triggers an increase in adrenaline, cortisol and activates stored glucose so our heart, lungs and working muscles are ready to deal with the stressful moment or

demand at hand – be that giving a speech or going on a 10K run.

This all happens below the surface without any awareness on our part, because it's an automatic bodily function (governed by the Autonomic Nervous System). Without it we wouldn't be able to react to the stressor, or run for that matter. Because of this automaticity, when we run for stress relief we're very unaware of the simultaneous physiological stress that is being placed on our body. We're too busy soaking up the dopamine high. This can be a huge problem in women who may be experiencing chronic stress, depression, burnout or excessive fatigue, because the benefits they're getting from running are potentially masking

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"I started running three years ago during a particularly stressful time. Life had thrown several curveballs my way and as a wife, mum of four and part-time teacher, there was little me time. Also, as a person of faith, running outside in peaceful surroundings enabled me to contemplate and process what I was going through. I would always get home feeling so much better. As my times improved, I trained more seriously, entered marathons and improved my diet. For a while I felt great. However, the tipping point came when I began to feel really fatigued

and experienced amenorrhea. Running itself was now causing the stress and at a RunWell workshop I realised I was approaching burnout. I learnt that rest is not a dirty word and in fact is an integral part of training. I was training like an elite but in fact was a normal, working mum juggling life like lots of women do.

Nowadays I'm much kinder to myself; sleep is key and if I need a nap, I'll take one! As a result, my running has also improved. Running has genuinely empowered me and changed my life and best of all, now that I have a better balance, I'm happy."

an underlying increase in stress, that could lead to even more tiredness, exhaustion, illness or injury.

A closer look

But don't worry. Just because running initiates a stress response, it doesn't mean people who are stressed shouldn't run. It just means people who are experiencing persistent, excessive life stress should run in a carefully considered way. Let's take a closer look.

A chronically stressed body is dealing with elevated cortisol, which contributes to fluctuating blood sugars, exhaustion, a suppressed immune system and inflammation. This can lead to irritability, sluggishness and fatigue.

All of this can be disappointing to hear, especially if you started running to improve stress management. You can still run. But you need to reduce cellular and psychological stress your body is exposed to at the same time as running. This can be achieved in two ways: firstly, adapt running/training to suit stress levels; and secondly, implement self-care/lifestyle changes to lower baseline stress.

► Adapt your training to suit your health needs

Stress should be treated with the same respect as other physical illnesses or injuries, by adjusting your training according to the stress symptoms being experienced. Training should be adjusted frequently depending on how you're responding to the additional training stress. This can be achieved by simply adding plenty of rest until you're feeling better. But this can be very subjective and take time, so a more objective way to

monitor your body's stress response is to use the physiological metric, Heart Rate Variability (HRV – can be done using an HRV app). HRV score is a direct indicator of nervous system activity. The lower the score the more likely it is the sympathetic (fight or flight) branch of your nervous system is dominant and your underlying stress is high. If HRV scores are showing a declining pattern over days, weeks or months, it suggests your body is stressed and not responding well to the training programme you're doing. Another way to monitor this could be to simply keep a training diary and give yourself a score out of 10 (with 1 being exhausted and 10 being fully revived), noticing when you're feeling off and adapting accordingly.

Without this knowledge you are at risk of being held hostage to a predetermined running programme that will cause you to run too much or train too hard when your body's stress levels are high and you need to rest. This can be the case at certain times of the month in women. Research just published in the *Journal of Psychophysiology* has shown women can experience changes to HRV in relation to their menstrual cycle with a raised stress response (thus lower HRV scores) between ovulation and the onset of bleeding (luteal phase). Therefore it's advisable to monitor HRV alongside your menstrual cycle so training can be adjusted to physiological stress that happens during the luteal phase.

► Self-care/lifestyle changes

In order to lower physiological stress, it's really important that we seriously consider improving our lifestyle too.

Self-care can really be anything you want it to be, from having a massage to going out and partying with friends. But for self-care to be truly effective as a stress buster, it should promote parasympathetic nervous system activity (ie, the opposite to sympathetic nervous system activity), because this induces the calming relaxed sensation along with lowered heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and stress hormones in the blood (ie, adrenalin and cortisol).

You would be doing your stress levels a huge favour if you regularly engaged in activities that promote this, such as yoga, Pilates, meditation, mindfulness, singing, being creative/artistic, being in nature, spending quality time with friends and family. In fact, light to moderate physical activity, like going for a walk in your lunch break or in the evening can be stress busting too.

Practising self-care like this also gives you an alternative means of stress management should you ever experience illness, injury or a time when you can't run. This is great news and often a relief to runners who fear that if they don't run, they will be more depressed, anxious or stressed.

Of course, what we don't want is self-care to become another thing on your to-do list, especially when time is already precious. Therefore, it's probably most effective to choose activities you can incorporate into your daily routine and that don't take much time. You really don't need to spend a lot of time practising self-care. It's more important that you make it a habit you do consistently over time.

Self-care can be a simple massage or partying with friends. But to be an effective stress buster, it needs to promote your parasympathetic nervous-system

TURN OVER TO DISCOVER SEVEN MORE WAYS TO DEAL WITH STRESS

Stress busters

Seven ways to manage lifestyle stress with running stress and find the perfect balance

1 Manage expectations

You're not a professional athlete whose job is to train and run. You may believe you 'have to run' to manage your stress, but is that really true? A study in the *Journal of Sport Science and Medicine* has shown that as little as 30 minutes low-intensity physical activity three times a week is enough to manage and treat burnout and stress.

2 Get a coach

Not everyone needs a running coach. But if you're chronically

stressed with physical symptoms (the main one being fatigue), it's almost imperative you get yourself a coach who can guide you to train more appropriately for your current health.

3 Monitor HRV and menstruation

There are various apps on the market that can help with this, but two of the market leaders are HRV4Training and FitrWoman. Both of these apps are evidence-based with several academic papers published using them for research.



4 Include restorative movement

Physical activity, such as walking, light swimming and yoga, can be beneficial for stress as it facilitates the nervous system being in parasympathetic mode (ie, rested state with low cortisol). This is imperative to help lower your baseline stress levels.

5 Run mindfully

Pay attention to your body and how it feels on a run. If a pace you normally find easy suddenly feels hard, it might mean you need to take a rest. Don't be held hostage to predetermined splits or mileage. If you're not feeling it, change it.

6 Eat well

You must avoid under eating, especially when it comes to

carbs. Running well requires you to fuel (and refuel) your body. A common mistake runners make when they start off is to eat less in order to lose weight. This can be counterproductive, because you won't have the energy you need to run hard, especially in higher intensity sessions. It's much healthier to eat well and create an energy deficit via the exercise you are doing.

7 Rest and recover

Take a day off. Some people can run every day, but if you're experiencing stress it isn't a great idea. Resting means doing nothing. It doesn't mean going for a swim or doing a spin class instead. In order for your body to adapt from the training you're doing, it needs time to rebuild and recover anyway. Rest is making you stronger and fitter. 🧘



Further information

Bernadette Dancy (bernadettedancy.co.uk) is a Health and Exercise Coach specialising in helping people experiencing chronic stress make lifestyle changes for stress management. Bernadette is also a co-founder of RunWell Workshops, which are multi-disciplinary workshops designed for coaches and endurance athletes to learn how to balance

life stress with training stress. For more information about HRV monitoring visit hrv4training.com. For information on training stress and the menstrual cycle check out hrv4training.com/blog/heart-rate-variability-hrv-and-the-menstrual-cycle. For information about how to train according to your menstrual cycle go to fitrwoman.com.