

Recreational Running for Physical and Mental Health

- Up and Running was set up in February 2010 by Harriet Heal (clinical psychologist) and Shona Campbell (running coach)
- We have delivered the course 20 times, to an average of 6 to 8 participants each time
- On three occasions over those years, a piece was published about the group in SDC's In Shape magazine, and on 2 out of 3 occasions the number of attendees increased significantly (to 15, 8 and 13)
- Our biggest problem is reaching the people we would like to help, so we are constantly looking for ways to promote the group and encourage people to try it.

What is Up and Running?

Originally set up with support from SDC, since autumn 2015 it has been run by the two facilitators with no outside support or funding. Our only source of income is the £2 per week we charge to attend (which we waive if participants are unable to pay), and we use that to pay for flyers, advertising etc.

Our group is a 10 week beginners' running course (but not a standard 'Couch to 5k' programme), designed for women who have issues with mental wellbeing and who are not currently runners but would like to learn. It is open to all women over 18 who have experienced mental health issues.

The programme starts with brisk walking and a small amount of jogging, and the duration of the jogging then builds up gently over 10 weeks in line with the facilitators' assessment of what the participants are able to cope with both physically and mentally.

At the end of the course we hold a run for all current and former attendees, so that the current group can chat to people who have carried on running after the course and benefit from their experience of what worked for them and what didn't. It also allows us to maintain ongoing contact with former participants if they would like that.

Up and Running is not a therapy group – it is an exercise and mutual support group facilitated by a psychologist and a running coach, and that means that participants can talk about their difficulties within the group if they wish, but there is no obligation to do so.

The two key elements to the group are the exercise and the social support provided by the group. Both elements are individually recognised to be helpful, and we believe bringing them together with a third element – being outdoors in green space – gives a potentially powerful combination which helps to make exercise more sustainable in the long term.

What about Physical Health?

I also coach a recreational running group open to all women (www.shonasrunners.co.uk), specialising in complete beginner and intermediate runners. Although it doesn't have the particular mental health focus of Up and Running, we do discuss mental wellbeing (some of the members are people who previously ran with Up and Running) as there is clearly an interplay between physical and mental health. My focus is on small, supportive groups where women can feel nurtured and encouraged.

My experience of coaching women over the last 10 years is that the physical challenge of running can be very beneficial for self-esteem, confidence, and mood. Many runners tell me they find it very

helpful in dealing with stress. There is a lot of research evidence about the physical benefits of running too, and I would be very keen to work with agencies to promote the message that recreational, social running can be immensely beneficial to your mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

Just a little more detail as an example of the sorts of benefits of running for physical health, though this is by no means an exhaustive list:

It can improve your blood pressure.

Runners are less likely to get blood clots and varicose veins.

It makes your bones stronger and denser.

Runners suffer fewer disabilities in later life

Running delays age-related disability by up to two decades

Runners are seven times LESS likely to require knee replacement

Runners suffer fewer cancers and neurological problems

Runners are half as likely as non-runners to die early.

Runners are up to 36% less likely to develop dementia

Postscript – some evidential detail in case it may be of interest

It is a popular belief that running is bad for the knees, but in fact our joints are highly tolerant of running, and for most people the health benefits of running far outweigh any potential risks. Weight-bearing exercise such as running helps prevent osteoporosis and can be positively beneficial for the knees because it strengthens the muscles around the joint and makes the tendons and ligaments more resilient to stress, making them less likely to tear or sprain. Indeed various studies have indicated that running can actually increase the volume of cartilage and decrease cartilage defects in the knee, which is important in preventing osteoarthritis - one large study of older runners found a lower occurrence of knee replacements compared with a non-running peer group (Medical studies in this area www.npr.org/assets/news/2011/03/28/effect-of-physical-activity-on-knees.pdf and <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2556152>).

In addition, regular running can slow the effects of ageing, according to a study from the Stanford University School of Medicine that has tracked 500 older runners (aged over 50) for more than 20 years. Elderly runners have fewer disabilities, a longer span of active life and are half as likely as ageing non-runners to die early deaths, the research found. The senior author of the study said "The study has a very pro-exercise message. If you had to pick one thing to make people healthier as they age, it would be aerobic exercise." The subjects, now in their 70s and 80s, have answered yearly questionnaires about their ability to perform everyday activities such as walking, dressing and grooming, getting out of a chair and gripping objects. The researchers have used national death records to learn which participants died, and why. Nineteen years into the study, 34 per cent of the non-runners had died, compared to only 15 per cent of the runners.

For runners the onset of disability started 16 years later than non-runners. Not only did running delay disability, but the gap between runners' and non-runners' abilities got bigger with time. The senior author of the study said "We did not expect this. The health benefits of exercise are greater than we thought". In the runners in this study, not surprisingly, running has reduced deaths from cardiovascular disease. However, it has also been associated with fewer early deaths from cancer, neurological disease, infections and other causes.

And finally, researchers examined the relationship between cardiovascular fitness and loss of brain function, using data from The Cooper Center Longitudinal Study, a database of patient visits to the Cooper Clinic in Dallas, Texas, which has been previously used to link greater fitness to longer life-expectancy and a lower risk of stroke, diabetes and other diseases. Researchers in the new study compared the midlife fitness levels of 19,458 generally healthy people to the number of those people who were diagnosed 19 to 30 years later with dementia. Fitness levels were measured by a treadmill test. Compared to the least fit people, those with the highest level of conditioning had a 36 per cent lower risk of developing any form of dementia.

