

By the time I passed the 30-mile mark, my eyelids were caked in salt, blood was oozing down my leg, and I was running on broken blisters, headed toward delirium. After seven humiliating trips over tree roots, and more than five hours of battling back doubt and tears, I was approaching the finish of my first ultramarathon. So when I saw a man on the path who was all grin and high-tech gear, I proudly shared the news, expecting a high-five or a “way-to-go!” But as I passed, he shook his head, threw off a laugh, and hollered after me, “You’re crazy!”

More often than not, those are the first two words that come out of people’s mouths when they discover that you run long distances. People react as if you’ve come clean about some despicable habit—like nose picking—that’s so universally regarded as socially unacceptable that they figure it’s o.k. to berate you about it. They shake their heads. They wince and wag their fingers. They mutter something about obsessive-compulsive behavior, and insist “that’s crazeee.” They demand, “Why? Why would you do such a thing?”

I’ve been fielding these questions since I entered my first marathon, in New York City in 1997. My family and friends couldn’t understand what would possess me—absent of Olympic hopes, the promise of fame, or even the prospect of winning—to voluntarily put myself through such pain.

I can hardly blame them. After all, I’ve always been some version of the chubby, clutzy, bi-focaled kid whose athletic career spanned a single soccer season at the Jewish Community Center and was punctuated by a single point I scored—dramatically and tragically—into the opposing team’s goal.

But the deafening roar of “tsk, tsk” have persisted, even as I’ve run in nine marathons injury-free, and qualified five times for the Boston Marathon. One day not too long ago, I was returning to my desk from a lunchtime run, revived and relieved that I’d been able to grab an hour of fresh air in a day otherwise spent in traffic and office space. When a co-worker found out where I’d been, she responded in earsplitting horror: “You went for a run? Oh my Gawd! You’re obsessed, aren’t you?” I’ve heard comments such as these in some of the most unexpected places: in doctor’s offices, health clubs, and even on the sidelines of race courses.

More than once, I’ve expended precious energy to urge on the silent, gawking marathon spectators, shaking their heads at the spectacle before them, “Cheer for us,” (gasp) please!” So one of the most important strides I’ve made has been to tune out the discouraging words. Because regardless of the race—whether it’s a five-km or a 100-mile—the toughest distance to cover is the first step. The distance between pillow and pavement, between bedroom slippers and running shoes, is epic. The logistical gymnastics alone are daunting: juggling running with piles of dirty dishes, loads of laundry, school plays, commutes, friendships, quality time with spouses, and unreturned phone calls to Mom and in-laws.

But most of all, there is fear: big, black holes of it. Fear that passers-by will call you fat, or old, or hopeless, or road kill. Fear that you’ll accidentally tie your shoelaces together and trip and fall on your face, that you’ll be chased by a dog, or drop from a heart attack, and an ambulance will have to come and retrieve your spandex-covered body from the sidewalk, and the headline on the suburban newspaper will read “Woman, 31,

Overestimates Her Fitness Level on a Jog Around the Block.”

So why, why, why, why would anyone run an ultramarathon? Everyone has their reasons. Out on the road, I’ve founded the much needed clarity and solitude I need to take the edge off of any given mood. Beyond that, I’ve found that it’s nice to have one little corner of the day where there’s a tidy little equation between the amount of effort I make and the territory I cover.

But most of all, running reminds me of the possibility of transformation in a life in which it’s way too easy to be overwhelmed by the momentum of things that can’t or won’t be controlled. Every race feels like a victory lap, celebrating the tiny advances I’ve been able to make through hard work and commitment to that first step, morning after morning, month after month.

So that’s why, as long as my legs are willing, my big toes will be covered in gun-metal-colored blisters, Epsom salts will be a permanent fixture on my grocery lists, and the turning of winter into spring and summer into fall will always mean that the hard work of training is drawing to close, and the reward, the starting line, is just ahead. Crazy? Maybe.

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