

TRAIL RUNNING IS YOUR SUPERPOWER!

UNCOVER THE AMAZING MOOD & BRAIN

BOOSTING EFFECTS OF RUNNING OFF-ROAD



Words Stuart Haw

Can just 20 minutes of running boost your mood and your brain power? You bet it can! And we're not just saying that because we like nothing better than to head off-road for an hour or so. In fact, Researchers at King's College London teamed up with shoe brand Asics to answer this question and have come up with some pretty sensational findings. The research team, led by Dr Brendon Stubbs, explored the relationship between running and brain power and mental health, by testing participants in a natural environment. By using EEG technology (an electroencephalogram, or EEG, recording of brain activity), the researchers took five elite athletes and seven everyday runners out of the lab and recorded the impact that running for 20 minutes had on their cognitive and emotional function.

POW!

This research shows that with just 20 minutes of running you can have meaningful improvements in memory and in cognitive function. The team proved that, through running, you can reduce people's impulsivity and improve their relaxation, reduce frustration and build up stress resilience.

Dr Brendon Stubbs says, "It is impossible to overstate just how significant the impact sport and exercise have on our mind. It's absolutely vital that people regularly move their body to experience those all-important cognitive and emotional benefits for themselves. Never has there been a more important time to become active and experience the mental health benefits sport and movement bring."

"What is really exciting is that we have shown that it is possible to take research outside the lab and measure real-world changes in people's brain

before and after they have exercised and engaged in physical activity. The next stage for this is to replicate this study with a larger sample of people so we can further validate and demonstrate the cognitive and emotional uplift across different samples of people, and to also include people who are not used to running, to see if there are greater benefits for them. Furthermore, there may be certain times of day or certain forms of running which are beneficial for you as an individual, so personalised exercise, such as trail running, to help across those mental well-being issues could be explored for particular demographics."

SHAZZAM!

It's particularly exciting research given the lockdown drama we've all endured. Gary Raucher at Asics said, "We know Covid has put even more pressure on our wellbeing. We also know and believe that sport and movement can lift spirits. For us, 2021 is about unlocking the unique power of sport to uplift our minds. That starts with encouraging

people everywhere to move with us at sunrise (see below, right) as we commit to our philosophy of 'sound mind, sound body.'"

The cold hard facts are super. The evidence from the findings showed that, for all athletes, improvements in emotional and cognitive functioning

were objectively noticeable. Additionally, for everyday athletes (those doing 150 minutes of exercise per week) 20 minutes of running improved stress resilience by 28%, and how they handle frustration also improved by over 100% compared to when not running. Furthermore, when it came to brain pathways associated with cognitive performance, the everyday athlete again demonstrated a significant uplift after 20 minutes of running. This included up to a 26% increase in brain processing speed, up to a 21% improvement in memory, and as much as a 58% reduction in levels of cognitive stress.

YOU CAN GET INVOLVED TOO

Take a selfie of your sunrise run and for every #SunriseMind selfie shared, Asics will make a donation to mental health charity Mind to fund research into mental health in sport, and fund support services for people experiencing mental health problems.

■ Get up, get out and move at sunrise by going for a run, walk, or taking part in any kind of sport or activity

■ Take your sunrise selfie. Upload to Instagram, Facebook or Twitter hashtagged #SunriseMind
More info: asics.com

→ TURN THE PAGE FOR MORE WAYS RUNNING CAN HELP

IF YOU CAN RUN, YOU CAN CONQUER ANYTHING

RUNNING IS AEROBIC ECSTASY...

Words Christopher Hart

And you learn that by... running. Run outdoors. Run fast. Run free. Run through forests, or in the mountains, or over the nomad grasslands. Treadmills are for bored gerbils, chubby captive hamsters. Roads and pavements and sidewalks are the leaden asphalt pathways of the devil.

Maybe I'm exaggerating? But wherever human beings anywhere, whether in England or China or Peru, create an idealised landscape just for pleasure, they don't lay down concrete and tarmac. They create a park: a wide spacious grassland dotted with handsome trees. Look at Central Park or Hyde Park: What are they but New York's or London's Serengeti? Our

ancestral home, that red African soil from which we first sprouted. Unhappily transplanted to modern megacities, we create parklands to a counter an ancient homesickness, a longing we no longer understand.

The same with running. Here I am again, padding over these green Wessex downs, bare to the waist in 8°C, skin tingling pink, panting palaeo substitute, primal hunter gatherer, hunting not food but freedom, gathering rapture – or sometimes, after some sprints, just breathless red-faced doubled-up gasping laughter.

Running is like those bogus pills that quacks hawked in Victorian times – “Dr Coulston's Sovereign Remedy for irritability of the digestive system, gout, dropsy, quinsy, sciatica, toothache, housemaid's knee, and general disorders pertaining to the female sex” – except it's not bogus. Running truly is the king of cure-alls and sovereign of panaceas, the fleet-footed doom of megriums and mopings, the

ruthless destroyer of blue moods and melancholies. Ditch those prison-pills for free aerobic ecstasy.

Running is cardio crack, mother nature's oxygen therapy, a pure intoxication of the blood, the obsessive's drug of choice that costs nothing but your time and does nothing but good. It reminds you – no, it etches and burns into your brain and your heart, in capital letters haemoglobin-red – of the astonishing daily miracle of your very existence on this Earth. The only planet in all of the universe's 100 billion x 100 billion planets, maybe, where any one living, breathing, joyous thing can look on other living things, and feel their hearts almost bursting with the love of it all as they run by.

Padding patiently through the world, a hundred thousand years of nameless ancestors running behind me, or ahead of me perhaps. No more perfectly evolved creature on earth for running like this, mile after steady mile over every landscape, over the green misty hills, stile hopping, stream jumping,

through the rustling woods with the brazen beech leaves thick on the ground, crunching the spiky mast beneath my shoes, ducking under low branches, twisting past the holly bushes, brushing the elephant skin of the beech trees, those spare grey columns of their woodland cathedral.

And then a hare starts forward from its form beside a tree! Hares are supposed to rest up in grass or in the stubble fields, high up on the downs. But a hare takes its rest where it feels like I guess, amber-eyed beauty not ours to order or bid. That's why we love them. A hare's no tame and treadmill hamster.

Brother hare erupts from virtually under my feet, peeved at being driven from his warm patch, instantly up to 40mph, and then stops again only 20 yards off, twitching, considering and, deciding I'm mostly harmless, lopes leisurely away.

A circling buzzard's lonesome cry high above, and then a gang of deer, too, trotting across my path and then doubling back behind me in the fading winterlight. Gathering mist and a rising moon in the east – and no headtorch! No compass! No map! Bare as a hare, as burdened with gear as a deer. Dampening hot-cold skin, pad pad pad, systematic systolic thump thump thump, pumping me back home.

A mad thing to do, of course, a crazy thing, going off like that, miles from anywhere – in shorts! – in midwinter! Running nowhere, daydreaming about deer and hares and stuff. What a loon. What a barmpot. What a useless member of society.

So says the plump and sober citizen, pursemouthed with dismal disapproval.

Quite right, of course. In our advanced and enlightened times, the sane and responsible person should be safely at home watching TV, or shopping online, or fretting about the number of likes on their Twitter feed. Not running around in the woods or over the hills as if none of that other stuff mattered. Getting healthier and stronger, more resilient, immuno-boosted, and intensely careless about their social media profile.

Meanwhile the trees are talking to each other, feeding and nurturing each other through the vast mycelial networks beneath the soil, the tiny teeming underground capillaries of billions of fungal hyphae. The trees know I'm here, too, running over their roots. Plants can feel and hear, we now know, and emit ultra-sounds when they're cut.

Experts used to pontificate that believing everything is mysteriously connected, often in ways hidden from us, was a sign of mental illness. Now it's called ecology. But long ago, our ancestors knew it, too. They also knew that if living things become disconnected, they die.

If we lived once again with as much wisdom as the towering trees, we would be growing our mycelial networks, mending our fraying connections.

So switch off your screen and come out and run with me, my brother, my sister, greyfaced and sad, swap your blubbery blues for some rubbery shoes and come running, running, under the sun, under the blue sky forever...

TOP TIPS

SIMPLE STEPS TO SALVE THE SOUL



Dr Brendon Stubbs has been working in mental health and mental wellbeing for 18 years and has been researching the subjects for well over a decade. He

is also a clinician who helps people with mental health conditions to become active.

His research covers two overarching areas. The first is how the mind and body are connected, so he is working with Asics, looking at that relationship between having a sound mind and a sound body. But also he researches how they can be *disconnected* and what we can do to reconnect them. The other area of his research is lifestyle interventions and looking at how, through movement and through running, we can promote better physical and mental health and treatment for a range of different mental health conditions. He has published over 550 academic papers, is one of the highest cited researchers in the field of mental health and also a rare example of someone who's a physical activity expert in this field. So what does Dr Stubbs suggest?

"There is emerging data that running outdoors in green spaces can have a cognitive impact on mental health. And the same is true with running in blue spaces – that is, running near water. So, my tip for trail runners would be to carry on running as you are but be mindful when you are running, because we know that this can improve both your emotional and your cognitive health."

In brief, follow his advice on how to boost your mental health and you might find it's even more achievable than you might have imagined to ease your mind.

KERPOW!

Dr Brendon's top tips:

- Getting out in green spaces when running can have positive emotional and cognitive uplifts.
- Running around water can also improve your mental wellbeing.
- Be mindful when running. Focus on your breathing and be aware of your environment.
- Most importantly, keep doing what you are doing, and enjoy it!



YOUR PERSONAL COACH

Just go with the flow and have fun

We used to think it was by chance that our college coach insisted we ran all of our pre-sunrise morning miles on the rolling dirt roads that surrounded campus. But now, in hindsight, I suspect he knew something we teenagers didn't – fabulous scenery and peace and quiet are good for you!

NO WATCH

He had a few rules as well – the most important of which was 'no watch'. Never time that six-miler, indeed never even measure it. If it feels good, well then it is good

for you. All he wanted was that we got out and enjoyed ourselves. It doesn't sound quite right given we were out there to perform on race day, but we always came up trumps on the big day.

VARY THE PACE

Of course, on occasion it does pay to hit the gas. So we'd often run an out-and-back course, accelerating hard after the turn around. There's something rewarding about cruising out without a care, then racing back as fast as you can. Trust me, it's a fun workout.

GO GREEN

THE HEALING POWER OF NATURE



Dr Emma Short is a pathologist, trail runner and 'forest bathing' advocate...

"As trail runners, we already know the tremendous physical benefits that exercising in nature brings. In addition

to these, spending time amongst trees has its own independent and positive impacts upon our health and wellbeing. Forest bathing, or Shinrin Yoku, simply describes being in nature and connecting with it using all of our senses. Many people experience a feeling of calm or rejuvenation after taking time out in the wild. These beneficial effects are backed up by scientific research.

"Studies have shown that, in a forest environment, individuals can experience a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure, improved mental wellbeing and reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety. Spending time in green areas can reduce the perception of pain and is associated with lower physiological indicators of stress, such as cortisol levels. It has also been shown to enhance NK cell activity. NK cells are part of the immune system and have roles in defending the body against viruses and in helping it to kill tumour cells.

"The practice of Shinrin Yoku is already very popular in Japan and it is currently gaining many followers in the UK. It is easy, free and can be done by anyone, wherever there are trees."

- Find somewhere quiet without too many people present.
- Slow down. Allow yourself to travel through a forest without haste, so you really have the time to appreciate what is around you.
- Be mindful. Mindfulness describes being present in the here and now, and focusing your attention on the current moment. As you walk through the forest, allow your consciousness to pause on what you experience – the colours, smells, sounds and sensations you encounter.
- Pause. Take the opportunity to stop and allow yourself to focus on one sense in greater detail. Really take note of nature – the sound of a stream, the details in a leaf or the feel of tree bark.
- You may want to have your phone on you in case of any emergencies, but try and keep it turned off and out of sight so you're not distracted by its digital power. Don't use a camera to take pictures, allow your eyes and mind to be your tool.



BOOST YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Words Gemma Naylor

Good mental health, defined by the World Health Organization, is "a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". Many sources define it as our emotional wellbeing. One thing's for sure, it's something we are all aware of on a daily basis. More importantly it's refreshing that mental health is finally spoken about in the media. We now recognise the ways in which it has a direct effect on our physical health and its powerful influence over general wellbeing. But, to educate people on how to care for their mental health and for them to feel comfortable seeking support, we must remove the stigma attached to speaking about it. We wouldn't think twice about seeking professional advice about a back problem or other physical

pain and the same should be true for when we experience prolonged periods of uncomfortable emotions such as deep sadness or anxiety.

Fortunately, there are many positive actions you can take to support your mental health and as a trail runner you will be pleased to hear that you are already doing many of them.

EXERCISE

As a runner, I'm sure you have first-hand experience of the benefits running has on your mood. It has been shown to reduce stress and increase self-esteem – an essential contributor to positive mental health. And exercise is a wonderful tool for helping us believe in our abilities. This confidence transfers into other areas of our lives and makes us feel better equipped to deal with life's difficulties.

EAT WELL

Katie Powell, Registered dietitian from kp-nutrition.com shares her

recommendations based on current research in ways to improve your mood through diet and nutrition. "Follow a healthy balanced diet such as the Mediterranean diet, which is based on eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, nuts, beans and pulses, grains, fish and unsaturated fats such as olive oil. Eat regular meals which include a source of carbohydrate to help maintain your blood sugar levels and drink plenty of fluid – ideally somewhere between six and eight glasses a day."

SLEEP

Sleep is vital for our mental and physical health. If you are experiencing a period of less than positive mental health then it's also common for your sleeping patterns to become disturbed. Allow yourself time to relax before you turn in for the night and try to avoid screens and digital devices an hour before bedtime. Try setting a sleep routine and sticking to it, even if you are having trouble sleeping use that time to rest and relax so your body has a chance to recover for the following day.

KEEP LEARNING

Whether it's trying out a new recipe or taking up a hobby, learning a new skill helps to keep our minds alert. Our minds are always hungry for new stimulation, so feed it with the challenge of learning something new so you can experience a powerful boost to your self-esteem.

CONNECTION

Human beings crave a sense of belonging and feeling connected to others. Whilst social media may be a wonderful tool for connecting people, nothing beats in-person relationships. Find people with similar interests and passions to yourself and experience how feeling part of a community improves your sense of identity.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness simply means "present moment awareness". We often experience uncomfortable emotions when we are worrying about the future or replaying our past. By bringing your mind back to the present moment mindfulness helps alleviate symptoms such as anxiety and depression frequently caused by emotions associated to the past and concerns about the future.

NATURE

One of the best mindfulness techniques is to spend time in nature and to really take notice of its beauty. Time outdoors in the open air also helps our bodies to fill up with fresh air which helps to boost our mood and revitalize our bodies.

LOWER STRESS

Staying in a prolonged period of our bodies natural response to stress,

commonly known as "fight or flight mode" can play havoc with our mental health. The body produces a stress response whenever the mind perceives the body to be in danger so it's crucial that we find ways to relax our minds in an environment where we feel safe and secure. Effective relaxation methods include meditation, Thai chi, massage or simply a bubble bath with some scented candles. Find what works for you and don't feel any guilt for taking some time to relax every single day.

THE MEDIA

What we read, see and hear has a profound effect on our mental health. Take the time to identify if your current choices of entertainment are serving you in a positive way. Notice if you feel bad after watching a specific programme or after looking at someone's social media feed. Remember that it's within your power to decide which media to pay attention to and what to ignore. If you find something is triggering and sending your mind into a negative mental spiral it might serve you well to avoid that influence.

COMMUNITY

One of the most powerful actions you can take to improve your sense of purpose is to serve other people. Giving back to your community and helping other people will help you feel of value and proud of who you are – important qualities for positive mental health. **TR**