

Running Away From Home

How clearing your head by taking a quick run makes you a better mom.

Just when I think I'm getting the hang of this balancing work and baby thing, my world turns crazy and I feel like the scary-looking guy in the Edvard Munch painting "The Scream." I've discovered that sometimes the only thing that can make it better is a run.

First, I should say that all in all, I have a pretty good work/life balance situation. When Max was two months old, my husband, Allen, quit his job to be a stay-at-home-day and I continued to work full-time from home as a freelance writer (This had been our plan all along.) The same things that make this a great plan also make it challenging. Top on the list of challenges lately has been finding time to run. Or I should say, finding time to run without feeling guilty that I'm either dipping into my "work" time, or dipping into my husband's "baby free" time. Somehow, running has become the no-man's-land of time. I can't always figure out where to put it on the schedule—and the busier I am, the more I need those miles to myself. In fact, one thing is clear: when I don't run, we all suffer.

This past week was a prime example. My magazine work took me out of town (about 4 hours away) for three days. Since I'm still nursing, it made sense for Allen and Max to come with me. After a monumental amount of planning and packing, we were on our way. It was a successful trip, but exhausting for all of us: my husband spent too much time cooped up in a hotel room with the baby, and after three 10-hour days, all I wanted to do was chill for a while.

But once back at home at my desk Friday morning, I was faced with a frenzy of deadlines. Editors needed things from me; Allen was cranky; the baby was cranky, and the coming weekend—normally the respite in the storm—was jammed packed. There was only one way to deal with the mounting anxiety, guilt, and resentment: I had to take a run, and I had to do it NOW. Of course, taking time to do something for myself when I'd barely seen my baby for the past three days felt wrong. But I set the guilt aside and went anyway.

I admit, that first mile was filled with self-pity. But I just let it drain out of me. I used the second mile to deal with my anxiety, picking up my pace a little to let those endorphins do their thing. By the third mile, I let go. Like one big whoosh. I thought of my baby giggling when his daddy tickled him, of how much I loved that first toothless smile of the day (even when it came too early), and of how fortunate I was to have this opportunity to both work and spend time with my son.

By the last mile, I was sprinting toward home. I couldn't wait to get back to it all.

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A Run To Remember

My best running moment as a mom.

I've had a lot of good running moments since having my son, Max, almost a year and a half ago. The first time I ran after I gave birth (and realized that all wasn't lost!) was pretty important. Getting a PR on a 5K just a few months ago was one of my prouder moments. And there have been tons of wonderful little moments—things that happened outside of running, but are only made possible by the fact that I run. Like when my husband and I took Max to the big playfield near our house and let him run around like a crazy little monster. I had so much fun chasing him around trees, letting him chase me, and seeing him giggle as he watched my husband and I chase each other. If I wasn't a runner, I probably wouldn't have the fitness to keep up with him, we'd all just be camped out on the couch.

But thinking back, my best moment came recently—at the end of an 18-mile solitary run in preparation for the Philadelphia marathon. This isn't the kind of run I particularly like to do (who really *likes* to do 18 miles though?) and certainly not the kind of run I like to do alone. But my training partner (my sister) needed to baby her knees before the marathon, so I either had to skip the run, or just grit it and head out alone. I made a special 3-hour playlist for my iPod, packed up my water bottle and my Gu, and drove to the trail a few miles away. I took a deep breath, and just started the darn thing.

It was a great run—an amazing run, really. I did it faster, stronger, and better than any other long training run, including the ones I did when I was younger. Finishing up the last few miles, I felt so at peace with myself. It wasn't just that physically, I felt stronger than I ever thought I could feel at 35, it was that I was in such a better place mentally. I had a million (legit and invented) excuses for not doing this particular run (I'll be lonely; my hips hurt; the baby needs me; my husband needs me; the cat needs me), but I dug down and did it anyway. In those last few miles, I thought about the fact that one of my biggest fears about having kids was that I would wind up stagnate, with no sense of myself or my goals. But after cranking out those 18 miles, I realized all of the sudden that I wasn't going to let myself go. Probably ever. This washed over me like this huge relief: I can still do this. I'm not finished. The baby who I love so fiercely doesn't define every aspect of me.

At the same time, I got a sudden warm feeling as I thought about my husband and baby waiting for me at home. I had this wonderful rich, blessed life. Maybe it was the endorphins, or glycogen depletion, or just plain fatigue, but it was just such a perfect moment of complete happiness and fulfillment.

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Beginning Again

After I had a baby, I was reminded of how it felt when I first started running.

My recollection of my first “by choice” run (as opposed to the one-mile timed runs you have to do in school) is that I was taking a walk one evening in the summer of 1995 in an attempt to lose a little weight. It suddenly occurred to me that instead of walking, I could probably burn more calories in a shorter amount of time by running. I think I only made it about a half-mile before my legs and my lungs couldn’t take anymore. Building mileage and feeling comfortable running was a slow process for me—in part because I kept telling myself that I wasn’t *really* a runner. The first time I ran 5 miles (about 6 months after I started), I was shocked that I could actually *do* that.

So when I stopped running at 6 months pregnant, I knew that getting started again after the baby was born wouldn’t be easy. Since I started running that fateful night 14 years ago, I’d never gone more than about a week without running. What would *five whole months* do to me?

In many ways, it WAS like starting over! I’ve already written how hard that first postpartum run was. I had to refigure out my gait and remember all over again how to breathe. However, this time around, I had something really key on my side: I believed that I *was* a runner, and I didn’t have the doubts and insecurities that often go along with being a beginner. My body may have felt like a beginner, but my brain didn’t. So I did things like tapping into those memories of myself cruising along at a comfortable pace and crossing the finish line at the marathon. In fact, every time I felt like quitting, I just conjured up one of my good running memories (like the first time I ran 10 miles, the first time I did a sub 26-minute 5k, or running through Hyde Park in London or along the lake in Chicago). I knew if I could do it in my brain, my body would follow—and sure enough, the muscle memory started to come back within a few weeks.

Those first postpartum runs will mess with your head if you let them. You have to really differentiate being *slow* from being *weak*. I was running slow, but I was running strong—which is different from how I ran when I was a true beginner.

These are the things that helped me keep running through the challenging postpartum period. What did you do to make it through?

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In It Together

How my new baby is teaching me to adjust my expectations.

I caught myself doing it again this morning: pushing the stroller through town with a fury that almost felt like anger. I was ferociously pounding the sidewalks, trying to defy my postpartum body and the flurry of emotions that wreck me at any minute. I had forgotten the wild mood swings that happen in the weeks after giving birth: one minute, I think, wow, this isn't so hard; I've got it all under control. And the next minute, I'm hit with a wave of doubt and regret, as I lament: What have I done? (And then feel guilty for thinking that.) The postpartum weeks are absolutely crazy, and anyone who says they're not is flat-out lying.

Hence, the fury on the pavement.

I'm a person who likes a plan. I like to know exactly what I'm in for every day, and when that routine gets upset, it causes me great anxiety. So I have a new plan: get through the rough patches by taking my cue from my new baby, Georgia. Instead of seeing her as the tiny antagonist ruining my schedule, I'm trying to see us as partners, figuring out this new world together.

The biggest thing this means for me is adjusting expectations. I can't expect to have my body back pronto. I can't expect to be able to go crank out a speedwork session (or any run, for that matter) like it's no big deal. I can't expect to get through my day uninterrupted by crying, spit up, baby poop, sore nipples, a cranky 2-year-old, and just plain exhaustion. I can't expect my world to confirm to what I want right now. I have to go with the flow.

And I've got the best teacher right here in front of me! Babies are the ultimate go-with-the-flow gurus. They're hungry: they eat. They're tired: they take a nap. They're happy: they smile. They have to poop: they poop. They're mad, in pain, or overstimulated: they tell you (loudly). There's no hemming and hawing or calculating schedules or crunching the numbers: they just do what they need to do to get through the day.

Which is exactly what I need to do right now! Some days, that means a run. Some days, it means nursing (what feels like) all day long. And some days, it means being in perfect sync with my perfect little baby. As she approaches one month, I'm having more and more of those days (and less fury on the pavement).

Thanks for the lesson, Georgia!

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