

# Getting Through Injury

By Bob Wischnia

Let me clarify something right away. This article isn't going to be a sympathetic, touchy-feely treatise on getting in tune with the five stages of grief when you're injured and unable to run. If you're looking for compassion, don't come to me.

Don't get me wrong – being hurt stinks. I've been injured many times (once for about two years) and I've been forced to learn how to deal with it.

The easiest thing to do when you're hurt is to get bogged down in funereal gloom and the unfairness of it all. Which, of course, does you no good at all – just the opposite, in fact. Recovery is your goal, and what you need is an effective way to bridge that depressing gap between the day you're forced to stop running and the day you can start again.

It's your choice. Wallow in self-pity, lose your aerobic base, put on weight and make yourself and everyone around you miserable – or get a life. Here's the plan...

## 1. No whining

If you love to run, there's no denying that injury downtime can be a major pain. But try to keep it in perspective. Most running injuries are relatively minor and will heal in due time. It may seem catastrophic when you can't run, but a bad case of shin splints is nothing when you compare it to friends who have real problems, real illnesses and real pain. Some of those friends may not recover; you will. Don't complain, because no one wants to hear it. Not your partner, not your kids, not even your running friends. Besides, complaining is counterproductive to getting healthy again.

**The gain:** You'll stay positive during the lay-off, thus speeding your recovery.

## 2. Be patient

Every runner I've known has been injured at one time or another. And every one of those runners – even a 72-year-old friend who broke his hip – was able to run again. There's a cure for practically every running injury, and most injuries heal with time. Unfortunately, no magic pill will cure you instantly. Nor is a simple change of shoes the right answer. Instead, be confident that regardless of how bad your injury may seem, it's only temporary. You will run again, if you're patient enough to allow the healing process the time it needs.

**The gain:** You'll give the injury adequate time to heal.

## 3. If you have a routine, stick to it

That is, if you normally run at lunchtime, continue to get some sort of exercise at lunchtime. If you're an early morning runner, go for a walk early in the morning.

I'm so anal about my routine that I try to maintain the same daily pattern even when I can't run. Particularly on Sundays. No one enjoys a long run more than I do. I love getting up early, hitting the trail and cruising for a couple of hours.

When I'm injured, I still head to the same trail and walk for a couple of hours (being more attentive to the wildlife). I follow this with my post run ritual: some stretching, a session with the ice pack, a shower, warm bagels and the Sunday papers. From a psychological standpoint, this ritual is almost as important

to me as the run itself. Is this walk as satisfying as my long run? No way. But maintaining my routine is a whole lot better for my mind and body than doing nothing.

**The gain:** By sticking with some semblance of your exercise ritual, you'll reap many of its mood-boosting benefits.

## 4. Do it outdoors

Especially when you're injured, you need fresh air. You can scoop up a lot of it on a bike ride. If it's winter, or if the weather is too foul to cycle, I just walk. Processing lungfuls of oxygen is one of the things that make you feel good when running, and you'll get a similar effect by doing just about any other vigorous outdoor activity.

**The gain:** Checking out the world around you will take your mind off your injury, and you'll get your accustomed dose of fresh air and sunlight.

## 5. Sweat

If you normally run 45 minutes a day, make sure you do some activity vigorous enough to keep you aerobic for 45 minutes. This is critical for hanging on to your sanity, not to mention your aerobic fitness. It doesn't matter too much what you do, as long as it doesn't aggravate the existing injury.

The only problem with things like fast-paced walking is that I don't sweat. Working up a big sweat is so ingrained in me that I desperately need the feel of a wet T-shirt after a workout. If only from an emotional standpoint, I must do something to jack up my heart rate and work up a lather every day. If I do I've accomplished something. If I don't, I can feel myself slipping into that dark, gloomy abyss of worthlessness. Swimming doesn't do it for me. Neither does running in a pool. In-line skating looks too dangerous. If I could play tennis without aggravating my strained hamstring, I'd do that. But I can't. So I'll hit the exercise bike or, better still, use a new device called a Skywalker. An indoor exercise machine, the Skywalker is something of a hybrid: part cross-country ski machine, part treadmill, part stairclimber.

There's virtually no technique involved in using it properly, and it simulates the running motion to some degree, without any jarring. Therefore, it doesn't seem to aggravate any of the common injuries associated with running.

I guarantee that if you put in 45 minutes on a Skywalker, exercise bike, stairclimber or rowing machine, you will be drenched with sweat. More important, several studies suggest that if you do these aerobic alternatives properly and with enough intensity, they can maintain and even increase your fitness level.

Even so, it's mindless, boring stuff, so treat your cross-training activity the same way you treat your running. For instance I know every flat section, hill and pebble on my favourite 6-mile loop, so I try to simulate each section of this run on whatever machine I am using. I start with an easy 10 minutes on the 'flats', then pick it up over a series of three 'hills'. I'll recover for a bit then go really hard at the point when I'd be hitting that steep hill on my run. You get the idea.

**The gain:** You'll end up with a puddle of sweat and a saturated T-shirt – tangible evidence that you've done something to burn calories and maintain your aerobic base.

## 6. Lift weights

I don't know about you, but when I'm gearing up for a marathon, the last thing I want to do is throw lead around in the gym. I barely have enough time to do all the running and stretching I need, much less mix in weightlifting.

But when I'm hurt, weights can be a godsend. Since I'm often at the gym anyway, riding a stationary bike or the Skywalker, it's not a big deal to spend another 20 minutes with weights. And, because I'm not running, I'm doing more legwork than usual, along with some abdominal and upper body stuff.

**The gain:** You'll burn calories and maintain overall fitness and muscle tone.

## 7. Stay connected

For me, one of the worst aspects of being injured is not being able to run with my friends. The only time I see some of them is when we run together. So when I'm out of action, I make an effort to stay in touch and at least feel like I'm part of the running scene. A good way to do this is to volunteer to help out at races.

I also try to spend more of the dreaded 'quality time' with my family. Normally, they make all sorts of concessions to my running idiosyncrasies, so when I'm injured I do the activities they want to do. During lay-offs, I don't have convenient running excuses ("I'm too tired", "I'm resting for a big run tomorrow") for dropping out of things like playing football with the kids or going to a late-night party.

**The gain:** Instead of becoming too self-absorbed, you'll keep lines of communication open with your friends, family and the running community.

## 8. Do something every day to get your health back

While injuries can be markedly different, most of them respond extremely well to rest and self-treatment. If there are things I can do – see a chiropractor or podiatrist, have a massage – I do them, even if they seem like a lot of hassle.

If all I need to do is ice the injury or take anti-inflammatories, I do it religiously. If muscle inflexibility or imbalance may have contributed to the problem, I make a point of stretching carefully twice a day.

**The gain:** By taking action, you'll speed recovery and achieve peace of mind.

## 9. Eat properly

When I'm running, I tend to eat large quantities of anything that gets in the way of my face. When I'm not running, I can gain an extra 10 pounds in a hurry. A lay-off calls for exerting a little more control over what I eat.

That's not to say that I recommend going on a crash diet; reduced nutrition lessens the body's ability to repair itself. It's inevitable that I'm going to gain weight during an enforced lay-off, but by focusing more on low-fat goodies and fruits and reducing my intake of a few staples (beer, crisps and Dairy Lea triangles), I can exercise some control and avoid porking out. When I start running again, the few pounds I put on will come off quickly.

**The gain:** Staying lean will keep your self-confidence up.

## 10. Focus on today

Don't set an arbitrary deadline for when you'll be ready and then start, whether you're healthy or not. With any luck, you'll only be out of action for a few weeks, but you never know how quickly you'll heal. Just because an injury took four days to heal last time doesn't mean that the same injury will take four days to heal this time. The older you get, the longer it takes for your body to heal.

You may also have to forget about that upcoming race (especially if it's a marathon) you'd planned on running, Just because you signed up for it doesn't mean you'll recover by then. And if your injury does. heal before the race, be prepared to lower your expectations on race day. Be happy you're on the starting line and in one piece, and enjoy the race.

**The gain:** By not setting strict deadlines, you won't get frustrated when you miss them. More important, you won't start running before you're ready.