

# For Your Health

## When You Can't See the Forest for the Trees

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As a clinician, I am often asked by injured runners “what caused the injury?” The client laments “why me, why now?” My answer to this question is that one or more of three things contributed to the injury. The first thing

is running too much, too fast, too soon. The second is running on a funky system and the third is running funky. An increased dose of running, in concert with poor structure/alignment and faulty mechanics, will result in exceeding the injury threshold. I spend a large percent of my time with clients investigating their structure (posture, alignment, muscle strength/flexibility) and faulty mechanics of running. However, it is important to remember that there are times when you can't see the forest for the trees.

How many wheels are on an 18 wheel truck? Okay, the answer is obvious, but frequently the injured runner ignores the obvious, which is that the running injury was caused by running too much! Frequently, in conversing with fellow health care professionals, we speak facetiously about treating injured runners and how dense they are about their injuries. Runners are often unwilling to stop running.

Noted author and physician Dr. Kubler-Ross, proposed a theory of grieving and loss. She believes that if an individual experiences a significant loss, like the death of a loved one, the individual typically passages through sequential stages from denial, to anger, to bargaining, to depression, to testing and then to acceptance. For some runners this theory is applicable. The thought of not running can be a significant loss. He/she first denies the injury is severe enough to cause cessation of running. According to Dr Kubler-Ross, how slowly or quickly an individual passes through the various stages varies, and often individuals can get stuck in a particular stage.

An interesting study demonstrated that injured runners scored higher than non-injured runners on psychological testing for motivation, competitiveness, type A behaviors and exercise dependency (Ekenman I, 2001). As one would expect, runners who have higher

levels of motivation and personality traits of exercise dependency are at greater risk of getting injured.

Of course, the risk of denying that an injury is caused by running too much is that the most appropriate treatment, decreasing the dose of running, will be delayed and this will likely prolong the healing process.

If you have a running injury, in order to minimize the likelihood of getting stuck in the denial stage, pay attention to the comments and observations of significant others. Often our spouses or friends have a better advantage in terms of observing our behavior.

When recovering from an injury, there are two possible mistakes when it comes to exercise and activity. One mistake is exercising too much, too fast, too soon, resulting in a disruption of the healing process. The other mistake is not exercising enough and becoming deconditioned and losing your fitness level. Most individuals have enough self awareness of their motivations and personality traits to be able to make a safe bet as to which mistake is most likely to happen. For most dedicated runners, the most likely mistake is exercising too much, too fast, too soon. Therefore, if you are not sure whether you should be running or have some doubts, don't run, and you will avoid the most probable mistake.

Excess doses of running are one of three causes of running injury. If you can answer “no” to all of the following questions - (1)Have you had previous traumatic injury to the lower extremities? (2)Worn corrective shoes/braces as a child? (3) Are there discrepancies in the sizes of your feet? (4) Are your legs of different length? (5) Have you been told you have scoliosis of the spine? (6) Have you had surgery on a lower extremity? – it is unlikely that faulty structure (posture, alignment, muscle strength/flexibility) are a contributing factor in the development of a running injury.

If you have been skilled athlete for a number of years, feel confident about your running form and have not made recent changes in your running technique, it is unlikely that poor running form/style/technique is a contributing factor in the development of a running injury.

If your reflection eliminates two of the three potential causes of running injury, you are left with the obvious. Remember, there are times when you can't see the forest for the trees. If you are uncertain whether faulty structure (posture, alignment, muscle strength/flexibility), is a contributing factor to recurring injury, a health care professional can preform an in-depth orthopedic examination to help answer that question.

If you have had a slow motion video analysis of your running form/technique/style and have been told that you have good form but have a recurring injury, recognize that there are times when you can't see the forest for the trees.

When I write this column I try to provide actual case examples of the point I am trying to make. I had difficulty identifying an actual example of an injured runner whose only cause of the injury was excessive running. After reflecting on this observation, I concluded that when patients come to me, they expect me to provide some sophisticated advice and I expect they would be terribly disappointed if the only advice I gave them was “don't run for a while”. That is not what they want to hear. As a businessman, I need to meet my clients' expectations. Usually, I can find at least some minor structural asymmetries or faults for which I make recommendations and, in addition, tell the client to take it easy and cross train.

The take-home message is that sometimes, not running is the best treatment for running injury. Cross-training is the way to maintain aerobic base and control weight. There are times when spending money, time and resources on medicine, braces, physical therapy and/or massage, may be questionable because the cause of the injury may just be running too much, too fast, too soon. Spend money, time and resources on finding answers to the question “What caused the injury and why did it happen now?” Recognize that there is always another marathon, usually within driving distance of Richmond, every month of the year.