



DISORDERED EATING

How it sneaks up
How to see it
How to beat it

Therapist Relays Struggle That Led To Helping Others

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"I have to go on a run."

"I'll feel guilty if I don't do my morning training run."

"Running really helps with my stress."

These thoughts were so familiar to me, as they are for many runners. What may not be as overtly obvious to the average person, however, is that these thoughts are actually tied to important human needs. We find all kinds of ways to meet these needs—some of them constructive and some destructive. Our methods develop from the unique concoction of our brain chemistries, our social and family environments, and cultural factors. I discovered the connection between these human needs and sports through my journey of healing from an eating disorder and a messy relationship with running.

In high school, I ran to meet the needs of achievement, a sense of mastery, and the attention of others. I was hungry for my dad's attention — for him to simply look at me with pride and value. Once I figured out that my performance in sports would turn my dad's attention toward me — plus gain respect from my peers and community, an added bonus — I was hooked. The equation was easy: perform well, get attention, feel valued and get that need met.

Keep in mind that the need for attention is not inherently bad; yet getting the attention I craved completely hinged on my performance. The problem with this was that it meant that performance became a singular focus, leading to lots of pain and distress when I had poor races.

The intensity of the performance/attention equation heightened when I ran for a Division I program in college. I certainly didn't make room for multiple needs while I focused on training, making the best times and beating records....numbers, numbers, numbers! These numbers dictated my life. I would do anything for success, and eventually found myself restricting my eating, training as hard as I could, and seeing the results on the track. By this time, I not only longed for my dad's attention, but sought validation of my worth from my coach and teammates, too.

It wasn't until a couple years into this pattern that I realized my plan for achievement was not working. I found myself in a dark place in my relationship with food and running, and I sought help for treatment of an eating disorder. I painstakingly worked my way through recovery by slowly making peace with food and disentangling disordered thoughts and behaviors from my relationship with running. Ultimately, I ended up doing the much deeper work of learning about myself — my identity, value and needs outside of my external performance successes.

Through my recovery process, my relationship with running today meets many of my needs: play, friendship, sense of freedom, spiritual awareness and respect. I can train for an event and enjoy the need for a sense of accomplishment with an intense track workout. I can also go for an early morning run in the quiet of the day and feel

a spiritual connection to the beauty around me. I can meet up with a great friend and enjoy the social connection while running a much slower pace. I can access all these forms of running with ease and appreciation.

I decided to pursue the field of mental health therapy because I felt called to help young women like me — women doing their best, but eventually getting trapped and suffocated by their relationship with food and/or their sport. For the past decade, I have worked with numerous athletes in the outpatient setting, and most recently opened a higher-level-of-care facility in Seattle called Opal: Food + Body Wisdom. The structure of Opal has allowed me to work with athletes on their relationships with sports in a way that was limited by outpatient care.

One of the first questions I ask my runner clients to consider is, what

basic human needs are met through your relationship with running? Oftentimes I'm met with expressions of absolute confusion before I explain the connection between the two. We look at the needs list together, and we go



Bazzi during her track years at the University of Washington, where she discovered she had a problem.



Bazzi ran for the glory of competition in college. Now she enjoys running for its own sake.

run together and explore those needs in real-life experiences.

A client that I worked with recently was consumed by her obsessive and ritualistic running "rules." We pulled out the needs list, and we talked about what she might want to pay attention to on our run. She expressed the desire to feel more freedom in her running, so we took off her watch and ran on a new path (thereby blocking her knowledge of time or distance). I had her do a full body scan during the run to bring her more into the moment in a mindful, meditative way. Could she feel and pay attention to the sun and breeze on her skin? The activation of her calf muscles during each stride?

over their history with running, identifying what needs it originally met and how that's changed or stayed the same over time. We can then go outside,

As we processed the experience after the run, she noticed feeling some discomfort with not knowing how long she ran, but she was also aware of a sense of curiosity and enjoyment as she paid attention to

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a few things she had never previously considered. She enjoyed the social companionship of running with me and was surprised that her distress was fairly low after violating her "running rules." That one experience opened a door of hope that her relationship with running could meet a fuller range of needs, including more freedom. Her journey had just taken a new turn.

So where do you find curiosity in your relationship with running? If this idea piques your interest, I would encourage you to experiment in your runs. Consider running without your watch, taking a new route that is beautiful in nature, going with a good friend that you may even have to slow down for, paying attention to your body at some point on your run, and seeing how each body part feels in that moment. How can these new practices open opportunities to meet more of your essential human needs? What might you discover? My hope is that we as runners can discover more of ourselves with compassion for all of our various needs through this thing that we love so much. •

Important Human Needs

Physical safety and security	Sexual expression
Financial security	Loyalty and trust
Friendship	A sense of accomplishment
The attention of others	A sense of progress toward goals
Being listened to	Feeling competent or masterful in some area
Guidance	Making a contribution
Respect	Fun and play
Validation	Sense of freedom, independence
Expressing and sharing your feelings	Creativity
Sense of belonging	Spiritual awareness—connection with a "higher power"
Nurturing	Unconditional love
Physically touching or being touched	
Intimacy	

(Source: The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook, Bourne)

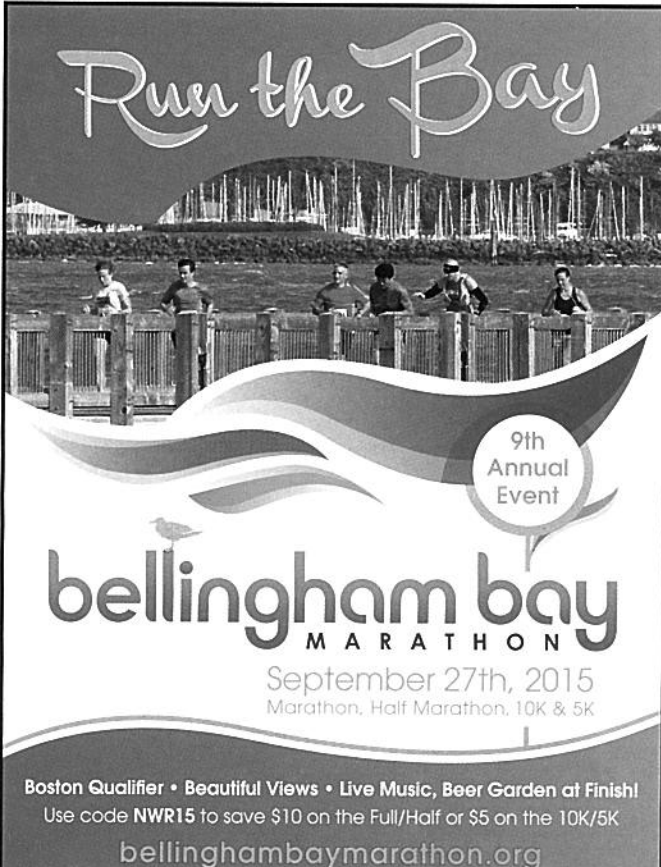


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