The Experience of Self-Discovery and Mental Change in Female Novice Athletes in Connection to Marathon Running

Alison L. Boudreau and Barbro Giorgi
Saybrook University

Abstract
This article evaluates the experience of an extraordinary mental change of novice female runners that is connected to long-distance running. Two female participants were interviewed regarding their life-changing experience associated with endurance exercise. Descriptions of the lived experience from women who train for marathons were gathered and a phenomenological analysis of the data was conducted which suggests that the women underwent a mental change that improved their self-confidence and enhanced relationships with their selves and others. The six constituents that emerged were: Participants Perception of an Enhancing Outdoor Environment, Life-Style Changes Resulting in More Openness to Others and Self, Discoveries Concerning Self-Improvements, Sustaining a Desired Mental Disposition, Empowerment in Considering New Possibilities, and Support for Encountering Future Challenges. This article demonstrates how a mental change associated with long-distance running positively impacts participants’ personal and professional lives.

Keywords
Endurance athletes, self-discovery, personal change, long-distance running, marathon, ultra trail runners, road runners, women

Author Shanti Sosienski (2006) encourages readers to “run hard, run fast, and live fully because life only has the limits you put on it” (dedication page). Olympic gold medalist Paavo Nurmi acknowledges, “Mind is everything: muscle, pieces of rubber. All that I am, I am because of my mind” (as cited in Pfitzinger & Douglas, 2009, p. 11). The Finn won nine gold
medals for 1,500 to 10,000 meters, and he understands the need for psychological strength or mental toughness required for longer distances. Uta Pippig, the first woman to win the Boston Marathon three consecutive times (1994–1996), also validates, “I’m more relaxed for training… more mentally strong, so I can train much harder” (as cited in Sandrock, 1996, p. vi). However, what are the psychological benefits that individuals gain or receive from long-distance running?

The above motivational quotes imply that when an individual has determination or relentless passion, he or she will find a way to accomplish challenging tasks. An empowered person will creatively ask, “How can I do that?” instead of negatively believing, “I can’t do that.” These individuals seek the possibility in impossibility, focusing on natural strengths and opportunities rather than on weaknesses or devastation.

What happens, however, when a woman’s inner will is so faint, exhausted, or numb that she becomes paralyzed and just goes through the motions of life? She may dream of a brighter future at work or home and yet fail to take small steps towards creating the life she imagines. She may become defeated in some aspects of her life and not realize that she can have a positive effect on her own life. What would help empower her to become unstuck and propel forward, instead of her merely existing each day?

Women are traditionally the caretakers of others, juggling emotional and fundamental needs of their employers, partners, children, parents, and extended family, along with their own needs (Legault & Chasserio, 2003). Social dynamics are rapidly changing, and two-family incomes are often required to afford the middle-class lifestyle; however, societal roles and expectations of women remain slow to change (Newcomer, 2008). Women are faced with relentless demands by their bosses, co-workers, and peers, as well as their own family’s expectations (Legault & Chasserio, 2003).

Furthermore, Campbell (1998) found that women tend to be insecure about their abilities in achievement settings compared to men. Campbell concluded that women become removed from what it means to be an individual, losing their feminine insight into their own unique goals and dreams by focusing all energies in support of the priorities of others. There is a tendency for women’s personal desires to become placed in the back seat (Legault & Chasserio, 2003). Fatigue, confusion, and detachment set in, surrounding their own emotional and physical needs (Dahlkoetter, 2001). In essence, how does a woman make room for her own personal desires?
Regardless of numerous family commitments and work responsibilities, more women are investing time and energy to branch out from routine lives to do something for themselves (Legault & Chasserio, 2003). Examples include volunteering at a favorite charity, taking classes to learn a new hobby, or joining an organized athletic program such as a marathon race (Boudreau, 2006; Strigas & Jackson, 2003). In addition to the well-documented personal growth aspect associated with exercise (Barrios, 2007), it is important to acknowledge that women who choose to train for a marathon are making an investment on many levels—sacrifices made to others (time away), emotional demands (fear of the unknown, lack of belief in self to finish, worry about injury), and physical challenges (intense workouts, proper nutrition, getting rest).

**Marathon Running**

The word marathon refers to a long-distance running event of 26.2 miles that occurs internationally on paved city roads or bike trails (called road races), and occasionally on natural trails (called trail running). The majority of courses are on city streets with road runner participants, with a smaller percentage held on dirt roads or mountain paths for trail runners (though some have a small amount of paved roads as well).

While there are many unique reasons for why people start long-distance running, those who continue training appear to do so for various mental and physical benefits (Choate, 2008; Newcomer, 2008). “Every marathoner, no matter how experienced, has to dig down and find resources to get through the training program” (Galloway, 2001, p. xiii). In addition, Galloway (2001) affirms that for those who continue to pursue running, “Participant reports have indicated that individuals discover previously dormant strengths and capabilities on their journey to meet the challenge” (p. xii).

Women may choose to train for a marathon as a celebration of who they are (Majcen, 2007). A few women will even venture further distances in order to surpass incredible odds and adversity. For example, when ultra-marathon (distances greater than 26.2 miles) runner Pam Reed was asked why in 2005 she ran 300 miles in 80 hours without sleep, she replied, “First, I love to run. But second, I did this because I wanted to reinforce that historically women have had to do much more than men to get the same recognition” (as cited by Sosienski, 2006, p. 88).
Marathon training for road races has been distinguished as the fastest growing exercise activity (Galloway, 2001), as individuals continue to discover the ample rewards in connection with this sport. Participation has dramatically increased over the last 30 years. An estimated 25,000 Americans completed a road marathon in 1976, compared to 143,000 in 1980, and 412,000 in 2007. What used to be the annual total number of runners is now less than the largest marathons in the world each year! Despite these increases, only one-tenth of 1% of the entire U.S. population will finish a marathon each year (Hanc, October 2008, p. 86).

Training for a marathon is an extraordinary human accomplishment. “The marathon stands out as one of the most esteemed of life’s accomplishments, which has to be won by pulling from within oneself the physical, mental and spiritual resources over an extended period of time” (Galloway, 2001, p. xii). Regardless of the situation, Csiksentmihalyi (1990) noted that, “Whether jogging along, racing the clock running against competition, the simple act of moving the body across space becomes a source of complex feedback that provides optimal experience and adds strength to the self” (p. 95). Hal Hidgon (2005), the longest contributing writer of 43 years with Runner’s World magazine, also confirms that new marathoners “can apply what they learn finishing a marathon to other challenges that present themselves in life” (p. 340).

The act of taking a leap and joining a novice marathon-training group is a big step forward that takes immense individual dedication, courage, time commitment, financial costs, voluntarily participation and willingness to face both physical and mental challenges (Ogles, Masters, & Richardson, 2003). Having outward support from others (such as teammates, coaches, peers, coworkers, family, etc.) is also key to a successful training experience “on and off the track” so to speak. Taylor and Schneider (2005) concur, “Receiving supportive encouragement from family and friends to pursue your athletic goals can build confidence and reduce stress. Similar support from your coworkers, where you might need flexible hours in order to train, can also bolster your confidence” (p. 44).

Marathon running can be an alternative route of self-examination (Bond & Batey, 2005) and self-discovery (Boudreau, 2006). This is especially important for women. A feminine perspective on the personal changes and shifts that arise as a direct result of or in connection with long-distance running experience is worthy of interest and study. How the decision to begin marathon running impacts a woman’s self-identity, her decisions, and
relationships within her personal and professional life is an intriguing psychological issue. As a result, what changes occur in her family, career, neighborhood communities, as well as deep down within herself? How might she change her beliefs of who she is, and what she will accomplish?

**Psychological Benefits of Marathon Running**

Runners often report psychological benefits from exercise. For example, Callen (1983) surveyed 424 runners and found the most frequent mental and emotional benefits of running were tension relief, better self image, more relaxed, better mood, more self-confident, and “feeling happier, more alert, relieves depression, more content, thinking more clearly” (Noakes, 2003, p. 549).

Evidence shows that sedentary and non-athletic women who have completed a run program have an improved sense of well-being, better resistance to stress, reduced fatigue, and increased work capacity (Hanson & Neddle, 1974). Depressed women have experienced significant gains of self-esteem from an eight-week run and weight training program (Morgan, 1997). Depressed and anxious individuals have been shown to experience improved mental health from 20 to 60 minutes of brisk walking or jogging, three times a week (Blumenthal, Babyak, Moore, Craighead, Herman, & Khatri, 1999, p. 2351; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Endorphins may also be linked to the success of using exercise to treat mildly depressed individuals (Rogatko, 2009).

Marathoner benefits cited in the literature include improved well-being (i.e., self-esteem, feeling less shy, mood control, relief from depression), social support, weight-control, greater physical attractiveness, and more relaxation and energy (Gill, Williams, Dowd, & Beaudoin, 1996; Ziegler, 1991). Studies also suggest that women perceive more benefits from long-distance running than do men (Choate, 2008). However, it is unclear if studies focused on road racers, trail runners, or both.

Macjen (2007) found that midlife women had increases in psychological well-being (i.e., positive feelings, happiness, elation, empowerment, enhanced quality of life, etc.) after their first marathon completion. The women had enhanced confidence, self-esteem, empowerment (i.e., self perceived control, competence, and goal attainment), accomplishment,
and self-efficacy, including the belief that future challenges can be overcome (i.e., career development, risk taking, setting goals, being dedicated and perseverant). Additional psychological benefits included coping better with stress (i.e., death of loved ones, managing chronic illness, concerns of daily-life), reduced depression and anxiety (i.e., discontinuation of medication previously used for depression), greater sense of control, and more energy (Majcen, 2007, p. 102).

Majcen also stated, “The marathon was reported as being an opportunity for self-discovery” and “seemed to enhance or confirm their personal insight regarding their capabilities” (Majcen, 2007, p. 81). These findings are supported by Summers et al. (1983) as well, in that nearly 70% of the marathoners they sampled experienced “gaining personal insight” from endurance running. Participants frequently reported the ability to: “persevere under duress,” “do something I set my mind to,” and “know my own capabilities/limitations better.” Marathoners also had “increased confidence” and awareness of “having qualities I felt I lacked” (p. 319).

Attempts have been made to understand persistence, motivation, behavior, and other factors that help maximize participation in sport (Thogersen-Ntoumani, Lane, Biscomb, Jarrett, & Lane, 2007). Schomer and Dunne (1994) examined the emotional transitions from a sedentary way of life to an active lifestyle of 13 women and 21 men. Randomly selected volunteers were placed in a seven-month organized marathon program. The novice runners completed a Profile of Mood States questionnaire before starting the program, during the training, and after the marathon event. Researchers were able to predict dropouts, as well as efficient/inefficient adapters to training on the basis of participants’ emotional transitions. The study was limited to a focus on negative emotions and their relationship to dropout prediction, over training, and injury. Although they examined mood changes, they did not investigate how self-efficacy emerged or how mental changes positively influenced or benefited runners.

Running also serves as a stress management tool (Boudreau, 2010; McKenna, Coulson, & Field, 2008). Noakes (2003) states, “It is difficult to dispute that most runners are attracted to running because it provides a powerful psychological support system that enables them to cope better with their own unique life stresses” (p. 553). Barrios (2007) states, “Women speak of running as meditation, therapy, quiet time, an outlet
for emotion, catalysis for growth, and a microcosm of their bigger picture. Running takes on these roles and more, often with powerful effect on your whole life” (p. 147). Lynch and Scott (1999) affirm running is a tranquil “opportunity to get quiet, center your energy, reflect, meditate, and silence the inner chatter and noise of your busy life to access your creative self” (p. 177).

Robbins and Joseph (1980) found in their classic study of 345 runners that “the use of the run to revitalize is important for most of our subjects” regardless the distance (p. 99). The full-time runners (i.e., defined as running 40 to 75 miles per week) and occasional joggers (i.e., defined as running four to 24 miles per week) had perceived equal gratification and benefits. It is unclear, however, how many male and females participated, or whether road racers and trail runners were used.

Cardiovascular exercise has been shown to benefit cognitive health in older adults (Hillman, Belopolsky, Snook, Kramer, & McAuley, 2004). A newly released 21-year longitudinal medical study with participants 50 years and older found, “Vigorous exercise (running) at middle and older ages is associated with reduced disability in later life and a notable survival advantage” (Chakravarty, Hubert, Lingala, & Fries, 2008, p. 4).

Motivations of Endurance Athletes

Because marathon training requires enormous time and effort, many speculate about the demographic and motivational characteristics of those who participate (Choate, 2008). Several descriptive “adjectives” have been used to describe zealous runners, including addiction compulsiveness, perfectionism, and need for achievement (Ogles, Masters, and Richardson, 1995, p. 135). Significant findings about marathoner motivations consist of improving physical fitness (Havenar & Lochbaum, 2007), psychological well-being (Summers, Machin, & Sargent, 1983), self-image (Clough, Shepherd, & Maughan, 1989), social reasons, competition, and personal achievement (Ogles et al., 2003; Ziegler, 1991).

Carson (2005) used a mixed-methods approach to measure self-efficacy and goal orientation in first-time marathoners. Findings showed the runners had increased self-efficacy, determination, motivation, discipline, courage, and optimism. Manuel (2000) also studied new marathoners, with results showing that runners were motivated by goal achievement,
personal challenge, satisfaction, and improved fitness. After marathon completion the participants had improved self-image (i.e., increased self-confidence or self-discipline) and increased knowledge or self-awareness concerning personal limitations or abilities.

Majcen (2007) focused on 27 middle-age women (40 to 64 years old) who trained and participated in a run/walk marathon event. She declared the training program was “more than the running” because “it is possible to see in the course of mastering the marathon challenge, these women transformed anxiety-provoking uncertainties and psychological vulnerabilities into inspiring, performance enhancing and sustaining activities. This psychological process, which involves a heightening of achievement expectancy, empowered them” (Majcen, 2007, p. 130).

In his 1999 dissertation, Kowalski found that for individuals to continue endurance events, motivating factors varied depending on the length of involvement. “Rookie marathoners appeared motivated by weight concerns, self-esteem, and personal goal achievement. The mid-level experience group was motivated by personal performance enhancement and psychological benefits. Veteran marathoners were concerned with social identity, recognition, affiliation, health and completion” (Kowalski, 1999, p. 15).

Breheny (2002) utilized a quantitative study to investigate the motives of 292 (187 men and 105 women) marathon runners in Virginia. The purpose was to examine the reasons for running among individuals of various ability levels, ranging from novice athletes of only six months to veteran runners who had participated in the sport for over 50 years. The research focus was on achievement perspective, which was defined as “a person’s need to overcome obstacles, to exercise power, to strive to do something difficult as well and as quickly as possible” (p. 6). The participants evinced greater mastery and competitiveness needs than sedentary individuals.

Research has shown that the overall personality characteristics of marathoners and triathletes (i.e. athletes who participate in three successive activities, usually swim-bike-run, in one event known as triathlon) are different from those of the general population. Sample outcomes for these individuals include inner strength and courage, intrinsic motivation and empowerment, positive body image, and high self-efficacy (Kowalski, 1999, p. 49). Kowsaksi also stated that endurance athletes “are likely to have better adjustment in the major areas of life such as work, school and relationships” (p. 49).
Rationale for this Study

There are a few quantitative studies that mention the psychological benefits of endurance sports, yet by the very nature of their methods, these studies do not address the unique perceptions and descriptions of the athletes who experience them. When the subject of marathons does appear in the literature, it is predominantly related to road racing and not trail running. There is currently no research on the self-discovery and mental changes that female marathoner’s experience, and how the change impacts the personal and professional lives of women.

The majority of the current literature focuses on male elite athletes, college teams, and children sports (Gilbert, 2000). Few studies focus on female runners. Majcen (2007) confirms, “There is a lack of research on the benefits of marathon running, with no known research on the benefits of a marathon-training program for midlife woman” (p. 138). Much needed is a study on the mental and emotional changes that occur in connection with female long-distance running, and how the shift impacts and benefits the personal and professional lives of women.

The study presented here is a contribution to the understanding of novice female runners, particularly how mental change occurs in connection with marathon running. Little is known pertaining to what prompts emotional changes to emerge, how the changes impact female identity, and what the benefits are in women’s personal and professional lives. Evidence shows that sedentary and non-athletic women who have completed a running program improved their well-being and resistance to stress as well as reduced their fatigue and increased their work capacity (Hanson & Needle, 1974). Depressed women have experienced significant gains of self-esteem from an 8-week run and weight training program (Morgan, 1997). Novice women runners (5k to marathon distance athletes) have also derived greater benefits than men, as related to socialization and affiliation, relief from depression, and overcoming shyness (Choate, 2008). None of these studies, however, address the mental changes that may naturally occur without deliberate intention.

The psychological concept most closely relating to emotional changes is the self-efficacy theory of Bandura (1977). Self-efficacy theory is defined as individuals’ level and strength of experiencing an inner belief and competence in learning or performing a specific task or future activity success-
fully, regardless of past history of events (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy beliefs are concerned with personal competence. This overarching concept is not to be confused with outcome expectations (i.e., belief that certain behaviors will lead to environmental outcomes, such as winning a race). Self-efficacy beliefs are consistent and have a positive impact on performance for various athletic teams, regardless of age and ability (Singer, Hausenblas, & Janelle, 2001).

Although the focus of the present study, mental change, is close to that of self-efficacy theory, it is not identical. In self-efficacy theory, individuals have a strong belief they are capable of achieving a desirable outcome through a future activity (Bandura, 2008, p. 4). Bandura explains, “After people become convinced that they have what it takes to succeed, they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks. By sticking it out through tough times, they emerge stronger from adversity” (Bandura, 2008, p. 3). In contrast, mental changes occur regardless of winning or losing, or how well individuals feel they may perform in a future activities. A person may participate for the sheer enjoyment and peace that an activity gives them, without placing importance on how skilled they are or what type of outcome may result (e.g., winning award money, gaining fame, finishing last). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explained that people are motivated by “the quality of experience they felt when they were involved with the activity” (p. 9). For instance, stressed mothers with young children may run as an outlet for private time, thus helping to overcome parental hardships (Choate, 2008). Female runners may also become empowered with increased confidence and a more positive outlook, regardless of how slow or fast they may perform (Majcen, 2007).

Bandura (1977) argued that individuals are self-regulating, since goal-setting is often used, with adjustments made to strategy or effort as needed, in order to successfully attain goals and predict future performance in specific activities. For example, athletes with high self-efficacy persevere longer, put more effort into their sport, are more focused on tasks, and have better overall strategies (Bandura, 1986). However, runners may experience a self-discovery process with a new insight that “I can do anything” regardless of whether deliberate goals are set or not (Grant, 1987). Participants may have changes in their perception and belief system (Majcen, 2007). For instance, due to an action (e.g., scheduled time
for self, joined a run group, finished a marathon) the participants’ belief system may change their sense of who they are, what skills they have, and what ability they possess (e.g., I am confident, strong, can achieve goals). The new positive mindset may lead to potential for future activities (e.g., managing unfamiliar work projects, moving homes, taking risks, or establishing higher goals). Novice marathoners may have increased confidence, goal achievement, individuality (personal freedom), physical strength, and euphoria (Newcomer, 2008).

Method

There is currently no descriptive phenomenological research that documents the life-changing experiences that naturally occur with marathon running. To gain greater insight and understanding in the research conducted for this study, an exploration of the actual experience of the runner was required. The focus of the study was to acquire an accurate depiction of what it is like for women to experience mental changes that occur while running long-distances. Consequently, the primary purpose was to explore the phenomenon of women who have had personal experiences or life-changing shifts that were connected to marathon running.

Participants

An invitation to participate form was distributed to a San Francisco Bay Area running group founder, who then emailed the invitation to the group. Two female participants were selected from the larger group of respondents who met the following requirements:

- 30–55 year old women;
- Currently training for or have completed a full (26.2 miles) or half marathon (13.1 miles) with an organized run group over four to six months;
- Able to articulate a description of an experience of change, including thoughts and feeling, in connection with long-distance running;
- Novice runner with no intention of becoming elite or winning events on a sponsored or professional level; and
• Reasons to run involve personal choice (i.e., for stress relief, new friendships, weight loss, goal completion, personal time for self).

P1 is a married, part-time financial analyst, and mother of two adult children (32 and 34 years old). She is a 54-year-old Caucasian woman who has completed college. She started short-distance running in 1983 and completed her first marathon in 1996 with an organized running group. Over the last nine years she has completed 32 marathons, and she is currently training for her next event with a local group.

P2 is a married, stay-at-home mother of two young boys (2 and 4 years old) and founder of running group in the San Francisco Bay Area. She was a 37-year-old, is Croatian decent, and obtained her Master’s Degree in Public Administration in 2000. She began short-distance running around 1988 and completed her first marathon in 1998 with Team-in-Training. Over the last seven years she has finished three half marathons and two marathons (second one was in 2005, just days after participating in this study, with run group she founded).

The women began a long-distance running program for various individual reasons. They were novice runners with no intention of becoming elite or winning a marathon; they volunteered to run for their own fulfillment. The women had completed or were currently training in an organized four to six month run program for a full or half marathon event. During the four to six month run program, the women had experienced an emotional change as a direct result of, or in association with, long distance running.

Procedure

Data collection consisted of two descriptive interviews of the two women, who were currently training in an organized run program in order to complete another marathon event. Volunteer participants completed consent documents and discussed the option to end involvement at any time. All information was confidential in order to protect privacy. Participants were protected in agreement with the ethical standards governed by the APA Code of Conduct (1992). The researcher conducted an in-depth interview, approximately 30–45 minutes in length, with each participant in order to obtain descriptions of and to discuss their experience of a
change in connection with marathon running. The participants chose the most suitable location (i.e., one at their home, and one in a café) to share their experience. Audiotape recording was used with written permission for the researcher to transcribe and analyze data afterwards. Participants were asked to describe an experience in which their thoughts and feeling were changing in connection with distance running.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

The descriptive phenomenological analysis comprised of four steps: 1) reading the text for a sense of the whole, 2) dividing the text into meaning units, 3) transforming each unit into psychological meaning, and 4) synthesizing the transformed meaning units into a consistent structure (Giorgi, 1985). These steps were conducted within the attitude of the phenomenological reduction, with a psychological perspective and with sensitivity to the phenomenon of emotional changes while running. The first step involved reading participant’s transcript with the intention to acquire a broad-spectrum understanding of the description as a whole. The second step entailed division of text into meaning units, marking the data where there was a change of meaning, while ensuring the participants’ original language was unaltered. The third step consisted of reviewing all meaning units in order to articulate the psychological insight, noting the most essential and pivotal moments of change in each unit. The final step examined the meaning units established in step three in order to grasp and acquire knowledge of the structure of the phenomenon.

**Results**

The data obtained from the two subjects were able to be coalesced into a single structure. The structure of the mental changes experienced by female marathon runners is as follows: the psychological changes experienced by P as recreational female solitary marathon runner, results in lifestyle changes due to more openness to others and self, induced by discoveries concerning self-improvements within a perceived enhancing outdoor environment, which empowers P to sustain a desired mental disposition, consider new future possibilities, and to embrace challenges.


Table 1. The Six Constituents of the Experience of Self-Discovery and Mental Change

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Six Constituents of the Structure</th>
<th>Quotations Supporting the Six Constituents from Participants Transcripts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Participants Perception of an Enhancing Outdoor Environment</td>
<td>P1: Every morning I would get up early and run at the Bay Lands. Which is really quiet...a good place to run and cry...it is a beautiful course...the water is very healing...it was very comforting.</td>
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<td>P2: Just seeing the beauty in everything because I am running. I am feeling really good and excited. It's beautiful...the [trail] marathon is so different...a lot of nature, with steep hills and gorgeous views...you're with few people or by yourself...it allowed me to be reflective...it was very peaceful and a really great experience.</td>
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<td>2. Life-Style Changes Resulting in More Openness to Others and Self</td>
<td>P1: I'm much more outgoing and confident in my relationships....I was kind of a loner and shy. I ran alone...I was brave to join a run group...now they are friends.</td>
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<td>P1: I've done things I never would have without running, like going to different marathons with women I don't know well, but because we train together, we travel together. Or running a marathon and connecting with a stranger [runner], and then end up taking the entire marathon together. I never would have done these things before.</td>
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<td>P1: I am less critical of him [husband]...more open to his suggestions and ideas...less fearful of change...I moved from the city I loved and grew up in since it was something he wanted so badly....it was time for me to allow for change to happen.</td>
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<td>P1: I'm more willing to listen to them [her adult children]...to support them...be more open and kind...I am not as vocal about choices I would do differently....Like my daughter is done with her classes, yet has not started her thesis...I realized that's her time, and she might not finish her Masters, and that's her choice. I let it go.</td>
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<td>P2: Running has really catapulted me to come out of myself more. Coming out of that complacency...to enjoy myself, try new things, and the adventure of that.</td>
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<td>P2: If you don't get a break, and you're going all day with kids...you lose pieces of yourself...because you're on autopilot, just like a machine...you're not doing things for yourself...so running really pulls me out of that. I take the time to run now.</td>
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| **2. Life-Style Changes Resulting in More Openness to Others and Self** | **P2**: Before running I would tell my girlfriend…. I feel so overwhelmed right now, with family commitments. Don’t take it personally if I don’t respond sometimes…. I’ve pulled myself out of it, and now make time for myself.  
P2: Running gets me grounded…. feeling appreciative, and the energy alive.”  
P2: I set my sights on new ideas…started setting goals…got me excited…really enjoying myself more…wanting to try new activities, like adventure racing. |
| **3. Discoveries Concerning Self-Improvements** | **P1**: I think it [running] has made me calmer inside. More focused on things, on myself, more than anything else.  
P1: Most of the women in my family are depressed….I don’t get depressed and I think it is because of running….I rarely feel sad….I have down periods, like when my mom passed away….running keeps me going…. I realized that everything in life is going to happen the way it is supposed to, and to let all the worry and sadness go.  
P2: The inspiration, goal setting, being appreciative and energy, all gets buried under the stress of not having time for myself. Constantly having to give as a mom….running gives me the moment to quiet myself….to refocus and re-think how good things are.  
P2: Running gives me the ability to quiet myself. Like I am listening to my soul….connected, in the most intimate and personal way with myself. I can hear myself think. I feel good, and strong, and healthy, and energetic.  
P2: Running is everything to me. It is symbolic of life, and my one outlet….I feel like I can breathe….I clear my head….you really get to know yourself better through running. I feel like my authentic self….no makeup….just down-to-earth me….nothing holds you back….it’s just your true spirit. I feel connected to who I am, who I’m supposed to be, and where I’m going. It’s the one time when I can cry and be myself.  
P2: I do my best thinking when I run. Always inspired. Think of, out-of-the-box kind of things….and with being a mom, I gain perspective with whatever the problem is. |
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| 4. Sustaining a Desired Mental Disposition | P1: More confidence….and empowered. After I qualified for Boston it was a big impact because I realized that I really can do anything that I set out to do….it felt like a great achievement, like anything in life is possible! 
P1: That my body and mind is strong. That I am healthy. That I can push myself to do goals. That I am disciplined enough to do [marathon] training. That I can achieve anything or whatever I want to achieve. These are all new feelings for me. 
P1: I have a more positive outlook. The little ups and downs don’t concern me as much as they used to. I just don’t worry now…like my financial challenges…issues in my kids’ lives that I can’t change…how I approach family conflicts. 
P1: More focused on myself. I used to put family first, now I make goals a priority that I want to do, and put myself first…like the marathon is pretty selfish…I spend a lot of time of money and time…like traveling to different areas so I can run. 
P2: I’m more reflective and calmer…less overwhelmed, worried…a better mom and more patient…Running is spiritual…the ability to quiet myself…it feels very emotional…so happy within and knowing I can do anything. 
P2: Having a positive attitude…that’s symbolic of running. You pick yourself up. |
| 5. Empowerment in Considering New Possibilities | P1: I feel a new confidence in myself…to do what I want to do…to strive for goals, or even have goals at work, with my husband, or for me…. I have started to set goals at work, that I thought were way above, and achieve those too. This is all new for me. 
P1: I step out of my comfort zone now, and push myself to volunteer for new projects all the time, and my work has changed a lot because of it. I also never tried to get promoted…now I know I can get through anything. I figure I will do the best I can. 
P2: And it [running] made me realize, of course since I was feeling so good, that I want to do more of this. That you can do and accomplish anything, because you’re on that real big high. Spiritual high. Endorphin high. You can do anything. And you have the energy to do it too, that’s the other part of it. |
### Table 1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Six Constituents of the Structure</th>
<th>Quotations Supporting the Six Constituents from Participants Transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Support for Encountering Future Challenges</td>
<td>P1: I’ve had no problems with menopause. I can keep up with people twenty years younger. My friends are worried about their mental and physical health, and I don’t have any concerns about my health at all… running has helped me with all of these things.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>P1: Running just has opened up a new life for me in many ways… it’s like a whole new world… I have a really good and positive outlook on life. If I wake up in the morning, I feel great physically and emotionally.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>P1: I have new feelings and awareness about myself… an instilled confidence and knowing. That if all else fails, like if something happens to my marriage… my relationships… or if I lost my job… or my horse dies… I still have running matter what. It instills me with pleasure… gives me peace… and I am extremely grateful.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P1: Running helps process feelings and problems. Like working on a problem, either work or a family issue, often the answers come during the run, other than other times.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>P2: It reminds me to take time for myself. To appreciate family and the simple things. That I can do this thing that I actually enjoy because I’m healthy enough to do it. It excited me to set more goals and running goals… helps me think out of the box.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>P2: When running by myself, thinking about being appreciative… how healthy I am… how I can improve my life… make sure I let people know how I feel… how much I love my husband, and I should hug him more. Running gives me time to refocus, and rethink how good things are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P2: Running brings me back to me. No busy noise or other people… it makes me focus, look at my future, clear my head… think out-of-the-box, be inspired, and feel alive. It’s like my kick-start. As life goes on you get more challenged. Running is something I can always hang on to, and forge ahead no matter what.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>P2 (founded a running group) That night I had the first meeting was really poignant because it not only excited me personally about running and setting goals. But also, it excited me that they were going to be able to look at themselves, look at their goals, and look at what they wanted at their lives. From running, and how that can change things for them.</td>
</tr>
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Discussion

The above table presents sample quotations from the participants’ transcripts that support the six constituents. The start of the women’s lived experience began while they were long-distance trail running in what they perceived as an enjoyable outdoor setting (see constituent 1). The tranquil, spiritual and physically challenging wilderness experience gave the women private time to reflect, which prompted more openness to others and themselves, thus resulting in life changes at home and work (see constituent 2). The women discovered self-improvements that occurred from marathon running (see constituent 3), and they were sustaining a desired mental disposition (see constituent 4). The women had empowerment in considering new possibilities for personal or career goals (see constituent 5), and felt support for encountering future unknown challenges (see constituent 6).

The findings revealed that marathon running empowers female identity during and after exercise, with mental and physical benefits. The essential structure included feminine insight describing increased awareness, improved emotional well-being, and enhanced self-efficacy with confidence-positive behaviors. The women had improved relationships with themselves as well family and peers (‘I’ve gotten more confident in my relationships.’). The women attempt new activities (i.e., “I’ve done things I never would have without running.”), such as traveling to destinations with new friends. The women have improved decision-making (i.e., reflecting on alternatives, weighing options, making resolutions) and better problem-solving (e.g., “Like working on a work problem or a family situation, often the answers come to me more during the run.”). The women also had improvement with balancing work/home responsibilities (e.g., effectively managing needs of employer, family, and friends) without becoming overwhelmed.

Comparison to Prior Research

Exercise science has laid a foundation for various health advances over the past 30 years. Countless books and articles describe the benefits of physical exercise on mental health, and vice-versa (Berger, Owen, Motl, & Parks, 1998; Eyler, Brownson, King, Brown, Donatelle, & Heath, 1998;
Majcen, 2007; Penedo & Dahn, 2005; Saxena, van Ommeren, Tang, & Armstrong, 2005; Wankel, 1993). These studies suggest that regular exercise and physical activity are associated with enhanced mood states (i.e., improved self-esteem, reduced anger, confusion, neuroticism), better quality of life (i.e., reduced stress, anxiety, depression), and improved health outcomes (i.e., higher vigor, reduced tension). This article is the first research that focused on the self-discovery and mental change process that occurred in connection with female long-distance running and how the shift benefited and impacted the personal and professional lives of women.

Research by Hanson and Needle (1974) showed physical benefits of reduced fat and weight control, increased energy, good health, enhanced work and greater life balance. In addition to physical benefits, there was a synergetic relationship between mental health and regular exercise. These aspects were reflected in the present study as well; however, what additionally emerged was how long-distance running empowered women to make positive changes at work and home. We discovered how women experienced, without a deliberate or mindful choice to transform behavior, an emotional change in connection with running and how the change impacted their personal and professional lives well after the exercise was completed.

Schomer and Dunne’s (1994) study of children in team sports found instilled self-assurance, healthy social interaction, personal accomplishment, and new skills to better manage difficult situations in individual and team settings. The women in our study exhibited similar benefits, but in contrast to team activity, these women ran individually without concern for competitiveness, personal sport performance or controlling their mindset through visualization or imagery. Emphasis was on taking lessons learned and applying them. They described enhanced decision-making (i.e., risk-taking with new project, problem-solving), which helped them with numerous adulthood challenges, mostly in the roles of mother and wife. They had improved well-being, increased self-respect and pride in themselves, new confidence in ability and skill set. They had relief from anxiety, stress, and fear of an uncontrollable future or the unknown.

Campbell (1999) found that key components of individual achievement and development included a sense of community and opportunity to share experiences with other women. Sonstroem (1984) stated that exercise increased self-confidence and expanded optimistic feelings in col-
lege women. Newcommer (2008) concluded that female marathoners ran in order to enhance physical (i.e., general health orientation and weight) and psychological health (i.e., coping, self-esteem), whereas men ran for competition and goal achievement. Macjen (2007) found that 27 women road marathoners (ages 40 to 64 years old) were motivated to improve all areas in life, such as having empathy and compassion, practicing sitting meditation, and being constructive with time. These above findings support the results of our study, however, the women in the present study also had increased patience, much more openness, and new respect for dissimilar viewpoints (i.e., with spouses and children).

Acadia (1996) found that female rock climbers experienced peace and spiritual connectedness while in a beautiful outdoor environment. “As a result of their climbing experiences, all the women reported the addition of new dimensions to their lives, personal growth, and a carryover of some aspect of climbing into other parts of their lives. Some felt this changed them as people” (Acadia, 1996, p. iii). Our study has extended the findings by Acadia (1996) relating to female rock climbing to women marathon running. Additional themes found in our study included self-empowerment and power, feelings of accomplishment, confidence in their own abilities in facing challenges, and taking risks at home and at work. The participants in this study also described having these same beneficial outcomes after experiencing a mental change in connection with distance running. What also emerged was a lack of depression (e.g., “Most of the women in my family are depressed, and I have never had to take a depressant drug. I don’t get depressed and I think it is because of the running.”), improved mood, and feelings of happiness, pleasure and positive self-worth (e.g., “A new confidence in myself and to do what I want to do, which wasn’t there before.”). Women found endurance exercise helped them overcome challenges within their personal (e.g., “When my mom passed away a couple of years ago it was tough, but I knew I had the running out there to keep me going.”), and professional lives. One woman feels she was more proactive at work during stressful times because distance running made her more confident and open to new projects. She described:

One of my co-workers retired and I volunteered for the greatest portion of her work even though I’m part time. In the past, I wouldn’t have had the confidence to take on new projects that are out of what I’m used to doing and out of my comfort zone. I still feel uncomfortable when I walk in and
realize I’ve taken on these things and I don’t know what I’m doing. But I’ll get through it.

In contrast to past research, this self-confidence in performing well was a natural outcome of the exercise rather than of a conscious choice to visualize success. For example, one participant used to feel fear and worry of the unknown, but after she started distance running, her concerns dissolved and were replaced with new courage to let go and to be accepting of whatever life may bring (e.g., “I realized that everything in life is going to happen the way it is supposed to happen, and to let go.”). She described, in regards to having less anxiety or fears:

I just don’t worry about things I used to; like financial things, family challenges, or circumstances in my kids’ lives that I can’t change. I am always there for my granddaughters, husband, and kids; but not at my own expense anymore.

As well as:

A new confidence or feeling about myself that if all else fails—like if something happens to my marriage, my relationships, or if I lost my job, or if a horse dies—running will always be there still, instilling me with pleasure no matter what.

Past research examined the widely used tool of visualization (considered a form of imagery) which included using imagination to create a multi-sensory experience with mental images that elicited scents, sounds, and tastes of imagined future events (Smith, Holmes, Whitemore, Collins, & Davonport, 2001). Focus was placed on creating mental images before exercise to help athletes get through and improve performance in future challenges during sport (Calmels, Holmes, Berthoumieux, & Singer, 2004). Brennan (2001) showed a direct link between emotional state and physical performance, with emphasis on how deliberate thoughts would impact future team performance. Visualization is both an effective performance enhancement and important pressure-coping technique (Brennan, 2001). Using imagery creates a sense of control and empowerment for athletes in a competitive environment (Thiese & Huddleston, 1999).
The above findings were not significant in the experience of our participants. Results show a positive outlook towards a brighter future was a natural outcome after exercise, rather than a conscious or deliberate choice. The present study revealed how individual sport may naturally transform women’s feelings (i.e., “I have new feelings and awareness about myself.”) and self-identity, and how the change positively impacted her relationships at home, work, and within herself. In addition to having a direct relationship between endurance exercise and mental thoughts, the women felt happiness (e.g., “Running makes me happy.”), exhilaration, euphoria (e.g., “I feel that real big spiritual high, endorphin high.”), and tranquility (e.g., “Running gives me peace more than anything.”), which naturally occurred during and well after exercise.

The closest concept in the literature in relation to mental change is the self-efficacy theory. This concept brings together the ideas of self-confidence and personal expectations. Self-efficacy is defined as individual’s belief or perception in their capability to perform a task successfully (i.e., to achieve anticipated outcomes) regardless of their past history. Singer et al. (2001) argued, “The self-efficacy construct is one of the most influential psychological constructs thought to affect achievement strivings in sport” (p. 340). These aspects are reflected in this study as well, since the data indicates that self-efficacy is a linked outcome of what naturally transpires following an emotional change in connection with long-distance running. For example, the female participants described first becoming aware of feeling unfulfilled with their life circumstances during an “aha moment” while they were running in a nature setting. After this initial awakening, they experienced a change in their thoughts and feelings which resulted in new behaviors and a belief system that included a heightened confidence (i.e., “a new confidence that wasn’t there before”), and capability to achieve anything in life (i.e., “that you can do and accomplish anything”).

One study examined the emotional changes of 34 individuals (13 women and 21 men; averaging 37 years old) who went from a sedentary lifestyle to actively training for a marathon in seven months with a run program (Schomer & Dunne, 1994). Volunteers completed written questionnaires before participating, during the training, and after the marathon event. The research was limited to a main focus on five negative emotions (tension, depression, anger, fatigue and confusion) with only
one positive (vigor) to monitor performance, detect possible issues (i.e., over training, injury, burnout, fatigue), and predict dropouts. Our study focused on emotional mood changes as well, however the method captured the actual lived experience of change and not an isolated quantitative measurement. The participants demonstrated how self-efficacy could naturally (i.e. without deliberate intent) emerge from the mental changes that had occurred for each individual athlete. The negative moods that were mentioned (i.e., depression, fatigue and uncertainty), only appeared previously to their mental change, when subjects were disconnected from their true authentic self. One woman described how distance running helped her manage the overwhelming stress of being a mother with young boys:

I think a lot of my inspiration, goals, appreciation, and energy get buried under the stress of not having time for me. I forget, lose touch, or don’t acknowledge. Running is the one thing that gives me the energy and the refocus to regroup. During a run I feel good again, strong again, healthy again, and energetic again. Running gets me back to being grounded, and the appreciation, and energy alive.

The majority of past research focused on the deliberate choice of transitioning to a mindset with controlled visualization and imagery techniques to boost competitiveness, sport performance and self-efficacy (Brennan, 2001; Calmels et al., 2004; Schomer & Dunne, 1994; Smith et al., 2001; Thiese & Huddleston, 1999). However, visualization tools were unknown to our participants who ran to have freedom from daily restraints at work or home (e.g., “Running is just freedom. When I was young I didn’t have the responsibilities that I have now, and I didn’t appreciate it. The simplicity of running lets me quiet myself, almost like a meditation.”).

Our participants were inadvertently swept away with their body-spirit-mind awakening in connection with marathon running (i.e., “The quiet moment I had [when running] was spiritual.”). The outcome was an enhanced self-efficacy (i.e., a new belief or perception in their capability to perform a task successfully (i.e., “I can do anything, and have the energy to do it too.”)). The women also had a clarity regarding whom they are (i.e., “I learned that my body was strong and healthy, that I can push myself to do these goals, and was disciplined enough to do the training.”). The women also realized what they desired in life (i.e., “I appreciate everything in my life now. Just thinking how I would like to do things.
even better."), and took action towards a future with greater dreams (i.e., “It’s [distance running] made me set big future goals. I really want to try new things, the adventure of it.”), and possibilities (i.e., “I can achieve anything.”).

Additional gaps in prior research remain as well, such as how self-efficacy beliefs impact novice endurance athletes who participate in individual sports, such as marathon running (Soffer, 2008). There is also a lack of data regarding the impact of non-physical activities on female athletes, such as changes with their inner emotions or outward behaviors towards themselves and others. This is the first study to explore what motivates women to naturally experience (i.e., without a deliberate choice to alter behavior) a mental change in connection with marathon running, and how the change impacts their personal and professional lives after the endurance exercise is completed.

Implications of Constituents

The phenomena that the women experienced involve a mental state in which a woman completely loses focus on what time it is. Through the rhythmic movement and intense effort of the body, her mind relaxes and goes into a meditative and peaceful state (Betancourt & Lieberman-Cline, 2002). Our participants reported that marathon running “gives me peace more than anything else,” and as a time of “quieting myself like a meditation.” They were fully unaware of the physical path they had just traveled, and the sense of time became distorted. As Csikszentmihalyi puts it, “Hours may pass by in what seems like minutes” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 13). They quietly lived in the moment (i.e., “It was in my own quiet moment. I kept running, and it just felt really good.”), where their mind, body and spirit were authentically integrated during exercise (Teichler, 2001). Our participants also shared an enhanced self awareness: “Like I was listening to my soul. Connected, in the most intimate and personal way with myself. I can hear myself think again.”

This state might be compared to the driver of a car becoming aware of their current environment and location on the road without any memory of where they were during the prior 20 minutes. Person safely driving their car have been found, on some unconscious level, to be able to relax and go into a soothing state known as highway hypnosis (Lardon &
In contrast to the marathon experience, however, the car is an external motor vehicle controlled by a sitting driver. The physical aspect involves what is outside the body, such as the moving steering wheel, the car vibrations, and the seat against one's back. The driver hears the radio, the engine revving, and the wind against the glass. One is unaware of relaxing and letting go into a hypnotic state (Lardon & Leadbetter, 2008). In running, however, the “vehicle in motion” is a woman’s own body. As she runs, she propels her body forward in an outdoor setting, entirely in touch with the beauty that surrounds her. She feels the fresh air on her skin, as well as inside her lungs from taking shallow breaths from an increased heart rate. She feels the snugness of her running shoes and the surface of the ground beneath her. Her cadence moves her forward in a rhythmic pace (i.e., feet hitting the ground, the shortness of breath, arms swinging back and forth). “This repetitive and intense effort can be a form of mediation. There’s only rhythm, like a mantra” (Betancourt & Lieberman-Cline, 2002, p. 47).

During this experience, a woman’s mind may drift to an inward place of peace, where she freely lets go (i.e., “The ability to quiet myself and just be. It was a quiet moment, and I was feeling really grateful.”). She silently becomes unaware of the environment (i.e., does not know where she just ran or what time is it), while her body functions in an autopilot mode (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). She is in a safe, effortless, blissful, an exceedingly private space. The experience is more than a meditative state (Murphy & White, 1995) or day dreaming trance (Lardon & Leadbetter, 2008), however, for there is an extraordinarily authentic connection between mind, body and soul (Teichler, 2001). It encompasses her entire core, in a very whole and “spiritual” manner. She has no responsibilities, stressors, or fears (“Running is symbolic of life and the essence of freedom.”). She is in the moment and feels free, whereas the physical “movement becomes spiritual and allows one to touch her core” (Teichler, 2001, p. 120). One participant believes while running she feels in touch with “my true spirit. I just feel so feel connected to who I am, who I am supposed to be, and where I’m going. That’s how it feels.”

At some point there is a visual awakening and the environment in which a woman is running surprisingly reappears (e.g., “Wow, I’m here at this 12 mile trail post already.”). This is similar to driving a car in that drivers may become aware of their surrounding after hearing a change of
songs on the radio or seeing another car. Drivers may ponder how they were able to drive their vehicle (i.e. performing on autopilot) while being consciously disconnected from their environment (Lardon & Leadbetter, 2008). While driving a car there is an obvious safety concern, however, which is not the case with running.

Another type of activity that may by provide an informative comparison with the running experience is a therapeutic back massage, in which one can also reach a heightened level of relaxation and serenity (Olney, 2007). Afterward the massage is over, the person is no longer in a deep or gratifying state but continues to enjoy the therapeutic effects from the recent physical bond of touch (Helms, 2006). This case is similar to the experience that occurs in connection with distance running where “that great feeling usually lasts for most of the day.” There is a sequence of reaching a tranquil emotional space that is “meditative and spiritual”, naturally awakening from it, and enjoying the lasting effects.

After a woman awakens from her peaceful and spiritual state, her mind, body and spirit have been rejuvenated and she feels enjoyment, similar to after a massage, and a “positive attitude and happier outlook and on life.” There is no analyzing or questioning of how the phenomena took place. Rather, there is this instinctual sense of being at “peace and in the moment.” There is an understanding that the moment occurs naturally to them, just as the body’s breath. The runner is aware that running makes her feel good both physically and mentally. For instance, our participants reported that running helps them “feel good again, strong again, healthy again, and energetic again,” one saying, “I may start a run feeling sluggish or sore, but once I get going and that runner’s high kicks in, and then I feel great the rest of the day, on all levels.” Since the women “feels so good”, there is no dissection or inquiry regarding how it happens, it just is. For instance, if someone were to ask her, “Do you breathe?” she would answer, “Of course I do.” This question seems absurd, yet unless she stops to take notice of your breath, the routine event goes unnoticed.

The experience may also be compared with a painter being asked, “How do you paint? What is your inspiration? How do you bring the painting to life?” The artist might reply that they just pick up their brush and paint. The work simply and organically comes to them. The artist is not choosing the work, but rather they show up, are in the moment, and remain open to what transpires in front of them (Jarvis, 2004). When the
painting is complete, the artist may feel a new freedom that was not there before. In terms of exercise, a woman may originally show up as a willing participant in the physical act of running. During the rhythmic movement of her body, and feeling comforted by the “beautiful outdoors” in nature, her mind and spirit are set free as she believes “I feel more like myself when I run; just my authentic self without any makeup. I can run and just be me.” She is transformed, just as a butterfly emerges from a cocoon. Her life-changing experience empowers her whole life, thus impacting the lives of others she touches (i.e. at work, home, and her community).

The underlining meaning or significance of the phenomena is that running is symbolic of the precious gift of life (Majcen, 2007), as well as the journey from birth to death. For instance, a woman realizes she is “in a rut” and physically going through the motions each day, yet is mentally exhausted and dissatisfied with her life (Kushnir & Melamed, 2006). She is a stranger in her own skin. She is detached from having dreams, goals or life purpose (“While on autopilot you’re just numb.”). What first began as a sincere intention to be the societal role model of a ‘good mother, wife and friend’, has negatively magnified into giving herself away. She is disillusioned and sees no end in sight from succumbing to the constant demands of others. She is burnt out, fatigued, and lost, with a perception of failure to handle her multiple roles. One participant described how running has served an outlet that gives her freedom, as she explains:

The running is an outlet where I feel like I can breathe. [laughs] Nobody’s tugging or pulling at me. I feel more pulled together. I clear my head. I’m always inspired when I run. So that’s carried on to me being a mom, and I gain perspective. I think, ok you know what? Things aren’t so bad. When I get back I’ll just be more patient with whatever the problem [laughs] or tantrums are.

Running reunites her deep inner self, ultimately empowering her to be reborn as a new woman. She discovers her current life is unfulfilling (“I felt so overwhelmed and wanted to pull myself out of it.”), as well as what her needs are to live, and what she wants in her future. With her new founded independence she celebrates, “I am a priority!” She views taking her personal time away from partners and children as being important if not vital, to maintain a sense of self, confidence and overall life balance (“It really catapulted me to come out of myself even more; coming out of
that complacency, a rut, it keeps me moving forward and managing my life better.”). She embraces it, knowing her “private time alone” helps her face daily challenges and future hardships. The therapeutic benefits may long continue after she takes off her running shoes. Her new founded gift of the phenomena received through running, brings her more life balance. She has increased clarity regarding what she uniquely wants to achieve, and enjoy each day with her home, career, friends and self. For instance, one participant enthusiastically described details of beginning a new project:

I started a women’s running group would take extra time but that it would make me feel like myself again. The first meeting was really poignant because it excited me about running and setting goals, as well as I was going to be able to help other women look at themselves, look at their goals, and look at what they wanted at their lives. From running, and how that can change things for them.

She enjoys the physical and mental state that may be long-lasting. She feels the sense of satisfaction, “Wow, I just ran 12 miles, 18 miles, a marathon!” The meaning is not about the winning or achieving a medal, it is the mental enjoyment the activity brings, such as the peace, the tranquil time, and just being with oneself. Our participants valued the relief from the drudgery of everyday life by having “time to escape from all the different dynamics and stressors of the external world.” For instance, “When you’re running, it’s just you. There’s nothing else but you and your [laughs] running shoes, your hat, or whatever you have.” It is the losing track of time, instead of being so absorbed in it. It is about being in that moment in time, without worry, and reaching that space with being with their internal selves. Another mental state that running encourages is relief from emotional pain. For example, one participant described how distance running near water helped her after her mother passed away. She said:

It was quiet, beautiful course. The water is so healing. I could run and cry. My mother loved birds and there were birds out there. I felt like I was in touch with her. Even now when I run along the Delta there are a lot of birds, and I am reminded of her. I do feel closer to her when I’m running. Much more when I’m running, then anywhere else. It’s a totally different experience. Like spiritual.
When a woman freely lets go and tends to her mind, body and spirit it is empowering. She finds herself wanting more of the gift that naturally and organically presented itself to her. She feels enjoyment ("I really enjoy myself and the adventure of it [distance running."]), rejuvenated and nourished by her experience, on a whole mind, body and soul connection. She changes from constantly nourishing and feeding the needs of others, to first taking care of her own needs and desires ("Now I make my goals a priority, and I put myself first."). She no longer suffers from personal neglect ("I used to always put family first, but now I don't. Not at my own expense.") , and she takes private “time for me to run” in order to “do something just for myself.”

The experience of inward connection brings significant strength, love, and peace. She is empowered and realizes, “I can take care of myself. I can celebrate myself. My life is filled with choices and anything is possible.” The belief system is changed, and she makes changes in her life. From her new relationship with herself, she begins to build new relationships with her spouse ("I am less critical of him, the things he does. I’m more open to his suggestions."), children ("I’m more willing to listen to them, to be more open, and kind of let them find their own path in life."), parent ("My mom is still with us, and I’m so grateful for the time we still have together."), co-workers, peers, etc. For example, one woman said long-distance running helped her overcome her shyness with others. She described:

My job was ok but I didn’t really push myself. It was actually my manager who kept on asking me to fill out paperwork, so I could get promoted. With my relationships it wasn’t like I went out to find friends. I was kind of a loner and shy, actually. More so, until I started running with a group.

When endurance exercise leads to injury, the athlete may be subjected to the stressors of emotional detachment from self and others (i.e., depressed state), from being forced to pull away from running, which represents one’s private connection and realization (Hoar & Flint, 2008). For instance, one participant said about a past injury that “When I’ve had the plantar fasciitis, I’ve felt more down, unmotivated, or as positive.” Future research might be vital to determining how to frame athletic injury in the context of self-discovery.

The study presented here simply has two subjects which may be considered a limitation by some. However, the purpose was not to examine a
large sampling or conduct a quantitative analysis, but to discover in detail what it is like for women who experience mental changes that arise in connection with marathon running. The sample of two women in the present study is enough to have shown that women can actually have this experience as consequence of running. Further research can investigate how common such changes are along with other general possibilities of change that may also be found.

Summary

This article discussed the significance and impact of endurance running on life change in female novice athletes. Participants described how their thoughts and feelings have changed since they have been long-distance running and how their change impacts relationships with their inner selves and others. They extended their newfound and enhanced positive outlooks to all aspects of their personal and professional lives.

The participant responses presented new material and add greater valuable insights into the relationship between emotional change and endurance exercise. For participants in the article, experiencing self-connection and self-discovery were key defining factors. Regardless of the outcomes, this self-discovery and mental change process began to build new understanding and knowledge of resources that assisted women in increasing self-awareness and in experiencing mental change.

References


Run and triathlon training as a female can have its fair share of challenges. We are not shaped like men, so we won't swim, bike or run like them. Repin and click through this article for more in-depth information on what it means to train as a female in endurance sports. Whether that's training for a triathlon, an ironman triathlon, a 5k or marathon. This is for you ladies! Like a marathon runner, lifelong learners plan, prepare, work hard and execute to push themselves to success. Photo by Joe. What do marathon running and lifelong learning have in common? More than you might think actually! I've been an athlete for most of my life, generally in team sports, and I have always loved it. In the last couple of years though I haven't been able to compete as fiercely as I used to as the younger generation come through. I was getting old!! I'm only 37 now but when competing against 19 and 20 year olds who don't have as many miles on the clock I started to think that my Willingness to tolerate a hard effort if it means we'll finally grab that PR, for example. And mental toughness is all about embracing how you endure. 2. Find a way, not an excuse. For morning runners, alter your schedule and run in the evening after a long day when you're feeling fatigued. Tolerating an uncomfortable moment each day lets you learn the connection between an unpleasant physical experience and the games your mind plays to quickly escape or avoid. Related Story.