

RUNNING HIGH

Is there any truth to the “runner’s high”? And does running reduce stress? The answer is yes and no! I like to sound like the scarecrow on *The Wizard of Oz*. If you don’t know what I mean, rent the movie! We’ll explore the ambiguity in the paragraphs below. I know from a personal standpoint that running has been a stress reliever, but it has also created more stress, so I’m living proof of what the research denotes. One thing for sure is that there IS such thing as a “runner’s high”.

Running CAN be great stress relief. It is a fact that when you run or do any other form of aerobic exercise, your body does release ENDORPHINS, which are your body’s natural pain killer hormones (same as opium). This accounts for the runner’s high. Studies have confirmed that when people are at a certain aerobic state, the endorphins get released into the blood stream. Simply put, these endorphins elevate your mood during and following your activity. Yes, endorphins do get released during many other activities such as listening to music, etc. For our purposes, running will bring these out.

In addition to releasing endorphins into the blood stream, running also helps relieve stress by helping you blow out cortisol, which is a stress hormone that floats around your body and wreaks havoc when you are under stress. Basically, cortisol is the opposite of endorphins. But the activity itself (burning up the energy) will help you blow this stress out. Hitting a punching bag does the same thing, but again, we’re runners, so we try to blow the stress out on our runs. The studies confirm that we can.

Is there a formula? You bet there is. The studies on runner’s high indicate that endorphin release occurs when you are training at 75-80% of your maximum heart rate. So this is a moderate running pace. Not hard and not easy. As far as blowing off stress goes, any AEROBIC PACE will work. So even slow jogs and walks will blow stress off (don’t go too hard—more on that later). If you want to burn off the stress, you have to make sure that you do your best not to bring it with you on the run. In other words, try to let your mind go. If you stew on the run, chances are you didn’t blow off a lot of stress. George Sheehan used to call running his meditation, and I think that’s a great way to put it. You simply run and let your gait be your mantra. Just try to zone out, clear your head, and you will leave the stress behind you.

When can running not be a stress reliever? Very simply, it’s when it becomes a source of stress. We know, or hopefully know, that overtraining is training that has gone too far either by being too much or too intense. We also know that it is counterproductive. When we get overtrained, we are simply adding to our stress, and studies have shown a greater amount of cortisol in the blood stream of overtrained individuals. Simply put, being overtrained is being physically over-stressed. Moderation is the key. Too much of anything is not a good thing. Also, a speed workout will not be a stress reducer. In fact, it creates stress. That is sort of the idea. In a speed session, you are trying to break the body down somewhat. Of course I’m a huge advocate of speed work. It needs to be in a competitive runner’s plan. But as for burning off stress or creating endorphins that day, it will not.

Running out of compulsiveness will not relieve stress either. Again, it will create it. If you're running because you feel guilty, then you are not doing your mind much good. Compulsive running will catch up to you and will create stress later by forcing you into an overtraining rut and/or possibly injury, which of course won't relieve any stress. Finally, running through injuries is stress in itself. Real physical stress. When you run dinged up, you're asking to get injured, so running while slightly hurt will not lead to long term stress relief.

I hope I've cleared up some of the questions regarding healthy running and what it does for the mind. I know I've been at both ends of the equation. Overall, running is a great stress reliever in my life. I know the workouts that work best for me, and that is the 30-40 minute runs at moderate pace. They leave me feeling great. Those are the runs I look most forward to, and they're the ones that I'll look to after a stressful day. But I've also been overtrained, so I've run myself into stress as well. And that is never pleasant. I try to learn my lessons and keep it all in moderation, because running feels too good to have to take a break due to overtraining.