

# The Physical, Mental and Spiritual Benefits of Running Outdoors

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Nature writer, Richard Louv (author of bestselling book, Last Child in the Woods) rightly observes that if the Planet stands a chance, human beings must start building a closer relationship with nature. “Nature deficit disorder” is a term he has coined to describe the current alienation of human beings from the natural environment - a phenomenon that contributes to everything from obesity to stress, as we spend endless hours indoors, embracing the sedentary lifestyle.

Magnuson Series taps into the vital relationship between nature and human health, by offering monthly running and walking activities for individuals, groups and duos, based at the stunning Magnuson park on the shores of Lake Washington, Seattle. In this post, we discuss the important physical, mental, and spiritual effects of running in the Great Outdoors, an activity that yields more benefits than indoor exercise.

## **A Fitness Boost from Outdoor Running**

Gyms can be a great way to hone your fitness when time is of the essence or the climate is extreme, but studies indicate that going for an outdoor run is ideal for

various reasons. Firstly, we take different strides when running outdoors, flexing our ankles more and stressing muscles in unique ways.

The unpredictability of the outdoor terrain means that we have to alternate between running uphill and downhill, conditions which treadmills are still unable to completely emulate.

We also burn more calories outdoors, with studies showing that the exertion of running outside is greater than on a treadmill.

Of course, running per se has countless benefits for our physical health, including maintenance of a healthy body weight, greater cardiovascular fitness, and prevention of obesity-related conditions such as Type 2 diabetes. It can also speed up your metabolic rate, an effect that lasts for several hours. To make the most of your daily run, try having a contrast shower afterwards; cold water will encourage your body to 'heat up', thus giving your metabolism an additional boost.

### **Outdoor Running Can Lift the Mood**

Recent studies have shown that when covering the same distance on foot indoors and outdoors, the latter leads to greater enjoyment, vitality, enthusiasm, pleasure, and self-esteem, and lower levels of stress, fatigue, and depression. This adds to a plethora of findings on the mental benefits of running per se, which include battling stress-related conditions such as anxiety and depression.

In one study, participants were assigned to one of three groups ( one group ran, the other received cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and the third took part in psychotherapy). The results showed that all three groups enjoyed a similar decline in depressive symptoms, which is interesting considering that CBT is considered the 'gold standard' for treating depression. Researchers believe that the sun might have something to do with it; exposure to direct sunlight is known to have a positive effect on mood.

Running, like other forms of cardiovascular exercise, lowers levels of stress hormone, cortisol, though a few small-scale studies have shown that the effect is more extreme after exercising outdoors.

### **Honing Our Spiritual Health**

Running can also help us tap into our spiritual side when undertaken outdoors. Human beings throughout history have found important links between nature and spirituality, with cultures such as the Native American Indians and the Aborigines of Australia finding important spiritual symbols in nature. This relationship has also been observed in the work of philosophers such as Carl Jung, who believed that nature contained powerful archetypes that reminded human beings of the importance of a spiritual life. Therefore, it is vital to connect with nature as much as we can – in modern life, time constraints can mean that our daily workout is the only available time to do so.

Recently, Eckhart Tolle reminded us that “We depend on nature not only for our physical survival. We also need nature to show us the way home, the way out of the prison of our own minds. We got lost in doing, thinking, remembering, anticipating - lost in a maze of complexity and a world of problems.” Is there any better way to break free of this prison than by running?