



TRAIL *therapy*

Running through the wilds is a simple way to combine a runner's high with nature's therapeutic benefits. Throw in the social aspects of a running group and you've got the ideal remedy for stress, anxiety and depression.

WORDS / JENNIFER CHASTRE PHOTOGRAPHY / SIMON CARTER, ONSIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

Jodie's heartbeat slowly decelerated as she diverted her dusty 4WD away from the busy stretch of highway that routinely took her home after yet another exhausting day at the office. Her usual corporate office attire had (by this time) made way for the gym gear that was customarily stashed in the boot of her car along with protein powders, water bottles, dog leads, pint-sized scooters, thongs and beach towels that hadn't seen the washing machine for weeks.

It was a last-minute decision to ditch the confines and egos of her local gym and head out for a bit of solitude and sanity among the bush trails. It was to be the necessary distraction she needed before heading home to dinners, homework and bedtime storybook routines. "Me time" was a key part of her weekly schedule and, without it, it seemed all would come crashing down.

As the road began meandering through tree-lined suburban streets toward the narrow country thoroughfares, Jodie could feel the office-induced anxiety slowly abating. As soon as she left the car and hurdled over the makeshift fence towards the rocky trail, she was stepping into a world that was designed for her. It was a place where she could see life in a

different way. Hearing the quietness in nature was the calming, comforting and mind-quietening effect she needed in order to maintain some kind of balance. She didn't know why, but being out here wove a weird yet fascinating magic.

THE NATURE CURE

In recent years, researchers have become aware of a powerful new kind of therapy that's as effective against depression as traditional psychotherapy or medication. Not only is this therapy accessible to anyone at any time, it's also free — and it's not even new. In fact, it's older than the human race.

This is ecotherapy: contact with nature. Extensive research conducted all over the world has identified the importance of ecotherapy as a tool for boosting physical and mental wellbeing, though it's not surprising that nature has a therapeutic effect when you consider that the human race (and all of our evolutionary forebears) has been closely bonded with it for our entire existence.

Brisbane-based psychologist Lana Hall (lanahallpsychology.com) recognises the therapeutic benefits of using "forest therapy" as a tool for alleviating stress, depression and anxiety symptoms. "It makes sense that going for a walk in nature helps us to relax and improves

our mood," she says. "Nature itself has an ability to target all of our senses and such variation of sensory experiences forces us to tune into our bodies more, which means less focus on the unhelpful thoughts in our heads."

Hall's insights into the healing effects of nature come not only from her scientific knowledge but also from firsthand experiences of combining exercise with nature. "I'm a runner myself and only run outside, for the very reason of connecting with the natural world. There is no better feeling than timing my runs (or walks) to coincide with a sunrise or a sunset. This is a time when birds are at their most active and the changes in light and temperature are at their most pronounced."

Nature is also the perfect way to experience feelings of gratitude, she notes. "Seeing something beautiful tends to invoke feelings of gratitude in us as we appreciate the chance to witness it. It's also a state in which we focus on what we have rather than what we lack, [so] it's a great antidote to depressive and anxious thinking".

HIGH & MIGHTY

The kinds of sensory experiences obtained from

exercising in nature contribute to what's known as the "runner's high". You only have to scroll through early morning Instagram and Facebook posts to catch a glimpse of the positive energy that exists between runner and nature — and the flow-on effect is contagious.

According to Cedric Bryant PhD, chief science officer for the American Council of Exercise, "'Runners high' is a phrase we use to describe the feelings of psychological wellbeing that are associated quite often with long-duration, rhythmic-type exercise."

Road running definitely falls into this category and, if you're a runner, whether you pound the pavement for fun, competition, weight loss or sanity, there's no doubt you've experienced this euphoric high. It's what gets you habitually waking to early morning alarms or sees you diverting your car to the beach for that afternoon jog.

The feeling of invincibility that comes after running is what ironically recharges the batteries and allows runners to tackle





the daily challenges of a hectic work and family life. For some, though, the pleasure they gain from the release of endorphins in the brain can sometimes come at a price. They seek it out at any cost and an overuse injury such as shin splints or stress fractures can send a frustrated road runner to tears and even back into the depths of depression.

Is it possible to find a substitute to pavement pounding that can charge those positive emotions in a similar way? For Gold Coast occupational therapist Jac Edser (jacedser.com.au), the answer is “yes!” After experiencing her own setbacks due to running injuries, she’s now encouraging clients, fellow runners and gym enthusiasts to go off the beaten track for an adventurous dose of dirt.

Edser offers a unique and holistic approach to muscular skeletal pain, chronic pain and sports injuries by incorporating an awareness of “body intelligence” into her therapies. “The beauty about trail running is that you’re training not only your body but your mind also,” she says. “Not only are you activating your muscles in a whole different way, you must also be very mindful of every step, maintaining a constant focus in the present moment. This is why trail running is the perfect graded rehabilitation from injury.”

Billy Cane, 41, was one of those frustrated road runners who turned to trail running after being diagnosed with shin splints in late 2014. Shin splints, a common complaint, refers to pain felt anywhere along the shinbone from knee to ankle. For Cane, this diagnosis meant that running was out of the question so he began walking in the local national park to keep his fitness levels up.

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Walking soon turned to running and, before he knew it, he was entering more trail events than road races. “I found walking and running on the trails was easier on my legs and much better on the mind,” explains Cane, acknowledging the spiritual element of trail running in addition to the physical benefits.

TAKING IT OFF THE STREETS

With all its physical and psychological benefits, trail running is no longer the domain of the super-fit endurance runner — increasingly, recreational runners are now choosing to seek adventure, fun and freedom off-road. Sure, there will always be inspirational athletes who push their bodies to their trail-running limits in an attempt to break records in competitions but shorter, more accessible trail events are also being introduced to the Australian running calendar.

In Australia, ultra-events (anything longer than a marathon) such as the Ultra-Trail Australia (previously known as the North Face 100) are now offering distances to suit all levels. Held in May in the Blue Mountains National Park in NSW, the festival includes the full 100km race, 50km, 22km, the stair challenge (951 stairs, 1km) and also a free kids’ 1km fun run, which honours

the role of children as a valued part of the festival and allows them to experience trail running for themselves.

The 2016 event recorded capacity fields (4017 entrants) and attracted a total of 848 international competitors, making it the fourth-largest trail race in the world. This year’s event was expected to attract a further 15 per cent increase in numbers, bringing with it greater global media coverage.

But it’s not the lure of media attention that attracts crowds to the picturesque landscapes that frame our trails. Events such as the South East Queensland Trail Running Series, Victoria’s Hoka One One Trail Running Series and Tasmania’s Endorfun Series all cater for a variety of distances, tailored to the ability of the average runner or hiker.

You only have to follow any trail runner on Instagram to see why this new adventure sport is gathering momentum. With routes passing through stunning bushland and across peaks bearing names like Strawberry Hill, Drop Bear Alley, Ugly Sister, Vomit Peak and Hellfire Pass (all named by the trail runners themselves), it’s no wonder people are drawn to the brutality and beauty each trail brings.

KEEPING IT SOCIAL

If stumbling over slippery rocks and landing face down in a puddle of mud is your thing, it may be time to join one of the many social running groups that hit the trails each weekend. Encouragingly, girls seem to love it just as much as the blokes — yet there’s always room for more.

Trail-running groups such as Trail Chix (trailchix.net), in Nerang in southeast Queensland, are helping break down the barriers for many women by getting them out among the dirt. Its founders, Tymeka Warburton and Connie Richards, are as enthusiastic about life as they are about trails and “get a real buzz” when they watch members of their group achieve what they never thought possible. But, when it comes to inspirational women, they immediately name social runner Cassie Cameron who joined the group in February 2015.

AGAINST THE ODDS

I first met Cassie Cameron in May 2015 at a local night trail event and was immediately attracted to her and the friendly group of women dressed in identical singlets and bright reflective tights. The head torches and glow sticks



weren't the only things beaming that night as Cameron confidently high-fived her teammates and set off on the 6.5km relay event. She'd joined the group three months prior in search of friendship and extra weekly training motivation.

Having completed two Kokoda Challenges (96km) and a few ultra-trail runs, there was no stopping Cameron's capacity to partake in challenging events. But her real challenges had only just begun. Ten months after first joining the group and the day after turning 38, she was diagnosed with the chronic autoimmune disease rheumatoid arthritis (RA), becoming one of its 62 per cent female sufferers.

Cameron struggles as she describes how she went from being able to run 50km to barely being able to walk to the bathroom without being reduced to tears. But, while she waits for treatment to settle the inflammation and pain in her joints, she still makes the effort to go for a walk in the trails.

Most people who suffer from RA find that exercising is beneficial as it helps maintain muscle strength, joint flexibility and builds up stamina, which helps to manage the pain. In Cameron's case, "I always feel so much happier and relaxed after hitting the trails. The friends, the fresh air and knowing that I've beaten

rheumatoid arthritis today is the reason why I'll always keep going back."

As her frail body sits cupping its swollen fingers around a glass of water, there's a certain unassuming invincibility and steely determination in Cameron's eyes. It's a character trait that many trail runners share as they humbly navigate their way through life's rocky and sometimes muddy terrain.

CREATING CONNECTIONS

Twenty-nine-year-old Ian Dowling is another example of how trail running

provides powerful connections, not only with nature but with self. After the death of his mother when he was 12, Dowling turned to running as a form of mental therapy. "The physical pain of running was easy compared to the other emotional pain from losing a loved one," he says.

"Amazing things can happen on an emotional and spiritual level when you run in nature," adds Dowling, his words flowing effortlessly as he shares how trail running for him has been the gateway to healing and mindfulness. "Every run is like a life class in some way, so starting a day on the trails just gets me in the right space for the whole day."

Our confinement to man-made environments is only a recent phenomenon and, just as it is for Dowling, contact with green spaces typically feels like going back home. It fills us with a sense of safety and belonging. We crave nature in the same



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HIT THE TRAILS!

Australia

■ **Trail events:** lazyrunner.com/australian-trail-runs, adventurerace.com.au/Search/Trail-Running

NSW

■ **Trail running association:** runningwildnsw.com

■ **Trail series:** sydneytrailseries.com.au

■ **Running groups:** sydneytrailseries.com.au/sydneytrailseries/running-groups

QLD

■ **Trail running association:** traq.org.au

■ **Trail series:** seqtrailrunningseries.com.au

■ **Adventure races:** adventurerace.com.au/Search/Trail-Running/Queensland

■ **Running groups:** wildrunners.com.au, trailchix.net

VIC

■ **Trail events:** trailsplus.com.au

■ **Trail series:** rapidascent.com.au/hokaoneonetraillseries

■ Running groups:

facebook.com/groups/sctrs/

SA

■ **Trail running association:** trailrunningsa.com

■ **Trail events:** adventurerace.com.au/Search/Trail-Running/South-Australia

■ **Running groups:** trailrunningsa.com/trail-running-groups-in-south-australia

WA

■ **Trail events:** adventurerace.com.au/Search/Trail-Running/Western-Australia

■ **Trail series:** perthtrailseries.com

■ **Running groups:** mrtrailrunners.org.au

NT

■ **Trail events:** rapidascent.com.au/runlarapinta

TAS

■ **Trail events:** adventurerace.com.au/Search/Trail-Running/Tasmania

■ **Trail series:** endorfun.com.au/trail-runs

way a child needs a mother and derive the same feeling of comfort from it.

Trails serve as that the perfect home away from home for people in need, providing fun, limitless adventures and endless expanses to explore. It's the freedom to be present and "still" in a society that encourages noise and busyness that sets this pastime apart from others. And it's not just the trail runners themselves who benefit — your bosses, colleagues, friends and family also reap the benefits when you're energised, refreshed and focused.

Trail running affords us the chance to form a connection to nature, to ourselves and to something far greater than our physical existence. Above all, though, it's the primal nature of trail running that provides the ideal therapeutic supplement to any wellness program. And, just as it is for Jodie, it may be the magical part of your day that guarantees a closer connection to nature and the most important person in the world: you. 🌿

Jennifer Chastre is a qualified primary school teacher and freelance writer with a passion for all things preventive health as a result of witnessing her mother's 10-year struggle with dementia.

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