

EXCUSE-FREE RUNNING

your local running club's weekend group run. Most clubs welcome members and non-members alike, with participants going various distances and different paces. It's a great way to meet fellow runners, too. Go to www.rrea.org, and click on "Clubs" to locate ones near you. Or contact your local running store, which probably organizes group runs on weekends.

3. YOU'RE TOO TIRED

Real life: Your newborn child has left you short on sleep. Or the 12-hour-a-day demands at work are taking a toll. You're simply too exhausted to change clothes, let alone go for a run.

Real-life solutions: Don't think about whether you should or shouldn't go for a run. Your new mantra needs to be those three little words: "Just do it." Once you do, you'll get a pleasant surprise after the first few, stiff-legged minutes of running as your exhaustion melts like butter on a griddle.

Whether you were sleep-deprived, just bone-tired, or both, a good run will quickly awaken and revive you, pumping you full of enough energy to carry you through the day or evening. Granted, the very idea that a physical workout such as running can actually energize you is quite illogical. But all you need to do is try it, and you'll see that it works.

4. YOU'RE TOO STRESSED

Real life: Who pushed your buttons today? Was it a client, your mother-in-law, your teenage daughters?

(Who *didn't*?) There are bills to pay, and trying to help your kid with 8th-grade algebra has you grinding your teeth. After figuring out how to explain equations, you still need to finish the work you brought home. A run is simply out of the question. You're just trying to come up for air.

Real-life solutions: C'mon, you know this one. You know because you've read and heard about it, and it's worked for you countless times. But in case you're in denial, we'll say it again: Running reduces stress; in fact, it's one of the best stress-busters out there. Many health professionals prescribe it for their stressed-out patients. Studies have proven that running works effectively to calm the frazzled mind. The President of the United States uses running every day for stress relief, and I don't care how crazy your life is, it's probably not any worse than his.

5. THE WEATHER STINKS

Real life: Go ahead and pick one: It's too hot, cold, humid, windy, wet, icy. Weather is a great justification for not running because it shifts all blame to the forces of

nature. It's not my fault, you smugly assure yourself. It's that annoying guy on The Weather Channel who predicted the brutal cold front that came through and prevented me from running. Nice excuse. But it's not going to work.

Real-life solutions: The weather is vitally important to all runners, but most runners figure that what doesn't kill them just makes them tougher. Most runners think there's nothing more invigorating than running through 5 inches of freshly fallen snow. Or beating the heat before the sun comes up. Most run-

ners enjoy an occasional duel with the harshest elements. How so? They prepare for it. Here's what you can do so you don't use the weather as an excuse:

- If the day is likely to be too beastly hot or humid, or the air is too polluted, run early before it gets too bad. Also, either carry some water or sports drink (hydration belts make it convenient), or plan to run by several water fountains.

- If it's going to be extremely cold, try to run in the daylight hours when it won't be quite as brutal. Wear gloves and a hat, and be sure to invest in running clothes made of lightweight, moisture-wicking material, and dress in layers. If you get too warm, peel them off and tie them around your waist.

- If it's raining or snowing, wear a water-resistant running top and tights over breathable inner layers.

- If the weather is truly horrendous, and the footing is treacherous, jump on a treadmill, or seek out an indoor track (see No. 6).

6. IT'S TOO DARK

Real life: Like the weather, there's nothing you can do about darkness. If that's the only time you can run, prepare for it. But don't use the darkness as an excuse for skipping a run.

Real-life solutions: Running-specialty stores and bike shops carry an array of reflective, neon-colored shirts, jackets, vests, and adhesive strips. On dark, unlighted roads or even trails, powerful flashlights or headlamps can light the way. Night running demands more awareness of your surroundings, but it can be just as exhilarating as a daylight run.

If you live in a particularly tough neighborhood or busy city where the streets are just too dangerous to run in the dark, run indoors on a health-club treadmill or indoor track. Some clubs let non-members work out for a minimal fee. Treadmills let you run any pace, on any incline, in climate-controlled comfort. If you dislike the gym, purchase a home treadmill. (For treadmill buying info, visit www.runnersworld.com, click on "Shoes & Gear," then "Treadmills.")

7. YOU HAVE NO MOTIVATION

Real life: We all go through periods when it's tough to get the motor running. We can't seem to get psyched up for a run, and no amount of inspiration or encouragement seems to work.

Real-life solutions: If you really don't want to run, don't. The feeling will pass in a few days. But remember also that you'll almost always feel much better once you get out the door. Try this trick: Tell yourself you're going to run for just 10 minutes. That's it. Often, that's enough to break out of your lethargy, and you'll be amazed how quickly the time goes. Once you've been running for a few minutes, you'll probably feel good enough to keep going for a half-hour or more. Or if you're truly in the dumps, and even 10 minutes of running is out of the question, walk. Just getting outside and moving for a few minutes is better than moping around. And often times, you'll end up breaking into a run.



THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR: Don't put off your run. Call a training buddy, and head for a scenic running spot.

8. YOU FEEL GUILTY

Real life: After being away from your family all day, you come home and . . . then what? Do you selfishly head right back out to get your run in? That won't score

points for you. So instead of feeling guilt-stricken for neglecting your family, you ditch the run.

Real-life solutions: There are two ways to avoid this dilemma. The first is to leave work a little early, then stop before you get home and run in a park or along a bike path. This lets you get your run in before your family ever sees you, and also allows you to shed work and commute stress. If your family still lays a guilt trip on you for getting home later, point out that the run makes you healthier and more relaxed. If they don't buy that, try this: You owe it to yourself.

The other solution is even better: Convince your spouse and kids to become your occasional running partners. They can join you on a run (or keep you company on a bike), allowing for quality family time and a nice dose of exercise.

9. YOU PROCRASTINATE

Real life: How many times have you said these words—"I'll run later"—and never did? If that sounds at all like you, join the crowd. We all suffer from this one at times. "Later" often turns into "tomorrow" and then "next week." Before you know it, you have a week of blank pages staring at you in your training log.

Real-life solutions: Pencil in a specific time on your day calendar for your run and you'll be a lot more likely to do it. Meeting a friend raises the chances you'll feel obligated to follow through.

If your friend cancels out at the last minute, don't cave in and use that as an excuse to bail. Instead, run solo, and give your partner grief about what a great run you had.

Another way to fit running into your schedule is to join a running-club group run (see No. 2) once or twice a week. If it becomes a habit you look forward to each week, you won't play hooky as often.

10. YOU FEEL POSTRACE LETDOWN

Real life: You were so good and trained like a champion for so many months. On race day, you gave it everything

you had and maybe even set a personal record. Congratulations! But now the necessary recovery days have stretched into weeks of infrequent runs. With the big race behind you, it's hard to gear up again.

Real-life solutions: One antidote is to find another race in the weeks that follow the "big one." Then pick another after that, so you're racing maybe once a month or so. To keep your interest level high, pick from a variety of races—different distances; road and trail races; big-city and small-town ones. You will probably enjoy yourself more taking this potpourri approach than putting all your eggs in the basket of one or two races a year.

One other thing that should keep you running (if not racing) year-round is that the alternative stinks. For every week you fall out of running shape, it can take a couple of weeks to get back to your previous fitness level. Ping-ponging back and forth between being in shape and out of shape is like driving an expressway with stop lights every quarter-mile: It's hard on the engine to constantly whip yourself back up to speed. That's why excuse-free running is easier, healthier, and more productive. Once you jettison the excuses, running becomes as automatic as filling up the tank. **R**