

The Confidence Effect

“Running makes me stronger.” It’s a refrain we hear often in the running community. But for these five women, the confidence gained from logging miles gave them the strength to reimagine their lives, careers, and families.

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A New Path Forward

ELVINA SCOTT

Four years ago, Elvina Scott finally pressed pause. For 10 years, she and her husband cared for their daughter Colby while both working full-time. Colby was born with multiple disabilities. At six months old, Colby started having severe seizures, a condition that continues to dominate their home in Ithaca, New York. Colby is nonverbal and nonmobile and needs help with most of her basic functions. It's an endless stream of work—feeding, cleaning, and diapering; the type of work a parent expects will end after a certain age, but for Scott, has persisted for years.

She was exhausted from the years of chronic sleep deprivation. Then her doctor intervened, placing Scott on disability and telling her to rest. In that moment, Scott's perspective shifted. She accepted what her life would look like—that Colby would always come first—and she felt a certain relief. She eventually decided to stay home to care for her daughter.

The transition to full-time caregiver was hard. Growing up on the coast of California, Scott believed she could have it all: a career, a family, and plenty of epic outdoor adventures. Now, her world had shrunk dramatically, and she felt lost and without a map.

In search of some mental space, Scott began "aimlessly" running on nearby trails. "When I get up after a really stressful night with Colby, it feels like there's this exoskeleton of stress that's scratchy," she says. "When I get out in nature, it quickly soothes that hum of stress. I come into my body and feel good in my body, which I hadn't for a very long time."

Not long after, Scott signed up for her first trail race. About four miles into the 10K, she came to an intense downhill section—single-track and



punctuated with big rocks and tree stumps. Instead of hesitating, Scott flung herself forward. She recalls making a deep, primal sound as she bounded down the trail, like she was releasing trauma lodged deep inside her. "All these different moments were flinging through my mind like a slideshow. They were flung out of my brain and left behind," she says. "By the time I finished, I felt like I had claimed something back. I went from this sense that I never had enough time or energy, or that I wasn't doing enough, to a sense that I was going to do this well. I was going to be in the woods, take care of myself, and run in a way that was brave."

Running became a place where Scott, now 50, can feel successful and strong. Running has everything to do with Colby, who is now 15, and nothing to do with Colby at the same time. "Watching Colby recover from thousands of seizures and rally with her spirit in tact—this readiness to be delighted

and stoked again about life—it really taught me that we know our limits more than we know our strengths," she says.

Scott's trail adventures have rubbed off on Colby, too. When she comes home, Colby beams at her "like I'm Christmas," says Scott. "I have all these good vibes and hormones coursing through me after a run and she's totally perceptive of that. She's so stoked. She's not in a body that's ever going to run and this is how she gets a taste of it."

More than anything, the transition to trails has helped Scott find new joy. "You can have a life that is and looks quite challenging, and you can still have total beauty and freedom within that. It's not this tragic drudgery," she says. That perspective is one she strives to model for her 12-year-old daughter Coral. "By taking care of myself in this way, doing things that look brave, I hope I'm showing her that life doesn't stop even if it gets hard. You can keep looking, shaping, and redefining."

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The Right Steps

DALILA YEEND

Dalila Yeend wasn't remotely interested in running 10 years ago. But she was looking for free childcare for her then 1-year-old son, her second child. She was also involved in an abusive relationship at the time and needed a reason to get out of the house. So when her caseworker from Unity House, a human service agency in Troy, New York, told her about its new partnership with Strong Through Every Mile (STEM), Yeend signed up.

Yeend hadn't run since middle school. Lacing up was rough at first, she said. Upon meeting the other women who had registered for STEM, Yeend thought to herself, "Well, we look like a bunch of misfits and this is going to be terrible." The women wore whatever clothing they had—leggings, sweatshirts, pajama pants, and jeans. Three women, including Yeend, were smoking.

But over the course of 10 weeks, the STEM group met three times a week to train for its first 5K. "As the weeks went on, I just started liking it," she says. "I looked forward to meeting with this group of women and running and walking with them. It was a safe environment, and we could talk about all the stuff going on at home and not be judged by other people."

Soon, this group of women and the STEM trainers became an indispensable support network for Yeend. When she missed three days due to a domestic situation at home, the STEM trainers were worried that Yeend was going to drop out of the program. They came to her house to check on her and encouraged her to come back. Another time, she was trapped inside her house

with her abusive partner. One of her friends from STEM came to get her, saying that Yeend had to go to training.

As she started to feel better mentally and physically, Yeend began to look at herself in a different light. Ultimately, it was the high of finishing her first race that changed the trajectory of her life. "It's a feeling I will never forget. I started something and went all the way through and finished it," she says. That newfound self-esteem gave Yeend the courage to walk away from her abuser. "Without running and without STEM, I don't think I would have had the confidence to walk away from my domestic situation as early as I did. Running gave me the strength to say, 'I'm stronger than this.'" Yeend went on to run seven 5Ks during her first year of running.

Now 38 years old, Yeend is a manager of a restaurant and role model for other domestic violence survivors. She was also one of the main advocates for New York State's green light law, which passed in 2019 and provides people equal access to driver's licenses, including undocumented immigrants. Yeend is originally from Australia and was detained for three months by U.S.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2018 after rolling through a stop sign. She's now a green card holder. She never imagined that she'd have the courage to speak on the legislative floor of the New York State Assembly and Senate.

Yeend still runs, too. "It's part of who I am, who I will always be now. Whenever I feel like I'm lacking something in life, running is what I can do to make myself feel better and accomplished," she says. "If you go for a run, you'll be OK. You'll be able to breathe. You won't be as stressed," she says.

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More Than Miles

HEBAH HEFZY

In 2012, right before she turned 30 years old, Hebah Hefzy realized something needed to change. She felt like she had lost herself. She graduated from high school early and completed an accelerated medical school program, earning her white coat at the age of 22. Now she was married with three children, working full-time as a vascular neurologist in Detroit, Michigan.

As a doctor, Hefzy talked to patients about the importance of exercise. But she felt like a hypocrite. She felt out of shape climbing a flight of stairs. Hefzy couldn't run a mile, but decided running was something she could fit into her schedule. She recalls changing in a Starbucks bathroom, running 10 minutes, then going to pick up her kids. For her, it was manageable.

Soon after, Hefzy signed up for a local Race for the Cure 5K to support her children's babysitter, who had breast cancer. She planned on walking, but the atmosphere was so invigorating that she ended up running. "I saw all these women at the event who felt so empowered because they were survivors. It got me super excited," she says.

She established a rhythm with her schedule, running in the morning before heading to work. Eventually, Hefzy built her way up to running marathons, toeing the line at the 2014 Detroit Free Press marathon. "I was still running in cotton. I didn't know anything about dry wick clothes or nutrition. I didn't take a sip of water until the tenth mile," she remembers. Not surprisingly, she hit the wall, hard. This was supposed to be her one and only 26.2, but the experience left her wanting to figure out how to train and race better. It set her on a quest to run the World Marathon Majors and qualify for the Boston Marathon. At first, Hefzy was far off from the time she needed to qualify for Boston, but she put in the work, getting a little faster each time. To date, she's run 20 marathons and qualified for Boston four times.

"When you're able to watch your body do something you didn't think it can do, you start to think, 'If I can do that, I can do this,'" she says. So when the position for the medical director of the stroke program at Henry Ford Medical Center opened six years ago, Hefzy threw her name into the ring. "I never would have thought to apply for that role. But running gave me the feeling that I could step out of my comfort zone and be successful," she says.

"As a runner you really learn to rely on yourself—during moments of discomfort, or when you're trying something new, and being able to overcome those hurdles has helped me rely more on myself and be more confident in myself and the decisions that I make, personally and professionally."



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Running was her companion through her divorce and the difficult transition to life as a single mother two years ago. "So much was happening, and I couldn't control it. Running was the one constant. It helped me feel like I had control over my life when so much was out of control. I feel like I found my voice again; no one can take it away from me," says Hefzy, now 37 years old.

Hefzy hopes the power she's gained through running will extend beyond just herself. She likes that her three children, now ages 8, 9, and 11, get to witness their mother prioritize her health. "They get so excited when I do races," she says. And as a Muslim woman who runs with a hijab, she hopes that she can be a good role model for her daughter, nieces, and other Muslim girls. "I hope that I'm sending the message that they can accomplish anything they believe they can, and that doing so while practicing your faith makes it that much more special," she says. "Because you have to have the confidence to proudly be the unicorn in a field of horses. I hope they see my confidence and can be confident in themselves."



Keeping the Calm

ALLISON HENSON

For as long as Allison Henson can remember, she's been painfully shy. The 25-year-old Toledo, Ohio, resident says she has always been anxious, finding social situations to be difficult. She just thought she was weird and awkward.

But Henson always felt comfortable when she was out running. It makes sense: Henson's parents met while running in college. "I didn't have much of a choice," she says. Henson began running with her father at the age of 12. She says it was a struggle at first, "huffing and puffing our way through 6 a.m. runs." By seventh grade, Henson joined the cross-country team. One of the best parts was competing against the boys and beating them, she says with a chuckle.

Underneath it all, Henson's anxiety continued to buzz in the background. It's a jittery energy that she can't quite dissipate. She's jumpy. Her leg constantly bounces up and down. "Looking back, I see things that were very obviously

anxiety but I didn't know it then—panic attacks that I didn't know were panic attacks, being super scared and nervous," she says. Right before leaving for college, Henson parked herself under her mom's desk at home and declared that she wasn't leaving.

Henson says her anxiety heightened during her college years. But she also started noticing something curious. On the days that she didn't run, she felt more restless and uneasy. On the days that she ran, she felt more relaxed. Soon, she realized that running was not only time to be alone with her thoughts and breath, it was a way to channel her anxiety.

Two years ago, Henson was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. "Being able to run, I get to run out that energy, that part of my anxiety. It calms me down. I feel so much more collected," she says. Henson says that her mind is constantly moving when she's anxious. But after a run, she says she can get her thoughts together. "I can think about one thing and be focused."

Running has helped Henson create bridges during social situations, too. After graduating from college, Henson

joined a chapter of Oiselle's Volée team.

"I'm not outgoing, so I have a difficult time meeting people. It takes a lot for me to make myself go to the meetups," she says. "Running is something I can do while I make an effort socially. I can relax a bit because running is so comforting to me. I'm not just thinking about the social anxiety of being in a social situation." As a result, she's developed some good friendships within her running group.

Currently, Henson works as a dietitian at a long-term care facility. With the rapid spread of COVID-19 in nursing homes and long-term care facilities across the nation, Henson says it's an incredibly stressful time at work. With everything on lockdown and no visitors allowed, it's been difficult for residents who don't understand why family members can't come to visit.

Henson has found herself leaning into her running more. Since the pandemic began, she's noticed that her mileage has increased, ramping up from 20 to 30 miles a week to 30 to 40 miles a week. "It definitely helps to manage the stress and anxiety of everything going on," she says.

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'Why Not Me?'

EMILIA BENTON

Emilia Benton, 33, caught the long-distance running bug in college. A year after graduating, she ran her first 26.2-mile race, the 2010 New York City Marathon. At the time, she was living in New York, trying to establish a career in journalism.

The race went better than expected. So, like most goal-oriented runners, Benton set her eyes on a Boston Marathon qualifying time. She knew that she wouldn't necessarily BQ right away, but after moving to Houston, Texas, in 2011, she wanted to begin chipping away at her goal. "That's where I got ahead of myself," she says.

After she broke four hours in her third marathon, the 2012 Houston Marathon, Benton began to train herself into the ground. She never gave herself a break. She trained too hard and ran through nagging aches and pains. She dealt with a string of injuries and jumped back into training too quickly after each one. "I was sabotaging myself. Really, I was preparing myself to run the worst race of my life instead of the best race," she says. Between 2013 and 2015, she didn't run a personal best in the marathon. Some years, she didn't run her best time in any race distance. "I was constantly seeking instant gratification when my body was just seeking a break," she says.

It took her four years (and a lot of self-reflection) to break the cycle. After she backed off and chilled out, she ran two personal bests in the marathon: 3:49 at the 2016 Houston Marathon and 3:45 at the 2019 Houston Marathon. She also broke 1:40 in the half marathon in October 2019, a goal she previously never would have believed was possible. Benton is still working toward her BQ, but she has a healthier mindset.

She learned that failing is OK, which gave her the confidence to pursue a career full-time as a freelance writer. Ironically, it was a story about her running "failures" that ultimately led her to her writing break. It gave her the nudge she needed to pursue opportunities with other big-name publications. The lessons she learned have helped her manage the ups and downs of freelancing, too.

"I've gone through bouts where I've bitten off more than I can chew and taken on too many assignments at once, to the point where I was putting in 12-hour days, working on the weekends, and being generally overwhelmed," she says. She didn't want to burn bridges with editors by turning down

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work. Plus, working as an independent contractor is stressful. With no consistent income stream, at times it can feel like a feast or famine. Benton wanted some peace of mind and financial security in case work dried up down the road.

But she knows that pushing too hard can lead to burnout like it did in running. So she has slowed down and become more deliberate in her work, from pitching stories to the assignments she takes on. "Figuring out a good balance to be able to give my all to everything I'm working on has definitely benefited both my financial and mental health," she says. "Three years in, I've built a decent emergency fund so that I don't have to worry if I ever have a down week."

And the lessons have gone both ways. Benton thought she closed the door to journalism when she left New York after college, but she's proven that she can make a career out of it. In the same vein, she thought that her opportunity to BQ had passed. During the four-year cycle when she didn't see much improvement in her running times, she thought to herself, "Did I really peak at 24 or 25? Is that it?" But she's not ready to close the door just yet. "This experience has led me to ask myself 'Why not me?' when I might be doubting myself on something career-related or even something running-related, like my longtime goal to BQ," she says. ♦