

Learning to Fly But I ain't Got Wings

This year I turned 50. This didn't bother me. An excuse for a great fancy dress party with a fabulous cake. Despite this, by May I was at a low ebb due to a slow recovery from an operation in January, doing very little exercise, eating the wrong stuff, and generally struggling to leave the house. The turning point came when I was told that, after 10 years of diet-controlled diabetes, my latest test results were terrible and I was put on Metformin. This shocked me into action: something had to be done. A year or so before, a friend and I had discussed the NHS Couch to 5K running programme; this provides a 9 week framework which takes you from not running at all to being able to run for 30 minutes without stopping. I decided to give it a try.

I started with a trial go at the first run in my walking boots, figuring that I should see how it felt before investing in a pair of proper running shoes; if I didn't enjoy it, they would end up abandoned in the garage. I set off at the nearby country park with an MP3 player loaded up with the first week's run. The friendly voice of Laura greets you and sends you for a 5 minute brisk warm-up walk, followed by a 1 minute run, followed by a 1.5 minute brisk walk, and the run and walk is repeated until you have done eight 1 minute runs, at which point you do a 5 minute brisk warm down walk. 1 MINUTE HAS NEVER SEEMED SO LONG. I was doing alright for the first 4 runs, but starting to flag by the time I hit number 5. I struggled, gasping and puce-faced, through to the end and, to my surprise, I not only didn't die, I succeeded in completing all 8 runs. I was filled with a sense of achievement which in turn created a shy and slightly wobbly determination to continue.

I duly bought a cheap-ish (about £30) pair of running shoes from Decathlon, got a good proper exercise bra from Simply Be Online, determined that my 3 running days per week would be Monday, Wednesday and Friday and tentatively set out to give this whole running thing a good go. Of course, "do or do not, there is no try" should be my watchword, but I wasn't sure that I could manage to run for the impossible-seeming time of 30 minutes non-stop by the end of 9 weeks.

I am very lucky; the nearby country park has a 5k path round 2 lakes. The path is concrete in some places and crushed compacted stone in others. The valley is surrounded with bits of woodland, but the path is mostly in full sunlight, and there is usually a breeze. There are swans and geese and ducks and coots, mothers with strollers and gaggles of children, there are dog-walkers, cyclists, walkers and runners. There is always plenty to see and this has the benefit of distracting you from the running itself.

For the first few weeks of the programme you complete the same run 3 times. You must always have a rest day before you do the next run, as this allows your body time to rebuild you, better, faster, stronger. I found that the first run each week felt impossible – it was a struggle to get through it – and although I did just about manage it, I would worry about how the second one would go. The second run was easier, and by the time I did the third one I felt I might be capable of more. This format changed for the middle weeks and you had 3 different runs to do, each week ending with a longer run than you'd done before. I found this quite scary, and ended up repeating Week 4 because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to manage the big jump in running time at the end of Week 5.

When I did Week 5 it seemed my fears had been groundless and I steamed on through; at this point it seemed that the longer runs were easier than the shorter runs.

After the middle section you start doing just one longer run rather than breaking the running into sections interspersed with walking, and by now you have built the stamina to do this. I found the addition of a couple of extra minutes to the time of the run each week working up to the full 30 minutes was an easier transition than dealing with the earlier stop-start nature of the walk-run weeks. Don't misunderstand me – the running was still hard work; within seconds of starting a run I was breathing like a warhorse, so wet with sweat I felt like I'd been through a carwash, and my face was glowing a sort of fluorescent purple. I would strip off my top layer and tie it round my waist, and on hot sunny days pray for cooling rain or a strong breeze as I staggered along.

There are two important things that helped bolster my determination to complete this programme. The first thing was that there is a free NHS community for C25K on their Health Unlocked website (<https://healthunlocked.com/couchto5k/>). You can sign up, creating a user ID for yourself – mine, for obvious reasons, is “purple_faced_woman”! The community is mostly populated by people who have done or are doing the C25K programme. Everyone is very friendly and extremely helpful. You can seek advice by asking a question, you can search on topics to find if it has been covered previously (and even if it has, no-one seems to mind if you ask it again), you can give your own advice as a member of the community, and you can share your highs and lows with a group of people who have been there, too. They will rejoice at your successes and help you pick yourself up when you are struggling; there is always encouragement, enthusiasm and camaraderie to be found on this forum.

The second thing that helped me a lot has been the other users of the path I run round. I am 5'4" and when I started this I was 18 ½ stone. Add to that the wheezing and gasping and the purple face, I must look pretty ridiculous. I was concerned about people laughing at me or making rude comments, but determined to get on and do this; I would just ignore anyone who pointed and laughed. No-one has done so. In fact, the opposite has been true. I tend to smile at people, anyway, and my experience has been they not only smile back, they actively encourage me, from basic “hallos” and comments on the weather to expressions of admiration at my managing to run, from cheerful “keep goings” and “you're getting there” to a high-five from a fit young man passing me in the opposite direction for the second time with us both still running. It may seem unlikely, but having a total stranger smile at you and say “well done” or even wistfully “I wish I could do what you're doing” is a terrific boost, which has driven me on further than I thought I could and helped me finish the run on days when I might have just given up.

I have got so much out of doing the C25K programme. My latest diabetes blood test was back in the normal range. Forcing myself to get out and run 3 days a week in the fresh air and sunshine, the rain and the wind certainly kicked out my proto-depression. The sense of achievement from sticking to the programme and reaching the end is huge, and still with me months after completing. I also felt able to start calorie counting shortly after starting and have lost a stone. I have continued to run 3 times a week for a minimum of 30 minutes a time, 1 of those runs I usually cover 5k, which currently takes me about 45minutes. Maybe some time in the next year I may speed up enough to run 5k in

30 minutes, but I am delighted with my achievements so far and thrilled to have found a totally unexpected joy in running.

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