



LUKENOTES

SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE INC. • 8901 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE • SILVER SPRING MD 20903
LUKENOTES is a bi-monthly publication of Saint Luke Institute • Tel. (301)445-7970 • lukenotes@sl.org • www.sl.org

“Icon of St. Luke” - Copyright© 1985 by Monastery Icons

Lessons Learned From A Marathon

Hetty Irmer, LCSW-C

Vol. X, No. 5

November/December, 2006

Recently I completed my first marathon, 26.2 miles of physical and mental endurance. It was an accomplishment that was a long time in coming. I had first entertained the idea years ago, but wasn't ready to commit to the time, effort and discipline required. Finally, four years ago, I started the training but was overambitious and injured myself. It took another three years to recommit to a marathon. Then, there was one full year of intentional physical and mental training before I was prepared to go the distance.

Running a marathon is similar to what many people go through in early recovery. Initial ambivalence about the commitment to recovery can cause an individual to postpone taking the steps that are needed to live a healthy lifestyle. Then, when one does decide to take the step into recovery, circumstances may occur that distract from the goal of a healthy lifestyle. And finally, when a person finally commits to living a recovery lifestyle, it takes time before he/she is able to implement all of the elements of that lifestyle into daily life.

During my marathon training, I faced a number of setbacks and challenges. There was a period of time when I could not train due to another commitment. I also had a number of small injuries, the “growing pains” of my body learning how to do something new. At one point near the end of the training, with the race just a few weeks away, I sprained my back. Throughout these experiences, and especially with my back injury, I feared I would not be able to accomplish my goal of running the marathon. Dealing with my fears was emotionally draining, and it took a lot of willpower to continue training.

Again, the parallels to recovery are strong. For many people, establishing a recovery lifestyle brings emotional “growing pains” that accompany the hard work of living life in new ways. Recovery often includes the setback of relapses, and it can be tempting to give up when it seems at the moment that all that one has worked for has been lost. It is only through perseverance in the midst of these emotionally, and often physically, taxing periods that recovery can be sustained and deepened.

When race day finally came, I had to summon all of my physical, mental and emotional resources to tackle the task at hand. First, I dealt with the pre-race jitters that led me to question my ability to complete the race. I shared my feelings with my training buddies, soothing myself through positive self-talk (e.g., “You trained for this – you can do this”), and releasing some physical energy by stretching and walking. Once the race had started, I had a little over four

hours to spend by myself, doing the most physically challenging activity I have ever attempted. In the days and weeks preceding the race, I had taken time to mentally envision myself running the race successfully, and I had practiced what I would do when it became difficult. I also tapped into the support and strength of friends and loved ones whom I knew would encourage me.

Setting up my “support system” in this way gave me the courage to believe that I could succeed. I also tapped into lessons I had learned during the training. I created an “internal coach” – a internal voice that gave me strength and encouragement during the difficult middle section of the course and in the arduous last three miles. Throughout the race, I used many different strategies to keep my mind focused and my body relaxed, so that I could handle whatever came my way. For example, every time a spectator rang a cowbell (which happened often) I would check my breathing, the foundation of any physical activity. This enabled me to access all of my physical endurance and to feel strong even in the middle of a long race. I also smiled as much as possible, which helped my mood and also encouraged spectators to support me. A support network is essential in recovery, both for encouragement when the going gets tough and to gain wisdom from others as one develops his/her values and goals.

Finally, when it became painful to keep moving forward, I did not allow myself to entertain thoughts of quitting. Instead, I thought of what I am grateful for (e.g., my physical health and the love and support of others), which distracted me from the pain of the moment and enabled me to access inner reserves of determination and commitment to the task at hand: completing the marathon. For the last two miles, every step was hard. Yet, by that time I had gotten through so much that I knew I would make it. At the end of the race, I lifted my arms in victory – an act I had practiced in my mind and on my training runs dozens of times.

The finish itself was oddly anti-climactic, but deeply satisfying nonetheless. Recovery can be experienced similarly. In recovery, an individual is able to tap into mental, emotional, social and even physical resources when they encounter difficulty. An individual with more sustained time in recovery, transitions from “doing” recovery to “being in” recovery, something to be savored day by day.

My marathon lessons will stay with me for the rest of my life. I have learned that I have the ability to tackle difficulty with optimism and perseverance, and that I can accomplish goals that I set before me if I stay committed to the process. I was also reminded that I am loved and supported by many people. These are lessons that individuals in recovery also learn through the practice of recovery itself. As it says in “The 12 Promises” of the 12-Step programs, we will come to know “the freedom of a happy life” if we trust the process of recovery. That’s a race we can all win.

LUKENOTES is a bimonthly publication of Saint Luke Institute. Permission to use these materials must be requested in writing by contacting Lukenotes@sl.org.

Telephone (301) 422-5499 • Fax (301) 422-5519 • www.sli.org

Copyright © 2008 Saint Luke Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.