

LEARNING CURVE

RUNNING FOR MY LIFE

→ When a sudden tragedy upended her world, writer **Allison Ellis** found solace—and hope—in the one activity she used to hate.

I run every day. I run up hills and along flat terrain, through fields, boggy meadows, city streets, mud puddles and gravel pathways that wedge tiny pebbles in the tread of my sneakers. I don't stop to rest until well after I'm fully winded, my heart thumping in my ears like a metronome. Sometimes I last for only a mile or two; other days I'll jog around the neighborhood for 45 minutes or more. Or so I think—I don't wear a watch often, preferring instead to time my tempo according to the mood of the day, my energy level or whim. I don't race, I don't train, and I stop before any joint pain sets in. Time, distance, calories, music playlists and fitness apps hardly ever cross my mind.

I haven't always liked running. In fact, I used to do everything in my power to avoid it. During middle school I purposely wore inappropriate shoes on gym days, and when that didn't work, I faked side aches and limped dramatically with a hand clutched to my rib cage. When I tried out for my college crew team, the coach informed us that running 5 icy-cold miles before our 6 A.M. practice was part of our "warm-up," so I quit on the spot. It wasn't as though I loathed all exercise: I swam competitively, hiked and biked during the summer and skied almost every weekend in winter. But running, I was convinced, would do me in. Running was painful. It required a different type of stamina. And I simply had no motivation to do it.

Then Gregg burst into my life. We were in our mid-20s, spending long hours at a chaotic online start-up in Seattle. He was the cute project manager who worked on a different floor; I was the Web editor who took the back stairwell every day so I could walk casually past his desk. Our relationship was slow to start, though once we paired up, things took off quickly. After our first kiss, Gregg insisted that I share *exactly* how I felt about

him. Four months later, we were engaged. Once, while I was lazily walking on a treadmill in a halfhearted attempt at getting in shape for our wedding, Gregg strolled over and punched up the speedometer. "You can go a lot faster," he said with a mischievous grin. Our relationship was a lot like that. Before I met Gregg, my life plodded along at a slow and predictable pace, and then *bam*, he put me on the fast track to adventure.

Once married, we traveled to far-flung locations, road-tripped through the Southwest with our Siberian husky and camped out in the middle of winter in the snowy foothills of the Sierra Nevada. We fantasized about quitting our jobs and sailing down the coast of California—and then we did it; for three months we got to live that dream aboard a 26-foot boat. We were like teenagers, talking late into the night and musing about the meaning of life. If I ever felt unsteady, Gregg would ground me, filling me with love and confidence. Five years after our wedding, I gave birth to our daughter, and we moved from Los Angeles to Vashon Island, near Seattle and both our families. We wanted to dial down our frenzied pace and put down roots. That's when Gregg decided to start training for a marathon. And that's when everything fell apart.

It was a bright Sunday morning in early September, about a month before Gregg's big race. After he'd increased his mileage all summer, this long training run was critical. When he finished, a few hours later, I met him at the ferry landing near our home, making my way down the long dock with our 10-month-old daughter, Lizzie. I remember thinking that Gregg resembled a statue, silently standing there with a vacant look on his face. Why wasn't he rushing to embrace us? "I feel weird," he said, his last words before collapsing. I frantically performed CPR until

the paramedics arrived; Gregg showed brief moments of consciousness before being carted off in an ambulance.

After an hour, he was pronounced dead at the hospital. An autopsy later revealed that he'd died of a massive heart attack. Though he was in perfect shape on the outside, his major arteries were nearly completely blocked. If there were symptoms, they were either too vague to identify, or Gregg had chosen to ignore them. He was 39 years old.

All the hopes we shared—from the big ones (having a second child) to the mundane (putting an addition on our house)—were suddenly shattered, now lying in tiny shards on the hospital floor. In shock and numbness, I went through the motions of talking to doctors and tending to my daughter. But by the time I got to my mom's house a few miles away, my body and brain were hopelessly out of sync. I kept dropping things. The ground swayed beneath me. I felt nauseous and unmoored. And then a thought occurred to me: *Just run away.*

There was no plan; I knew that I had to move. Immediately. As I dug out an old pair of sweatpants from the back of one of my childhood dressers, the concept of runner's high or the mood-boosting benefits of cardiovascular activity were definitely not on my mind in that moment. I simply couldn't sit still with the image of my fit husband, cold and unmoving on the hospital gurney, flashing on repeat inside my head. So I handed Lizzie to my mom and took off.

The wind filled my lungs and whipped back my hair as I sprinted into the unknown that evening. My body felt surprisingly strong and fast, my limbs full of energy. Just as quickly as that surge had arrived—likely an adrenaline-fueled flight response—it was over. About a half mile in, I gasped for breath. What had started as a small side stitch was now piercing my gut, forcing me to double over. But I didn't stop. Stopping meant I'd have to go back to reality—to the flood of pity from friends, the medical forms still waiting to be signed. So I kept shuffling forward, slow and hobbled, until exhaustion took over. I limped the remaining distance back to my mom's house and collapsed on the floor—from physical pain or grief, I couldn't tell.

The next morning, awaking in agony to the blunt force of my new life, I promised myself that I could get through the day if I went out for another run. I fixated on this salve until I was outside once again, momentarily escaping the mounting casseroles and funeral planning. On the third day, I did the same, and by the fourth day, the run left me slightly less wiped out. "One step at a time," I repeated to myself, over and over. Pervasive dark thoughts, such as "My life is over" and "How will I be strong for my daughter?" were replaced with the idea, "If I just make it up that hill without throwing up, I can make it

THE GROUND SWAYED BENEATH ME. I FELT NAUSEOUS AND UNMOORED. AND THEN A THOUGHT OCCURRED TO ME: *JUST RUN AWAY.*

through this day." As the first week turned into the fourth, and my increasing endurance translated into longer runs, I noticed my mood improving, however mildly.

In the weeks and months that followed, friends and family wanted to know how they could help, and my frequent request was for them to watch Lizzie so that I could run. I needed that time to sort through my fears about going back to my job and arranging for child care (Gregg had been a stay-at-home dad, and we didn't have any life insurance). It was while running that I confronted my anxiety over raising Lizzie alone, over how being so young to lose her dad might ultimately affect her. Runs were also when I felt most connected to Gregg and talked to him during imaginary conversations. (Me: "Hi, are you there? I miss you, I love you. Are you running up in heaven?" Him: "Hi. I love you and miss you, too. Great job with your running. Keep going, you're looking good!")

Even more than my weekly grief-therapy group, my daily runs helped me grow stronger mentally. They inspired forward movement despite the void in my soul. Running never asked, "How are you coping?" Running never gave me a look of sorrow, avoided my gaze or passed me over for a project because it assumed I was too distraught to handle the workload. Running gave me a sense of control after my world had crumbled around me.

And so my grief became less of an

open wound and more like a chronic, dull ache. As I made strides toward carving out a new identity for myself—no longer a mourning widow but an independent single mom—I began to question the necessity, and practicality, of religiously adhering to my daily routine. I'd evolved into the type of runner who prioritized her life around the ritual (skipping lunch for a jog; joining a gym near the office for access to their showers post-workout). But I wondered: Did I really need to push myself like this anymore? Was I healed?

I started giving myself permission to slack off and devoted time to other

things I enjoyed: I traveled with friends to San Diego, New York City and Portland, Oregon. I bought new clothes for my now-toned physique. I decluttered the house, unloading dozens of boxes to the donation center, and repainted the walls shades of orange and magenta. Around the eight-month mark, eager to meet new people, I started dating. I found a yoga class and worked on my Warrior pose, where I need to be centered yet outstretched.

Ultimately, though, nothing was as comforting or as motivating as that daily run, so I happily recommitted to the practice. Lizzie often came with me now, in a baby jogger. Running had been an outlet at first, a way to work through the shock, denial and deep grief. Then it evolved into a companion for the challenging slog of moving toward a new future.

Almost exactly one year after losing Gregg, I met Jeff, a man who made me feel whole again. An 18-month courtship led to a beautiful wedding on Memorial Day weekend. Lizzie, 3½, walked me down the aisle. I reached a few more milestones after that. I got pregnant again. And I decided to go out on my own as a freelance writer.

It's been 13 years since Gregg died, and sometimes I still imagine us talking. I recognize glimpses of him in Lizzie, especially in her wry smile when the two of us jog together. And so I keep running—no longer from my fears but to see how far I've come. ●