

# New York **runner**

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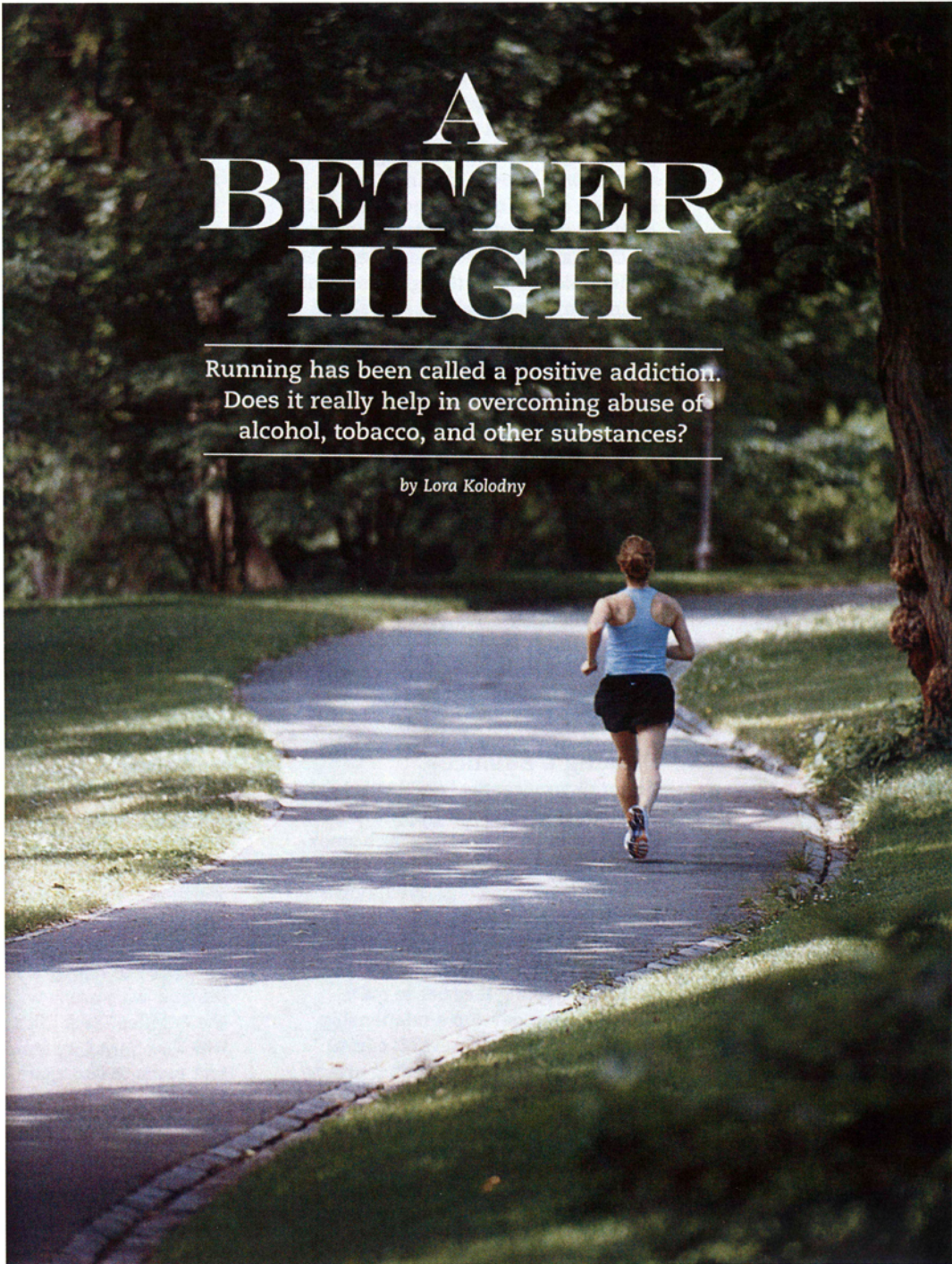
## A BETTER HIGH

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Running has been called a positive addiction.  
Does it really help in overcoming abuse of  
alcohol, tobacco, and other substances?

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*by Lora Kolodny*



**As researchers** sink billions of dollars into understanding and trying to cure substance abuse and addiction, many addicts are finding an effective recovery tool: *running*.

### Running for Recovery

Odyssey House, a residential therapeutic program for drug addicts and alcoholics with six residential centers in New York City, encourages its clients to participate in Run For Your Life, a running program founded by senior vice president and chief operating officer John Tavolacci. Odyssey House also has a full-time recreational director, making fitness a key element to achieving sobriety.

Long hours of talk-therapy sessions and regular sit-down meals can add on the pounds for many recovering addicts, which can wreak havoc on fragile self-esteem, according to Tavolacci, who will run his sixth ING New York City Marathon this year. To battle the weight gain and malaise of a sedentary lifestyle, Run For Your Life injects variety and physical activity. Participants in the program begin by training and eventually take part in charity races. A significant number train for and complete the ING New York City Marathon. Besides building a better body, the addicts also build on their self-esteem, Tavolacci says.

"The regimen of every day becomes monotonous in recovery," Tavolacci explains. "Running gives people an opportunity to burn off stress and change their routine. With distance running, the practice takes them to another level. They have time during runs, and over the course of training, to talk to one another. Clients who run develop relationships with one another, become more engaged, and behave more consistently."

### An Alternative to Getting High

Replacing an alcohol, drug, or tobacco habit with a positive one like running is not a new concept. In 1976, psychiatrist and self-help author William Glasser wrote the book *Positive Addictions*, suggesting activities including running and meditation "strengthen us and make our lives more satisfying," replace so-called "negative" addictions.

Circle of Friends, a program of the American Legacy Foundation, supports and educates the estimated 70 percent of women smokers who want to quit. For the past two years, the organization has sponsored a Winning Circles team of runners and walkers in the Circle of Friends New York Mini 10K, a New York Road Runners women-only race held in Central Park.

In the winter of 2005, Carolyn McCrory of New York City was desperate to kick her 20-year nicotine habit. "I just felt like this disgusting addict," she said. "It was my rock bottom." McCrory answered a newspaper ad promising discounted running gear to women who joined Winning Circles. Her goal: replacing her smoking habit with running and a network of support.

Once a high school and college track athlete, McCrory, 42, thought she would mainly enjoy getting back into shape. "Running with Circle of Friends gave me the feeling of a big comeback," she said after finishing the Mini in 1:07:30. "I was teary when I first crossed a finish line again."

But more than the boost to her self-esteem, McCrory learned that the feeling of running gave her a physical sensation that directly squashed her cravings. "It helped me to just breathe, and think about the way your breath shifts," McCrory said. "Whereas before it was smoke, going in and out, it became like, 'This is fresh air.' I was aware of my lungs. I knew I simply could not smoke again."

### Finding a Balance

Major pharmaceutical and biotech companies are pursuing approvals for pills and shots that aim to curb smoking, alcoholism, and other addictions by blocking the feelings of euphoria. These new drugs would block the brain from receiving chemicals like nicotine, making those substances less appealing and thus making it easier to quit.

"Once you develop a relationship with a chemical, wherever it comes from, there's an overwhelming urge to repeat the feeling of euphoria you get from it," says psychologist Rick Natale, who runs a private practice in Norwalk, CT. "Runners get a famous euphoric feeling after [running] a certain distance. And running is an absolutely healthy alternative to other behaviors that people do to—albeit ineffectively—deal with garbage that is happening in

their lives."

Natale, though, counsels his clients to abstain immediately and stop making excuses or waiting for a magical shot or pill. At the same time, he cautions addicts not to let a new positive pursuit such as running become the dominant, excessive part of their therapy.

"Don't overdo it," Natale says. "Incorporate running as part of your recovery, but don't allow it to become a dominant part of your recovery. Running should not become an absolute replacement. A balanced approach should be included."

Most treatment centers offer inpatient clients state-of-the-art training facilities to encourage "attachment" to positive behaviors. But when patients leave to face the challenges of a sober life—from dealing with debts to breaking social ties with addicts—running can be an affordable way to cope.

### Perspective on the Run

Curtis Jenkins, 30, a recovering crack addict, says running has kept him in treatment long enough to become more focused than he ever was. He was introduced to the sport in April 2005 through Odyssey House's Run For Your Life program. Initially, he says, running was "just a way to get away from [the treatment center]." But once he started, Jenkins says the people he met, along with the beauty he found outdoors in Central Park and his newfound fitness level, won him over.

"Running gives me perspective," Jenkins says. "I'm in my own zone when I'm running. I have time to think about the things I probably would not normally deal with. I think about the good and the bad and have time to weigh everything when I run."

He hasn't touched a crack pipe—despite, he admits, overwhelming cravings—in nearly a year and a half. Jenkins, who trains with NYRR and the Achilles Track Club, completed the ING New York City Marathon in 2005 and plans to run again this year. The essence of recovery means changing negative behaviors into positive ones. For many recovering addicts, running is the light at the start and end of their day. ■