

# relax and count to five

By Sean McBride

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***I was experiencing the worst case scenario for a runner. Heart pounding, lungs bursting, legs turning to water and the entire field of runners spread out ahead of me. I started to stress about being last place and wondering what happened to all that training! Worst of all, I had only covered the first five hundred meters of the Dunbar 10K Boundary Race. Who'd have thought that finishing, with a personal best time no less, would be as simple as slowing my breathing and thinking pleasant thoughts? There is of course a scientific explanation.***

In that first five hundred meters, I had made a mistake common to many runners. Keen to keep with the main field of runners, all faster than myself, I had started at a pace faster than I could cope with. In response, my heart had reached maximum heart rate (MHR) and my body told me to stop.

The jogscotland Jog Leader manual describes MHR as 220 beats per minute, minus a person's age. It's almost impossible, and highly unadvised, to work more than a few minutes at this heart rate. This means that either your race is over or you need to get that heart rate down fast. Yet, most people's natural reaction tends to keep their heart rate high.

In a nutshell, it's all down to stress. Runners forced to walk when they get tired on a race tend to 'speed march' to try and make amends. In addition, they tend to feel stress about their inability to keep running. Runners who I've run with when they reach this state express concerns. They say they are too slow, not improving or holding people up. Sadly, neither their pace, nor their state of mind act to slow their heart rate.

In his article 'Learn How To Breathe' Dr Roger Henderson describes the cycle when people are stressed. Breathing is shallow, only using the upper lungs which can lead to symptoms including palpitations.

He describes deep breathing techniques which, he says, have a direct effect on the heart rate. Though his techniques are for indoor use to relieve stress, I asked Dr Henderson if they could be adapted to slow a runner's heart rate. He agreed that these techniques would work for a runner who has slowed their pace to a jog or a walk. Also they would likely enable quicker and deeper reduction in heart rate than the mere act of slowing down.

So what should we do? First, and most important, we need to listen to our bodies! When your body is screaming at you to slow down, it's not such a bad idea take heed and slow down! Experienced or fast runners may be able to slow to a trot and still recover. For the rest of us we need to walk. Walk that is, not speed-march!

The key is to relax. Reverse the cycle of stress and introduce instead the cycle of relaxation. The physical step to initiate relaxation is to breathe slowly and deeply. As you have been running and are no doubt panting, you will need to get control of your breathing first. This can be done by breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth for about a minute until your breathing starts to slow down. Once breathing slows, you are now ready to try proper deep breathing.

From my own experience, it also helps to replace the stressed out thoughts about going too slowly with more relaxing ones. In Dunbar there was a beautiful stretch of beach from 5 to 7km for example with only the hiss of the sea beating against the shore. Whether it's the sea, trees, listening to the cheering crowd or laughing at a runner in fancy dress, if it's a positive thought, use it!

Remember, we are not trying to completely de-stress, just get the heart rate sufficiently down to give us more running time.

Crossing the finish line of that Dunbar 10K race I felt a mix of emotions. I felt elation on seeing the finish line, excitement at my time and pride as I wandered through the milling crowds with my medal. Most important however was the sense of achievement at meeting a significant challenge and having a simple, yet powerful, technique available to overcome it. So next time you start too fast or try and maintain a pace you can't cope with, remember the drill. All you have to do to keep running is relax and count to five.

Dr Roger Henderson qualified as a doctor from St Bartholomew's Hospital, London in 1985 and as a general practitioner in 1990. He decided to work part time in 1995 to concentrate on his writing career, and within 2 years was the medical columnist of the Sunday Times. He is currently the medical columnist for the Sunday Times, the Mirror group, Arena magazine and many other publications and websites. His first book - 'Stress Beaters; 100 Proven Ways to Manage Stress' - was an immediate best seller. If you wish to find out more about Dr Henderson and his work please visit his website at [www.doctorhenderson.co.uk](http://www.doctorhenderson.co.uk)