

An injury gave
McMorris
a new
perspective.



“Pain gave me a new outlook on my life”

by MEGAN McMORRIS

The other day, I found myself wandering through my former neighborhood. I was cat-sitting in the area, and I took the opportunity to feel like a visitor in my hometown. As I walked down the main drag that used to be my home for seven years, I realized what made those particular streets so special to me: They served as the setting as I crossed the threshold between my Before and After Megan Lives, from before I started upon a rapid succession of changes in all regard—personal, professional, life. And the invisible thread which started me down this rabbit hole of life change was an unlikely culprit: chronic back pain.

They say that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear, and that’s how I view my back pain: A gentle, wise teacher tapping me on the shoulder saying, “Hey, kiddo, maybe it’s time to make a change.”

There never was one big moment—no impact, no injury, no real diagnosis even. I first started to gradually feel some aches in my hip, and then my back, the year I turned 40. The culprit, I soon deduced, was my regular running habit. While it took me some time to admit it, after 25 years of running five to six days a week, all that pounding

was simply starting to hurt.

Eventually, I decided to visit a doctor who—between spinal adjustments and regular prescriptions for painkillers—would casually mention that maybe I should give up running. At first, I just ignored the advice. It took me a while to accept as even an option. I hadn't realized how much running had become a part of my identity, my family traditions, and even my career as a journalist and writer who often covered fitness. Being a runner had snuck up on me. After all, I had joined my adolescent cross-country and track teams more for socializing than winning (I was known for a mean finish-line kick but it usually just helped me secure second-to-last place).

But as I grew older, I started running for conditioning during the off-season of my sport of choice—gymnastics—and fell in love with the moving meditation that a longer, slower run offered. It seemed like no matter what was going on in my life, I would return from my regular 5-mile route feeling refreshed, with a better outlook, renewed energy and a brighter perspective. I continued running regularly throughout college, and upon moving to New York City after graduation, I became mesmerized with the rich tradition and energy of the races that were held in Central Park. Training for and running long-distance races breathed new life into my routine, and became an annual ritual that I shared with my mom and sister, who also ran. I moved to Portland, Oregon, eight years later, where trail-running and snowshoe running further fueled my love for the sport. I had to admit that running—once something I thought I just did, but wasn't a part of me—had indeed become ingrained in me. So when I was faced with the idea that I may have to give it up, a niggling part of me

"Giving up running was a thread for other changes to come"

thought, if I didn't run, who was I?

And then one day, something clicked. I think my mind may have already given up on running before my body did, but just needed a reason to quit. Maybe I was tired of being 40 years old and having to pop painkillers in order to survive a plane trip. Maybe I was ready for something new, but I didn't know what that "new" looked like yet. I don't know what the trigger was, but something in me shifted when my doctor suggested I try yoga.

Later that week, the subject of yoga came up on two different occasions, and I took that as a sign. I joined a Bikram hot yoga studio the next day, and for a while it was exactly what I needed. It made me feel like an athlete again, and left me feeling energized instead of drained.

But the physical changes were only a small part of the story. Once I stopped running, I began noticing my surroundings in a different way. Instead of running with my dog,

Luey, in the neighborhood streets with our usual destination, usual mileage and usual route, I slowed down the pace and let Luey lead the way as I just followed along (which suited him just fine—more sniffing to do!). It was like transitioning from being a driver to a passenger, where I could enjoy the scenery instead of controlling every step of it.

Giving up running ended up being just a thread for other changes to come. It was as if relinquishing that part of my identity subconsciously gave me courage to try on different identities: different jobs, different neighborhoods, different relationships.

Don't get me wrong: There are times when I miss going for a run. The simplicity of the routine, the feeling of an effortless rhythm where your body is on autopilot and your mind is clear, the energy and ritual of annual marathons. It was a big part of my life for 25 years, and allowed me to reach a number of goals, from 24-hour relays in the mountains to



Running was a part of this writer's identity.

“I finally found relief through biofeedback”

by MICHAEL COOPER

Michael Cooper* was only 19 when he shattered the L5 vertebrae in his spine working a construction job. He underwent emergency surgery to fuse the surrounding vertebrae and a titanium rod was installed to keep his spine together. While the procedure worked, it left him with limited mobility and in excruciating pain.

Medication and trigger-point injections provided intermittent relief. For more than 12 years, Cooper lived with chronic pain day and night. To make matters worse, he was involved in an auto accident in May 2014, which knocked loose one of the screws keeping his spine in place. Additional surgery, he was told, was invasive, risky—and might not even help.

Finally, his girlfriend, Shelley, heard an audiobook about biofeedback while



Biofeedback gave Cooper pain control.

researching options for pain management. The therapy uses electronic sensors to help monitor changes in blood flow and reduce pain sensations. “It became clear to me that if you change the way the brain receives a pain signal, you can reduce the perception of pain. I thought there was hope,” she says.

Cooper, now 32, went to biofeedback therapist Cindy Perlin, who did an assessment

to see where his pain signals were coming from. She also gave him techniques like breathing exercises to help lower his stress levels, which had exacerbated his symptoms. Cooper didn’t see a change right away, but after a couple of weeks, he noticed he was sleeping better, moving more easily and was less irritable. Over the next couple of months, his symptoms continued

to improve, and after four months of weekly sessions, his pain levels are noticeably lower. “Biofeedback has been a game-changer for me,” says Cooper, who adds that while he’s not fully pain-free, it’s much more manageable. “It’s important for others to know they need to look for all possible solutions, and not give up hope that something can help.”

*Name changed for privacy

big-city marathons, to the day-to-day ritual of lacing up for a neighborhood run. And like any long-term relationship—even when you’ve parted mutually and it’s best for everyone—there’s nostalgia involved.

But still, I wouldn’t go back. In the past five years, I’ve moved on in every way with a new neighborhood, new house and new life. I can’t run anymore, but I have several yoga studios and hiking trails near-

by. Instead of feeling beat-up and achy after a run, my body now feels stronger and more energized after a workout. The pain does come and go and will never be gone for good, but I don’t need to see a doctor or take medication anymore to manage it. Instead, when it flares up, I’m grateful for it. It serves as a gentle reminder of when I’m out of balance, overstressed, or am simply overdue for my favorite vinyasa class.

While back pain may be a strange and sometimes frustrating teacher, it’s proven to be one of the best that I’ve had. It has taught me to let go of things that don’t serve me anymore, to take care of myself and learn to say no when I need to. In fact, it’s made me a more patient, open-minded, observant person and has opened doors that I wouldn’t ever have noticed, had I still been rushing from Point A to Point B.