

BE HEAR NOW

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Question from the audience: “What do you think about when you’re running?”

Answer: “I think about running.”

Chris McDougall
author of *Born to Run*

Here’s a “what if?” scenario for you:

What if you woke up one day and discovered that the sensations you were experiencing in your eyes, ears, nose and skin didn’t match up with the physical reality around you? Wouldn’t you find that condition disorienting and disturbing? And what if that disconnected experience continued for a long period of time? Wouldn’t you begin to feel alienated from the world? And ultimately, wouldn’t that disconnect begin to make you, quite literally, crazy?

And, to come at it from the other direction, isn’t it the case that one of the primary goals of physical and performance training is to make sensation congruent with the environment in which we work and play? Isn’t it essential that we sense and perceive the world *as-is*? Don’t athletes and other high performers spend years, even decades trying to fine tune their nervous systems to the subtle qualities of their environments?

So what then are we to make of the epidemic of sensory distortion brought about by portable music players, now in widespread, almost universal use by exercisers? What are we to make of the fact that millions of people now spend a considerable portion of their days in profound sensory disconnect with the world around them?

This is no trivial question; the implications of this kind of behavior are immense—we are talking about billions of hours of human attention each year, directed away from the world as it is. What if those billions of hours were spent in direct sensory connection with the world? How would our consciousness and behavior change?

Some observers have looked at this audio-electronic disconnect between sensation and reality and dubbed it *schizophonia*. This word may be new to you, but I can guarantee that you haven’t heard the last of it; this conversation is going to become increasingly commonplace in years to come.

Schizophonia, of course, is a play on the word *schizophrenia*, that notorious mental illness marked by a distorted sense of reality, disintegration of the thought process, bizarre

delusions and auditory hallucinations. Of course, it would be foolish to suggest a causal connection between schizophonia (the act of wearing an iPod while running) and schizophrenia (the mental illness), but the parallels are just a little too close for comfort. After all, if you've been wearing an iPod consistently for months or years, you already are, in a very real sense, disconnected from reality and your body. You may not yet be experiencing the profound symptoms of delusion and hallucination that characterize full-blown schizophrenia, but you are clearly out of contact with the world. And even if you do manage to get your heart rate up and condition your musculoskeletal system, you still cannot claim to be "fit," especially if the word "fit" implies a close relationship with the world at large.

MEET THE SCHIZOPHONICS

So, if schizophonia is the general term describing the disconnect between audio reality and piped-in sensation, individuals who practice this behavior must be described as *schizophonics*. Not only are schizophonics disconnected from their physical experience while running, they're also cut off from the people around them, lost in their own worlds of sound. Nothing says "I'm not here" better than plugging the earbuds into your head. Nothing says "leave me alone" more effectively than wearing an iPod. If you've ever tried to have a conversation with a schizophonic, you know the challenge; they're nodding their heads, but you're never really sure if they're actually paying attention to the words coming out of your mouth.

Schizophonics often claim that they need the music to provide the necessary motivation to work out or go for a run. But this begs an obvious question: if you really need an artificial stimulus to provide the psychological drive for your workout experience, wouldn't you be better off choosing some form of movement that actually generates pleasure in and of itself? If you need artificial stimulus to get your body moving, maybe you're in the wrong sport.

There's another question that we also must ask at this point: Would any wild animal voluntarily wear a device that pumped substitute sensory stimulation into its nervous system? Unlikely. Wild animals are smart enough to know that their very survival depends on tight integration between sensory experience and what the military calls "facts on the ground." That, after all, is one of the main reasons that animals—both human and non-human—have a nervous system in the first place. When we run with artificial audio, we pay disrespect to an incredibly elegant system that has been hundreds of millions of years in the making.

THE DEATH OF THE MONOTASK

Schizophonia is rapidly becoming one of the most dramatic and potentially destructive forms of multi-tasking in the modern world. Human performance experts are united in their cautions against multitasking in the workplace, but their warnings are usually directed against commonplace disconnects such as checking email while talking on the phone. In contrast, wearing an iPod while running creates a radical disconnection between body

and environment, at the very time when attention is essential, not only for safety and injury-resistance, but for quality of movement and experience. Remember, running is a skill event that demands attention to the subtle nuances of sensation and motor control. If we treat it as a mindless, attentionless event to be simply endured, we'll be more prone to injury and poor results.

My martial art sensei would be appalled by the proliferation of music players in the world of physical training. For him, and for many other teachers of the transformative arts, the whole point of the physical exercise is to enter into a complete experience with full attention. In the martial arts, this quality is known as *zanshin*, but we find the same emphasis on highly-focused training in all sorts of disciplines, from dance to medicine to academics. If you want to do something well and be transformed in the process, you've got to give yourself completely to the experience. In contrast, the iPod heaps disrespect on the training process and trivializes it. The message it reflects is simple: I find this activity boring and I need to be entertained.

It's not just running, athletics, or martial art by the way. Full engagement in process is now becoming the preferred practice for transformation and performance at every level, a point made clear by Jim Loehr in his landmark book, *The Power of Full Engagement*. The formula for improved performance is simple: high contrast living. When resting, rest deeply; when engaged, engage completely. If you're not going to devote all your resources to a process, you can't expect to get much out of it.

THE COLOR GREEN

Our discussion of schizophrenia goes well beyond the disconnection of individual mind-bodies and tells us something essential about the larger human-earth relationship. In an era in which almost everyone claims to be an environmentalist, we are apt to wonder: Who is actually walking the walk? What are we to conclude about the environmental credentials of people who intentionally disconnect themselves from their environment with a technological device? Some will say that the iPod is a harmless entertainment tool of minimal impact, but in fact, intentional sensory disconnection is the antithesis of green. Symbolically at least, schizophrenia is an act of profound environmental ignorance, even disrespect. If you really want to save the world, you have to know the world. And how are we to know the world if we intentionally pipe substitute stimulation into the very center of our brains?

So, my sisters and brothers, the time has come to ditch the Pod (and the shoes, if you can manage it). If you hate running and need a crutch to get you through the miles, stop running! Find something you're passionate about and enter into that with your entire being. Pay the process the respect it deserves. Be. Hear. Now.