

Health & Science

Feet of endurance

FIRST PERSON
Brian Martin

The best thing about running to work is that I arrive in a good frame of mind. That's been my experience over the past 28 years of combining commuting with exercising.

It's a bonus that I don't need to motivate myself to keep fit. It's just commuting.

Living in Sydney in the early 1970s, I ran for exercise but often had trouble motivating myself to do it. Tomorrow, I'd say. Somehow I got the idea that running to work would solve the problem. But the route in Sydney was too congested and polluted for running.

In 1976, I obtained a job in Canberra and was able to fulfil my dream. My wife and I chose a house a

few kilometres from where I worked, close enough for running, far enough away to work up a sweat. It worked perfectly. Running became part of my routine without thinking about it.

The first thing most people ask me is: "Do you take a shower?" It seems they worry about causing offence. Usually I wait until I stop sweating, then use a washcloth in a few strategic places. Sweat from most parts of the body does not generate much odour. (But workplaces definitely should have showers for runners and cyclists.)

People who drive to work cause unpleasant, harmful odours: the exhaust from their cars! Do they worry about that?

As a runner-commuter, I'm lucky to work at a university, where there's more tolerance for unorthodox dress. More importantly, though, I don't



worry about what people think. I'm in running clothes until I stop sweating and change, then I dress neatly.

One of the best things about running to and from work is stress reduction. After a tense day at the office, the run home relaxes me. If the run isn't enough to put my worries to rest, I know they're pretty serious.

The most important step in running to work is choosing where to live. Downtown in a big city is not great for running. When we moved to Wollongong in 1986, we looked at houses a few kilometres from the university. Because the freeway runs to the north and east of the university, we looked mainly to the south. I can choose from several routes that avoid any heavy traffic.

Commuting by running requires some planning. I can't carry a heavy bag. I take a briefcase and alternate between four carry positions. Others prefer a backpack. When there's too much to carry, I walk, cycle or take a bus or taxi. I keep several changes of clothes at my office.

I don't push myself too hard. My goal is long-term fitness, not setting records. Luckily, I haven't had many injuries. The most serious required the removal of knee cartilage a few years ago. With help from my surgeon and physiotherapist, I'm back to running like before, but now I include

weight training in my routine. This adds variety and helps prevent further injury.

Running is slower than cycling, but safer. I usually run on the grass by the side of the road, crossing streets when there's no traffic.

There seems to be a status hierarchy in commuting. Driving has more status than taking the train. Walking has more status than cycling. Running is quite cheap, uses no fossil fuels and requires lots of exertion. That makes it low-status. It isn't dignified!

Social theorist Ivan Illich argued that high-speed transport is socially destructive. I agree. In my view the status hierarchy in commuting should be inverted.

In this column, you are invited to tell us your story. Send 650 words with your contact details, including daytime phone number, to Ichristopher@smh.com.au or fax 9282 2481. Submissions may be edited and published on the internet.