



Strand C – Low commitment Sports, Fitness and Social activity:

PGRunners

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Setting the scene

The primary aim of this strand of Courage Project work was to provide opportunities for PGRs to engage in low-commitment physical activity that could be easily integrated into day-to-day activities.

This case study presents PGRunners a postgraduate running group.

Action taken

PGRunners is a running group for postgraduate researchers, set up as part of Strand C of the Courage project to provide low commitment physical activity. PGRunners is led by a member of the University Student Support Service, who is also a current PGR and qualified running instructor.

PGRunners began in January 2019, following the Couch to 5K programme and finishing the programme with running a local Park Run. Since then, the group has continued to meet on a weekly basis to run around the UEA campus.

Key impacts / outcomes

There are 25 PGRs who are part of PGRunners, because of the low-commitment nature of this group, people are welcome to come when they can and should feel no obligation to attend every session.

Attending the group fits around their schedules and needs. PGRunners has met for a run 34 times from January 2019 - January 2020 and will continue to meet weekly beyond this point.

The running group lead and some of the members of the group wrote a blog piece about the group in the Lakeside View PGR blog and extracts from this post are presented in this case study.

Zoe Jones (Running Group Lead, Student Support Services Staff and PGR):

"PGRunners started running together on a chilly January morning, with a fresh sprinkling of snow on the ground of Earlham Park. I work in the Student Support Service and am also at the beginning of my Doctorate in Education. I'm a very enthusiastic runner too, so I was delighted to

have the chance to lead a PGR running group for the Courage Project. It was a hardy group of nine runners who met that morning, although maybe the cold weather helped us to bond; not only did it provide a talking point, it also inspired us to keep moving in order to get warm! Our first session on the Couch to 5K plan required one minute of walking followed by a minute and a half of brisk walking, which we repeated eight times.

We followed through with our training plan and some of us ran the Colney Lane Parkrun at the beginning of April. This Parkrun is on campus and it's such a lovely, friendly event. The course is all on trails with quite a big hill halfway through (which we try to remember to love, as running up it makes us stronger...).

Sometimes we really don't feel like running (even me!) if we're honest, but we've carried on since the Parkrun. Why do we do it? Well, we generally feel so much better for it; it's great to be out and exploring our beautiful campus through the changing seasons and it gives us the chance to move our bodies before a day of being sedentary. We also get the chance to talk to other researchers: mostly we're running at a pace where running and talking go alongside one another. Part of my role in Student Support is facilitating writers' groups and retreats; it seems to me that the "power of the group" is as motivating in the running group as it is in those settings."

Anna-Grace (PGR Art Media and American Studies)

"As I'm in my third year, the past six months have been a particularly stressful period in my PhD studies, but the supportive, relaxed ethos of PGRunners has helped me through some very tough weeks. The PhD process can breed a tendency toward isolation and sedentariness, and at times of peak pressure I sometimes fall into a vicious cycle of feeling like I don't have enough time to socialise or exercise, becoming even more stressed. PGRunners allows us to set aside time for both in a reassuringly structured, guilt-free way. The non-competitive, low-commitment focus makes the group feel quite collegial, and catching up with each other and encouraging each other with our work feels as important as the running; perhaps this is why, as research shows, group exercise is the most beneficial form of exercise for mental health. Making tangible progress in my running each week has given me a sense of satisfaction that is rare during the PhD, and the shared goal of the Parkrun provided a valuable non-academic achievement. The group has also built an hour of being outdoors into my week, whereas I rarely took advantage of the beautiful campus before. Overall I feel that the challenges of running have improved my mental capacity to deal with the demands of the PhD; Zoe's mantra, "I love the hill, the hill makes me stronger" has great resonance."

Laurie (PGR Environmental Sciences)

“At the risk of sounding corny, PGRunners has undoubtedly had a positive impact on my wellbeing. Doing a PhD can at times seem an all-encompassing pursuit, and it's easy for other things to fall by the wayside. PGRunners encourages taking time for yourself, but in a low-pressure way, and is something I believe I truly benefit from. Doing PGRunners is a great way to start the day, and I arrive in the office after feeling energised and yet calm.

Running is something that didn't come naturally to me, and I struggled through the first few weeks. But following the couch to 5k training plan meant it didn't take long for me to see improvement, and that really helped my confidence. The friendly and supportive environment of PGRunners encourages everyone to find their own pace, and you never feel left behind or 'too slow'.

If someone told me 6 months ago that I would be at Parkrun most Saturday mornings I wouldn't have believed it for a second, but running has now become a part of my routine that I really value.”

PGRunners has been a successful low commitment, physical activity for PGRs from across the institution to engage in. Key areas for consideration if a running group were to be set up elsewhere is the location, time of day and level of the group. PGRunners meets at 9am every Wednesday, which may exclude a number of PGRs who teach or are required to be in a laboratory at a specific time. PGRunners was targeted at beginners or people who had not run for a while and was led by someone with extensive experience and qualifications in leading running groups. The group could be easily set up at another university as it is a cheap and easy to manage group. The group uses Microsoft Teams as a way of keeping in touch with each other during the week, to plan the next runs and arrange to meet for other running events (e.g. ParkRun) at other times.

Appendix

Image 1: PGRunners after completing the Couch to 5k Programme and completing their first group ParkRun

