

Can parkruns be an antidote to pandemic pressures?

July 19 2021



The 5k running events are set to resume on Saturday July 24, following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. Credit: Northumbria University

Academics from Northumbria University, Newcastle, have published a research paper explaining why parkruns are so popular, particularly among those in managerial and professional positions.

The research, "Lost and found: parkrun, work and identity," was carried

out by Dr. Russell Warhurst and Dr. Kate Black from Newcastle Business School at Northumbria in conjunction with parkrun UK. It comes as the high-profile mass-participation events are set to resume on Saturday July 24 following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. Published in *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, Dr. Warhurst and Black investigated why despite significant efforts to broaden the appeal of parkrun among the wider population, a disproportionate number of parkrunners are in managerial and professional careers. Their research explored the diverse reasons why such runners take part and reveals some surprising results.

Started in 2004, parkrun has become a major mass-participation running event, with hundreds of thousands taking part together over five-kilometer distances in different locations across the UK every Saturday. The huge growth in popularity pre pandemic had seen the events widely lauded in the fight against obesity.

Dr. Warhurst explains: "The success of parkrun has typically been explained in terms of a reaction to the dangers of obesity and sedentary lives and, particularly in relation to professionals and managers as having social and mental wellbeing benefits. Our research delved deeper, inviting parkrunners at one of the UK's larger parkruns in Newcastle to participate in interviews and explain just what parkrun means for them. We found that managers and professionals reported less satisfaction from their work than might once have been the case as these workers are subject to ever increasing performance standards, individual accountability and decreasing autonomy and discretion.

"While to some extent running was extending these forces of control into workers' [leisure time](#), reinforcing, for example, the imperative to continuously improve, achieve and never fail, our results also paint a more positive picture. With its unique ethos, parkrun is enabling managerial and professional runners to not only escape from the

isolation and pressures of their work but to discover or rediscover a more autonomous, holistic, healthier and sustainable sense-of-self."

Dr. Warhurst and Dr. Black believe the results of their research provide support for the value of parkrun post-pandemic in view of the further isolation and pressures that COVID-19 has brought.

Dr. Black adds: "Managerial and professional runners are encouraged to reflect upon and engage with the non-competitive, participatory ethos of parkrun. This reconnection will enable such runners to avoid reinforcing what might have been lost in their work lives and to use parkrun to find a new, positive sense-of-self post-pandemic.

More information: Russell Warhurst et al, Lost and found: parkrun, work and identity, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2021.1924244](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2021.1924244)

Provided by Northumbria University

Citation: Can parkruns be an antidote to pandemic pressures? (2021, July 19) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-07-parkruns-antidote-pandemic-pressures.html>

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