


CAREERS

WHY I... run half marathons

Nicole Nation, a second year GP trainee, tells **Kathy Oxtoby** how running 21 km races gives her a sense of community, pride, and a chance to support good causes



Participating provides me with perspective on what ingredients are needed to complete any journey in my life

MARK THOMAS

HOW TO MAKE THE CHANGE

- **Start small** Perhaps try the Couch to 5K challenge or find your local Parkrun, and work your way up. You don't need to have the most expensive running gear or have the fastest time for your age group, but you do need to have fun
- **Start local** Most major towns and cities host their own half marathon so you don't have to travel far
- **Get connected** See if there is anyone at your workplace who is interested in running. Once you get connected, it becomes much easier to plan logistics. Most towns and cities have a local running club
- **Run for a cause** Consider the causes you are passionate about, and research if they have a team that's participating in the race, or if you can set up a fundraising page on their behalf
- **Have fun** If it's a city you have never visited before, then while you are on the running course, have a look around, observe the landmarks, and take a photo with the marathon mascot, rather than being fixated on the clock

It's important to do something outside medicine that brings a sense of joy and personal accomplishment," says Nicole Nation, a second year GP trainee.

Currently on the Torbay vocational training scheme in Devon, she also believes it's important to find an outside interest to boost your mental health. For Nation, who is also an international medical graduate (IMG), that something is running half marathons.

"I like challenges. And the feeling I get after completing a half marathon is priceless," she says. "Having something to be proud of, in addition to my clinical work." She enjoys the atmosphere at running events, and their inclusiveness. "People turn up to cheer and give out jelly babies and support. It's very uplifting," Nation says. "All abilities are welcomed, and everyone gets a shiny medal, no matter their finishing time."

Jamaican by birth, Nation came to the UK in 2018 to study for a masters in public health at the University of Sheffield, before starting her GP training in 2021.

Her interest in running began in 2018, when she was offered a free spot in the Sheffield half marathon on the premise that she would fundraise for student scholarships. "Once I completed my first half marathon, I was hooked," she says. "I then went on to research how I could participate in other events."

To date, she has run more than a dozen half marathons, spanning Edinburgh to Devon, and remains "humbled by the various charities that participants represent, such as diabetes, stroke, dementia, homelessness, and mental health."

Running a half marathon—which is 13.1 miles or 21 km—requires a minimum of equipment. "You don't need fancy trainers," she says, but it does require some pre-race preparation. "You need to think about the logistics—the route, so you don't get lost if you fall behind; the terrain you're running on; and how to get to the event." And while running, "you must stay hydrated

and keep your energy up—I carry energy drinks and oranges." On average, it takes Nation less than three hours to run a half marathon, and to maintain her fitness she spends 30 minutes every day on the treadmill and goes for weekly early morning walks to the beach with friends.

Having felt the physical and mental benefits of running—burning calories, increasing muscle strength, and boosting mood—Nation advocates the power of exercise to her patients.

She compares the experience of running half marathons to the "journey" of being a GP in training. "From the need to have milestones to celebrate along the training pathway as you move from placement to placement, to having family and friends to support me through my training journey—similar to the crowds who usually gather at these events to cheer on participants," she says, "participating in half marathons provides me with perspective on what ingredients are needed to complete any journey in my life, successfully."

As a clinician, Nation brings scientific and analytical skills to her approach to running. "I dissect my completion time, my nutrition, and try to tweak what I'm doing based on what I see others doing."

Her colleagues have been "very supportive," helping with logistics, fundraising, and encouragement, and she would recommend her interest to others, especially IMGs. "These events are a great way to meet new people especially if you are new to an area. It is good to be able to find and build a community with others who like running. Plus, it's a lovely way to support causes meaningful to you."

Nation intends to carry on running for the long haul. "It's a positive obsession—a passion you can build on as time goes by. I'm hoping I'll still be running in my seventies."

And for now she is sticking with half marathons—a full marathon "is a target that I can master over time," she says.

Kathy Oxtoby, London

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