



Run in England – Really changing lives

The Run in England has only been up and running for just over twelve months but it's already making a huge impact, and really beginning to change lives.

People attend our running groups for a range of reasons. To get fit, to meet new people, to train specifically for a race, or maybe to lose weight. Sometimes the reasons are so personal that the story becomes inspiring to all of us. This is one of them

Debbie (name changed) used to be a keen runner before the effects of domestic violence began running her life for her. Thanks to Run In England, she's now getting her life back on track.

She was a dedicated runner, running up to 30 miles over 4 days. This was something she enjoyed and could do independently. Each year Debbie would take part in the Great North Run, raising awareness of children's leukaemia.

This all changed when her ex-partner became violent and controlling.

Between 2004 and 2007, Debbie received numerous injuries from physical abuse such as a fractured right hand, 7 stitches in her eye and having the base of her spine broken. Despite the pain of her horrific injuries over the years, it is the mental abuse that has produced the long lasting effects. Debbie's confidence took the biggest hit, consistently doubting herself, telling herself she couldn't do it. She became scared of leaving the house, making excuses not to go out. She had lost trust in people, even those she used to be close to.

Debbie described her relationship as "perfect to begin with, I was treated like a princess" but this soon changed. This resulted in her ex-partner locking her in the house, with no keys to get out. This is when her fear began to build up, confined to the house, losing touch with her family. She was on her own with no help and support. Debbie was too scared to escape this life because of the consequences she would face.

In 2008, with Debbie's health seriously at risk, she found courage to leave. With the help of the Zero Centre (a drop-in service to help women, young people and children who have experienced domestic violence) she could begin to take control of her own life again, for the sake of herself and her children. Despite being out of a violent relationship, her ordeal was not over. Throughout 2008, Debbie spent her time in and out of court. Her weight plummeted to size 6-8.

Debbie's parents first saw Run In England sessions advertised in the local paper and suggested that they would be good for her. Debbie took a lot of persuading and remained doubtful, with her parents

accompanying her on her first session. Since then, Debbie has never looked back. Not even her parents could predict the extent of positive change these sessions have had on their daughter. For this, they are extremely grateful!

When this group began in January, Debbie found she was the only one attending. Our Run In England instructor was aware of her situation, and kept the sessions going. This benefited Debbie, as she was making a huge step in the right direction by attending and the instructor was seeing a change in her each week. Over the last couple of weeks, numbers have increased and this has slowly introduced Debbie to more people. When asked, "How did this make you feel?" she said that the instructor made her feel "**comfortable**" with the other members. Debbie has gained confidence through the slow uptake in numbers and is something that can be worked on as this group gains in popularity.

Debbie often has anxiety attacks and begins to talk herself out of going to the running group, due to a range of fears that were a consequence of domestic violence. But the 'team spirit' of Run In England helps persuade her to go each week, despite running being seen as an individual sport she feels part of that team. Debbie is delighted about the positive effect the running instructor has had on her, testing her running ability and supporting her to believe she can do it, and breaking down the mental barrier that is affecting her day-to-day life. Debbie recently took a step in the right direction, when the Run In England instructor took her away from the usual park location. This pushed Debbie outside of her comfort zone, as she feels safe in the park. She said, "**Without the Run In England instructor, I wouldn't be doing the run, I live to come here**".

Domestic violence not only affected Debbie but her children as well, seeing their mummy bruised and battered from years of abuse. This affected Debbie and her children both mentally and physically, with the children once being hospitalised due to injuries they received. Her children would often want to spend days out with their mum, but Debbie was too scared to leave the house, not used to freedom and making her own decisions. Since attending Run In England sessions, Debbie's re-found passion for running has rubbed off on her children who've seen a positive change in their mum which is benefiting the whole family. They have got her back and can't wait to get active with her, doing activities they enjoy such as running and bike riding.

Debbie described the running sessions as a "**big whirlwind**" that has "**opened a massive door of opportunities**" for her, giving her the confidence to lead her life how she wants again. Since building up her confidence through attending running sessions, she went on her first bike ride, stepping outside her comfort zone and has begun attending trampolining again, something she used to enjoy but was stopped from doing during a particularly tough time in her life. This all could not have been achieved without the confidence and self-belief she gained through Run In England sessions. Debbie still has a long way to go, but with the support of experienced Run In England instructors, it is hoped she will be able to enter the Great North Run once again.

"Anyone can do it, that's what I like – I take my hat off to anyone that will give it a go"