

# 'Pain' is Mandatory, 'Suffering' is Optional: A Comparative Analysis of Ultrarunning and Living Well with Persistent Pain



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## ***Pain, Endurance, and Adaptation:***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Though fundamentally different in origin, one chosen and the other often imposed, ultrarunning and living with persistent pain share striking psychological, emotional, and physiological parallels. Both challenge human endurance, foster identity reformation, and necessitate sophisticated coping mechanisms. Drawing on contemporary pain theory, psychological resilience literature, and qualitative lived-experience accounts from ultrarunners and individuals managing persistent pain, this paper explores the conceptual, experiential, and therapeutic intersections between these two domains. Understanding these parallels can reshape health narratives and offer mutual insights across clinical and athletic spheres.

### **AIMS**

Firstly, to review the literature to gain an understanding of the key themes found in successful ultra runners and patients successful with managing, or living well, with persistent pain or CRPS. Secondly to find what mutual benefit might be gained for each group by understanding the other.

### **METHODS**

A PubMed search was undertaken looking at successful pain management in ultra runners and secondly patients living well with persistent pain, or CRPS. Also, a semi structured interview was undertaken with a CRPS patient deemed to live well with her condition and an experienced mid pack ultra runner, for their individual perspectives on managing pain in their own context.

### **RESULTS**

Key themes were noted to include similarities but also differences in:

#### **Physical Sensation and Pain Interpretation**

Both ultrarunners and individuals living with persistent pain must interpret and respond to ongoing physical discomfort, though the meaning attributed to these sensations differs. Ultrarunners often view fatigue and pain as markers of resilience and achievement (Gross, 2025), whereas people with chronic pain, including CRPS, frequently experience similar sensations through a pathological lens shaped by uncertainty and chronicity (Smith & Miranda, 2024). In both contexts, learning to distinguish between “hurt” and “harm” is critical; understanding that pain does not always equate to tissue damage supports performance in sport and improved function and quality of life in persistent pain (Alschuler et al., 2020; Sheedy et al., 2016).

#### **Psychological Resilience and Emotional Regulation**

Psychological resilience underpins both ultrarunning and adaptation to chronic pain, enabling individuals to maintain wellbeing despite adversity. Ultrarunners commonly demonstrate high resilience through positive reappraisal and effective emotion regulation (Roebuck et al., 2020; Roebuck et al., 2020), while active coping, social support, and re-engagement in valued activities support adjustment in CRPS and other chronic pain conditions (Rodham et al., 2012; Sheedy et al., 2016). In both groups, strategies such as self-talk, mindfulness, and goal setting help regulate fear, frustration, and hopelessness, supporting endurance during emotional lows such as race fatigue or pain flares (Gross, 2025).

#### **Identity, Purpose, and the Self**

Both ultrarunning and persistent pain engage deeply with identity and self-concept. Ultrarunners often frame suffering within narratives of resilience and achievement (Gross, 2025), whereas chronic pain can disrupt identity through loss of valued roles and experiences of stigma (Rodham et al., 2012). However, adaptation in persistent pain frequently involves identity reconstruction and meaning-making, with both groups ultimately reframing limitation into persistence—whether in completing an ultramarathon or living a valued life alongside pain.

#### **Moral Language and Social Narratives**

Ultrarunning and persistent pain differ markedly in their sociocultural framing, with ultrarunners often using moral language that casts suffering as virtuous and purposeful (Gross, 2025). In contrast, individuals with persistent pain frequently encounter disbelief or dismissal, particularly when pain lacks visible injury, reflecting societal biases about legitimate suffering (Werner & Malterud, 2003). Despite this, many people living with chronic pain adopt narratives of resilience and transformation, drawing on similar moral frameworks to assert meaning and agency in the face of adversity.

#### **Strategies for Endurance and Coping Across Contexts**

Both ultrarunners and individuals with persistent pain draw on similar psychological and behavioural strategies to sustain endurance. Adaptive coping approaches such as distraction, acceptance, and cognitive reframing are associated with success in ultrarunning (Alschuler et al., 2020; Roebuck et al., 2020), while active coping, social support, and re-engagement in valued activities support adjustment in CRPS and other chronic pain conditions (Rodham et al., 2012). Across both contexts, psychological flexibility, community, and purposeful pacing enable individuals to navigate fatigue, fear, and emotional exhaustion while continuing to move forward meaningfully.

#### **Implications and Reflections**

Recognising the shared experiential themes between ultrarunners and individuals with persistent pain has implications for both clinical practice and athletic training. Clinicians can use endurance-based metaphors to validate patient experiences and support identity reconstruction, while coaches may incorporate pain science education to help athletes distinguish adaptive discomfort from injury-related pain. More broadly, viewing pain as contextually mediated rather than inherently negative challenges binary thinking and highlights its role in shaping human adaptation, vulnerability, and strength.

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### **CONCLUSION**

Ultrarunning and living well with persistent pain are not equivalent, but they share a grammar of endurance. Both involve pain, identity negotiation, emotional regulation, and making sense of symptoms. By examining them side-by-side, we illuminate the universal elements of human resilience. Both groups may benefit and learn lessons from recognizing and validating this shared terrain.

